Forged of Steele Bundle

By Brenda Jackson

Never Too Late
Solid Soul
Night Heat
Beyond Temptation
Risky Pleasures
Contents

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Chapter One

Twelve days and counting….

Pushing a lock of twisted hair that had fallen in her face behind her ear, Sienna Bradford, soon to become Sienna Davis once again, straightened her shoulders as she walked into the cabin she’d once shared with her husband—soon-to-be ex-husband.

She glanced around. Had it been just three years ago when Dane had brought her here for the first time? Three years ago when the two of them had sat there in front of the fireplace after making love, and planned their wedding? Promising that no matter what, their marriage would last forever? She took a deep breath knowing for them, forever would end in twelve days in Judge Ratcliff’s chambers.

Just thinking about it made her heart ache, but she decided it wouldn’t help matters to have a pity-party. What was done was done and things just hadn’t worked out between her and Dane liked they’d hope. There was nothing to do now but move on with her life. But first, according to a letter her attorney had received from Dane’s attorney a few days ago, she had ten days to clear out any and all of her belongings from the cabin, and the sooner she got the task done the better. Dane had agreed to let her keep the condo if she returned full ownership of the cabin to him. She’d had no problem with that since he had owned it before they married.

Sienna crossed the room, shaking off the March chill. According to forecasters, a snowstorm was headed toward the Smoky Mountains within the next seventy-two hours, which meant she had to hurry and pack up her stuff and take the two-hour drive back to Charlotte. Once she got home she intended to stay inside and curl up in bed with a good book. Sienna smiled, thinking that a “do nothing” weekend was just what she needed in her too-frantic life.

Her smile faded when she considered that since starting her own interior decorating business a year and a half ago, she’d been extremely busy—and she had to admit that was when her marital problems with Dane had begun.

Sienna took a couple of steps toward the bedroom to begin packing her belongings when she heard the sound of the door opening. Turning quickly, she suddenly remembered she had forgotten to lock the door. Not smart when she was alone in a secluded cabin high up in the mountains, and a long way from civilization.

A scream quickly died in her throat when the person who walked in—standing a little over six feet with dark eyes, close cropped black hair, chestnut coloring and a medium build—was non other than her soon-to-be-ex.

From the glare on his face, she could tell he wasn’t happy to see her. But so what? She wasn’t happy to see him, either, and couldn’t help wondering why he was there.

Before she could swallow the lump in her throat to ask, he crossed his arms over his broad chest, intensified his glare and said in that too sexy voice she knew so well, “I thought that was your car parked outside, Sienna. What are you doing here?”
Chapter Two

Dane wet his suddenly dry lips and immediately decided he needed a beer. Lucky for him there was a six-pack in the refrigerator from the last time he’d come to the cabin. But he didn’t intend on moving an inch until Sienna told him what she was doing here.

She was nervous, he could tell. Well, that was too friggin bad. She was the one who’d filed for the divorce, he hadn’t. But since she had made it clear that she wanted him out of her life, he had no problem giving her what she wanted even if the pain was practically killing him. But she’d never know that.

“What do you think I’m doing here?” she asked smartly, reclaiming his absolute attention.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have asked,” he said, giving her the same unblinking stare. And to think that at one time he actually thought she was his whole world. At some point during their marriage she had changed and transitioned into quite a character—someone he was certain he didn’t know anymore.

She met his gaze for a long, level moment before placing her hands on her hips. Doing so drew his attention to her body; a body he’d seen naked countless times, a body he knew as well as his own; a body he used to ease into during the heat of passion to receive pleasure so keen and satisfying, just thinking about it made him hard.

“The reason I’m here, Dane Bradford, is because your attorney sent mine this nasty little letter demanding that I remove my stuff within ten days, and this weekend was better than next weekend. However, no thanks to you, I still had to close the shop early to beat traffic and the bad weather.”

He actually smiled at the thought of her having to do that. “And I bet it almost killed you to close your shop early. Heaven forbid. You probably had to cancel a couple of appointments. Something I could never get you to do for me.”

Sienna rolled her eyes. They’d had this same argument over and over again and it all boiled down to the same thing. He thought her job meant more to her than he did because of all the time she’d put into it. But what really irked her with that accusation was that before she’d even entertained the idea of quitting her job and embarking on her own business, they had talked about it and what it would mean. She would have to work her butt off and network to build a new clientele; and then there would be time spent working on decorating proposals, spending long hours in many beautiful homes of the rich and famous. And he had understood and had been supportive…at least in the beginning.

But then he began complaining that she was spending too much time away from home, away from him. Things only got worse from there, and now she was a woman who had gotten married at twenty-four and was getting divorced at twenty-seven.

“Look, Dane, it’s too late to look back, reflect and complain. In twelve days you’ll be free of me and I’ll be free of you. I’m sure there’s a woman out there who has the time and patience to—”

“Now that’s a word you don’t know the meaning of, Sienna,” Dane interrupted. “Patience. You were always in a rush, and your tolerance level for the least little thing was zero. Yeah, I know I probably annoyed the hell out of you at times. But then there were times you annoyed me, as well. Neither of us is perfect.”

Sienna let out a deep breath. “I never said I was perfect, Dane.”

“No, but you sure as hell acted like you thought you were, didn’t you?”
Chapter Three

Dane’s question struck a nerve. Considering her background, how could he assume Sienna thought she was perfect? She had come from a dysfunctional family if ever there was one. Her mother hadn’t loved her father; her father loved all women except her mother; and neither seemed to love their only child. Sienna had always combated lack of love with doing the right thing, thinking that if she did, her parents would eventually love her. It didn’t work. But still, she had gone through high school and college being the good girl, thinking being good would eventually pay off and earn her the love she’d always craved.

In her mind, it had when she’d met Dane, the man least likely to fall in love with her. He was the son of the millionaire Bradfords who’d made money in land development. She hadn’t been his family’s choice and they made sure she knew it every chance they got. Whenever she was around them they made her feel inadequate, like she didn’t measure up to their society friends, and since she didn’t come from a family with a prestigious background, she wasn’t good enough for their son.

She bet they wished they’d never hired the company she’d been working for to decorate their home. That’s how she and Dane had met. She’d been going over fabric swatches with his mother and he’d walked in after playing a game of tennis. The rest was history. But the question of the hour was, had she been so busy trying to succeed the past year and a half, trying to be the perfect business owner, that she had eventually alienated the one person who’d mattered most to her?

“Can’t answer that, can you?” Dane said, breaking into her thoughts. “Maybe that will give you something to think about twelve days from now when you put your John Hancock on the divorce papers. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have something to do,” he said, walking around her toward the bedroom.

“Wait. You never said why you’re here?” She blurted out before she could hold it back and immediately wished she hadn’t. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she cared…even if she did.

He stopped. The intensity of his gaze sent shivers of heat through her entire body. And it didn’t help matters that he was wearing jeans and a dark brown bomber leather jacket that made him look sexy as hell…as usual. “I was here a couple of weekends ago and left something behind. I came to get it.”

“Were you alone?” The words had rushed out before she could think her way around them. “I came to get it.”

“I was alone? The words had rushed out before she could hold them back and immediately she wanted to smack herself. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she cared…even if she did.

He hooked his thumbs in his jeans and continued to hold her gaze. “Would it matter to you if I weren’t?”

She couldn’t look at him, certain he would see her lie when she replied, “No, it wouldn’t matter. What you do is none of my business.”

“That’s what I thought.” And then he walked off toward the bedroom and closed the door.

Sienna frowned. That was another thing she didn’t like about Dane. He never stayed around to finish one of their arguments. Thanks to her parents she was a pro at it, but Dane would always walk away after giving some smart parting remark that only made her that much more angry. He didn’t know how to fight fair. He didn’t know how to fight at all. He’d come from a family too dignified for such nonsense.

Moving toward the kitchen to see if there was anything of hers in there, Sienna happened to glance out of the window.

“Oh my God,” she said, rushing over to the window. It was snowing already. No, it wasn’t just snowing, there was a full-scale blizzard going on outside. What happened to the seventy-two hours warning?

She heard Dane when he came out of the bedroom. He looked beyond her and out the window, uttering one hell of a curse word before quickly walking to the door, slinging it open and stepping outside.

In just that short period of time, everything was beginning to turn white. The last time they’d had a sudden snowstorm such as this had been a few years ago. It had been so bad the media had nicknamed it the “Beast from the East.”

It seemed the beast was back and it had turned downright spiteful. Not only was it acting ugly outside, it had placed Sienna in one hell of a predicament. She was stranded in a cabin in the Smoky Mountains with her soon-to-be-ex. Things couldn’t get any more bizarre than that.
Moments later when Dane stepped back into the cabin, slamming the door behind him, Sienna could tell he was so mad he could barely breathe.

“What’s wrong, Dane? You’re being forced to cancel a date tonight?” she asked snidely. A part of her was still upset at the thought that he might have brought someone here a couple of weekends ago when they weren’t officially divorced yet. The mere fact they had been separated for six months didn’t count. She hadn’t gone out with anyone. Indulging in a relationship with another man hadn’t even crossed her mind.

He took a step toward her and she refused to back up. She was determined to maintain her ground and her composure, although the intense look in his eyes was causing crazy things to happen to her body, like it normally did whenever they were alone for any period of time. There may have been a number of things wrong with their marriage, but lack of sexual chemistry had never been one of them.

“Do you know what this means?” he asked, his voice shaking in anger.

She tilted her head to one side. “Other than I’m being forced to remain here with you for a couple of hours, no, I don’t know what it means.”

She saw his hands ball into fists at his side and knew he was probably fighting the urge to strangle her. “We’re not talking about hours, Sienna. Try days. Haven’t you been listening to the weather reports?”

She glared at him. “Haven’t you? I’m not here by myself.”

“Yes, but I thought I could come up here and in ten minutes max get what I came for and leave before the bad weather kicked in.”

Sienna regretted that she hadn’t been listening to the weather reports, at least not in detail. She’d known that a snowstorm was headed toward the mountains within seventy-two hours, which was why she’d thought like Dane that she had time to rush and get in and out before the nasty weather hit. Anything other than that, she was clueless. And what was he saying about them being up here for days instead of hours? “Yes, I did listen to the weather reports, but evidently I missed something.”

He shook his head. “Evidently you missed a lot if you think this storm is going to blow over in a couple of hours. According to forecasters, what you see isn’t the worst of it, and because of that unusual cold front hovering about in the east, it may last for days.”

She swallowed deeply. The thought of spending *days* alone in a cabin with Dane didn’t sit well with her. “How many days are we talking about?”

“Try three or four.”

She didn’t want to try any at all, and as she continued to gaze into his eyes she saw a look of worry replace the anger in their dark depths. Then she knew what had him upset.

“Do we have enough food and supplies up here to hold us for three or four days?” she asked, as she began to nervously gnaw on her lower lip. The magnitude of the situation they were in was slowly dawning on her, and when he didn’t answer immediately she knew they were in trouble.
Chapter Five

Dane saw the panic that suddenly lined Sienna’s face. He wished he could say he didn’t give a damn, but there was no way that he could. This woman would always matter to him whether she was married to him or not. From the moment he had walked into his father’s study that day and their gazes had connected, he had known then, as miraculous at it had seemed, and without a word spoken between them, that he was meant to love her. And for a while he had convinced her of that, but not anymore. Evidently, at some point during their marriage she began believing otherwise.

“Dane?”

He rubbed his hand down his face, trying to get his thoughts together. Given the situation they were in, he knew honesty was foremost. But then he’d always been honest with her, however, he doubted she could say the same for herself. “To answer your question, Sienna, I’m not sure. Usually I keep the place well stocked of everything, but like I said earlier, I was here a couple of weekends ago, and I used a lot of the supplies then.”

He refused to tell her that in a way it had been her fault. Receiving those divorce papers had driven him here, to wallow in self-pity, vent out his anger and drink his pain away with a bottle of Johnny Walker Red. “I guess we need to go check things out,” he said, trying not to get as worried as she was beginning to look.

He followed her into the kitchen, trying not to watch the sway of her hips as she walked in front of him. The hot, familiar sight of her in a pair of jeans and pullover sweater had him cursing under his breath and summoning up a quick remedy for the situation he found himself in. The thought of being stranded for any amount of time with Sienna wasn’t good.

He stopped walking when she flung open the refrigerator. His six-pack of beer was still there, but little else. But then he wasn’t studying the contents of the refrigerator as much as he was studying her. She was bent over, looking inside, but all he could think of was another time he had walked into this kitchen and found her in that same position, and wearing nothing more than his T-shirt that had barely covered her bottom. It hadn’t taken much for him to go into a crazed fit of lust and quickly remove his pajama bottoms and take her right then and there, against the refrigerator, giving them both the orgasm of a lifetime.

“Thank goodness there are some eggs in here,” she said, intruding on his heated thoughts down memory lane. “About half a dozen. And there’s a loaf of bread that looks edible. There’s some kind of meat in the freezer, but I’m not sure what it is, though. Looks like chicken.”

She turned around and her pouty mouth tempted him to kiss it, devour it, and make her moan. He watched her sigh deeply and then she gave him a not-so-hopeful gaze and said, “Our rations don’t look good, Dane. What are we going to do?”
Chapter Six

Sienna’s breath caught when the corners of Dane’s mouth tilted in an irresistible smile. She’d seen the look before. She knew that smile and she also recognized that bulge pressing against his zipper. She frowned. “Don’t even think it, Dane.”

He leaned back against the kitchen counter. Hell, he wanted to do more than think it, he wanted to do it. But, of course, he would pretend he hadn’t a clue as to what she was talking about. “What?”

Her frown deepened. “And don’t act all innocent with me. I know what you were thinking.”

A smile tugged deeper at Dane’s lips knowing she probably did. There were some things a man couldn’t hide and a solid rock hard-on was one of them. He decided not to waste his time and hers pretending the chemistry between them was dead when they both knew it was still very much alive. “Don’t ask me to apologize. It’s not my fault you have so much sex appeal and my desire for you is automatic, even when we’re headed for divorce court.”

Dane saying the word “divorce” was a stark reminder that their life together, as they once knew it, would be over in twelve days. “Let’s get back to important matters, Dane, like our survival. On a positive note, we might be able to make due if we cut back on meals; which may be hard for you with your ferocious appetite.”

A wicked sounding chuckle poured from his throat. “Which one?”

Sienna swallowed as her pulse pounded in response to Dane’s question. She was quickly reminded, although she wished there was some way she could forget, that her husband…or soon to be ex…did have two appetites. One was of a gastric nature and the other purely sexual. Thoughts of the purely sexual one had intense heat radiating all through her. Dane had devoured every inch of her body in ways she didn’t even want to think about. Especially not now.

She placed her hands on her hips knowing he was baiting her; really doing a hell of a lot more than that. He was stirring up feelings inside of her that were making it hard for her to think straight. “Get serious, Dane.”

“I am.” He then came to stand in front of her. “Did you bring anything with you?”

She lifted a brow. “Anything like what?”

“Stuff to snack on. You’re good for that. How you do it without gaining a pound is beyond me.”

She shrugged, refusing to tell him that she used to work it off with all those in-bed, out-of-bed exercises they used to do. If he hadn’t noticed then she wouldn’t tell him that in six months without him in her bed she had gained five pounds. “I might have a candy bar or two in the car.”

He smiled. “That’s all?”

She rolled her eyes upward. “Okay, okay, I might have a couple of bags of chips, too.” She decided not to mention the three boxes of Girl Scouts cookies that had been purchased that morning from a little girl standing in front of a grocery store.

“I hadn’t planned to spend the night here, Dane. I had merely thought I could quickly pack things and leave.”

He nodded. “Okay, I’ll get the snacks from your car while I’m outside checking on some wood we’ll need for the fire. The power is still on, but I can’t see that lasting too much longer. I wished I would have gotten that generator fixed.”

Her eyes widened in alarm. “You didn’t?”

“No. So you might want to go around and gather up all the candles you can. And there should be a box of matches in one of these drawers.”

“Okay.”

Dane turned to leave. He then turned back around. She was nibbling on her bottom lip as he assumed she would be. “And stop worrying. We’re going to make it.”

When he walked out the room, Sienna leaned back against the closed refrigerator thinking those were the exact words he’d said to her three years ago when he had asked her to marry him. Now she was worried because they didn’t have a proven track record.
Chapter Seven

After putting on the snow boots he kept at the cabin, Dane made his way out the doors, grateful for the time he wouldn’t be in Sienna’s presence. Being around her and still loving her like he did was hard. Even now he didn’t know the reason for the divorce, other than what was noted in the papers he’d been served that day a few weeks ago. Irreconcilable differences; whatever the hell that was supposed to mean.

Sienna hadn’t come to him so they could talk about any problems they were having. He had come home one day and she had moved out. He still was at a loss as to what could have been so wrong with their marriage that she could no longer see a future for them.

He would always recall that time as being the lowest point in his life. For days it was as if a part of him was missing. It had taken a while to finally pull himself together and realize she wasn’t coming back no matter how many times he’d asked her to. And all it took was the receipt of that divorce petition to make him realize that Sienna wanted him out of her life, and actually believed that whatever issues keeping them apart couldn’t be resolved.

A little while later Dane had gathered more wood to put with the huge stack already on the back porch, glad that at least if nothing else they wouldn’t freeze to death. The cabin was equipped with enough toiletries to hold them for at least a week, which was a good thing. And he hadn’t wanted to break the news to Sienna that the meat in the freezer wasn’t chicken, but deer meat that one of his clients had given him a couple of weeks ago after a hunting trip. It was good to eat, but he knew Sienna well enough to know she would have to be starving before she would consume any of it.

After rubbing his icy hands on his jeans, he stuck them into his pockets to keep them from freezing. Walking around the house, he strolled over to her car, opened the door and found the candy bars, chips and…Girl Scouts cookies, he noted, lifting a brow. She hadn’t mentioned them, and he saw they were her favorite kind, as well as his. He quickly recalled the first year they were married and how they shared the cookies as a midnight snack after making love. He couldn’t help but smile as he remembered that night and others where they had spent time together, not just in bed but cooking in the kitchen, going to movies, concerts, parties, having picnics and just plain sitting around and talking for hours.

He suddenly realized that one of the things that had been missing from their marriage for a while was communication. When had they stopped talking? The first thought that grudgingly came to mind was when she’d begun bringing work home, letting it intrude on what had always been their time together. That’s when they had begun living in separate worlds.

Dane breathed in deeply. He wanted to get back into Sienna’s world and he definitely wanted her back in his. He didn’t want a divorce. He wanted to keep his wife but he refused to resort to any type of manipulating, dominating or controlling tactics to do it. What he and Sienna needed was to use this weekend to keep it honest and talk openly about what had gone wrong with their marriage. They would go further by finding ways to resolve things. He still loved her and wanted to believe that deep down she still loved him.

There was only one way to find out.
Chapter Eight

Sienna glanced around the room seeing all the lit candles and thinking just how romantic they made the cabin look. Taking a deep breath, she frowned in irritation, thinking that romance should be the last thing on her mind. Dane was her soon-to-be ex-husband. Whatever they once shared was over, done with, had come to a screeching end.

If only the memories weren't so strong…

She glanced out the window and saw him piling wood on the back porch. Never in her wildest dreams would she have thought her day would end up this way, with her and Dane being stranded together at the cabin—a place they always considered as their favorite get-away spot. During the first two years of their marriage, they would come here every chance they got, but in the past year she could recall them coming only once. Somewhere along the way she had stop allowing them time even for this.

She sighed deeply recalling how important it had been to her at the beginning of their marriage for them to make time to talk about matters of interest, whether trivial or important. They had always been attuned to each other and Dane had always been a good listener, which to her conveyed a sign of caring and respect. But the last couple of times they had tried to talk ended up with them snapping at each other, which only built bitterness and resentment.

The lights blinked and she knew they were about to go out. She was glad that she had taken the initiative to go into the kitchen and scramble up some eggs earlier. And she was inwardly grateful that if she had to get stranded in the cabin during a snowstorm that Dane was here with her. Heavens knows she would have been a basket case had she found herself up here alone.

The lights blinked again before finally going out, but the candles provided the cabin with plenty of light. Not sure if the temperatures outside would cause the pipes to freeze, she had run plenty of water in the bathtub and kitchen sink, and filled every empty jug with water for them to drink. She’d also found batteries to put in the radio so they could keep up with any reports on the weather.

“I saw the lights go out. Are you okay?”

Sienna turned around. Dane was leaning in the doorway with his hands stuck in the pockets of his jeans. The pose made him look incredibly sexy. “Yes, I’m okay. I was able to get the candles all lit and there are plenty more.”

“That’s good.”

“Just in case the pipe freezes and we can’t use the shower, I filled the bathtub up with water so we can take a bath that way.” At his raised brow she quickly added, “Separately, of course. And I made sure I filled plenty of bottles of drinking water, too.”

He nodded. “Sounds like you’ve been busy.”

“So have you. I saw through the window when you put all that wood on the porch. It will probably come in handy.”

He moved away from the door. “Yes, and with the electricity out I need to go ahead and get the fire started.”

Sienna swallowed as she watched him walk toward her on his way to the fireplace, and not for the first time she thought about how remarkably handsome he was. He had that certain charisma that made women get hot all over just looking at him.

It suddenly occurred to her that he’d already got a fire started, and the way it was spreading through her was about to make her burst into flames.
Chapter Nine

“You okay?” Dane asked Sienna as he walked toward her with a smile.
She nodded and cleared her throat. “Yes, why do you ask?”
“Because you’re looking at me funny.”
“Oh.” She was vaguely aware of him walking past her to kneel in front of the fireplace. She turned and watched him, saw him move the wood around before taking a match and lighting it to start a fire. He was so good at kindling things, whether wood or the human body.
“If you like, I can make something for dinner,” she decided to say, otherwise she would continue to stand there and say nothing while staring at him. It was hard trying to be normal in a rather awkward situation.
“What are our options?” he asked without looking around.
She chuckled. “An egg sandwich and tea. I made both earlier before the power went off.”
He turned at that and his gaze caught hers. A smile crinkled his eyes. “Do I have a choice?”
“No if you want to eat.”
“What about those Girl Scouts cookies I found in your car?”
Her eyes narrowed. “They’re off limits. You can have one of the candy bars, but the cookies are mine.”
His mouth broke into a wide grin. “You have enough cookies to share so stop being selfish.”
He turned back around and she made a face at him behind his back. He was back to stoking the fire and her gaze went to his hands. Those hands used to be the giver of so much pleasure and almost ran neck to neck with his mouth…but not quite. His mouth was in a class by itself. But still, she could recall those same hands, gentle, provoking, moving all over her body; touching her everywhere and doing things to her that mere hands weren’t suppose to do. However, she never had any complaints.
“Did you have any plans for tonight, Sienna?”
His words intruded into her heated thoughts. “No, why?”
“Just wondering. You thought I had a date tonight. What about you?”
She shrugged. “No. As far as I’m concerned, until we sign those final papers I’m still legally married and wouldn’t feel right going out with someone.”
He turned around and locked his eyes with hers. “I know what you mean,” he said. “I wouldn’t feel right going out with someone else.”
Heat seeped through her every pore with his words. “So you haven’t been dating, either?”
“No.”
There were a number of questions she wanted to ask him—how he spent his days, his nights, what his family thought of their pending divorce, what he thought of it, was he ready for it to be over for them to go their separate ways—but there was no way she could ask him any of those things. “I guess I’ll go put dinner on the table.”
He chuckled. “An egg sandwich and tea?”
“Yes.” She turned to leave.
“Sienna?”
She turned back around. “Yes?”
“I don’t like being stranded, but since I am, I’m glad it’s with you.”
For a moment she couldn’t say anything, then she cleared her throat while backing up a couple of steps. “Ah, yeah right, same here.” She backed up some more then said, “I’ll go set out the food now.” And then she turned and quickly left the room.
Sienna glanced up when she heard Dane walk into the kitchen and smiled. “Your feast awaits you.”

“Whooppee.”

She laughed. “Hey, I know the feeling. I’m glad I had a nice lunch today in celebration. I took on a new client.”

Dane came and joined her at the table. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

She took a bite of her scrambled egg sandwich and a sip of her tea and then said, “It’s been a long time since you seemed genuinely pleased with my accomplishments.”

He glanced up after taking a sip of his own tea and stared at her for a moment. “I know and I’m sorry about that. It was hard being replaced by your work, Sienna.”

She lifted her head and stared at him, met his gaze. She saw the tightness of his jaw and the firm set of his mouth. He actually believed that something could replace him with her and knowing that hit a raw and sensitive nerve. “My work never replaced you, Dane. Why did you begin feeling that way?”

Dane leaned back in his chair, tilted his head slightly. He was more than mildly surprised with her question. It was then he realized that she really didn’t know. Hadn’t a clue. This was the opportunity that he wanted; what he was hoping they would have. Now was the time to put aside anger, bitterness, foolish pride and whatever else was working at destroying their marriage. Now was the time for complete honesty. “You started missing dinner. Not once but twice, sometimes three times a week. Eventually, you stopped making excuses and didn’t show up.”

What he’d said was the truth. “But I was working and taking on new clients,” she defended. “You said you would understand.”

“And I did for a while and up to a point. But there is a thing as common courtesy and mutual respect, Sienna. In the end I felt like I’d been thrown by the wayside; that you didn’t care anymore about us, our love or our marriage.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And why didn’t you say something?”

“When? I was usually asleep when you got home and when I got up in the morning you were too sleepy to discuss anything. I invited you to lunch several times, but you couldn’t fit me into your schedule.”

“I had appointments.”

“Yes, and I always felt because of it that your clients were more important.”

“Still, I wished you would have let me know how you felt,” she said, after taking another sip of tea.

“I did, several times. But you weren’t listening.”

She sighed deeply. “We used to know how to communicate.”

“Yes, at one time we did, didn’t we?” Dane said quietly. “But I’m also to blame for the failure of our marriage, our lack of communication. And then there were the problems you were having with my parents. When it came to you, I never hesitated letting my parents know when they were out of line and that I wouldn’t put up with their treatment of you. But then I felt that at some point you needed to start believing that what they thought didn’t matter and stand up to them.

“I honestly thought I was doing the right thing when I decided to just stay out of it and give you the chance to deal with them; to finally put them in their place. Instead, you let them erode away at your security and confidence to the point where you felt you had to prove you were worthy of them…and of me. That’s what drove you to be so successful, wasn’t it, Sienna? Feeling the need to prove something is what working all those long hours was all about, wasn’t it?”

Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven

Sienna quickly got up from the table and walked to the window. It was turning dark but she could clearly see that things hadn’t let up. It was still snowing outside, worse than an hour before. She tried to concentrate on what was beyond that window and not on the question Dane had asked her.

“Sienna?”

Moments later she turned back around to face Dane, knowing he was waiting on her response. “What do you want me to say, Dane? Trust me, you don’t want to get me started since you’ve always known how your family felt about me.”

His brow furrowed sharply as he moved from the table to join her at the window, coming to stand directly in front of her. “And you’ve known it didn’t matter one damn iota. Why would you let it continue to matter to you?”

She shook her head, tempted to bare her soul but fighting not to. “But you don’t understand how important it was for your family to accept me, to love me.”

Dane stepped closer, looked into eyes that were fighting to keep tears at bay.

“Wasn’t my love enough, Sienna? I’d told you countless time that you didn’t marry my family, you married me. I’m not proud of the fact that my parents think too high of themselves and our family name at times, but I’ve constantly told you it didn’t matter. Why can’t you believe me?”

When she didn’t say anything, he sighed deeply. “You’ve been around people with money before. Do all of them act like my parents?”

She thought of her best friend’s family. The Steeles. “No.”

“And what should that tell you? They’re my parents. I know that they aren’t close to being perfect but I love them.”

“Then what should that tell you? They’re my parents. I know that they aren’t close to being perfect but I love them.”

“Then what should that tell you? They’re my parents. I know that they aren’t close to being perfect but I love them.”

Sienna angrily wiped at a tear she couldn’t contain any longer. “I didn’t ever want you to have to choose.”

Dane’s heart ached. Evidently she didn’t know just how much he loved her. “There wouldn’t have been a choice to make. You’re my wife. I love you. I will always love you. When we married, we became one.”

He leaned down and brushed a kiss on her cheek, then several. He wanted to devour her mouth, deepen the kiss and escalate it to a level he needed it to be, but he couldn’t. He wouldn’t. What they needed was to talk, to communicate to try and fix whatever was wrong with their marriage. He pulled back. It was hard when he heard her soft sigh, her heated moan.

He gave briefly into temptation and tipped her chin up and placed a kiss on her lips. “There’s plenty of hot water still left in the tank,” he said softly, stroking her chin. “Go ahead and take a shower before it gets completely dark, and then I’ll take one.”

He continued to stroke her chin when he added, “Then what I want is for us to do something we should have done months ago, Sienna. I want us to sit down and talk. And I mean to really talk; regain that level of communication we once had. And what I need to know more than anything is whether my love will ever be just enough for you.”
Chapter Twelve

“You’re my wife. I love you. I will always love you. When we married, we became one.”

Dane’s word flowed through Sienna’s mind as she stepped into the shower, causing a warm, fuzzy, glowing feeling to seep through her pores. Hope flared within her although she didn’t want it to. She hadn’t wanted to end her marriage, but when things had begun to get worse between her and Dane, she’d finally decided to take her in-laws suggestion and get out of their son’s life.

Even after three years of seeing how happy she and Dane were together, they still couldn’t look beyond her past. They saw her as a nobody; a person who had married their son for his money. She had offered to sign a prenuptial before the wedding and Dane had scoffed at the suggestion, refusing to even draw one up. But still, his parents had made it known each time they saw her just how much they resented the marriage.

And no matter how many times Dane had stood up to them and had put them in their place regarding her, it would only be a matter of time before they resorted to their old ways again, though never in the presence of their son. Maybe Dane was right, and all she’d had to do was tell his parents off once and for all and that would be the end of it, but she never could find the courage to do it.

And what was so hilarious with the entire situation was that she had basically become a workaholic to become successful in her own right so they could see her as their son’s equal in every way; and in trying to impress them she had alienated Dane to the point that eventually he would have gotten fed up and asked her for a divorce if she hadn’t done so first.

After spending time under the spray of water, she stepped out of the shower, intent on making sure there was enough hot water left for Dane. She tried to put out of her mind the last time she had taken a shower in this stall, and how Dane had joined her in it.

Toweling off, she was grateful she still had some of her belongings at the cabin to sleep in. The last thing she needed was to parade around Dane half naked. Then they would never get any talking done.

She slipped into a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants she found in one of the drawers. Dane wanted to talk. How could they have honest communication without getting into a discussion about his parents again? She crossed her arms trying to ignore the chill she was beginning to feel in the air. In order to stay warm they would both probably have to sleep in front of the fireplace tonight. She didn’t want to think about what the possibility of doing something like that meant.

While her cell phone still had life, she decided to let her best friend, Vanessa Steele, know that she wouldn’t be returning to Charlotte tonight. Dane was right. Not everyone with money acted like his parents. The Steeles, owner of a huge manufacturing company in Charlotte, were just as wealthy as the Bradfords. But they were as down-to-earth as people could get, which proved that not everyone with a lot of money are snobs.

“Hello?”

“Van, it’s Sienna.”

“Sienna, I was just thinking about you. Did you make it back before that snowstorm hit?”

“No, I’m in the mountains stranded.”

“What! Do you want me to send my cousins to rescue you?”

Sienna smiled. Vanessa was talking about her four single male cousins, Chance, Sebastian, Morgan and Donovan Steele. Sienna had to admit that besides being handsome as sin, they were dependable to a fault. And of all people, she, Vanessa and Vanessa’s two younger sisters, Taylor and Cheyenne, should know more than anyone since they had been notorious for getting into trouble while growing up and the brothers four had always been there to bail them out.

“No, I don’t need your cousins to come and rescue me.”

“What about Dane? You know how I feel about you divorcing him, Sienna. He’s still legally your husband and I think I should let him know where you are and let him decide if he should—”

“Vanessa,” Sienna interrupted. “You don’t have to let Dane know anything. He’s here, stranded with me.”
“How was your shower?” Dane asked Sienna when she returned to the living room a short while later.
“Great. Now it’s your turn to indulge.”
Okay.” Dane tried not to notice how the candlelight was flickering over Sienna’s features, giving them an ethereal glow. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and for a long moment he stood there staring at her.
She lifted a brow. “What’s wrong?”
“I was just thinking how incredibly beautiful you are.”
Sienna breathed in deeply, trying to ignore the rush of sensations she felt from his words. “Thank you.” Dane had always been a man who’d been free with his compliments. Being apart from him made her realize that was one of the things she missed, among many others.
“I’ll be back in a little while,” he said before leaving the room.
When he was gone, Sienna remembered the conversation she’d had with Vanessa earlier. Her best friend saw her and Dane being stranded together on the mountain as a twist of fate that Sienna should use to her advantage. Vanessa further thought that for once, Sienna should stand up to the elder Bradfords and not struggle to prove herself to them. Dane had accepted her as she was and now it was time for her to be satisfied and happy with that; after all, she wasn’t married to his parents.
A part of Sienna knew that Vanessa was right, but she had been seeking love from others for so long that she hadn’t been able to accept that Dane’s love was all the love she needed. Before her shower he had asked if his love was enough and now she knew that it was. It was past time for her to acknowledge that fact and to let him know it.

Dane stepped out the shower and began toweling off. The bathroom carried Sienna’s scent and the honeysuckle fragrance of the shower gel she enjoyed using.
Given their situation, he really should be worried what they would be faced with if the weather didn’t let up in a couple of days with the little bit of food they had. But for now the thought of being stranded here with Sienna overrode all his concerns about that. In his heart he truly believed they would manage to get through any given situation. Now he had the task of convincing her of that.
He glanced down at his left hand and studied his wedding band. Two weeks ago when he had come here for his pity party, he had taken it off in anger and thrown it in a drawer. It was only when he had returned to Charlotte that he realized he’d left it here in the cabin. At first he had shrugged it off as having no significant meaning since he would be a divorced man in a month’s time anyway, but every day he’d felt that a part of him was missing.
In addition to reminding him of Sienna’s absence from his life, to Dane, his ring signified their love and the vows that they had made, and a part of him refused to give that up. That’s what had driven him back here this weekend—to reclaim the one element of his marriage that he refused to part with yet. Something he felt was rightfully his.
It seemed his ring wasn’t the only thing that was rightfully his that he would get the chance to reclaim. More than anything he wanted his wife back.
Chapter Fourteen

Dane walked into the living room and stopped in his tracks. Sienna sat in front of the fireplace, cross-legged, with a tray of cookies and two glasses of wine. He knew where the cookies had come from, but where the heck had she gotten the wine?

She must have heard him because she glanced over his way and smiled. At that moment he thought she was even more breathtaking than a rose in winter. She licked her lips and immediately he thought she was even more tempting than any decadent dessert.

He cleared his throat. “Where did the wine come from?”

She licked her lips again and his body responded in an unquestionable way. He hoped the candlelight was hiding the physical effect she was having on him. “I found it in one of the kitchen cabinets. I think it’s the bottle that was left when we came here to celebrate our first anniversary.”

His thoughts immediately remembered that weekend. She had packed a selection of sexy lingerie and he had enjoyed removing each and every piece. She had also given him, among other things, a beautiful gold watch with the inscription engraved, The Great Dane. He, in turn, had given her a lover’s bracelet, which was similar to a diamond tennis bracelet except that each letter of her name was etched in six of the stones.

He could still remember the single tear that had fallen from her eye when he had placed it on her wrist. That had been a special time for them, memories he would always cherish. That knowledge tightened the love that surrounded his heart. More than anything he was determined that they settle things this weekend. He needed to make her see that he was hers and she was his. For always.

His lips creased into a smile. “I see you’ve decided to share the cookies, after all,” he said, crossing the room to her.

She chuckled as he dropped down on the floor beside her. “Either that or run the risk of you getting up during the night and eating them all.” The firelight danced through the twists on her head, highlighting the medium brown coiled strands with golden flecks. He absolutely loved the natural looking hairstyle on her.

He lifted a dark brow. “Eating them all? Three boxes?”

Her smile grew soft. “Hey, you’ve been known to overindulge a few times.”

He paused as heated memories consumed him, reminding him of those times he had overindulged, especially when it came to making love to her. He recalled one weekend they had gone at it almost nonstop. If she hadn’t been on the pill there was no doubt in his mind that that single weekend would have made him a daddy. A very proud one at that.

She handed him a glass of wine. “May I propose a toast?”

His smile widened. “To what?”

“The return of the beast from the east.”

He switched his gaze from her to glance out the window. Even in the dark he could see the white flecks coming down in droves. He looked back at her and cocked a brow. “We have a reason to celebrate this bad weather?”

She stared at him for a long moment, then said quietly, “Yes. The beast is the reason we’re stranded here together, and even with our low rations of food, I can’t think of any other place I’d rather be…than here alone with you.”
Dane stared at Sienna and the intensity of that gaze made her entire body tingle, her nerve endings steam. It was pretty much like the day they’d met, when he’d walked into his father’s study. She had looked up, their gazes had connected and the seriousness in the dark irises that had locked with hers had changed her life forever. She had fallen in love with him then and there.

Dane didn’t say anything for a long moment as he continued to look at her, and then he lifted his wineglass and said huskily, “To the beast…who brought me Beauty.”

His words were like a sensuous stroke down her spine, and the void feeling she’d had during the past few months was slowly fading away. After the toast was made and they had both taken sips of their wine, Dane placed his glass aside and then relieved her of hers. He then slowly leaned forward and captured her mouth, tasting the wine, relishing her delectable flavor. How had she gone without this for six months? How had she survived? she wondered as his tongue devoured hers, battering deep in the heat of her mouth, licking and sucking as he wove his tongue in and out between teeth, gum and whatever wanted to serve as a barrier.

He suddenly pulled back and stared at her. A smile touched the corners of his lips. “I could keep going and going, but before we go any further we need to talk, determine what brought us to this point so it won’t ever be allowed to happen again. I don’t want us to ever let anything or anyone have power, more control over the vows we made three years ago.”

Sienna nodded, thinking the way the firelight was dancing over his dark skin was sending an erotic frisson up her spine. “All right.”

He stood. “I’ll be right back.”

Sienna lifted a brow, wondering where he was going and watched as he crossed the room to open the desk drawer. Like her, he had changed into a T-shirt and a pair of sweats, and as she watched him she found it difficult to breathe. He moved in such a manly way, each movement a display of fine muscles and limbs and how they worked together in graceful coordination, perfect precision. Watching him only knocked her hormones out of whack.

He returned moments later with pens and paper in hand. There was a serious expression on his face when he handed her a sheet of paper and a pen and kept the same for himself. “I want us to write down all the things we feel went wrong with our marriage, being honest to include everything. And then we’ll discuss them.”

She looked down at the pen and paper and then back at him. “You want me to write them down?”

“Yes, and I’ll do the same.”

Sienna nodded and watched as he began writing on his paper, wondering what he was jotting down. She leaned back and sighed, wondering if she could air their dirty laundry on paper, but it seemed he had no such qualms. Most couples sought the helpful guidance of marriage counselors when they found themselves in similar situations, but she hadn’t given them that chance. But at this point, she would do anything to save her marriage.

So she began writing, being honest with herself and with him.
Chapter Sixteen

Dane finished writing and glanced over at Sienna. She was still at it and had a serious expression on her features. He studied the contours of her face and his gaze dropped to her neck, and he noticed the thin gold chain. She was still wearing the heart pennant he’d given her as a wedding gift.

Deep down, Dane believed this little assignment was what they needed as the first step in repairing what had gone wrong in their marriage. Having things written down would make it easier to stay focused and not go off on a tangent. And it made one less likely to give in to the power of the mind, the wills and emotions. He wanted them to concentrate on those destructive elements and forces that had eroded away at what should have been a strong relationship.

She glanced up and met his gaze as she put the pen aside. She gave him a wry smile. “Okay, that’s it.”

He reached out and took her hand in his, tightening his hold on it when he saw a look of uncertainty on her face. “All right, what do you have?”

She gave him a sheepish grimace. “How about you going first.”

He gently squeezed her hand. “How about if we go together? I’ll start off and then we’ll alternate.”

She nodded. “What if we have the same ones?”

“That will be okay. We’ll talk about all of them.” He picked up his piece of paper.

“First on my list is communication.”

Sienna smiled ruefully. “It’s first on mine, too. And I agree that we need to talk more, without arguing, not that you argued. I think you would hold stuff in when I made you upset instead of getting it out and speaking your mind.”

Dane stared at her for a moment, then a smile touched his lips. “You’re right, you know. I always had to plug in the last word and I did it because I knew it would piss you off,”

“Well, stop doing it.”

He grinned. “Okay. The next time I’ll hang around for us to talk through things. But then you’re going to have to make sure that you’re available when we need to talk. You can’t let anything, not even your job, get in the way of us communicating.”

“Okay, I agree.”

“Now what’s next on your list?” he asked.

She looked up at him and smiled. “Patience. I know you said that I don’t have patience, but neither do you. But you used to.”

Dane shook his head. “Yeah, I lost my patience when you did. I thought to myself, why should I be patient with you when you weren’t doing the same with me? Sometimes I think you thought I enjoyed knowing you had a bad day or didn’t make a sale, and that wasn’t at all. At some point what was suddenly important to you wasn’t important to me, anymore.”

“And because of it, we both became detached,” Sienna said softly.

“Yes, we did.” He reached out and lifted her chin. “I promise to do a better job of being patient, Sienna.”

“So will I, Dane.”

They alternated, going down the list. They had a number of the same things on both lists and they discussed everything in detail, acknowledging their faults and what they could have done to make things better. They also discussed what they would do in the future to strengthen their marriage.

“That’s all I have on my list,” Dane said a while later. “Do you have anything else?”

Sienna’s finger glided over her list. For a short while she thought about pretending she didn’t have anything else, but they had agreed to be completely honest. They had definitely done so when they had discussed her spending more time at work than at home.

“So what’s the last thing on your list, Sienna? What do you see as one of the things that went wrong with our marriage?”

She lifted her chin and met his gaze and said, “My inability to stand up to your parents.”

He looked at her with deep dark eyes. “Okay, then. Let’s talk about that.”
Chapter Seventeen

Dane waited patiently for Sienna to begin talking and gently rubbed the backside of her hand while doing so. He'd known the issue of his parents had always been a challenge to her. Over the years he had tried to make her see that how the elder Bradfords felt didn’t matter. What he failed to realize, accept and understand was that it did matter...to her.

She had grown up in a family without love for so long that when they married, she not only sought his love, but that of his family. Being accepted meant a lot to her, and her expectations of the Bradfords, given how they operated and their family history, were too high.

They weren’t a close-knit bunch, never had been and never would be. His parents had allowed their own parents to decide their future, including who they married. When they had come of age, arranged marriages were the norm within the Bradfords’ circle. His father had once confided to him one night after indulging in too many drinks that his mother had not been his choice for a wife. That hadn’t surprised Dane, nor had it bothered him since he would bet that his father probably hadn’t been his mother’s choice of a husband, either.

“I don’t want to rehash the past, Dane,” Sienna finally said softly, looking at the blaze in the fireplace instead of at him. “But something you said earlier tonight has made me think about a lot of things. You love your parents, but you’ve never hesitated in letting them know when you felt they were wrong; nor have you put up with their crap when it came to me.

And you were right. I thought I had to actually prove something to them, show them I was worthy of you and your love, and I’ve spent the better part of a year and a half doing that, and all it did was bring me closer and closer to losing you. I’m sure they’ve been walking around with big smiles on their faces since you got the divorce petition. But I refuse to let them be happy at my expense and my own heartbreak.”

She switched her gaze from the fire to him. “The problem is that I put up with their crap when it came to me. And you were right. I thought I had to actually prove something to them, show them I was worthy of you and your love, and I’ve spent the better part of a year and a half doing that, and all it did was bring me closer and closer to losing you. I’m sure they’ve been walking around with big smiles on their faces since you got the divorce petition. But I refuse to let them be happy at my expense and my own heartbreak.”

She scooted closer to Dane and splayed her hands against his chest. “It’s time I become more assertive with your parents, Dane. Because it’s not about them—it’s about us. I refuse to let them make me feel unworthy any longer, because I am worthy to be loved by you. I don’t have anything to prove. They either accept me as I am or not at all. The only person who matters anymore is you.”

With his gaze holding hers, Dane lifted one of her hands off his chest and brought it to his lips and placed a kiss in the palm. “I’m glad you’ve finally come to realize that, Sienna. And I wholeheartedly understand and agree. I was made to love you, and if my parents never accept that then it’s their loss, not ours.”

Tears constricted Sienna’s throat and she swallowed deeply before she could find her voice to say, “I love you, Dane. I don’t want the divorce. I never did. I want to belong to you and I want you to belong to me. I just want to make you happy.”

“And I love you, too, Sienna, and I don’t want the divorce, either. My life will be nothing without you being a part of it. I love you so much and I’ve missed you.”

And with his heart pounding hard in his chest, he leaned over and captured her lips, intent on showing her just what he meant.
Chapter Eighteen

_This is homecoming_, Sienna thought as she was quickly consumed by the hungry onslaught of Dane’s kiss. All the hurt and anger she’d felt for six months was being replaced by passion of the most heated kind. All she could think about was the desire she was feeling being back in the arms of the man she loved and who loved her.

This was the type of communication she’d always loved, where she could share her thoughts, feelings and desires with Dane without uttering a single word. It was where their deepest emotions and what was in their inner hearts spoke for them, expressing things so eloquently and not leaving any room for misunderstandings.

He pulled back slightly, his lips hovering within inches of hers. He reached out and caressed her cheek, and as if she needed his taste again, her lips automatically parted. A slow, sensual acknowledgement of understanding tilted the corners of his mouth into a smile. Then he leaned closer and kissed her again, longer and harder, and the only thing she could do was to wrap her arms around him and silently thank God for reuniting her with this very special man.

Dane was hungry for the taste of his wife and at that moment, as his heart continued to pound relentlessly in his chest, he knew he had to make love to her, to show her in every way what she meant to him, had always meant to him and would always mean to him.

He pulled back slightly and the moisture that was left on her lips made his stomach clench. He leaned forward and licked them dry, or tried to, but her scent was driving him to do more. “Please let me make love to you, Sienna,” he whispered, leaning down and resting his forehead against hers.

She leaned back and cupped his chin with her hand. “Oh, yes. I want you to make love to me, Dane. I’ve missed being with you so much I ache.”

“Oh, baby, I love you.” He pulled her closer, murmured the words in her twisted locks, kissed her cheek, her temple, her lips, and he cupped her buttocks, practically lifting her off the floor in the process. His breath came out harsh, ragged as the chemistry between them sizzled. There was only one way to drench their fire.

He stretched out with her in front of the fireplace, as he began removing her clothes and then his. Moments later, the blaze from the fire was a flickering light across their naked skin. And then he began kissing her all over, leaving no part of her untouched, determined to quench his hunger and his desire. He had missed the taste of her and was determined to be reacquainted in every way he could think of.

“Dane…”

Her tortured moan ignited the passion within him and he leaned forward to position his body over hers, letting his throbbing erection come to rest between her thighs, gently touching the entrance of her moist heat. He lifted his head to look down at her, wanting to see her expression the exact moment their bodies joined again.
Chapter Nineteen

Sienna stared into Dane’s eyes, the heat and passion she saw in them making her shiver. The love she recognized made her heart pound, and the desire she felt for him sent surges and surges of sensations through every part of her body, especially the area between her legs, making her thighs quiver.

“You’re my everything, Sienna,” he whispered as he began easing inside of her. His gaze was locked with hers as his voice came out in a husky tone. “I need you like I need air to breathe, water for thirst and food for nourishment. Oh, baby, my life has been so empty since you’ve been gone. I love and need you.”

His words touched her and when he was embedded inside of her to the hilt, she arched her back, needing and wanting even more of him. She gripped his shoulders with her fingers as liquid fire seemed to flow to all parts of her body.

And at that moment she forgot everything—the beast from the east, their limited supply of food and the fact they were stranded together in a cabin with barely enough heat. The only thing that registered in her mind was that they were together and expressing their love in a way that literally touched her soul.

He continued to stroke her, in and out, and with each powerful thrust into her body she moaned out his name and told him of her love. She was like a bow whose strings were being stretched to the limit each and every time he drove into her, and she met his thrusts with her own eager ones.

And then she felt it, the strength like a volcano erupting as he continued to stroke her to oblivion. Her body splintered into a thousand pieces as an orgasm ripped through her, almost snatching her breath away. And when she felt him buck, tighten his hold on her hips and thrust into her deeper, she knew that same powerful sensation had taken hold of him, as well.

“Sienna!”

He screamed her name and growled a couple of words that were incoherent to her ears. She tightened her arms around his neck, needing to be as close to him as she could get. She knew in her heart at that moment that things were going to be fine. She and Dane had proven that when it came to the power of love, it was never too late.

Sienna awoke the following morning naked, in front of the fireplace and cuddled in her husband’s arms with a blanket covering them. After yawning, she raised her chin and glanced over at him and met his gaze head-on. The intensity in the dark eyes staring back at her shot heat through all parts of her body. She couldn’t help but recall last night and how they had tried making up for all the time they had been apart.

“It’s gone,” Dane said softly, pulling her closer into his arms.

She lifted a brow. “What’s gone?”

“The beast.”

She tilted her head to glance out the window and he was right. Although snow was still falling, it wasn’t the violent blizzard that had been unleashed the day before. It was as if the weather had served the purpose it had come for and had made its exit. She smiled. Evidently, someone up there knew she and Dane’s relationship was meant to be saved and had stepped in to salvage it.

She was about to say something when suddenly there was a loud pounding at the door. She and Dane looked at each other, wondering who would be paying them a visit to the cabin at this hour and in this weather.
Sienna, like Dane, had quickly gotten dressed and was now staring at the four men who were standing in the doorway...those handsome Steele brothers. She smiled, shaking her head. Vanessa had evidently called her cousins to come rescue her, anyway.

“Vanessa called us,” Chance Steele, the oldest of the pack, said in way of explanation. “It just so happened that we were only a couple of miles down the road at our own cabin.” A smile touched his lips. “She was concerned that the two of you were here starving to death and asked us to share some of our rations.”

“Thanks, guys,” Dane said, gladly accepting the box Sebastian Steele was handing him. “Come on in. And although we’ve had plenty of heat to keep us warm, I have to admit our food supply was kind of low.”

As soon as the four entered, all eyes went to Sienna. Although the brothers knew Dane because their families sometimes ran in the same social circles, as well as the fact that Dane and Donovan Steele had graduated from high school the same year, she knew their main concern was for her. She had been their cousin Vanessa’s best friend for years, and as a result they had sort of adopted her as their little cousin, as well.

“You okay?” Morgan Steele asked her, although Sienna knew she had to look fine; probably like a woman who’d been made love to all night, and she wasn’t ashamed of that fact. After all, Dane was her husband. But the Steeles knew about her pending divorce, so she decided to end their worries.

She smiled and moved closer to Dane. He automatically wrapped his arms around her shoulders and brought her closer to his side. “Yes, I’m wonderful,” she said, breaking into the subtle tension she felt in the room. “Dane and I have decided we don’t want a divorce and intend to stay together and make our marriage work.”

The relieved smiles on the faces of the four men were priceless. “That’s wonderful. We’re happy for you,” Donovan Steele said, grinning.

“We apologize if we interrupted anything, but you know Vanessa,” Chance said, smiling. “She wouldn’t let up. We would have come sooner but the bad weather kept us away.”

“You timing was perfect,” Dane said, grinning. “We appreciate you even coming out now. I’m sure the roads weren’t their best.”

“No, but my new truck managed just fine,” Sebastian said proudly. “Besides, we’re going fishing later. We would invite you to join us, Dane, but I’m sure you can think of other ways you’d prefer to spend your time.”

Dane smiled as he glanced down and met Sienna’s gaze. “Oh yeah, I can definitely think of a few.”

The power had been restored and a couple of hours later, after eating a hefty breakfast of pancakes, sausage, grits and eggs, and drinking what Dane had to admit was the best coffee he’d had in a long time, Dane and Sienna were wrapped in each other’s arms in the king-size bed. Sensations flowed through her just thinking about how they had ached and hungered for each other, and the fierceness of their lovemaking to fulfill that need and greed.

“Now will you tell me what brought you to the cabin?” Sienna asked, turning in Dane’s arms and meeting his gaze.

“My wedding band.” He then told her why he’d come to the cabin two weeks ago and how he’d left the ring behind. “It was as if without that ring on my finger, my connection to you was gone. I had to have it back so I came here for it.”

Sienna nodded, understanding completely. That was one of the reasons she hadn’t removed hers. Reaching out she cupped his stubble jaw in her hand and then leaned over and kissed him softly. “Together forever, Mr. Bradford.”

Dane smiled. “Yes, Mrs. Bradford, together forever. We’ve proven that when it comes to true love, it’s never too late.”
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“My mom needs to get a life!”

With a sigh of both anger and frustration, fifteen-year-old Tiffany Hagan dropped down into the chair next to her friend, Marcus Steele.

“I thought you said that the reason you and your mom moved here to Charlotte a few months ago was for a better life,” sixteen-year-old Marcus said after taking a huge bite of his hamburger as they sat in the school’s cafeteria.

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that’s what I thought, but now it seems that her idea of a better life is making mine miserable. Just because she got pregnant at sixteen doesn’t mean I’d go out and do the same thing. Yeah right! I don’t even have a boyfriend and if she keeps up her guard-dog mentality, I never will. She needs a life that doesn’t revolve around me.”

“Good luck in her getting one,” Marcus said, taking a sip of his soda. “My dad is the same way, maybe even worse. He’s so hell-bent on me making good grades and getting into an Ivy League college that I barely have time to breathe. If it weren’t for my three uncles I probably wouldn’t be playing football. Dad sees any extracurricular activities as a distraction.”

Tiffany shook her head in disgust. “Parents! They’re so controlling. Can’t they see that they’re smothering us?”

“Evidently not.”

“I wish there was some way that I can shift my mom’s attention off of me,” Tiffany said, unwrapping her sandwich. “If only she had another interest, like a boyfriend or something. Then she could get all wrapped up in him and give me some breathing space. I don’t remember her ever dating anyone.”

After taking another bite of his hamburger, Marcus said, “My dad has dated occasionally since my mom died seven years ago, and although I’m sure some of the women have tried, none of them holds his attention for long.”

Tiffany laughed. “Then he better not ever meet my mom. One look at her and he’ll be a goner for sure. I hate to brag but my mom is hot,” she said proudly.

“Hey, my dad doesn’t look too bad, either.” Marcus grinned. “Maybe we ought to get them together since it seems that neither of them has a life,” he added teasingly.

Tiffany was about to bite into her sandwich when Marcus’ suggestion sank in. A huge smile curved her lips.

“Marcus, that’s it!”

He looked at her, baffled. “What’s it?”

“My mom and your dad. Both are single, good-looking and desperately in need of something to occupy their time besides us. Just think of the possibilities.”

Marcus began thinking. Moments later, he smiled. “Yeah,” he agreed. “It just might work.”

“It would work. Think about it. If we got them together, they would be so into each other that they wouldn’t have time to drive us nuts.”

“Yeah, but how can we get them together without them getting suspicious about anything?” he asked.

Tiffany smiled mischievously. “Oh, I bet I could think of something....”
Chapter 1

Less than a week later

Kylie Hagan regarded with keen interest the handsome specimen of a man dressed in a dark business suit, who had just walked into her florist shop. That was so unlike her. She couldn’t recall the last time a member of the male species had grabbed her attention. Denzel Washington didn’t count, since each and every time she saw him on the movie screen it was an automatic drool.

She continued watering her plants, thinking that the woman he was about to buy flowers for was indeed very lucky. The good news was that he had selected her florist shop—she was the newbie in town, and Kylie needed all the business she could get, since she’d only been open for a couple of months. Business was good but she needed to come up with ways to make it even better.

Her heart jumped nervously when, instead of looking around at her vast selection of green plants and floral arrangements, he headed straight for the counter. Evidently he was a man who knew what he wanted and what he needed to woo his woman.

“May I help you?” she asked, thinking that with a face and physique like his, he probably didn’t need much help at all. He stood tall, six-three at least, with a muscular build, a clean-shaven head, chocolate-brown eyes and skin tone of the richest cocoa, altogether a striking combination. The drool she usually reserved only for Denzel was beginning to make her mouth feel wet. As she continued to look at him, waiting for his response, she suddenly noticed that he wasn’t smiling. In fact, he appeared downright annoyed.

“I’m here to see Kylie Hagan.”

Kylie lifted her eyebrows and the smile on her face began fading at his rough and irritated tone of voice. What business did this man have with her? All her bills were current, which meant he couldn’t be there to collect anything. And if he was a salesman, with his less than desirable attitude, she wouldn’t be buying whatever it was he was selling.

“I’m Kylie Hagan.”

“Surprise flickered in his drop-dead gorgeous eyes. “You’re Kylie Hagan?”

“That’s right and who are you?”

“Chance Steele.”

The name didn’t ring a bell, but then she had only recently moved to the area. “And what can I do for you, Mr. Steele?”

He stared at her for a moment, and then he said, “The only thing you can do for me, Ms. Hagan, is keep your daughter away from my son.”

Kylie froze. The man’s words were not what she had expected. For a long moment she stared back at him, wondering if she had misunderstood. But all it took was the deep scowl on his face to let her know she had not.

“Keep my daughter away from your son?” she repeated when she finally found her voice.

“Yes. I found this note yesterday that evidently dropped out of Marcus’s backpack. They were planning on cutting school together on Friday,” he said as he pulled a piece of paper out of the pocket of his jacket.

“What!” Kylie shrieked, grabbing the paper out of his hand.

“You heard me and you can read it for yourself,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Kylie read, then after the first few lines she wished she hadn’t. Three emotions enveloped her: hurt, betrayal and anger. Tiffany had always promised that if she ever got serious about a boy that she would tell her. Granted, she and Tiffany hadn’t been that close lately, but a promise was a promise.

“Now can you see why I want your daughter kept away from my son?”

Chance Steele’s question sliced through Kylie’s tormented mind and grated on her last nerve, deepening her anger. She came from behind the counter to stand directly in front of him. “Don’t you dare place all the blame on Tiffany, Mr. Steele. If I read this note correctly, she was merely responding to a note your son had sent asking her to cut school. The nerve of him doing such a thing!”

“Look, Ms. Hagan, we can stand here all day and we won’t agree who’s to blame. But I think we will agree on the fact that your daughter and my son shouldn’t even be thinking about cutting school. I have big plans for my son’s future that include him attending college.”

Kylie glared at him. “And you don’t think I have those same plans for my daughter?” she snapped. “Tiffany is
a good kid.”

“So is Marcus,” he snapped back.

Kylie breathed deeply and closed her eyes in a concerted effort to calm down before a blood vessel burst in her head. They weren’t getting anywhere biting each other’s heads off.

“Ms. Hagan, are you all right?”

She slowly opened her eyes to focus on the man looming over her. Concern was evident in his gaze. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Look, I’m sorry I came barging in here like this,” he said, the tone of his voice calmer, apologetic. “But after reading that note I got upset.”

She nodded. “I can understand why. I’m pretty upset myself.”

“Did you know our kids were hung up on each other?” he asked. She could tell that he was trying to maintain a composed demeanor.

“Mr. Steele, until you walked into my shop and dropped your son’s name, I had no idea he even existed. Tiffany and I moved here a few months ago from New York State, right before the start of the new school year. I knew she had made some new friends but she’s never mentioned anyone’s name in particular.”

“Okay, so as parents, what do you think we should do?” he asked.

His voice was drenched in wariness and Kylie could tell he was deeply bothered by all of this, but then he wasn’t the only one. “The one thing we shouldn’t do is demand that they not see each other. Telling them to stay away from each other will only make them want to see each other more. Telling them to stay away from each other will only make them want to see each other more. Teenagers will always deliberately do the opposite of what their parents want them to do. And once they start rebelling, it will be almost impossible to do anything.”

She didn’t have to tell him that she knew firsthand how that worked. Her parents had tried to keep her and Sam apart, which only made her want him more. The more she and Sam had sneaked around, the more risks they had taken until she had eventually gotten pregnant at sixteen…the same age Tiffany would be in about ten months.

“We have to do something. In confronting Marcus about that letter, I’ve thrown a monkey wrench into their plans for Friday. But how can we be sure this won’t happen again?”

At the sound of Chance’s voice, Kylie dragged her thoughts back to the present. “I’ll talk to Tiffany and, like I said, she’s a good kid.”

“Yes, but it appears that my son and your daughter are at the age where overactive hormones cancel out good sense. We need to do what we can to make sure those hormones stay under control.”

“I fully agree.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. “This is how to reach me if you need me to do anything further on my end. I talked to Marcus but things didn’t go well. I did the one thing you indicated I should not have done, which was demand that he stay away from Tiffany. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him that angry or rebellious.”

Kylie nodded as she took the card from him. She didn’t want to think about her upcoming talk with Tiffany. “I appreciate you dropping by and bringing this to my attention.”

“Like I said earlier, I apologize that my approach wasn’t more subtle. But Marcus’s last words to me this morning were that nobody would stop him from seeing Tiffany. I was furious and still riled up when I decided to come over here.”

He sighed deeply and then added, “It’s not easy raising a teenager these days.”

“Don’t I know it,” Kylie said softly, feeling terribly drained but knowing she would need all her strength when she confronted Tiffany after school.

“Well, I’d better be going.”

“Again, thanks for coming by and letting me know what’s going on.”

He nodded. “There was no way I could not let you know, considering what they’d planned to do. Have a good day, Ms. Hagan.”

As Kylie watched him walk out of her shop, she knew that as much as she wished it to be so, there was no way that this would be a good day.

The moment Chance got into his truck and closed the door, he leaned back against the seat and released a long sigh. If the daughter looked anything like the mother, he was in deep trouble. No wonder his usually smart son had begun acting downright stupid.

Kylie Hagan was definitely a beauty. He had noticed that fact the moment he had walked into the flower shop and headed straight toward the counter. When she had come from behind that same counter and he’d seen that she was wearing a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, he’d thought the outfit fit just right on her curvy, petite body and showed
off her shapely legs too perfectly. Braided dark brown hair had been stylishly cut to accent her face. Her creamy chocolate skin complemented a pair of beautiful brown eyes, a perky nose and an incredibly feminine pair of lips.

How in the world could she be the mother of a fifteen-year-old when she looked barely older than twenty herself? She looked more like Tiffany’s sister than her mother. Perhaps Tiffany had been adopted. There were a lot of questions circulating around in his mind, but the foremost was what the two of them could do about their kids who seemed hell-bent on starting a relationship that neither was ready for.

He understood Marcus’s interest in girls—after all he was a Steele—and Chance could distinctly remember when he was younger. He had fallen in love with Cyndi when he’d been just a few years older than Marcus, and had married her before his nineteenth birthday after she had gotten pregnant.

Pregnant.

He would never forget that day when Cyndi had come to him, a mere week before he was to leave for Yale University, to let him know she was having his baby. He had loved her so much he decided not to accept a full college scholarship and leave her alone. Instead, he had married her, gone to work at his father’s manufacturing company and attended college at night. It hadn’t been easy and it had taken him almost six years to get a degree, but he and Cyndi had made the best of it and he could look back and honestly say that although there were hard years, they had been happy ones.

And then the unthinkable happened. Cyndi had noticed changes in a mole on the side of her neck, a mole that was later determined to be cancerous. Even after surgery and chemo treatments, four years later, on the day Marcus should have been celebrating his ninth birthday, they were in the cemetery putting to rest the one woman who had meant the world to Chance.

He straightened and started up his truck. Although he would never think of marrying Cyndi as a mistake, he couldn’t help but remember her plans of attending college; plans that had gotten thrown by the wayside with her pregnancy. If he had it all to do over, he would have been more responsible that night when they had gotten carried away by the moment.

And then on top of everything else, he couldn’t forget the promise he had made to Cyndi on her deathbed; a promise that he would make sure that their son got to do everything they hadn’t done, and take advantage of every opportunity offered to him, which included one day attending a university that would give him the best education.

That was the reason he was driven to make sure Marcus did well in school. Of course it was Chance’s hope for him to one day join the family business, the Steele Corporation, but if Marcus wanted to do something else after finishing college, then he could do so with Chance’s blessings.

As he began backing out of the parking lot, he contemplated the emergence of Tiffany Hagan in Marcus’s life. He didn’t think his son’s interest in the girl was going to fade away anytime soon, regardless of what kind of talk Kylie Hagan had with her daughter. That meant Chance needed to have a “Plan B” ready. Under no circumstances would he let Marcus succumb to teen lust and ruin the life he and Cyndi always wanted for him.

His thoughts shifted to Tiffany’s mother again, and he felt lust invading his own body. The difference was he was a man and he could handle it.

At least he hoped he could.

After reading the note, Helena Spears glanced up at the woman who’d been her best friend since high school.

“Are you sure Tiffy wrote this, Kylie?”

The two of them had met for lunch and were sitting at a table in the back of the restaurant. Kylie shook her head. Leave it to Lena to try to wiggle her godchild out of any kind of trouble. “Of course I’m sure. I can recognize Tiffany’s handwriting when I see it and so can you. Those curls at the end of certain letters give her away.”

Lena shrugged as she handed the note back to Kylie. “Well, the only thing I have to say in defense of my godchild is that if Marcus looks anything like his daddy, then I can see why Tiffy fell for him.”

Kylie didn’t want to admit that she’d thought the same thing. “You know Chance Steele?”

“Oh, yeah. There are few people living in Charlotte who don’t know the Steele brothers. They own a huge manufacturing company, the Steele Corporation. There are four of them who were born and raised here. They’re not transplants like rest of us, and they are very successful, as well as handsome. Chance is the CEO and his brothers have key positions in the corporation. There are also three female cousins, one of which works in the PR Department. The other two chose careers outside of the company, but all three are members of the board of directors.”

Lena took a sip of her drink before continuing. “Chance is the oldest and the one I see most often with my charity work. He’s a big supporter of the American Cancer Society. His wife died of cancer around seven years ago.”
Kylie, who had been putting the note back in her purse, suddenly lifted her head. “He’s a widower?”
“Yes, and from what I understand, he’s doing a good job raising his son.”
Kylie frowned. “Not if his son is enticing girls to cut school with him.”
Lena laughed. “Oh, come on, Kylie. You were young once.”
“I remember. And that’s what I’m afraid of,” she said, meeting Lena’s gaze with a concerned expression. “You recall how I was all into Sam. I thought I was madly in love. It was like my day wasn’t complete until I saw his face. I was obsessed.”
Lena shook her head. “Yeah, you did have it bad. You thought you were in love, and nobody could tell you differently.”
“And you saw what happened to me. One day of acting irresponsibly changed my entire life. I was pregnant on my sixteenth birthday.”
And rejected at sixteen as well.
She would never forget the day Sam told her that he wanted no part of her or the baby, and that he would get his parents to give her money for an abortion, but that was about all she would ever get from him. He intended to go to college on a football scholarship and under no circumstances would he let her mess up his future with a baby he didn’t want. He agreed with his parents that there was no sense in him throwing away a promising career in pro football because of one foolish mistake. So instead of hanging around and doing the right thing, he had split the first chance he got. Even now she could count on one hand the number of times Tiffany had seen her father. Sam did get the football career in the NFL that he’d wanted, at least for a short while before an injury ended things. Now he was living in California, married with a family, and rarely had time for his daughter.

Emotions tightened her throat as she remembered that time she had gotten pregnant. She had hurt her parents something awful. And disappointed them as well. They had had so many high hopes for her, their only child, including her attending college at their alma mater, Southern University.

She had eventually gotten a college degree but that was only after years of struggling as a single parent and trying to make a life for her and Tiffany. And now to think that her daughter could possibly be traveling down the same path was unacceptable.

“Yes, I did see what happened to you, but look how much you’ve accomplished since then, Kylie,” Lena said. “The only thing you didn’t do was allow another man into your life because of Sam’s rejection, and I think you were wrong for turning away what I knew were some good men. You never gave yourself the chance for happiness with someone else after Sam. I tried to tell you how arrogant and selfish he was but you wouldn’t listen.”
Kylie sighed. No, she hadn’t wanted to hear anything negative about Sam. She had been too much in love to see his faults and refused to let anyone else talk about them, either. A sickening sensation swelled in her stomach at the thought that history was about to repeat itself with her child. “That’s why I can’t let Tiffany make the same mistake I did, Lena.”

Don’t you think you and Chance might be overreacting just a little? It’s not like Tiffy and Marcus planned to cut the entire day of school. They were skipping the last two classes to go somewhere, probably to the mall,” Lena pointed out.

“And that’s supposed to be okay?” Kylie’s nerves were screaming in frustration and anger each and every time she thought about what her daughter had planned on doing. She remembered when she had cut school with Sam. Instead of going to the movies like the two of them planned, he had taken her to his house, where they had spent the entire day in his bedroom doing things they shouldn’t have been doing and things neither of them had been prepared for. But all she could think about was that Sam Miller, the star player on the Richardson High School football team, was in love with her. Or so she’d thought. Silly her.

“You need to calm down before you talk to Tiff, Kylie. I understand you’re upset, but your anger won’t help. You know how headstrong she is. She’s just like you when you were her age.”
Kylie sighed deeply. Again that was the last thing she wanted to hear. “She broke her promise to me, Lena. We’ve had a lot of talks. She had promised me that she would let me know when she was interested in boys.”

“And had she come and told you about Marcus, then what? Would you have given her your blessings or locked her up for the rest of her life? Girls like boys, Kylie. That’s natural. And you’ve had so many talks with Tiffany that she probably knows your speech by heart. Has it ever occurred to you that maybe you’re laying things on a little too thick? Tiffany is a good kid, yet you’re judging her by the way you lived your life, by your own past mistakes. It’s important to you that she ‘be good’ because you don’t think that you were.”
Kylie’s eyes began filling with tears. “I only want what’s best for her, Lena. I made a foolish and stupid mistake once and I’ll do anything within my power to keep her from making the same one.”
Lena got up, came around the table and hugged her friend. “I know. Tiffany is going to be fine. I’ll be here to help you anyway that I can. You know that. I just don’t want you to build this brick wall between you and her. That same
kind of wall your mother built with you.”

Kylie wiped away a tear from her cheek. Although she and her mother had a fairly decent relationship now, Kylie would never forget when Olivia Hagan had let down her only daughter by upholding her belief that by getting pregnant out of wedlock, Kylie had committed the worst possible sin.

“I’ll never let that happen,” Kylie vowed quietly.
“That’s the crisis you called this meeting for?” Sebastian Steele asked, turning away from the window and looking across the office at his brother with both amazement and amusement on his face.

Chance glared first at Sebastian, and then at his other two brothers, Morgan and Donovan. They were sitting in front of his desk and looking at him with the same expressions. “Your nephew is putting a pretty face before his studies and that doesn’t add up to a crisis to any of you?”

When all three chimed the word “no” simultaneously, Chance knew talking to them had been a waste of his time.

At the age of thirty-six, Chance was the oldest of the group. Next was Sebastian, fondly called Bas, who was thirty-four. Morgan was thirty-two, and Donovan was thirty. Of the four, Chance was the only one who had ever been married. Bas was presently engaged, but the other two claimed they enjoyed their bachelor status too much to settle down anytime soon.

“Look, Chance,” Morgan said as he stood up. “It’s normal for boys Marcus’s age to like girls. So what’s the problem?”

Chance rolled his eyes heavenward. “The problem is that the girl is only fifteen and they were planning to cut school together and—”

“No,” Sebastian interrupted. “They planned to cut a couple of classes, not school. There is a difference.”

“And he of all people should know,” Donovan said, grinning. “Considering the number of times he used to play hooky. I understand they still have a desk in Mr. Potter’s math class that says, ‘Sebastian Steele never sat here.’”

“I don’t find any of this amusing,” Chance said.

Morgan wiped the grin off his face. “Then maybe you should, before you alienate your son.”

“How about chilling here, Chance,” Sebastian interjected. “You act as if Marcus committed some god-awful sin. We know the promise you made to Cyndi, but there is more to life for a teenager than hitting the books. He’s a good kid. He makes good grades. Marcus is going to go to college in a couple of years, we all know that. One girl isn’t going to stop him.”

“You haven’t seen this girl.”

Morgan raised a brow. “Have you?”

“No, but I’ve seen her mother, and if the daughter looks anything like the mother then I’m in trouble.”

“I still think you’re blowing things out of proportion,” Morgan countered. “If you make a big deal out of it, Marcus will rebel. You remember what happened last year when you didn’t want him to play football.”

Yes, Chance did remember, although he wished he could forget. He rubbed his hand down his face. Regardless of what his brothers said, he needed to talk to Marcus again. He didn’t have any problems with his son being interested in girls, he just didn’t want Marcus losing his head over one this soon.

Kylie was waiting in the living room the moment Tiffany walked through the door. She took one look at her daughter’s expression and realized Tiffany knew the conversation that was about to take place. Kylie tried not to show her anger, as well as a few other emotions, when she said, “We need to talk.”

Tiffany met her mother’s stare. “Look, Mom, I know what you’re going to say and I don’t think I did anything wrong.”

So much for not showing her anger, Kylie thought. “How can you say that? You planned to cut classes with a boy and you don’t consider that wrong?”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “My last two classes of the day are boring anyway, so we—”

“Boring? I don’t care how boring they are, you’re supposed to be in them and you will be in them anytime that bell sounds. Understood?”

Tiffany glared at her. “Yes, I understand.”

Kylie nodded. “Now, about Marcus Steele.”

Tiffany straightened her spine and immediately went on the defensive. “What about Marcus?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about him?”

“Why? So you could find some reason for me not to like him, Mom? Well, it won’t work because I do like him. You’re the one who wanted to leave Buffalo and move here. And I’m the one who was forced to go to another
school and make new friends. Not all of the kids at school like me. They say I talk funny. Marcus has been nice to me. Extremely nice. He asked me to be his girlfriend and I said yes.”

“You’re not old enough to have a boyfriend, Tiffany.”

“That’s your rule, Mom.”

“And one you will abide by, young lady.”

“Why? Because you think I’ll get pregnant like you did? That’s not fair.”

“It’s not about that, Tiffany. It’s about such things as keeping your reputation intact and not getting involved in anything you aren’t ready for.”

“It is about what happened to you when you were sixteen, Mom. And how do you know what I am or am not ready for? You want to shelter me and you can’t. You’ve talked to me, but the choice of what I do is ultimately mine.”

“No, it’s not,” Kylie bit out. “As long as you’re living under my roof, I make the rules and you will abide by them.”

“I can’t, Mom. I care too much for Marcus and we have news for you and Mr. Steele. We are madly in love!”

“Nothing either of you say is going to make us not be together, whether it’s at school or someplace else.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” Tiffany said stalking off to her room, “that I don’t want to talk anymore.”

Chance leaped to his feet. The sound of his chair crashing to the floor echoed loudly in the kitchen. “What do you mean you might not go to college but stay in Charlotte to be closer to Tiffany Hagan?” he shouted. His anger had clearly reached the boiling point.

“There’s no reason to get upset, Dad. What’s the big deal if I decided to hang around here and go to college? One university is just as good as another.”

Chance rubbed his hand down his face, trying to fight for composure, and quickly decided to use another approach. “Marcus,” he said calmly, “I’m sure Tiffany Hagan is a nice girl, but you’re only sixteen. In another couple of years you’ll finish high school and go to college where you will meet plenty of other nice girls. You have such a bright future ahead of you. I’d hate to see you get too serious about any girl now.”

A stubborn expression settled on Marcus’s face. “She’s not just any girl, Dad. Tiffany is the girl I plan to marry one day.”

“Marry!” Chance nearly swallowed the word in shock. “How did marriage get into the picture? You’re only sixteen! I know you think you really care for this girl and—”

“It’s more than that, Dad, and the sooner you and Tiffany’s mother realize it, the better. Tiffany and I are madly in love and we want to be together forever. There’s nothing either of you can say or do to stop us, so you may as well accept it.”

“Like hell I will.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Marcus said as he walked out of the kitchen toward his bedroom.

Total shock kept Chance from going after his son and wringing his neck.

Kylie paced the floor. Her nerves were stretched to the breaking point. Tiffany hadn’t come out of her room yet, which was probably the best thing.

Love!

At fifteen her daughter thought she was in love. Madly in love at that! Kylie swallowed a thickness in her throat when she realized how her mother must have felt sixteen years ago, dealing with her when she’d been obsessed with Sam Miller.

She paused when she heard the phone ring and quickly crossed the room to pick it up, thinking it was probably Lena checking to see how things with Tiffany had gone. “Hello.”

“We need to talk, Ms. Hagan.”

Kylie blinked at the sound of the ultra sexy male voice. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out who the caller was, or to know he’d evidently had another talk with his son. She sighed. Yes, they did need to talk. “You name the place and I’ll be there.”

“All right.” After a quiet pause, he said. “They think they’re in love. Madly in love.”

Kylie shook her head. “So I heard. Louder than I really cared to, in fact.”

“Same here. Do you know where the Racetrack Café is?”

“Yes.”

“Can you meet me there around noon tomorrow?”
Considering what was going on with Tiffany and his son, she really didn’t have a choice. Hopefully, together they could devise a way to stop the young couple before they got into more trouble than they could handle. “Yes, I can meet you there.”

“Fine, I’ll see you then.”

Chance arrived at the restaurant early to make sure they got a table. Jointly owned by several race car drivers on the NASCAR circuit, the Racetrack Café was a popular eatery in town. He hadn’t been seated more than five minutes when he glanced over at the entrance to see Kylie Hagan walk in.

He had hoped his mental picture of her from yesterday had been wrong, but it hadn’t. Kylie Hagan was an attractive woman. Every man in the place apparently thought so, too, judging by the looks they gave her. Not for the first time he wondered about her age and how someone who looked so young could have a fifteen-year-old daughter.

He watched her glance around before she spotted him. There wasn’t even a hint of a smile on her face as she walked toward him. But, he quickly decided, it didn’t matter. Smiling or not, she looked gorgeous dressed in a pair of black slacks and a blue pullover sweater. And those same curves that he’d convinced himself had to be a figment of his imagination made her slacks a perfect fit for her body. Even her walk was mesmerizing and sexy.

When she got closer, he saw the wariness around her eyes, which led him to believe that she’d probably gone a round or two with her daughter sometime during that day, as he’d done with Marcus. He wondered if the discussion had been about the “his and hers” tattoos Marcus had indicated he and Tiffany were thinking about getting.

Chance stood when she reached the table. “Ms. Hagan.”

“Mr. Steele.”

He thought they were overdoing the formality, but felt it was best to keep things that way for now. After all, this was nothing more than a business meeting, and the only item on the agenda was a discussion about their children.

After they had taken their seats, he asked, “Would you like to order anything? They have the best hamburgers and French fries in town.”

A small smile touched Kylie’s lips. “So I’ve heard. But no, I’m fine, you go ahead and order something if you’d like. It’s just that my most recent conversation with Tiffany has killed my appetite.”

Chance heard the quiver in her voice and recalled his own conversation with Marcus that morning before he’d left for school. “I take it Tiffany told you about the tattoo.”

He watched her nostrils flare as she drew in a silent breath. “Yes, she told me. Matching lovebirds on their tummies right above their navels, I understand.”

“That’s my understanding as well.” A soft chuckle erupted from his throat. There was a cloud hanging over his head that refused to go away and he had to find amusement anywhere he could to keep his sanity. But he had to believe this was just one part of parenthood that he would get through, and for some reason it was important to him for Kylie Hagan to believe that as well.

“Things are going to be all right, Ms. Hagan,” he said soothingly. “That’s why we’re meeting today, to make sure of it.” He flashed her a smile.

She glanced up and met his gaze. “I want to believe that,” she said quietly. “Under the circumstances I think we should forgo formality. Please call me Kylie.”

“Okay, and I’m Chance.” After a pause he said, “Kylie, I want you to believe things will work out. We have to think positively that we’ll get through this particular episode in our children’s lives. We have good kids—they’re just a little headstrong and stubborn. But I believe with some parental guidance they’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. Otherwise if they continue with the route they’re going, they’re bound to make a mistake.”

Chance raised a brow. “By mistake you mean…?”

“Taking their relationship to a level they aren’t ready for, Chance.”

He liked the way his name easily flowed from her lips. “I take it you mean sex.”

“Yes, that’s precisely what I’m talking about. Over the years, I’ve had the mother-daughter talks with Tiffany, but when teenagers are in love, or think they’re in love, they believe that sex is just another way to show how much they care.”

They paused in their conversation when a waitress came to give Chance his beer, hand them menus and fill their water glasses.

“And you think that’s going to be on their minds?” he asked.

Of course. Raging teenage hormones are the worst kind.”

He picked up his glass to take a sip of beer. “Are they?”

“Yes, trust me, I know. I had Tiffany when I was sixteen.”

Chance’s glass stopped midway to his lips. His mouth opened in surprise. “Sixteen?”
“Yes. So I hope you can understand why I’m upset with all of this. I don’t want Tiffany to make the same mistake I made as a teenager.”

Chance nodded. That explained the reason Kylie didn’t look old enough to have a fifteen-year-old daughter. That meant she was around thirty-one, but still she didn’t look a day over twenty-five. “Did you and Tiffany’s father get married?”

Her laugh was bitter. “Are you kidding? He had to make a choice between me and a football scholarship to Hampton University. He chose college.”

“I didn’t.”

Kylie glanced up from studying her water glass. “You didn’t what?”

“I was faced with the same decision as Tiffany’s father. My girlfriend, Marcus’s mother, got pregnant when we were seniors in high school. We were both eighteen and had plans for college. We acknowledged our mistake and felt that no matter what, we loved each other and loved the child we had made. Instead of going to college, we got married, remained here in Charlotte and made the best of things. I later went to college at night. My wife died of cancer when Marcus was nine.”

Chance finished his beer. A part of him regretted that the man who had gotten Kylie pregnant hadn’t done the responsible thing. “It must have been hard for you, pregnant at sixteen,” he said.

“It was.” He could tell by the way her lips were quivering their conversation was bringing back painful memories for her. “I disappointed my parents tremendously, embarrassed them. When it was determined that the father didn’t want me or his child as part of his future, my parents tried talking me into giving up my baby for adoption, but I refused. That caused friction between us the entire nine months. Things got so bad at home that I had to go live with my best friend and her mother the last couple months of my pregnancy.”

After taking a sip of water, she said, “The day the nurse brought Tiffany to me for the first time after I’d given birth to her, I gazed down at my beautiful daughter and knew I had made the right decision, no matter how my parents felt.”

“Did they eventually come around to your way of thinking?”

“Years later when they realized they were denying themselves the chance to get to know their granddaughter. But at first they wanted me to know what a mistake I’d made in keeping her. They’d intended to teach me a lesson. I couldn’t move back home so I continued to live with my friend’s family until I was able to get an apartment at seventeen. I finished high school at night while working at a grocery store as a cashier during the day. My best friend, who also became Tiffany’s godmother, kept her at night so I could finish school. It was hard but I was determined to make it work. After high school, I went to college and I struggled for years as a single parent before I finally earned a degree. I got a management position and later purchased a modest home for me and Tiffany.”

“What made you decide to move here?”

“The company where I worked as a supervisor decided to downsize. My position was no longer needed so they gave me a pretty nice severance package. Instead of seeing losing my job as the end of the world, I decided to turn it into an opportunity to do something I’d always wanted to do.”

“Open up a florist shop?”

“Yes. The reason I decided on Charlotte was that Lena had moved here after college and I liked the area the couple of times I’d come to visit her.”

“Lena?”

“Helena Spears, my best friend from high school.”

Chance smiled. “Helena Spears? I’ve met her on several occasions. She’s a Realtor in town and is very active with the Cancer Society. I think her father died of the disease some years ago.”

“He did, when Lena was fourteen. In recent years her mother has taken ill. I admire Lena for taking on the responsibility of her mother’s care the way she has.”

Kylie leaned back in her chair. “So knowing my history, Chance, I hope you can understand why I don’t want Tiffany to make the same mistakes I did. I don’t have anything against your son personally. I’m sure he’s a fine young man. I just don’t think he and Tiffany are ready for any sort of a relationship just yet.”

“And I totally agree. So what do you think we should do?”

“I think we should meet with them, tell them our feelings, let them know we understand how they feel, or how they think they feel, since we were young once. But we should try to do whatever we can to slow down things between them. They’re moving too fast. One day I didn’t even know Marcus existed and now my daughter is claiming to be madly in love with him.”

When the waitress came back to take their order, Chance glanced over at Kylie. “You’re still not hungry?”

Kylie smiled. “Yes, in fact I think I’m going to try a hamburger and fries.”

Chance returned her smile. “I think I will, too.”
“I’m glad we had our little talk,” Chance said as he walked Kylie to her car an hour or so later.

“So am I,” she said honestly, although the whole time she’d sat across from him she’d had to fight back her
drool. She was amazed at the thoughts that had crept into her mind. Thoughts of how Chance Steele had to have one
of the sexiest mouths she’d ever seen. And the type of physique that drew feminine attention. Watching him eat had
been quite an ordeal. She’d had to fight the urge to squirm in her seat each time he bit into his hamburger. Her
attraction to him was truly bizarre, considering the real problem was finding a way to keep their kids in line.

But she would be crazy not to acknowledge that she was drawn to him in a way she hadn’t been drawn to a man
in years. Sexual longings were something she hadn’t had to deal with for quite some time. Being in Chance’s
company she had been reminded of just how long it had been.

“So we’ve decided that I’m to bring Marcus over to your place for Sunday dinner so the four of us can sit down
and talk,” he said when they reached her car.

“Yes, that’s the plan.”

“And I think it’s a good one. We need to talk to them, but even more importantly, we need to let them talk to
us. And no matter what, we’re going to have to keep our cool, even when we’d like nothing better than to ring their
little necks. The situation we’re dealing with calls for strategy and tact, not anger.”

She tilted her head up and looked at him. “Strategy and tact I can handle, but it’s going to be hard keeping my
anger in check,” she said, thinking of the conversation she’d had with Tiffany that morning before the girl had left
for school. Her daughter was intent on being stubborn, no matter what.

“We’ll not only get through it, we’ll succeed,” Chance said.

Kylie knew he was trying to alleviate some of her worries and she appreciated it. “Okay, then I’ll see you and
Marcus on Sunday. I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

“And I’m looking forward to meeting Tiffany as well.” As he held the car door for her he shook his head and
laughed. “Matching lovebird tattoos. Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?”

Chance drew Kylie into his amusement. “No, and what’s really crazy is that Tiffany is petrified of needles.”

“Well, it’s been said that love makes you do foolish things.”

Later that night Chance swore as he got out of bed. For the first time in eight years, a woman other than his
wife had invaded his dreams. Every time he’d closed his eyes, he’d seen Kylie Hagan’s face.

It seemed as if he couldn’t keep his mind from dredging up memories of her. First there was her appearance
yesterday when a T-shirt and a pair of shorts covered her shapely body. And today, at the café, the slacks and
sweater she’d been wearing had made him appreciate the fact that he was a male.

And then there were the times she would do something as simple as drink water from her glass. He couldn’t
help but watch the long, smooth column of her throat as water passed down it. He had wanted to kiss every inch of
her neck and had wondered how it would feel for her to grip him the way she was gripping her glass.

Chance dragged a hand down his face thinking it had been a long time for him. Way too long. Sexual cravings
were something he’d barely had to deal with, but now he was having several sharp attacks. In addition to the lust he
was feeling for her, he also felt a deep sense of admiration.

She had given birth to a child at sixteen, hadn’t given in to her parents’ demand that she give the child up for
adoption, and had struggled the past fifteen years as a single parent who’d gotten a college education and had
provided for herself and her daughter. He considered what she’d done a success story. What he really appreciated
was the fact that her past experiences enabled her to foresee what could be a potentially dangerous situation for
Tiffany and Marcus. It was clear as glass that she didn’t want them to make the same mistake she’d made.

As he left the bedroom and headed for the kitchen, he thought about his own situation with Cyndi. They had
been blessed in that both sets of parents had been supportive of their decision to keep their child and marry. And
when Marcus was born, there was no doubt in Chance’s mind that Cyndi’s parents, as well as his own, loved their
first grandchild unconditionally. His heart went out to both Kylie and Tiffany when he thought about what they had
been denied.

His pulse began racing when he thought about dinner at Kylie’s place on Sunday when he would be seeing her
again. That was one dinner engagement that he was looking forward to.

Kylie awoke with a start, finding that she was drenched in sweat…or heat, since what had awakened her was an
erotic dream.

Chance Steele had kissed her, touched her, made love to her. At first she had moaned in protest but then they’d
become moans of pleasure. But at the exact moment he was about to do away with all the mind-blowing foreplay
and enter her body to take total possession, she had awakened.
She pulled herself into a sitting position and struggled to calm her ragged breath. Perspiration cloaked her body, a sign of just how long she had been in denial. For a brief moment, everything had seemed real, including the way his skin felt beneath her palms, how thick and solid his muscles were against her body and just how good those same muscles felt melding into hers.

With a deep sigh of disgust, she threw the covers back and got out of bed. Why, after fifteen years, did she finally become attracted to a man who just happened to be the father of the boy who could become her worst nightmare? On the way to the bathroom, she inwardly cursed for finding Chance so damn handsome.

As she turned on the shower and began stripping out of her damp nightclothes, she thought about how her life had been over the past fifteen years. Sam was the first and only man she had slept with. Once Tiffany had been born, her precious little girl had become the most important thing to her, her very reason for existing, and the years that followed had been busy ones as a single parent. Although a number of men had shown interest, a relationship with any of them had taken a backseat. It was either bad timing or a lack of desire on her part to share herself with anyone other than Tiffany. In essence, she had placed her needs aside to take care of the needs of her child.

But now it seemed that those needs were catching up with her. Something sharp, unexpected and mind-blowingly stimulating was taking its toll. For years she had been able to keep those urges under control, but now it seemed a losing battle. It was as if her body was saying, I won’t let you deny me any longer.

As she stepped into the shower and stood beneath the spray of water, she knew that she was in deep trouble. Not only did she have to deal with the situation going on with Tiffany and Marcus, but she had to deal with her own attraction to Chance. It was sheer foolishness to become this enamored with a man she had only met a couple of days ago, and the very thought that she had gone so far as to dream about him making love to her was totally unacceptable.

No matter how intense the sexual longings invading her body, she had to get a grip. And more than anything, she had to remember that men couldn’t be depended on to always do the right thing. Sam had proven that to her in a big way, and so had her father. He had let her down when he’d meekly gone along with her mother’s treatment of her when she’d gotten pregnant.

Moments later when she stepped out of the shower, dried off and donned a fresh nightgown, she had to concede that the water hadn’t washed any thoughts of Chance from her mind. She had a feeling that even when she went back to bed she wouldn’t experience anything close to a peaceful sleep.
“You actually invited Marcus and his father for dinner on Sunday!”

Kylie lifted a brow as she washed her hands in the kitchen sink. Surprised at the excitement she heard in her daughter’s voice, she turned to meet her gaze. “I take it that you don’t have a problem with it.”

The enthusiasm in Tiffany’s voice dropped a degree when she shrugged her shoulders and said, “No, why should I? Just as long as you and Mr. Steele aren’t going to try and break us up, because it won’t happen. Marcus and I are—”

“Madly in love,” Kylie rushed in to finish, stifling her anger as she dried her hands. “I know.” If she heard her daughter exclaim the depth of her love for Marcus Steele one more time she would scream.

“I thought it would be a good idea for me to finally meet Marcus, considering how you feel about him,” Kylie said.

“Why is Mr. Steele coming?”

“Because he’s Marcus’s father and, like me, he wants what’s best for his child.”

“Oh, then, he won’t have to worry about a thing because I am the best.”

Kylie rolled her eyes thinking her daughter was getting conceited lately—another of Sam’s traits rearing its ugly head.

“So the two of you have been talking a lot?”

Kylie frowned as she began making the pancakes for breakfast. “The two of who?”

“You and Mr. Steele.”

“More than we’ve wanted to, I’m sure,” Kylie said with forced calmness. The last thing her daughter needed to know was just what an impact Chance Steele was having on her. Just as she’d figured last night, she hadn’t been able to go back to sleep without visions of him dancing around in her head.

“How does he look?”

Many of the descriptive words that came to mind she couldn’t possibly share with her daughter. “He’s handsome, so I take it that Marcus is handsome, too.”

Tiffany beamed. “Yes, of course.” Then seconds later she said, “I heard Mr. Steele is nice.”

Kylie expelled a deep breath. “I don’t know him well enough to form an opinion but I have no reason to think that he’s not.” Although she pretended nonchalance, she couldn’t stop herself from glancing over at Tiffany and asking, “Who told you he was nice?”

“Marcus. He thinks the world of his father.”

Kylie’s first reaction at hearing that statement was to ask why, if Marcus thought the world of his dad, he was causing Chance so much grief.

“He doesn’t date much.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Steele.”

With his good looks and fine body, Kylie found that hard to believe. “Don’t you think you need to start getting dressed for school?” she prompted, not wanting to discuss Chance any longer.

Tiffany nodded. “I’ll be back in time for pancakes,” she said as she rushed out of the kitchen.

When she was gone, Kylie leaned against the counter wondering why Chance had dominated their conversation. Was there a possibility that Tiffany was nervous about meeting Marcus’s father? She couldn’t help but remember the first time Sam had taken her to meet his parents. They hadn’t been impressed with her and hadn’t wasted any time letting her and Sam know they thought the two of them were too young to be involved.

Too bad she hadn’t taken the Millers’s opinion seriously. How differently things would have turned out if she had. But then she could never regret having Tiffany in her life, even now when her daughter was determined to make her hair gray early.

So, she thought as she pulled the orange juice out of the refrigerator, Chance didn’t date often. Rather interesting…

Chance leaned back in the chair and stared out his office window. Instead of reading the report from the research-and-development department, he was sitting at his desk thinking of a reason to call Kylie Hagan. After that
dream last night, he had awoken obsessed with hearing her voice.

Gut-twisting emotions clawed through him. It was bad enough that his son was totally besotted with the daughter, now it seemed he was becoming obsessed with the mother. He hadn’t even managed to brush his teeth this morning without Kylie consuming his thoughts. He gritted those same teeth, not liking the position he was in one damn bit.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t dated since Cyndi’s death. But he quickly admitted that Kylie was different from any woman he’d taken out. She had a strong, independent nature that he admired. She had raised her child alone and when times had gotten tough with the downsizing of her job, she had made what she’d felt were the best decisions for the both of them. Even considering all of that, he still wondered what about her had not only grabbed his attention but was holding it tight. Could it be that now that he was getting older with a son who would be leaving for college in a couple of years, the thought of being alone scared him? Of course, he had his brothers, but they had their own lives.

Sebastian was the corporation’s problem solver and troubleshooter. The Steele Corporation was more than just a company to Bas; it was his lifeline. Bas had been the last brother to join the company, and of the four, he had been the one to give their parents the most grief while growing up. Cutting school on a regular basis had been minor considering the other things he’d done. His reputation for getting into mischief was legendary. Trouble had seemed to find Bas, even when he wasn’t looking for it. His engagement had mystified his brothers since he was the last Steele anyone would have thought would want to tie the knot.

Then there was Morgan, who headed R & D. Although he dated, everyone teased Morgan about holding out for the perfect woman. So far he hadn’t found a woman who qualified for the role, although he was convinced one existed.

Last but not least was Donovan, who women claimed could seduce them with his voice alone. The youngest of the Steele brothers headed product administration, but unlike Bas, who was married to the corporation, Donovan always managed to carve out some play time.

“It doesn’t look like you’re busy, big brother, so I’ll just come in.”

Chance turned his head and watched as Bas entered his office. He sat up, a little surprised that anyone, including his brother, had made it past his secretary without being announced. “Where’s Joanna?” he asked. It was a rare occurrence for Joanna Cabot to leave her post without advising him.

Bas smiled. “Just where is your mind today, Chance? Have you forgotten that Robert Parker is retiring and today’s his last day in sales? We were all at the celebration downstairs and wondering where you were. I made an excuse for you by telling everyone you probably had gotten detained on an important call.”

Chance muttered a low curse. He had forgotten about Robert’s retirement party. Robert had been part of the Steele Corporation when their father, Lester Steele, had run things. Now their retired parents were living the life in the Keys, doing all the things they’d always dreamed of doing, and had left the family business in the hands of their capable sons and niece.

“Yes, I’d forgotten about it.”

Bas leaned against the closed door. “Umm, and you were just talking about it yesterday, which makes me wonder what’s weighing so heavily on your mind.”

Chance stood and quickly slipped into his suit jacket. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

Bas scowled. “You aren’t losing sleep over that Marcus affair, are you? You are chilling like we told you to do, right?”

Chance decided not to tell Bas that the Marcus affair had conveniently become his own personal affair, thanks to Tiffany Hagan’s mother. “Yes, I’m chilling.”

Bas laughed. “You wouldn’t know how to chill if your life depended on it.”

Chance rolled his eyes, grinning. “Look who’s talking.”

It was a couple of hours later that Chance arrived back in his office. A part of him was still obsessed with hearing Kylie’s voice. Deciding not to fight it any longer, he pulled out his wallet to find the business card she had given him the other day at the café. He picked up the phone, then put it back down. Damn, he wanted to do more than talk to her. He wanted to see her.

He reached for the phone and punched in the number to connect with his secretary. “Ms. Cabot, I’m leaving early today. If an emergency comes up you can reach me on my cell phone.”

Strategy and tact were the methods he’d mentioned to Kylie for bringing their children around. Little did she know he was about to apply that same technique on her.

Kylie turned at the sound of the shop door opening with a smile of greeting on her lips. The smile quickly faded when she saw it was the one man who had invaded her dreams last night.
She took a calming breath, remembering her reaction the first time she’d seen him when he’d walked through her door two days ago. Nothing had changed. Dressed in another powerhouse business suit, he looked drop-dead gorgeous.

She tried not to stare at him like a love-struck teenager, but found she was helpless in doing so. Chance Steele wasn’t just any man. He was the one man who had started her blood circulating again in some very intimate places. He was definitely a man who was the very epitome of everything male.

“Hi,” she said, deciding to break the silence when they just stood there staring at each other.

“Hi.” He then glanced around. “You’re not busy.”

“No, the lunch crowd has come and gone.”

“Oh. Would you like to go out?”

She raised a brow. “Out where?”

“To lunch.”

Surprise flickered in the depths of Kylie’s dark eyes. “To lunch?”

“Yes,” he said, giving her a smile that made her stomach clench. “Would you go to lunch with me?”

“Why? Do we need to talk about the kids again?”

“No.”

That single word sent her mind into a spin. He wanted to take her out but not to talk about the kids. Then what on earth would they talk about?

Chance must have seen the question in her eyes because he said, “I discovered something very important yesterday at the café, Kylie.”

“What?”

“I enjoyed your company a lot. A whole lot.” Then as an afterthought, he added, “I don’t date often.”

His confession was the same as Tiffany had said that very morning. Although she knew it probably wasn’t good manners, Kylie couldn’t help asking, “Why?”

He shrugged. “For a number of reasons but I can probably sum it up in one rationale.”

“What is?”

“Lack of interest.”

Kylie knew all about lack of interest. She’d been dealing with it for over fifteen years. She hadn’t wanted the drama of getting into a hot and heavy relationship with someone, nor had she wanted to expose Tiffany to the drama, either. “Oh, I see.”

“Do you?”

Nervously, Kylie stared down at her hands, confused by a lot of questions, the main one being why she was more attracted to Chance than any other man. She lifted her head. “Then maybe I don’t see after all.”

Her heart began racing when he started crossing the room. When he came to a stop directly in front of her, he placed his finger under her chin, lifting her gaze to meet his. “In that case, for us to go to lunch together is a rather good idea.”

She was warmed by his touch. “Why would you think that?”

“Because it would make things easier for us on Sunday if we were honest with ourselves about a few things now.”

Kylie’s eyes clung to his, knowing he was right. There was no need to play dumb. There was something happening between them that she didn’t need or want, but it was happening anyway. And they needed to get it out in the open, talk about it and put a stop to it before it went any further. How could they help their kids battle lust when they’d found themselves in the same boat?

She drew in a deep breath. “All right, if you’ll give me a second, I need to close up and put the Out to Lunch sign on the door.”

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

Chance stood to the side while Kylie went about closing her shop. His eyes roamed over her with more than mild intensity. For some reason, today she looked even younger than she had the other days. She was wearing shorts and a top again, and he thought her legs were just as shapely as he remembered and her body just as curvy.

He couldn’t help the desire that quickly escalated to extreme hunger and hit him in the gut. For one intense moment, he felt a burning desire to walk across the room and take her mouth with his. The need to taste her was driving him insane.

“I’m ready.”

He blinked, realizing she had spoken. He inhaled a calming breath and fought for composure. He was ready, too, but doubted they were ready for the same thing.
“One of these days I’ll take you to a place that serves something other than hamburgers and fries.”

Kylie smiled as he led the way to their table. To save time they had decided to grab a quick lunch at Burger King. “I don’t mind,” she said, as butterflies began floating around in her stomach. Did he realize he’d just insinuated that he would be taking her out again?

“It’s not too crowded,” he said, pulling the chair out for her.

“No, I guess the lunch crowd has come and gone.”

“Which is fine with me. Before I go order, I think I need to do this.” He pulled off his tie and stuffed it into the pocket of his jacket. Then he reached for the top of his shirt and worked a couple of buttons through the holes. “I’m a little too overdressed for this place.”

Kylie watched as he walked off toward the counter, thinking that an overdressed Chance was the last thing on her mind. Thoughts of an undressed Chance seemed to be cemented into her brain. In a suit he looked handsome, professional and suave. And she would bet that even in a pair of jeans and a shirt he would look rugged and sexy. She didn’t want to think about how he would look without any clothes on at all. But she had, several times, day and night, and that wasn’t good.

It didn’t take long for him to return and they began digging into their food. It was only when they were halfway through their meal that Chance spoke. He leaned in close, smiled and said, “I was wondering about something.”

“What?”

“Since we’ve assigned ourselves the task of monitoring our kids’ behavior, to make sure they stay out of trouble, whom should we assign to do the same thing for us?”
That was a good question, Kylie thought as she held Chance’s gaze from across the table. Who would make sure the two of them stayed out of trouble?

The smile on Chance’s lips matched the one in his eyes. Still, she knew that, like her, Chance realized this was a serious discussion. A part of her wished she could forget that he was Marcus’s father and that they’d met because of their children. But she couldn’t forget, even while her attention focused on nothing but the shape of his mouth. It taunted her to lean in and cop a taste.

She drew in a deep breath, trying to regain control, and got a sniff of his cologne. The manly scent of him was unnerving, totally sexy.

“Don’t look at me like that, Kylie.”

She blinked and saw more than a bare hint of challenge in his eyes. She didn’t have to wonder just how she’d been looking at him. The throb between her legs told the whole story and then some. It was a deep ache and it was all she could do from asking him to relieve her of her pain.

She was astounded with her lack of strength where Chance was concerned and wished she could ignore how he made her feel, dismiss the longings he stirred inside of her. But at the moment she couldn’t. At least not while her heart was beating a mile a minute and the heat was taking her body to an intolerable degree.

Regardless, she knew she had to fight temptation and take control. She wasn’t a lustful teenager. She was a grown woman of thirty-one. A woman with a teenage daughter she should be concerned about. Tiffany was important. Tiffany was the only thing that mattered.

With all the strength she could muster, she broke eye contact and busied herself with pulling napkins out of the holder. “I don’t want this, Chance,” she said, knowing he knew full well what she meant.

He nodded. “To be honest with you, I don’t want it, either, Kylie. So tell me how we can stop it.”

She shrugged. It wasn’t as if she had any answers. She was definitely lurking in uncharted territory. The only thing she knew was that around him she had the tendency to feel things she’d never felt before. No man had ever made her breathless, excited and hot. When it came to the opposite sex, she felt just as inexperienced as her daughter. Oh, sure, she’d engaged in sex before, and at the time she’d thought it was pretty good, once she’d gotten beyond the pain. But Sam had been just as young and inexperienced as she had been, and she figured what she’d always thought of as satisfaction was nothing more than an appeasement of her curiosity and the elation of finally reaching womanhood at the hands of someone she thought she loved.

But she wanted more than that for Tiffany. More than teenage lust eroding what could be a wonderful experience with the man she married. That was the reason she was sitting here, a little past one, with the sexiest man alive. It wasn’t about them. It was about their children. They needed to realize that and get back on track.

“I think the first thing we should do is to remember the reason we’re here in the first place. You have a business to run and so do I, but our kids take top priority. Nothing else. My wants and needs have always come second to my daughter’s and things will continue to be that way, Chance.”

She paused briefly before she continued. “It’s going to take the two of us working together to keep things from going crazy between Tiffany and Marcus. Shifting our concentration from them to us will not only make us lose focus, but will have us making some of the same mistakes they’d be making.”

“So, you’re suggesting that we pretend we don’t have urges and that we aren’t attracted to each other? You think it will be that easy?” he asked.

The frustration in his tone matched her own feelings. “No, it won’t be easy, Chance. To be quite honest with you, it will probably be the hardest thing I’ve had to do in fifteen years.”

She thought about the men in her past who had shown interest in her and how she’d sent them away without a moment’s hesitation. There had been that new guy at work who tried hitting on her several times; then there was that guy who worked at the post office who had enjoyed flirting with her. Not to mention that handsome man at the grocery store who gave her that “I want to get to know you” smile. But none of them had piqued her interest like Chance had. None of them had offered any temptation. Chance was too incredibly sexy for his own good. Even worse, he was a pretty nice guy.

“We have to keep our heads,” she said. “Or the kids will take advantage without us realizing it.” Kylie hoped—prayed—that he wouldn’t give her any hassles. They needed to be in accord. They needed to be a team with one
focus.

He leaned over the table, closer to her. “I know you’re right but…”

She lifted an arched brow. “But what?”

“At this very moment, the only thing I want is to kiss you.”

His blatant honesty, as well as the heat of his gaze, burned her. She could actually feel the flame. His softly uttered words only intensified the throbbing between her legs, and made fiery sensations rip through her stomach. It wouldn’t take much for her to lean in to him and mesh her lips with his, satisfy at least one craving they evidently both had. And without any control, her body began doing just that, leaning closer…

They jumped apart at the sound of a car backfiring. Kylie’s eyes widened and her cheeks tinted with embarrassment. They were sitting in the middle of Burger King thinking of sharing a kiss, for heaven’s sake!

“Are you ready to go?” Chance asked.

Kylie drew in a deep breath. Yes, she was ready. The sooner she got back to the shop the better. There, she could regain her sensibilities, take back control of her mind. No doubt Chance had more experience dealing with this sort of thing than she did. Regardless, she knew she couldn’t depend on him to keep things in perspective. An affair with Chance was the last thing she wanted. No matter what, she had to remember that.

“Thanks for lunch, Chance,” Kylie said to him as he backed out of Burger King’s parking lot.

“You’re welcome. I enjoyed it.”

For the next few minutes they shared pleasant conversation in which he told her about his parents retiring to Florida and about his three brothers and three female cousins. It wasn’t hard to tell that the Steele family was close.

“So how is your flower business?”

She appreciated him asking. It was a good idea to stick to general conversation. “So far business is good. Before moving here I did my research, made sure adding another florist wasn’t overcrowding the market.”

“You have a good location since it’s an area ripe for development.”

“Yes, and I owe it all to Lena. She put her real estate skills to work and gave me a call one day. It was just what I was looking for, exactly what I needed. I grow a lot of my own plants in the greenhouse out back. Those I don’t grow I get from a pretty good supplier.”

She paused briefly as he glanced over at her. He hadn’t put back on his jacket or tie, which made her wonder if he planned to go back to the office or just chill the rest of the day. She scolded herself when she realized what Chance did was really none of her business.

“If you don’t mind, I need to make a stop. It won’t take but a couple of minutes. I promise to get you back to your shop before two.”

“All right.”

She blinked seconds later when he pulled up to a car wash. She thought his SUV looked pretty clean. It was definitely in better condition than her car.

“I have those pesky bugs on my fender,” Chance said, as he eased his truck into the bay.

The automatic equipment began moving around the truck, blasting water over it and hiding them from the outside world in a cocoon-like waterfall. The insides of the truck suddenly got dark, intimate, warm.

She didn’t want to but she couldn’t help but glance over at Chance. Seeing the seductive look in his eyes, she knew this was no coincidence. Coming here had been deliberate on his part.

“This is the first time I’ve done this. I’ve never brought a woman with me to get my truck washed,” he said in a husky voice. “But I want to kiss you, Kylie.”

Kylie swallowed at the passion she heard in his voice. She hated admitting it but she wanted to kiss him as well. But still…

“Chance, I thought we decided that—”

“Please.” His tone vibrated with a need that touched her when she knew it shouldn’t. “Ten minutes is all I ask.”

Kylie blinked. Ten minutes? A car wash took that long? As if reading the question in her eyes, he said, “I’m getting a heavy-duty wash.”

“Oh.” Still, she’d never been kissed for ten minutes.

“Come here, Kylie. Please.”

The knot in her throat thickened. She knew he wanted her to slide over to him, and heaven help her but she wanted it, too. Without stopping to question the wisdom of her actions, she unsnapped her seat belt and scooted toward him. When she got close enough he pushed back the seat and pulled her into his lap. His arms automatically closed around her shoulders as he held her in a warm embrace.

“Thank you,” he said huskily, before sweeping his tongue across her lips and taking her mouth, hungrily, thoroughly. The first touch of his mouth on hers had her automatically parting her lips. And now with the insertion
of his tongue, he brought out a responsive need in her so deep, she began to intimately stroke his tongue with hers.

She had never been kissed this way, had never known that such a way was possible. But it was clear as glass that Chance had a special, skillful technique. His tongue was stroking the top of her mouth, sliding over her teeth, entwining his tongue with hers, sucking relentlessly on it.

Her breasts, pressing against his chest, felt full, sensitive and tight. Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around his neck as they greedily consumed each other. She tasted every inch of his mouth while pressed against him, feeling the way his body had hardened beneath her bottom.

The kiss went on and on as his mouth continued to take hers, skilfully, thoroughly, tantalizing every bone in her body and making her conscious of just what a master he was at igniting sensations.

And they were ignited—by sensations she had never felt before. She was experiencing the emotions of a woman and not a sixteen-year-old girl. In reality, this was her first taste of passion and Chance was delivering it in grand style.

There was a need hammering deep within her that she didn’t understand, but evidently Chance did, since he seemed to sense just what she wanted, just what she needed, even if she wasn’t certain. The only thing she was sure about was that he had taken their kiss to a level she hadn’t known possible.

The sound of a car door slamming made her remember where they were and what they were doing. The honking of a horn indicated that someone was behind them waiting for their vehicle to move. Still, Chance took his time easing his mouth from hers. She could barely think. She could barely breathe. And she could barely break the connection of the dark eyes locked with hers.

“I think the truck is clean enough now, don’t you?” he asked throatily against her moist lips with a sound that sent sensuous chills down her body.

Kylie didn’t trust herself to speak at the moment. When he released her, she slid out of his lap and back across the seat. She’d read about women being kissed senseless but never in her wildest dreams had she thought such a thing was possible. Boy, had she been wrong.

She snapped her seat belt back in place as she felt the truck move forward. When they were back in the sunlight, a dose of reality struck. They’d been in the midst of making out in his truck like teenagers. She inhaled deeply, wondering how she could have let things get so out of hand.

“It was inevitable, Kylie.”

She glanced over at him. Just because what he said was true didn’t mean she liked hearing it.

“Well, don’t have any regrets,” he said softly.

How could she have regrets when she had been a willing participant, just as much into the kiss as he had been? However, she did intend to have her say. “We need to have more control, Chance. How can we expect our kids to have control if we don’t?”

He pulled the truck to the side and parked it, and then glanced over at her. “They’re kids, but we’re adults, Kylie. Our wants and needs are more defined than theirs. And a lot more profound.”

“Sounds like a double standard to me.”

“It’s not. That kiss we shared has nothing to do with our kids. That was strictly personal, between me and you.”

She stared at him, hoping he understood what she was about to say. “I don’t have any regrets about the kiss but it can’t happen again, Chance.”

A slow smile played across his lips. “That’s easier said than done, Kylie. I tasted your response. You’re a very passionate woman, moreso than you even know. You’ve denied yourself pleasure for a long time and now that your body has savored just a sampling, it’s going to want more.”

She didn’t like what he was insinuating. Okay, so she had been a little greedy back there, but still, she had her morals.

“And your principles have nothing to do with it,” he said as if he’d read her mind. “So don’t even think it. It’s about needs that are old and primitive as mankind. I have them and you have them, too.”

She frowned. “And I’m supposed to jump into bed with any man just to appease him?”

“No. Only with me.”

He evidently saw the startled look in her face, because he then added, “But I’m willing to wait until you’re ready.”

Kylie inhaled and decided it would be a waste of her time to tell him that no matter how much she had enjoyed their kiss, when it came to an affair, she would never be ready. Especially not with him.

Another night and Chance couldn’t sleep a wink. But at least tonight he wasn’t being kept awake wondering how it would be to kiss Kylie since he’d gotten a real down-to-earth experience earlier that day.

And it had been better than he’d imagined.
The moments their lips had connected he had felt a slow sizzle all the way to his toes. The more he’d kissed her, the more she had wiggled closer for a better connection, and while his truck was getting the wash it really hadn’t needed, he was inside with her locked in his arms, and getting hotter by the second.

She had felt like she belonged in his arms and the firm breasts that had been pressed against his chest had felt like they were meant to touch him that way. More than once he had been tempted to ease his hand under her blouse and cup her breasts, massage them, lift her blouse and lower his head and actually taste them.

The only reason he had finally lifted his mouth from hers had been to breathe in some air. He had heard the car behind them blowing the horn but he would have stayed right there and ignored the sound if he hadn’t needed to breathe. What he’d told her was true. She was one responsive woman but he hadn’t meant it as a bad thing. He was beginning to realize that everything about Kylie Hagan was all good.

He glanced over at the clock. It was a few minutes past eleven. He wondered if she was still awake. He reached for the phone, deciding there was only one way to find out.

Trying to get to sleep that night was torture for Kylie. The vivid memory of their kiss in Chance’s truck, her sitting in his lap while his tongue stroked her mouth into sweet heaven, kept her wide awake.

She remembered the feel of her breasts, their fullness, their sensitivity, and how at one point she had wanted his lips to bestow the same magic on them that he was giving her mouth. Then there was the feel of his body growing hard beneath her bottom. She would have given anything to feel that same erection cradled into the V of her thighs.

Feeling frustrated in the worst possible way, she was about to get out of bed when her telephone rang. She reached over and picked it up. “Hello.”

“I just wanted to hear your voice one more time tonight.”

Kylie breathed deeply at the seductiveness of Chance’s tone. She had wanted to hear his voice again, too, but hadn’t had the nerve to call him. He was definitely bolder than she.

“Kylie?”

She swallowed hard before saying, “I’m here.”

“Yes, but I wish you were here.”

She shook her head. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Your opinion and not mine.”

“We all have opinions.”

“Yes, and we all have the capability of getting a good night’s sleep. At least some of us do.”

She lifted her eyebrows. Was he having trouble sleeping as well? “Try counting sheep.”

“I tried that and it didn’t work. Any more suggestions?”

She pulled herself up in bed and relaxed against the huge pillow. “We could talk.”

“About what?”

“Anything you want to talk about—except what happened this afternoon.”

There was a pause, and then he said, “Okay, fair enough. I’ll let you choose the topic.”

“All right. Tell me about Marcus. Whenever I ask Tiffany about him the only words she can fix her mouth to say are, ‘Oh, he’s simply wonderful.’”

Chance chuckled. “Hey, I’m the kid’s father. Do you expect me to admit to any of his flaws? If she thinks he’s wonderful, then who am I to disagree?”

“Be serious, Chance.”

Evidently there was something he sensed in her voice that let him know she needed to know about Marcus before actually meeting him on Sunday.

“On a scale of one to ten with ten being exceptional, I’ll give Marcus a nine. He isn’t perfect but for the past sixteen years he has been a son any father would be proud to claim. He’s smart, and he’s also sensitive, something he inherited from his mother. Cyndi was a warm, loving and sensitive person.”

The undisguised love she heard in his voice let her know that he had cared for his wife very much. “How old was Marcus when his mother died?”

“He was nine and he took her death hard. Thankfully, he had my parents, Cyndi’s parents and my brothers and cousins. Still, there were times when I worried about him. I made Cyndi a promise the day before she died that I would do everything within my power to make sure that Marcus had all the opportunities that we either didn’t have or didn’t take advantage of, especially when it came to college.”

She nodded. No wonder he was so intense about his son staying focused to get into a good university.

“Marcus knew of his mother’s dreams for him and after she died it was as if he was trying to honor her memory by doing everything that she’d wanted. He was always at the top of his class, and I never had to remind him to do homework. He tried so hard to please me because I think in his mind, pleasing me meant pleasing his mom as well.”
“And then here comes Miss Tiffany....”
Chance chuckled again and in her mind she could actually see a smile lighting up his eyes. “Ahh, yes, here comes Miss Tiffany. But before Tiffany came football. I hadn’t wanted him to play. I had played in school and I knew how grueling practice could be. I wasn’t sure Marcus could handle it and still keep his grades up. I think that was the first time the two of us butted heads.”

After a pause he said, “Luckily he had his uncles on his side. It took my brothers to make me see that I was being unrealistic and that it wasn’t all about making good grades. Marcus had a few more years in high school to go, and kids these days need to be well-rounded and I was keeping him from being that.”

“So he started playing football?”
“Yes, and the girls started calling...and calling and calling. My phone was a regular hotline. But I think they annoyed him more than captivated his interest. At least until Tiffany.”

“Tiffany used to call your house all the time?” Kylie asked, somewhat surprised.

“No, and that’s what’s so strange. I can’t recall her ever calling. That’s why I was taken aback when I found that note and was stumped further when Marcus told me, in no uncertain terms, just how he felt about her. It was as if she appeared one day out of the clear blue sky.”

Kylie nodded. It was as if Marcus had appeared out of the clear blue sky as well. He’d definitely been one well-kept secret.

“Now it’s your turn.”
“My turn?” Kylie echoed.

“Yes, to tell me all about Tiffany so I can be prepared.”

Kylie’s lips tilted into a smile. “I don’t think anyone can ever get fully prepared for Tiffany. She’s smart, funny and extremely outgoing. An extrovert if you’ve ever seen one. I think that’s why she’s having trouble making friends at school since we moved here. I don’t think the kids know how to take her. They see her genuinely exuberant nature as being insincere and phony.”

Kylie’s smile then widened. “There is, however, something that I do think you should know.”

“What?”
“I told Tiffany that as Marcus’s father you would want what was best for him.”

“And?”
And she feels certain that you’re going to like her when the two of you meet because she is definitely the best.”
Chance laughed. “Sounds like a person with a lot of confidence.”

“A little too much at times. It comes from her dad’s side of the family.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with having an overabundance of confidence.”

“Remember you said that when you meet her on Sunday.”

There was a hint of amusement in Chance’s voice when he said, “I will. And by the way, is there anything you need for me to bring?”

“Yes, a lot of prayer just in case Tiffany and Marcus don’t want to go along with our plans for them.”

“Hello.”

“Marcus, are you awake?”

Marcus clutched the phone as he buried his head back underneath his pillow. “Tiffany, it’s Saturday morning. Nobody gets up before eight on Saturdays.”

“I do. Some of us have chores to do and the earlier they get done the better. I only called this time of the morning because you said your dad always plays basketball every Saturday morning with his brothers, and you told me to call if I had anything to report.”

Marcus removed the pillow. She had gotten his attention. “And you have something to report?”

“Yes. Your dad called here last night. And it was late.”

Marcus lifted a curious eyebrow. “How do you know?”

“Your phone number showed up on our caller ID this morning and it showed the time as close to midnight. That means our parents are talking after-hours. That’s a good sign.”

“But what if he just called to get directions to your house or something?”

“At midnight? Think positive, Marcus.”

“Okay. But we should be able to tell if anything is going on when we see them together tomorrow, right?”

“I hope so, Marcus.”

“Yeah, I hope so, too, considering how much of a pain in the butt I’ve been to my dad over the past week.”
Chapter 5

By the time Chance and Marcus arrived at Kylie’s home on Sunday evening, Chance was chomping at the bit to see her again.

The moment they pulled into her driveway, he saw her standing in the backyard in front of a barbecue grill. Kylie looked up the moment she heard his truck and their gazes connected. His gut clenched when an irrepressible smile lit her face.

“Wow! Tiffany was right. Her mom is a knockout,” Marcus said with such profound amazement that Chance sharply turned his head to look at his son.

Marcus’s gaze was glued to Kylie, so Chance let himself stare at her, too, letting his eyes roam over her features. Kylie was a beautiful woman, and that was the main reason he—a man known to have good self-control—had been in such a bad way since meeting her. She was wearing a sundress and the turquoise color flattered her.

“Isn’t she pretty, Dad?”

Chance swallowed. In his book she was more than pretty, or beautiful or even gorgeous. There wasn’t a word he had to define just what she was, although the word perfection came pretty close. And not for the first time he wondered how she’d succeeded in keeping men at bay all these years.

“Dad?”

He knew his son was waiting on his response but he dared not look at Marcus for fear of him recognizing the lust in his eyes. “Yes, she’s pretty.”

Moments later, Marcus asked, “Aren’t we going to get out?”

Feeling a lot more confident that he had regained a semblance of control, Chance glanced over at Marcus. “You sound rather anxious.”

Marcus chuckled. “I am. I want you to meet Tiffany. She’s really something else.”

Chance nodded as he opened the door to the truck, thinking that, evidently, it ran in the family, because he thought Kylie was something else as well.

As Kylie watched Chance get out of the truck, she could no more stop the flash of desire and excitement that raced through her body than she could have denied her next breath. And to make matters worse, Chance’s eyes were glued to her and she knew he was remembering their kiss as much as she was.

She had thought about it a dozen times since it had happened. Her response to him had surprised her, overwhelmed her, until she’d come to grips with the fact that Chance Steele wasn’t your typical man.

Today he was wearing a pair of jeans and a crisp white shirt, and it was the first time she’d seen him dressed in anything other than a suit. He looked the epitome of masculinity, fine and sexy.

She forced her gaze from him to the young man walking by his side. So this was Marcus, the potential root of her troubles. He favored Chance and was almost as tall. He had the look of youth, but like his father, Marcus’s features were sharp and well-defined. And she was glad to see that he eschewed the popular baggy pants and was dressed neatly in a pair of shorts and a shirt. It wasn’t lost on her that he was checking her out with as much curiosity as she was him.

“I hope we aren’t too early,” Chance said, breaking into Kylie’s thoughts when they reached her.

They were early; a good thirty minutes to be exact, but she didn’t have any complaints. “No, Mr. Steele, you’re right on time,” she said, addressing him formally. They had decided not to let the kids know they had been in constant communication with each other. They didn’t want to run the risk of Marcus and Tiffany thinking they were gaming and plotting behind their backs, even if they were.

“Tiffany is inside getting dressed and I was setting up the grill. I hope hamburgers and hot dogs sound okay.”

Chance chuckled. “You aren’t trying to pay me back with the hamburgers, are you?”

“Pay you back for what?” Marcus asked.

Both Chance and Kylie glanced at him. “Nothing,” Chance said quickly, clearing his throat. She knew he hadn’t meant to let that slip.

“You must be Marcus,” she said and then gave him her full attention and offered him her hand.

His grin was unrepentant as he took it. “Yes, ma’am. And you’ve got to be Tiffany’s mom. You’re pretty just like her.”
Kylie smiled. This kid was a real charmer and before the evening was over she intended to see if his charm was the real thing or not. “Thanks.”

“Do you need our help with anything, Ms. Hagan?” Chance asked, glancing around at her big backyard.

Kylie looked up at him and smiled. “I think it would be fitting if you called me Kylie, that is if you don’t mind me calling you Chance.”

He smiled. “No, I don’t mind at all.”

“In that case, Chance, there is this one little thing I might need help with. Tiffany thought it would be a good idea to put up the volleyball net in case anyone was interested in playing after dinner. If I can get you and Marcus to set it up, that would be wonderful.”

“Consider it done. Just tell us where it is and where you want it to go.”

“It’s over there and I think that would be a good spot,” she said, turning to point to an area of her yard.

“I think so, too. That should be fun. I haven’t played volleyball in years.”

“Should I be worried about that, Dad? I don’t think we have anything for sore, aching muscles at home,” Marcus said, grinning.

Chance’s mouth curved into a smile as he glanced over at his son. “I might be a lot older than you, Marcus Pharis Steele, but I think I can still manage to hit a ball or two over a net.”

That’s not all he’s capable of doing, Kylie thought, shifting her gaze from Chance to Marcus. No matter what disagreements they might have had since Tiffany had appeared on the scene, it was rather obvious that Chance and his son had a close relationship.

“You’re going to have to prove that big-time, Dad.”

“Hey, kid, you’re on,” Chance countered and then turned his attention to Kylie. “What do you think?”

“I think that this I got to see,” she told him, laughing.

“You’ll more than see it. I want your participation as well. The young against what this pup considers as ‘the old’. I think we need to show our children just what we’re made of. How about it, Kylie?”

She grinned. “I’m game if you are.”

“Mr. Steele?”

Chance cast a quick glance over his shoulder, blinked and did a double take. He turned around and blinked again, shaking his head in disbelief. He looked into the face of what had to be a younger version of Kylie. Her daughter looked so much like her it was uncanny. He watched as her mouth curved into the same type of smile Kylie wore.

He automatically smiled back. “Yes, and you must be Tiffany,” he said, taking the hand she offered. “Marcus has told me a lot about you.”

“And it was all good, right?”

Chance chuckled, remembering what Kylie had said about her daughter’s high confidence level. “Yes, it was all good.”

She glanced around. “And where is Marcus?”

“I sent him to the store to pick up some more sodas.”

“Oh. Mom told me to tell you that she’ll be back outside in a minute. She’s finishing up the potato salad and thought I should come out and keep you company.”

He smiled. “That would be nice since I’d like to get to know you. So what are your plans for the future?” he asked as he leaned against the stone post holding up the covered patio. Kylie had assigned him the task of cooking the hamburgers and hot dogs, something he had convinced her he was pretty good at.

Tiffany laughed. “You don’t have to worry about me and Marcus rushing off doing anything stupid when we become of age, like getting married or something.”

Chance grimaced. God, he hoped not. “That’s good to hear. What about the two of you making plans to cut school again?”

She grinned. “Okay, I admit that wasn’t a smart idea, but like I told Mom, our last two periods of the day are boring.”

Chance folded his arms across his chest and regarded her directly. “And I’m sure your mom told you that it doesn’t matter how boring the classes are, you and Marcus belong in school.”

Tiffany’s expressive eyes filled with remorse. “Yes, sir, and Marcus and I talked about it. We didn’t intend to get you and my mom upset with us, but Mom thinks I’m too young to start dating and you—”

When it seemed that she had encountered some difficulty in finishing what she was about to say, Chance lifted an eyebrow. “I’m what?”

She leaned in closer and squinted her eyes against the smoke coming from the grill. “Don’t take this personally,
Mr. Steele, and Marcus says you’re a nice dad and everything, but at times you can be too overbearing where his education is concerned.”

Chance couldn’t help but laugh. He was being told that he was overbearing by a fifteen-year-old girl! She might have inherited her high confidence level from her father but her directness had definitely come from her mother. “Marcus thinks I’m overbearing, does he?”

“Yes, and you don’t have to be, you know. Marcus is one of the smartest guys I know. In fact, the way we became such good friends is because the teacher had him help me on a class assignment that I was having problems with. He wants to go to the best college one day, just like you want him to. You’re just going to have to trust him to do the right thing. And he will because he wants those things for himself as well as for you.”

Chance’s smile widened. Tiffany’s expressive eyes had gone from being filled with remorse to being filled with sincerity and he liked that. He also liked what she was saying, and had to admit that his curiosity was piqued about something. “And where will all this leave you, Tiffany?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Where will that leave you when Marcus goes off to college two years from now?” Assuming your relationship lasts that long, he wanted to add.

Tiffany shrugged. “When he leaves I’ll have another year of school to complete and then I’ll be leaving for college myself. I doubt it will be to the same college Marcus will be attending since my grades aren’t nearly as good as his, but it won’t matter. Marcus and I have decided that the best thing for us to do is to make sure we both get a good college education. Then we will return home afterward and be together.”

Chance’s eyebrows drew together in surprise. The last time he and Marcus had talked, his son had threatened to hang around Charlotte and go to a local college. He released a satisfied sigh. He was certainly glad to hear this recent turn of events and was about to tell her so when they heard his truck pulling into the driveway, which meant Marcus had returned.

“Mr. Steele, Marcus and I can finish cooking if you want to go into the house and keep my mom company. I’m sure she’s bored making the potato salad.”

Thoughts of being inside the house alone with Kylie had his mind reeling. “You think so?”

“Yes.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Have you told your mom what you and Marcus have decided about your futures?”

“No, not yet.”

“Do you mind if I do?”

“No, I don’t mind. It’s not like me and Marcus won’t be girlfriend and boyfriend until he leaves for college, because we will. But we won’t let anything interfere with him going away to a good university, I can assure you of that. We want what’s best for our future.” Then with a smile on her face she said, “I’ll go help Marcus with the sodas.”

Chance watched her walk away, thinking he really liked Tiffany Hagan.

“So what do you think?” Tiffany whispered to Marcus while helping him unload the soda from the truck.

Marcus grinned. “I think my dad likes your mom. In fact I have a feeling that they may have seen each other another time in addition to that day he visited her flower shop.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because they’re too friendly with each other to have met only that one time. And then there was this private joke they shared.”

“What private joke?”

“It had something to do with hamburgers.”

“Hamburgers?” Tiffany raised a confused brow. “So you think he likes her?”

“He definitely notices that she’s a woman, which is more attention than he’s given other ladies, including those at church who are always vying for his and my uncle Morgan’s and my uncle Donovan’s attention. They know it’s a lost cause with Uncle Bas since he’s already engaged.”

After placing the soda cans in the cooler, Marcus continued. “When we pulled up today and I saw your mom for the first time, I commented on how pretty she was and he agreed with me. And he kept staring at her with this funny look on his face. He’s been smiling a lot since he got here. I don’t recall ever seeing my dad smile this much.”

Marcus then gave Tiffany a questioning glance. “You do think we’re doing the right thing, don’t you? Making our parents think something is going on between us so we can get them interested in each other?”

Tiffany nodded her head. “Yes, I think we’re doing the right thing. I have to admit that at first I was doing it just to get Mom off my back because I thought she needed a life, but today she was actually humming. She was
humming because she’s in a good mood, and I think the reason she’s in a good mood is because of you and your
dad’s visit. Seeing her that way made me realize just how lonely my mom probably has been. All she’s ever had is
me. Like I told you, I don’t ever recall her dating anyone. In a few years I’ll be leaving for college and she’ll be all
alone if she doesn’t meet someone and get serious about him.”

Marcus nodded. “Yeah, Dad will be all alone when I leave for college, too, in two years. He has his parents and
his brothers and cousins but it won’t be the same. He needs to get involved with a nice lady like your mom. I really
like her.”

When they reached the backyard, Marcus glanced around. “Speaking of our parents, where are they?”

Tiffany’s face glowed with excitement when she said, “My mom is inside making the potato salad, and I
suggested to your dad that he go inside and keep her company, and that you and I were capable of doing the
cooking.”

Marcus smiled down at her. “It seems our plan just might be working.”

Tiffany tipped her head back and looked up at him, returning his smile. “Yes, it certainly appears that way.
Now it’s going to be up to us to make sure they get to spend more and more time together.”

Chance strode into Kylie’s house, rounded the corner that led from the utility room to the kitchen and stopped
dead in his tracks. For the first time in his life, he forgot how to breathe.

Kylie was standing on a stool trying to get something out of a top cabinet. Stretching upward, the sundress she
was wearing had raised, showing off a pair of luscious hips and those legs of hers that he admired so much.

His conscience gave him a hard kick. He shouldn’t be standing in the middle of her kitchen ogling her this way.
The truth of the matter was that he couldn’t help it. The tantalizing sight of her had captured his attention and
wouldn’t let go. Pure, unadulterated hunger filled his gaze, keeping him focused primarily on her. She had a
gorgeous body and, with the fantasies playing around in his head, he could just imagine his hands all over it,
followed by his mouth.

He inhaled deeply when he felt his body getting hotter by the second. The need to escape back outside suddenly
overwhelmed him. He had to get out of there, right now, this very instant, before he went up in flames or—even
worse—before he did something outside of his control like cross the room, snatch her off that stool and take her into
his arms and kiss her senseless.

Kylie wasn’t certain if she’d heard a sound behind her or if her own body had alerted her to the fact that
Chance was near. Whichever it was, she turned around so fast that she almost slipped off the step stool and had to
fight to regain her balance.

Within an instant she was gathered into strong arms, avoiding a possible fall.

“You okay?”

The soft husky words from Chance’s lips that fanned against her temple raised her temperature ten degrees.

“Yes, I’m okay. You startled me. I hadn’t heard you come in.”

Instead of offering her any kind of explanation, he simply nodded as he held her body in his strong arms. For
the next couple of seconds her mind questioned the sanity of them standing in her kitchen that way. What if the kids
walked in?

She panicked at that possibility. “I’m okay, Chance. You can put me down now,” she said, although she knew
her voice lacked conviction.

“Yes, you’re okay?” he asked, his tone deep and rich, and his gaze remaining steadily on hers.

No, Kylie thought. She wasn’t sure. Desire, the likes of which she’d never encountered before, raced through
her, igniting her awareness, her attraction and her fire. Her eyes locked with his and at that instant she felt safe and
protected in his arms, even with the feel of his body growing hard beneath her, which reminded her of the kiss they
had shared Friday at the car wash.

With her teeth she caught the edge of her bottom lip, thinking she was just where she had dreamed of being last
night—in his arms. Would it be so terrible if she stayed there just a little longer?

“Where are the kids?” she asked softly, tilting her head back and not breaking eye contact.

“Outside, cooking the rest of the meat.”

“That should take at least five minutes.”

“I’m counting on at least ten,” he said.

She felt him sliding her down his body, lowering her feet to the floor. But he kept his hand at her waist, not
intending for her to go anywhere out of touching distance. When she was standing, her legs automatically parted
slightly to gain her balance; ironically it was just enough room for him to pull her close and place his thigh between
them. She felt him again, the hardness of his erection that was resting between her legs.
“Why didn’t you let me know that you had come inside?” she asked as intense heat shot up her core.

An apologetic smile touched his lips. “I couldn’t have spoken even if I had wanted to, Kylie. Seeing you on that stool like that had me barely breathing. Has anyone ever told you that you’ve got one hell of a nice figure?”

She tried not to be touched by the thought that he liked the way her body looked. “Yes, but it never really mattered.”

“Oh.”

“Until now.”

He bent toward her. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

He intended to be certain of that. Moving his hand to the swell of her hips, he gently pulled her closer as he leaned down and slanted his mouth over hers. She tasted sweeter than he remembered and he was helpless to do anything but deepen the kiss. He knew the exact moment she placed her arms around his neck, bringing their bodies closer into a locked embrace.

What he was sharing with her was a degree of passion he hadn’t shared with any woman in over seven years, and he was desperate for anything and everything she was offering. He suddenly felt it, a primitive need to bind her to him in the most elemental way. But he also knew he wanted more from her than just her body. He wanted her mind and soul as well.

The sound of their kids’ laughter came through the closed window and they parted quickly, but he didn’t release her. Resting his forehead against hers, he breathed in deeply, seeing the passionate look in her eyes and knowing it mirrored his own.

He motioned his head toward the back door. “You don’t think they’re outside burning our dinner, do you?” he asked, making an attempt at gaining control.

“I hope not,” she replied, trying to breathe again normally.

“I came inside to keep you company. Tiffany suggested it.”

“Did she?”

“Yes. Is that a bad thing?”

“Only if it meant doing so would give her more time alone with Marcus.”

Chance gave her an incredibly sexy smile. “Relax, Kylie, that isn’t it. Far from it.”

“Thank goodness for that.”

“I personally don’t think they’ve taken their relationship to that level, which is a good thing. In fact I’m a little more confused than before by what she said, although it pleases me.”

“Dammit, Chance, don’t keep me hanging,” Kylie said in a near desperate voice. “What did Tiffany tell you?”

“Our kids have decided that although they intend to remain girlfriend and boyfriend, they also intend to further their education by going off to college, after which they’ll return here and then decide their future.”

Kylie blinked. “Are you sure that’s what she said?”

“I’m positive.”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t make sense. Earlier this week she was ranting and raving about how madly in love they were and nothing and no one would ever break them apart.”

“I heard the same thing from Marcus. I guess they sat down and talked about it and in the end decided to take our advice. They were getting too serious way too fast.”

“Whatever made them decide to slow things down, I’m extremely grateful for it. Do you think we still need to lay out the rules we came up with?”

Chance nodded. “They may think this way now but it might be a different story tomorrow. Besides, either way, there’s plenty of trouble they can get into before Marcus actually leaves for school in two years.”

And it was the kind of trouble Kylie was definitely familiar with. She agreed with Chance. It wouldn’t hurt to let the kids know exactly where she and Chance stood and how they planned on handling the situation of them being a couple.

“Ready to go outside?” he asked.

“Just about. I just need to find that lid for the bowl of potato salad. That’s what I was looking for when you
came in.”

“Then let me look for it.”

Kylie watched as he crossed the room and, not needing a stool, reached up and opened the cabinet. He pulled out several lids. “Will one of these work?”

“Yes.”

He placed them on the counter then crossed the room to her. He reached out and caressed his finger against her cheek. “Thanks for the kiss, Kylie. I needed it more than you will ever know.”

He really didn’t have to thank her. She’d needed it just as much as he had, although she wished she hadn’t. “I think we need to get back outside now.”

As much as Chance wanted to stay inside with her, a part of him knew she was right. “All right. Is there anything else you need for me to do before I go?”

A smile touched her lips. “No, but it might be a good idea for you to wipe your mouth. You’re wearing the same shade lipstick I’m wearing.”

“Now that the both of you are well fed, there’s something Chance and I would like to discuss with you.”

Both Marcus and Tiffany looked up from eating their ice cream. Marcus’s smile faltered somewhat and Tiffany rolled her eyes heavenward. “I knew this day was going too good to last,” she said. “What do you want to talk with us about, Mom?”

“Your relationship.”

“What about it, Ms. Hagan?” Marcus asked her in a respectful tone.

Kylie glanced over at Chance, who nodded for her to continue. “Chance and I talked about the best way to approach the situation, especially since Tiffany isn’t old enough to date yet.”

“But I should be old enough, Mom. The other girls at my school began going out with boys when they were thirteen.”

Kylie frowned. “I’m not going to discuss what the other girls are doing, Tiffany. You’re my concern. And for me it’s not a particular age but a maturity level. I personally don’t think you’re ready to begin dating.”

“If you had your way I would never date!”

“That’s not true. You’re the one who has to prove to me that you’re ready. But Chance and I do understand you and Marcus would like to spend some time together, so we came up with what we feel is a workable solution.”

“And what solution is that?” Marcus asked when Tiffany refused to do so.

It was Chance who responded. “You and Tiffany can date only if the dates are chaperoned.”

Tiffany glanced over at Marcus before looking back at their parents. “You mean that you’ll be coming with us to the movies? Bowling? On picnics?”

“Yes,” Kylie answered. “So what do you think?” She braced herself for her daughter’s tirade.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Tiffany said, smiling.

Kylie blinked. “You do?”

“Yes. Since Marcus and I will be getting married after college, I think it would be good that all four of us get to know each other.” She smiled at Marcus. “Don’t you agree, Marcus?”

He smiled back at Tiffany. “Right, and in the process we can prove to our parents just how responsible we are.”

Kylie glanced over at Chance knowing he was just as confused as she was. Tiffany and Marcus were beaming.

If anything, Kylie and Chance had thought their suggestion would be met with some pretty strong opposition.

“Well, if everyone agrees with our plan then that’s great,” he said.

“So how soon can we go someplace?” Tiffany asked excitedly.

“Where would you like to go?” Chance asked.

“Umm, I’ve never been camping and Marcus said you take him all the time.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “Tiffany, we’re not talking about a family outing. We’re talking about a date.”

“I don’t have a problem with Tiffany coming along the next time Marcus and I go camping,” Chance said. “Of course that means that you’ll have to come too, Kylie.”

“Yes, Mom. You’ve never been camping before, either.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean we can just invite ourselves on a camping trip, Tiffany.”

“But Mr. Steele invited us.”

“Yes, but only after you——”

“It’s okay, Kylie, honest,” Chance cut in to say. “Marcus and I would love for you and Tiffany to go camping with us. My family owns a cabin in the mountains so we’re really not talking about roughing it too much. The cabin has two bedrooms, so you and Tiffany can take one and Marcus and I can take the other.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Kylie said as her gaze moved from one person to the next. “When Chance
and I thought of supervised activities we didn’t mean anything that involved staying any place overnight.”

“Yes, but it would be fun and different, Mom, and you and I have never done anything fun and different.”

Kylie leaned back in her chair. She thought the two of them had done several things that were fun and different. How about that train ride from New York to California a few years ago? And then there was that vacation to Disney World for Tiffany’s twelfth birthday. Had it really been three years ago? Okay, so they hadn’t actually done a lot of time to do fun and different things together on a regular basis. But she really hadn’t had the time since she’d been busy going to school and trying to move up the corporate ladder to provide for her and Tiffany.

“Please, Mom, just this once. Mr. Steele did say it would be okay.”

Kylie glanced over at Chance. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

He smiled. “No, I don’t mind. In fact I think it’s a wonderful idea.”

Chance’s statement should have had a calming effect on her but it didn’t. She was no longer concerned for Tiffany, but for herself. She didn’t want to think about a weekend spent in a mountain cabin with Chance in such close quarters. With all the heat they could generate, the kids might think something was going on between them when it really wasn’t.

“Well, Mom?”

The enthusiasm she heard in Tiffany’s voice almost made her say yes, but a part of her held back. This was something she needed to really think about.

Instead of answering Tiffany, she looked over at Chance. “Let me think about it some more and I’ll give you my answer within a week.”
With a sigh of resignation, Chance walked into his office Monday morning and met his brothers’ inquisitive gazes. He knew why they were there. Marcus had mentioned to them that they’d been invited to Kylie’s for dinner and no doubt they wanted to know how things went. But he wouldn’t make it easy for them. He would pretend that he hadn’t a clue why they graced his office with their presence.

“Good morning. Is there any reason the three of you have taken over my office?” he asked, placing his briefcase down on his desk.

After a few moments, when no one replied, he exhaled a long sigh and said, “I don’t recall us having a meeting this morning. I know I have a meeting with Bas later today, but what’s up with you guys? Is anything wrong?”

Not surprisingly, it was Bas who stepped forward and said, “How about cutting the bull, Chance. You know why we’re here. We want to know how things went yesterday.”

Chance looked at him. “Was there a particular way they were supposed to go?”

“You tell us,” Morgan said, frowning. “You were the one who was all bent out of shape last week when you found that note. Can we assume you blew things out of proportion and Tiffany Hagan isn’t the threat to our nephew’s future that you assumed she was?”

Chance leaned back in his chair. A part of him wanted to tell his brothers that Tiffany was no longer a threat but her mother definitely was. But there was no way he could do that and have a moment’s peace from their inquisition. “No, Tiffany’s not a threat and although I’m not going to say I overreacted, I will say that I think Kylie and I have everything under control.”

Donovan quirked an eyebrow. “Kylie?”

“Yes, Kylie Hagan. Tiffany’s mother.”

Donovan smiled. “Oh, yeah, the one who’s such a good-looker.”

A dark scowl suddenly appeared on Chance’s face and he leaned forward. “And how do you know that Kylie is good-looking?”

Donovan was taken back by the bite in his brother’s tone. “You told us, don’t you remember? In fact your exact words were, ‘If the daughter looks anything like the mother then I’m in trouble.’”

“Oh.” Too late, Chance recalled having said that. He leaned back in his chair again, ignoring the curious glances his brothers were now giving him.

“You know what, Chance?”

Chance glanced over at Morgan and frowned. “What?”

A smile curved Morgan Steele’s lips. “I hate to tell you this, but I have a feeling that you’ve gotten yourself into some trouble.”

“So there you have it, Chance,” Bas was saying after handing him the written report. “I’m glad to say that considering everything, we’re doing well. Although some of our competitors have gotten bruised by the severe trading conditions of the past few years, we’ve been successful because we’re a company that sets the pace and doesn’t just follow the trend. Still, whether we like it or not, sooner or later we’re going to have to give some thought to the possibility of outsourcing in order to stay competitive. I don’t like it any more than you, but that’s the way things are going now and we need to continue to adapt to change, even change we don’t particularly like.”

Chance tossed the report on his desk. Bas was right. He didn’t like the thought of outsourcing as a means to stay ahead of the game. With the new importance being placed on countries like India and China, for the past year he’d seen huge restructuring taking place in a number of manufacturing and production companies.

As the corporation’s problem solver and troubleshooter, Bas kept them in the know. He was an expert at tackling the company’s complex problems. So far the Steele Corporation was not unionized because, during the twenty-five years of its existence, the employees had always been pleased with the fair treatment they’d received. Their salaries were more than competitive, and the Steele Corporation had a reputation of never having laid off an employee, even during some of the company’s rough times.

However, according to Bas, there was talk in the production area that the Steele Corporation would be outsourcing to a foreign country.

“I’m still not ready to go that route, Bas. Our employees are loyal and we owe them for all the hard work they
do. Our people are the reason this company is successful, not the products we produce and deliver. What we’re
going to have to do is to continue to focus on developing our employees and executing those manufacturing
strategies that integrate people, processes and technologies to assure us tangible results. Until that stops happening, I
refuse to entertain the thought of outsourcing to another country.”

Bas smiled. “I fully agree with you. So what do we do about those rumors that we’re headed that way the first
of the year?”

“Before I leave for Dallas next week, how about setting up a meeting between me and the production
department heads? I want to make sure they’re delivering the same message to our employees. There’s evidently a
communication breakdown somewhere. And make sure you include Vanessa. She will be back in the office then,”
Chance said of his cousin Vanessa Steele who headed the PR Department and was presently vacationing in Europe.

“All right. Consider it done.”

Chance studied his brother as Bas placed the items back into his briefcase. Bas was a hard worker—too
dedicated at times since he lived, ate and breathed the Steele Corporation. That would make one wonder when he
had time for a social life, which he evidently had since he was engaged to be married. “Seems to me that you need to
chill more than I do, Bas.”

Bas glanced up and his lips curved into a lethal half smile. “I beg to differ, Chance. You’re the one who’s
tackling woman troubles. I’m not.”

“It’s hard to believe Cassandra is that understanding.”

Bas shrugged. “Frankly, she’s not but she knows how far to take her complaints.”

A frown pulled at Chance’s lips. Not for the first time he wondered what had possessed his brother to become
engaged to Cassandra Tisdale, a staunch member of Charlotte’s elite social group. Cassandra and Bas were as
different as day and night. The woman was so incredibly self-absorbed, it boggled Chance’s mind that Bas had even
given her the time of day, let alone become engaged to her. She had a tendency to think she was the most important
thing that existed in this universe. And while she was shining and polished, it was known that Bas was more than a
little rough around the edges and had a few tarnished spots on his reputation from a few years back. But Cassandra
was determined to do something nobody had ever been able to do—make Sebastian Steele sparkle.

Chance and his two brothers wondered how in the hell she planned to accomplish such a feat. If nothing else,
they would give her an A for trying. They knew, even if she didn’t, that it would be a wasted effort. The woman who
would eventually capture Bas’s heart would be the one who accepted him as he was, and not try to make him into
something that he wasn’t.

“Dinner is at six tonight, if anyone is interested,” Chance decided to say, since his brothers had a tendency to
drop by for a meal unannounced.

Bas chuckled. “I’ll pass the word on to Morgan and Donovan.”

“What about you?”

“I’m invited to dinner at the Tisdales’. My guess is that Cassandra’s mother will try to get me to finally commit
to a June wedding.”

Chance nodded. That was eight months away. “Will you?”

“There’s no reason for me not to, I suppose. Being engaged for almost six months is long enough, don’t you
think? See you later.”

When the door closed behind Bas, Chance stood and walked over to the window and looked out. Deciding to
rid Bas and his issues from his mind, he turned his thoughts to his own problem.

Kylie Hagan.

He couldn’t help wondering whether she’d made a decision about the camping trip yet. Several times that day
he’d been tempted to call her but had changed his mind.

He felt excited at the prospect of having her at the cabin for an entire weekend, even with the knowledge that
their kids would be around to keep them company. It would be hard to keep his attraction to her at bay, but he
would.

He figured the reason she was hesitating was because the thought of them spending the night under the same
roof bothered her. She was well aware that the kids would have to go to sleep eventually, and when they did, it
would be parents’ time.

She was fighting the chemistry between them. He knew that just as he knew it was a fight she wouldn’t win.
But he would let her try, up to a certain point. He’d give her until the end of the week and if he didn’t hear from her
by then, he would take some necessary action.

“So, have you decided whether or not you and Tiffy are going camping with Chance Steele and his son?”

Kylie glanced up from the meal she and Lena were sharing during their weekly lunch date at a popular
restaurant in town. “Who told you about that?” she asked.

Lena smiled. “Who else? My goddaughter, of course. She’s all excited at the thought of going camping.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “I’m beginning to wonder if it’s the camping trip that has her excited or the thought of being around Marcus an entire weekend. If it’s the latter then she might as well get unexcited because if I do decide to go, I’ll have my eyes on her and Marcus the entire time. Any time they spend together will definitely be supervised.”

Lena couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at her lips. “So you think she has an ulterior motive for wanting to go?”

“Hey, remember I was young and in love once, and when you are their age, you look for every opportunity to be together, whether you’re under your parents’ watchful eyes or not.”

“Yes, that could very well be, but at some point you’re going to have to start trusting her, Kylie. You can’t continue to judge Tiffy by the way you behaved with Sam. The more you do, the more she’s going to resent it.”

There was anguish in Kylie’s eyes and a wee hint of guilt. “It’s so hard being a parent these days, Lena. You want the best for your kids and you go on the premise that experience is the best teacher, but then you’re faced with the question of how you can be there to protect them without suffocating them.”

Lena nodded, clearly understanding. “I think for you it’s more difficult because Tiffy is all you have. Over the years she has become your life. Have you given thought to becoming involved in other things?”

“Other things like what? I have a florist shop to run, Lena. It’s not like I don’t have anything else to do with my time.”

“Yes, but only when Tiffy is at school. Other than that you’re a fulltime mother who really doesn’t have a life other than her child.”

Kylie knew where this conversation was leading since they had been down this road several times. It was the one topic she and Lena didn’t agree on. Lena felt it was a crying shame that she didn’t have a man in her life and hadn’t had one since high school.

Her thoughts shifted to Chance Steele and how much she had enjoyed his company on Sunday. It had felt strange sharing her time with anyone other than Tiffany, but she had to admit it had felt good, too. Too good. After they’d eaten they’d played a game of volleyball, the young against what Marcus and Tiffany had considered as “the old.”

Kylie had been surprised at how much energy Chance had. The kids had been surprised, too, and she and Chance had won the game, showing Tiffany and Marcus that age was nothing but a number. Afterward, they had eaten ice cream and the cake she had baked.

As much as she had enjoyed Chance’s company, she knew it was out of the question for something to develop between them. There was no way she would start depending on him or any other man for her happiness. She had done so once and refused to go that route again.

“I don’t want a man in my life, Lena, at least not now,” she decided to say. “Maybe when Tiffany leaves for college I’ll feel differently and I’ll get involved with someone, but I’m not interested now.” She then turned her attention back to her meal.

“Okay,” Lena said, placing her glass of iced tea aside. “Tell me about Chance Steele.”

Kylie looked up again, giving her friend an uncomfortable stare. “What do you want me to tell you about Chance that you don’t already know?”

“Well, Tiffy couldn’t stop singing his praises when I picked her up from school yesterday. He definitely made a positive impression on her. She thought he was cool and fun to be around.”

Kylie smiled. “She’s right. He was a lot of fun.”

She quickly resumed eating her meal, afraid that Lena might see all the lust that filled her eyes. The last thing she wanted was to tell Lena that Chance was the cause of her surging hormones lately. Which was exactly why she didn’t think going on a camping trip with him, Marcus and Tiffany was a good idea. The longings he stirred within her could be relentless at times, and it took all the will power she could muster to hold on to her sanity. Her needy libido and her out-of-control hormones confined in a cabin for the weekend with Chance Steele were way too much to ignore. Especially when she’d have to stay focused on Marcus and Tiffany.

“Chance is not a bad catch you know, Kylie. He’s good-looking, wealthy, intelligent and generous to a fault.”

Kylie glanced up. “Umm, sounds like someone you should be interested in, then.”

A sad smile tugged at Lena’s lips. “You know the story of my life. Because of Mom’s failing health, the two of us are a package deal and not too many men want that. At least none I’ve met so far. The moment I mention that I’m my mother’s caretaker, they conveniently drop out of the picture. However, I do believe Chance would be different, but he and I never connected that way. I can only see him as a friend and nothing more.”

Unfortunately, Kylie could see Chance as a lot more than a friend but she blatantly refused to go there. But
right now, at that moment, her main concern was not the issue of her and Chance. It was Lena. She silently searched
her mind for something to say that would ease the raw pain she’d heard in her best friend’s words.

Propping her chin in her hand, she gave Lena a serious smile. “There’s a man out there for you, Lena, who will
be more than happy to take you and whatever and whoever comes along with you. I’ve always known that if I got
interested in someone, that person would have to love Tiffany as much as he loved me. For some men it’s easy to
accept a package deal. For others it’s not. And those who can’t are the ones that women like us do better leaving
alone.”

Lena reached across the table and took her hand. “And I believe that there’s a man out there for you, too, and
believe it or not, he can be depended on. I know Sam and your dad let you down but you can’t continue to judge all
men by their actions, Kylie. Every young girl needs a good male role model in her life. Because of Dad’s death, I
missed having that, and you’re cheating Tiffy of having that as well. I think as a single mom you’ve done an
admirable job in raising her. But don’t you think at some point she needs to see you in a loving relationship with a
man?”

Kylie looked Lena squarely in the eye. Conversations like this tended to expose emotions that she would rather
keep under wraps because along with the emotions came the memories of the hurt and pain that Sam and her father
had caused.

“Even if I did, Lena, that man can’t be Chance Steele. For heaven’s sake, he’s the father of the boy that my
daughter thinks she’s madly in love with.”

Lena placed her elbows on the table and laced her fingers together. “And what does that have to do with
anything? More specifically, what does it have to do with you and Chance?”

“I don’t want to confuse her, nor do I want to send out a negative picture about anything.”

Lena shook her head. “Your daughter and my goddaughter is a lot smarter and mature than you think, Kylie.
Kids these days know the score. They aren’t as naive as we want to think they are. If something is going on between
you and Chance, she’ll be able to pick up on it, and personally, I doubt if she’ll see anything wrong with it.”

“She might not see anything wrong with it but I will. How am I going to lecture her about the difference
between love and lust when I’m having problems knowing the difference between the two myself?”

Lena smiled. “So you are attracted to Chance.” It was a statement and not a question.

“Yes, more than I want to be,” she said, deciding to finally be completely honest with her best friend. “Around
him I feel things that I’ve never felt before, Lena. We’ve kissed. Twice. And I’m not talking about a little kiss,
either. The man takes kissing to a level I’ve never experienced before. All he has to do is get close enough to breathe
on my mouth and my lips automatically open. Isn’t that pathetic? Now can you understand why I’m hesitating about
going on that camping trip?”

“Yes and no.”

At Kylie’s confused expression, Lena explained, “Yes, I can see why you’re hesitating about going, and no, I
don’t agree with your assessment of the situation. So what if you have the hots for Chance? You’re both adults and
should be able to do whatever you want to do. Your attraction to him shouldn’t have any bearing on what’s going on
between Tiffany and Marcus and how you’re handling their situation. I know you and no matter what you do, you
will always set a good example in front of Tiffany. However, what you and Chance do in private is your business.
But then, like I said earlier, I think it’s important for Tiffy to see you in a loving relationship with a man, and I can’t
think of a better person for that man to be than Chance Steele.”

“There are bound to be complications, Lena.”

“Only those of your own making, Kylie. Take it from someone who knows. Good men are hard to find, so if
you meet one who’s interested, you better grab him, hold on tight and don’t let go.”

Later that night Kylie got into bed, wrestling with the knowledge that the main reason she didn’t want to go on
that camping trip was because of her growing feelings for Chance. She had to finally admit those growing feelings
to herself after having lunch with Lena.

Their discussion had made her realize two things. She found Chance attractive and sexy, and thought he had a
body that was all that and a bag of chips. But there was more to him than that. He’d already proven that he was
dependable, unlike Sam and her father. When Chance and his girlfriend had been faced with a teen pregnancy,
instead of leaving her in a fix like Sam had done to her, Chance had done the noble, honorable and responsible
thing. He’d made whatever changes the situation called for to make a home for his wife and child. She could tell by
his relationship with Marcus that he was a good father and from what she read in the business section of the
Charlotte Observer, he was also a highly respected businessman. And she wanted to believe if he had shown up at
her shop that day to tell her that their kids were involved in an unplanned pregnancy versus a plot to cut school, he
would be angry, true enough, but nothing would make him turn his back on his only child, as her father and mother
had done to her.

She sighed. One of the problems she was having trouble coming to terms with was the knowledge that their relationship—if they could call it that—had developed because of their kids. She doubted they would have met any other way. There was a strong possibility that if they’d been in the same room together at any given function, he wouldn’t have given her a second look. So in her mind their meeting was a twist of fate rather than by their own choosing.

She jerked her head off the pillow at the sound of the phone ringing. The last time she had gotten a call this late it had been Chance. Sensations raced through her at that possibility and she quickly reached over and picked up the phone. “Hello.”

“Sorry to call so late,” Lena was saying. “But I forgot to mention today that the American Cancer Society is sponsoring their annual ball and I’m on the committee. The price of the tickets is high but it’s all for a worthy cause, of course. Would you like one?”

Before Kylie could answer, Lena quickly inserted, “In fact you can get two if you like and bring a date.”

“I’ll take one ticket, Lena,” Kylie said softly, hoping Lena didn’t pick up the disappointment in her voice. A part of her had hoped the caller was Chance. She hadn’t seen or talked to him since Sunday, which was three days ago.

“Sure you don’t want two?”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “No, I only want one ticket, Lena. I won’t have a date that night. Will that be a problem? I either come alone or not at all.”

“No, that won’t be a problem but I was hoping there was someone you could ask. Someone like Chance, perhaps?”

Kylie sighed. She knew where this conversation was leading and wasn’t in the mood. “No. Only one ticket, Lena. Good night.” She then hung up the phone.

A few seconds later, before Kylie could reclaim her comfortable position in bed, the phone rang again. She frowned. There were times when Lena was worse than a dog with a bone. She didn’t know when to let up.

Snatching the phone, not giving her best friend a chance to say anything, Kylie said, “Look, Lena, forget it. There’s no way I’m going to ask Chance to go with me.”

There was a brief pause and then…

“And just where is it that you won’t ask me to go, Kylie?” Chance Steele asked in a deep, husky voice that bespoke more than mild curiosity.

Kylie’s eyes widened and hot color rushed into her face. If she’d been standing she would have melted to the floor in embarrassment. Instead she found solace in burying her face under the pillow.

But even that couldn’t drown out the sound of Chance’s voice when he said, “Okay, Kylie, tell me. What’s going on and why won’t you ask me to go wherever it is that you’re going?”

She closed her eyes and moaned. Her only saving grace was that she’d heard the teasing in his voice and was glad he had such a good sense of humor, even if it was at her expense.

“Kylie?”

She pulled her head from beneath the pillow. “What?”

“Are you going to tell me voluntarily or do I have to come over and tickle it out of you?”

The thought of Chance actually tickling anything out of her had a stimulating effect on her rather than an amusing one. Yet she couldn’t help but smile. “I doubt if you can tickle anything out of me, Chance.”

“Don’t let me come over there and prove you wrong,” he warned in an even huskier tone of voice.

Kylie closed her eyes and in her mind she could envision him lying in bed saying what he’d just said. He would be propped back against the pillow with a sexy smile on his lips and a teasing glint in his dark eyes.

She allowed her mind to go a little further by envisioning him lying on top of the bedcovers completely naked. Her overactive imagination spread warmth through her as she envisioned her gaze moving down his muscular chest and firm stomach before coming to rest on his exposed groin. He was hard as steel.

She inhaled deeply and wondered what it would be like to touch him there, caress his body all over, bury her face in the curve of his neck, taste his skin and nibble him in a few places to brand him hers. She would let his musky scent fill her nostrils before pressing her mouth to his, getting the deep, tongue-tangling kiss she knew awaited her. She would let her hand reach down to touch him in his most private area, feeling the heat of him, hot, hard and thick. The mere thought of seducing him that way had blood racing recklessly through her veins.

“Kylie?”

She swallowed, trying to bring her thoughts back in check. “Yes?”

“Tell me.”
The sensuous tone of his voice was playing havoc on her sensibilities. She leaned back in bed, letting her body cool from the heated thoughts that had flowed through her mind earlier. Her lids lowered and for a long second she didn’t say anything, wondering if she should. But she knew he wouldn’t let up until she told him.

“Lena mentioned that the American Cancer Society is having their annual ball and she’s on the committee,” she started off by saying. “So quite naturally she’s trying to get rid of as many tickets as she can. I told her I’d get a ticket to support the cause and then she tried talking me into getting two, knowing full well I wouldn’t have a date that night.”

“And?” he asked when she paused briefly.
That single, softly uttered word stirred an area of her body that it shouldn’t have. “And…Lena suggested that I invite you.”

“So that’s what you meant when you screamed in my ear.”
Color rushed into Kylie’s face again. “Yes, that’s what I meant.”
“I see. Don’t I have a say in the matter?”
“No. The only reason we met, Chance, is because of the kids,” she said, giving voice to her earlier thoughts. “If we had been at any function together you wouldn’t have noticed me. I’m not the type of woman you would have been drawn to enough to show any real interest in.”

“You think not?”
“Yes.”
“What if I said you’re wrong?”
“We’ll never know, will we?”
When he had no comeback, she said, “Besides, I don’t date. I mentioned that to you before.”
“Yes, you did mention it. Is that also the reason you won’t go camping, because you see that as a date?”
“No, that in itself is a whole other set of problems, Chance. I just think the two of us spending a weekend at a cabin isn’t a good idea, even with the kids there. Especially with the kids there.”

“Why?”
“I think you know the reason without me having to go into any great detail. For some reason, we’re like magnets—we attract.”
“And you see that as a bad thing?”
“Yes. Our focus should be on our kids. What would Marcus think if he thought you were attracted to me?”
Chance chuckled. “He would probably think the same thing I did when I finally got to meet Tiffany. That he has great taste. She’s a nice girl and so is her mother.”

Kylie couldn’t help but smile, pleased with his compliment, but still…“Can’t you see the problems it will cause if our kids think something is going on between us?”

“No.”

“Chance,” she said, moaning his name in frustration.

“Kylie. We’ve had this conversation before and my feelings on the matter haven’t changed. We’re adults and what we do is our business. In fact I think Marcus will find it strange if I’m not attracted to you. He thinks you’re beautiful, so quite naturally he’ll assume that I’ll think you’re beautiful, too. And I do. I also think you’re someone I’d like to get to know better. He would assume as much as well. But you’re right. The camping trip will be about Marcus and Tiffany and not about us. Our time will come later.”

She wondered what he meant by that.

“Will it make you feel better if I promise to be on my best behavior when we go camping?”

Kylie shrugged. How could she explain to him that his behavior really had nothing to do with it? It was her own behavior she was concerned about. He didn’t have to do anything in particular for her to get turned on. Her dilemma was the fact that just seeing him did that.

“If you don’t go, you know what might happen, don’t you?”
Chance’s question recaptured her attention. “No, what?”

“The kids are going to feel that they can’t depend on us to keep our end of the bargain. We did tell them that we would agree for them to take part in supervised activities.”

“But we never said anything about overnight activities, Chance.”

“Neither did we clarify they had to be only daytime activities. They won’t understand what the big deal is since we will be there as chaperones. They will only see it as a cop-out on our part. I don’t think it’s fair to cancel out a weekend of fun for them just because we can’t keep our hormones in check for forty-eight hours. It makes us sound pretty damn selfish, don’t you think?”

Kylie sighed deeply. It hadn’t before, but since he’d put it that way, yes, it did make them—her in particular—sound selfish. Tiffany had never gotten the chance to go camping. Kylie had been too overprotective to even let her
go with the Girl Scouts that time when she was ten. And now all her daughter wanted was to experience her first camping trip and her selfish mother, who couldn’t keep her overactive hormones in line, was standing in her way.

“Okay, you’ve convinced me. I’ll go.”
“Great! The kids will be happy.”
She laughed. “Yes, I’m sure they will be.”
“I’ll make the arrangements for next weekend. Will that work?”
“Yes, that will work.”
“And, Kylie…?”
“Yes?”
“The kids aren’t the only ones who’ll be happy. I’m going to be happy as well. Good night.”
Before she could say anything, he hung up the phone.
A few days later Kylie was praying that at some point her life would resume a sense of normalcy. Since she'd told Tiffany of her decision to go camping, her daughter had been nothing but a bundle of mass excitement. So much, in fact, that Kylie had to wonder whether being with Marcus was the primary reason for her daughter's happiness or the camping trip itself.

With teenage exuberance, Tiffany had gone on and on about all the things she planned to do, like swimming in the lake, fishing in that same lake, having a picnic by that lake and taking oodles and oodles of pictures of that lake. And she intended to do a lot of bird watching and had even checked out a library book on the various species. Of course that meant she would need a pair of binoculars, which her godmother had been quick to buy for her.

Kylie hadn't talked to Chance anymore until he'd called early Saturday morning saying he would drop off a list of items she might want to bring along. The cabin's kitchen was well-stocked with cooking utensils, but he thought it would be good if they cooked outside on the grill or a camp stove. He'd gone on to tell her that although the cabin had electricity, usually he and Marcus enjoyed faking it by using candles and lanterns.

Anticipating his visit, she had been a mass of nerves, and once she opened the door not even the loud wail of a fire truck siren could intrude on her jolting awareness of him. She pulled in a deep breath. And then another. Neither did a thing to stop the pounding of her heart or the barrage of sensations that overwhelmed her.

Standing before her in jogging pants, a T-shirt and a pair of what appeared to have once been expensive tennis shoes, Chance Steele was the epitome of everything hot and spicy. He looked like a man capable of doing anything he pleased, whether it was in the boardroom or in the bedroom. Especially in the bedroom. However, at that very moment she had to concede that there was nothing sophisticated about Chance's appearance. He looked like a man ready for some play time, and his darkly stubbled jaw, which meant he hadn't yet shaved that morning, only added to his sharply male features.

“Here’s the camping checklist I told you about,” he said, breaking into her heated thoughts. She took the paper he handed her. “Thanks.”

“The only things you’ll need to bring for you and Tiffany are the items listed under the first-aid section.” She nodded and quickly scanned the list, okay with everything she saw on it until she noted the snake bite kit. She lifted her gaze back to his. The eyes that met hers were dark, sexy and full of sexual interest he wasn’t trying to hide, which made her thankful for two things: that she was a woman and that she was decently dressed. “Snake bite kit?”

A smile touched his eyes. “Yes, just as an added precaution. But I have one if you have trouble finding it. It’s a rather popular item this time of the year.”

An uninvited shiver ran through her. That wasn’t exactly what she wanted to hear. She cleared her throat. “Would you like to come in? Tiffany and I were just sitting down to breakfast. You’re welcome to join us.”

“No, thanks. I’m on my way to the gym. It’s tradition that my brothers and I play basketball every Saturday morning. It helps get rid of any competitive frustrations we might have before the start of a new week.”

She lifted a brow. “Competitive frustrations? Does that happen often?”

“I guess with four adult males it can’t help but happen occasionally, given the closeness of our ages and our competitive natures. Then of course there’s Donovan, who often forgets that I’m the oldest and he’s the youngest.”

It wasn’t the first time she felt that an extreme closeness existed between the Steele brothers. It was there in his tone whenever he spoke of them. “Well, enjoy your game.”

“I will. And just so you’ll know, I’m catching a flight out first thing Monday morning to Dallas. I’ll be there until Thursday. Marcus will be spending time with my brothers until I return.”

“All right, thanks for letting me know,” she said, missing him already, although she didn’t want to feel that way. “Have a safe trip.”

By the way he was staring at her, she knew without a doubt that if Tiffany hadn’t been home he would have come inside and kissed her goodbye. That knowledge caused an ache in certain parts of her body. Their connected gazes were holding just a little too long. She knew it and was fully aware that he knew it as well.

“I’ll call you,” he finally whispered huskily.

Kylie nodded. A promise made and one she knew he intended to keep. “All right.”
She wrapped her arms around her waist, hugging herself so she wouldn’t be tempted to reach out and hug him.

**Chapter 7**
He took a step back and looked deeply into her eyes one last time before turning back to his truck.

During the next four days Kylie spent her free time shopping for the items on the list Chance had given her. After that was done, Tiffany had convinced her that they needed to spruce up their wardrobes, with a collection of new outfits suitable for camping.

Kylie enjoyed this carefree, happy-go-lucky side of her daughter. It had been a long time since she’d seen it and she couldn’t help but count her blessings now.

She and Tiffany returned home from one of their shopping trips rather late on Wednesday night and were in her bedroom unwrapping their numerous packages.

“Mom, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, honey, you can ask me anything.”

“Why don’t you have a boyfriend?”

Kylie’s hand went still on the new blouse that she was about to place on the hanger. You can ask me anything but that, she wanted to say but decided it was a good question. If only she could give her daughter what she felt was a good answer. She decided to go for the truth…but only after she found out why Tiffany wanted to know.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I think you’re so pretty and all the other girls at school whose moms are single always talk about their mothers’ boyfriends. In fact Trisha Nobles’s mom is getting married next month.”

Good for Trisha Nobles’s mom, Kylie wanted to say. But she knew the only reason Tiffany had asked the question was because the answer was important to her.

“I’ve been too busy to have a boyfriend,” she said honestly. “Running the shop takes up a lot of my time.”

“But even before we moved here and you worked for that marketing firm you never went out on a date or anything.”

Kylie lifted an eyebrow. “And that bothered you?”

“I really never thought about it until recently.”

Kylie sat on the bed next to her daughter. “And why recently?”

“Because now I know how it feels to care for someone and I think it’s sad that you never cared for anyone before. It doesn’t seem right.”

Kylie pulled her daughter into her arms and was mildly surprised when she came willingly. “Oh, honey, but it’s okay. Some things aren’t just automatic. Another reason I never went out was because I’m a very selective person.”

“Nitpicky?”

Kylie laughed. “Yeah, nitpicky. Only a certain type of man appeals to me.”

Tiffany pulled back and glanced up at her. “Really? And what kind is that, Mom?”

Kylie immediately thought of Chance and forced him from her mind. “First and foremost he has to be willing to be a good father to you. Then he has to treat us both good, look good, be health-conscious, fun to be around, be someone I can always depend on even during my darkest hour, and someone who loves me unconditionally.”

“Unconditionally?”

“Yes. Someone who would love me no matter what and who would take me as I am—the good, the bad and the ugly.”

Tiffany smiled. “You know that’s funny.”

“What is, honey?”

“Marcus said he recently asked his dad why he never remarried. And it seems that he’s nitpicky, too.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And he gave almost the same exact answers as you did.” Tiffany chuckled. “Boy, adults sure are strange.”

“Strange in what way?”

Tiffany gave her mother a beaming smile. “If all of you are looking for the same thing in a person, then why is it so hard to find someone?”

Before Kylie could answer her daughter’s question—not that she thought she had an answer anyway—the phone rang. Tiffany quickly picked it up. “Hello?”

Kylie watched her daughter’s dark eyebrows lift curiously. “I’m fine, and yes, sir, she’s here. Just a moment please.”

Her daughter then stared at her with bright, penetrating eyes and whispered, “It’s for you and it’s Mr. Steele. He’s probably calling to make sure that you got everything on that list for the camping trip this weekend.”

Kylie took the phone her daughter handed her. “Yes, I’m sure that’s why he’s calling,” she said, trying to keep her voice neutral but feeling she’d failed miserably. She hoped Tiffany hadn’t picked up on anything.
“That’s really nice of him to call us all the way from Texas, isn’t it?”
“Yes, it is.”
“Well, it’s late and I have school tomorrow so I’m going to bed. Thanks for taking me shopping, Mom. Good night.”
“You’re welcome and good night, sweetheart.”
With quiet gravity Kylie watched Tiffany leave the room, closing the door behind her. It was only then that she turned her attention back to the phone and the man waiting on the line to talk to her.
“Hello?”
“Sorry about that, Kylie. I assumed Tiffany would be in bed by now.”
“Usually she is but that’s okay. I took her shopping after school and we just got back a little over an hour ago.”
Chance chuckled. “Must have been some shopping trip.”
Kylie smiled. “Trust me, it was.” She didn’t want to sound too excited but she was glad to hear his voice. “How are things going?”
“Busy. This is one of those annual meetings where the CEOs of various corporations get together, leave egos at the door and work on something we all need to improve within our companies.”
“And what’s that?”
“Employee relations. But I didn’t call to talk about that. I wanted to see how you and Tiffany were doing.”
“We’re fine.” Actually there was something concerning her. Maybe Chance could shed some light on it. “I know Tiffany talks to Marcus every day, but I’m a little concerned about something.”
“What?”
“Although I told him on Sunday that it would be okay if he wanted to visit with Tiffany for a few hours after school on occasion, he hasn’t done so.”
“Umm, even with football practice I’m surprised he hasn’t jumped at the chance at least once. Does Tiffany seem bothered by it?” Chance asked.
“No, and I know for a fact that they aren’t mad at each other.” Kylie sighed. Maybe things were different with teenagers today. She and Sam had practically tried living out of each other’s pockets. It had gotten so bad that he had become a regular fixture around her parents’ house although they had wished otherwise.
“Maybe I’m assuming too much here, Chance, but I thought with them being so ‘madly in love’ that once I gave the go-ahead for supervised visits that Marcus would become a constant visitor.”
“That’s strange, because I know that I would.”
“You would what?”
“Become a constant visitor if you ever gave me the go-ahead.”
Chance’s voice was hardly more than a whisper but she heard the underlying meaning loud and clear. Kylie’s breath hung in her throat for a brief second and then she took a deep, calming inhale, which was followed by a series of flutters in her stomach.
“Kylie?”
“Yes?” She was glad to say anything, even that one single word, to assure her that her vocal cords were still working and they hadn’t drowned in all those sensations overtaking her.
“May I ask a favor of you?” Chance asked.
“Yes,” she said with a small shrug, certain he wouldn’t ask her to do anything indecent or immoral.
“Would you pick me up from the airport tomorrow around lunchtime?”
Surprise flickered in the depths of her dark eyes. “You want me to pick you up?”
“Yes. My car is at the dealership getting serviced while I’m away. I can get one of my brothers to pick me up but I would like for you to... if it won’t be any problem.”
“No, it won’t be a problem. But can I ask you something?”
“Yes.”
“Why do you want me to do it?”
“You’ll find out when I see you.”
The sound of his voice held promises she wasn’t sure she wanted him to keep. She’d been having a lot of mixed emotions since meeting Chance. A part of her knew that getting involved with him was not a good idea, but then another part of her—the one that lately was constantly reminding her that she was a woman with needs—was egging her on to enjoy what he was offering. At least within reason.
“All right. Would you like to give me your flight information now?” For the next minute or so, she jotted down the information that he gave her.
“Well, I’ll let you go now. I’m sure the shopping trip tired you out.”
“Yes, it did somewhat. I appreciate you calling.”
“I told you I would. I just hope my doing so hasn’t raised Tiffany’s suspicions. I know how much you don’t want the kids to think anything is going on between us.”

“No, I don’t think your call did. In fact she said she thought it was very considerate of you to call and make sure we were all set for this weekend.”

“And are you all set for this weekend, Kylie?”

More than I need to be, she thought, thinking of all the new outfits she had purchased with the hopes that he’d like each and every one of them. “Yes, I found all the items on the list including the snake bite kit.”

“Good girl. Now do something tonight when you go to sleep.”

“What?”

“Think of me.”

Chance settled back in the bed after placing the phone back in the cradle. He hadn’t been able to concentrate on the summit all week, because Kylie was on his mind. Hell, for the last couple of nights, he hadn’t been able to sleep a wink.

It had been during Horace Doubletree’s speech that day when he’d suddenly came to the realization that it was a waste of time trying to fool himself any longer and that things for him had moved past him trying to get to know Kylie better. The truth of the matter was that he knew all he wanted to know. His heart had decided. He had fallen in love with her.

How such a thing was possible he wasn’t sure; especially when the woman had been sending out conflicting signals since the day they met. She was attracted to him, although she was determined to fight that attraction every step of the way. Her independence, while a turn-on, had ironically become a major obstacle to the relationship. That meant he needed to probe deeper and somehow break through her defenses. He also needed to take one day at a time and wipe away the fifteen years of hurt and pain she’d endured and prove that with him there would only be happier days. Even without her realizing she’d been doing so, for the past couple of weeks she had been extracting an unusual type of strength from him.

A strength of will.

He’d been fighting an intense longing, a deep-rooted desire for her since that day he’d walked into her florist shop. He could now admit that the first time their eyes had connected his heart had slammed into fifth gear. No wonder lunch at the Racetrack Café had seemed fitting as a place for their first date. Even then he’d known that something special was within his grasp.

After Cyndi died he’d actually thought that he could never love another woman again. And even with the few affairs he’d indulged in over the years, he’d never allowed his emotions to go any deeper than affection or desire. Yet here he had fallen hard for a woman whom he had never actually taken out on a real date, had never slept with and had never really spent more than a few hours with at a given time. His brothers would say such a thing was utterly insane. They would call in the shrink to have his head examined, or they would take him out somewhere and beat some sense into him. But then they would one day realize that some things in life were not meant to be understood, just accepted. Today he had accepted the fact that he had fallen in love.

And he knew he had his work cut out for him.

There was more than gentle pride in every bone in Kylie’s body. He knew just from the time he’d spent with her that she could be stubborn, willful and defiant. That was all well and good if she was dealing with any other man than him. But he refused to wait around for her to bolster her courage to take a chance and fall in love again—this time with a man who wouldn’t let her down. He still wouldn’t rush her into doing anything, but he definitely planned to show her how good things could be between them. He planned to jar her emotions, jump-start her heart and make her stare the truth in the face.

There were chances in life worth taking and he was one “Chance” she should definitely take. In high school he and his brothers had been pegged as guys who were forged of steel. It was time to prove to Kylie that no matter what, he was a man with the endurance to withstand just about anything.

The next day at noon Kylie was at the airport waiting for Chance to arrive. As usual, no matter what day of the week it was, Douglas International Airport was busy. People were scurrying to their connecting flights or to their rendezvous with their loved ones.

When Chance’s flight number was announced, she turned and glued her eyes on the gate. Evidently he traveled in first class because it didn’t take long for him to exit the jetway. He was dressed in an expensive suit, and his stride was long and confident as he passed through the gate. There appeared to be an aura of power and authority surrounding him. Chance Steele was one dynamic, compelling and forceful man.

He looked so dependable, like the kind of man at whose feet a woman could leave her worries knowing he
would take care of them and she wouldn’t ever have to carry them on her shoulders again. He also looked like the kind of man who could drive a woman crazy with desire. She could definitely attest to that.

Her breath caught the moment their gazes met and she felt that immediate quiver of anticipation in her middle. He was going to kiss her. Somehow she knew, and heaven help her but she wanted that kiss more than anything.

She watched his long, elegant stride eating the distance separating them. And with each step he made, a delicious heat inched its way through her veins, making her blood hot and leaving her wondering, not for the first time, how this particular man could affect her so. He was the type of man that fantasies were built on, and who made realities even more poignant. And with every step he took toward her, he was making anticipation that much sweeter.

When he was within five feet of her, she saw the undisguised longing on his face. She could actually feel his desperation. There was a lot she didn’t understand but at that moment the one thing she did accept was that in less than a minute, now more like a few seconds, she was going to be kissed senseless.

All the while he’d been walking toward Kylie, the one thought that kept churning in Chance’s mind was that she was the woman he wanted and needed in his life.

Other than his mother, he had never kissed a woman at an airport, but that thought was pushed to the back of his mind when he pulled Kylie into his arms and captured her lips with his. And as their lips engaged in one hell of a lockdown, he wished she could feel all the emotions flowing through him at that very moment.

Knowing he had to get a grip before the kiss really turned raw and primitive, he reluctantly pulled back, but kept his arms around her waist, refusing to let her go anywhere. “Now that was worth coming back to,” he whispered softly.

Kylie struggled for breath and then noted they had become the center of attention. “We’ve caused a scene.”

He smiled. “Yes, but some scenes are worth causing.”

She looked up at him. “Is this what you had in mind when you asked me to pick you up last night?”

He reached out and caressed her cheek. “Not entirely, but it’s definitely a start. Come on, let’s get my luggage so we can get the hell out of here.”
Chapter 8

Kylie couldn’t remember the last time she had a problem with keeping her eyes on the road while driving. But Chance’s presence in her car was interfering with her concentration and wreaking havoc on her senses.

After claiming his luggage, he had taken her hand as they walked out of the terminal to her parked car. Once he had placed his bags in her trunk, his arms had clamped around her waist, pulled her to him and he’d sunk his mouth down on hers in another kiss. The moment their lips connected, heat had exploded through her and the heavy bulge of his erection pressed to her middle had caused her entire body to ache.

“We’ve got to stop doing this,” she’d said the moment he had released her mouth.

“Why?” he had whispered hotly against her moist lips.

“Because it won’t lead anywhere. It’s a dead end.”

“Then my response is that you need a new pair of eyes.”

“I have very good vision, Kylie.” He’d then strolled to the passenger side of her car and got inside.

Bringing her thoughts back to the present, she took another quick glance over at him. He was sprawled in the seat next to her. His muscular body fit nicely into her Altima, although his broad shoulders took up a lot of space. His legs were long and his seat was pushed as far back as it could go to accommodate his height. His head lay back against the headrest and his eyes were closed.

Evidently the trip had tired him out, but not enough to stop him from engaging in a little mouth exercise with her a couple of times. She had begun thinking of their kisses as TST—taste, stroke and tangle—because each time they kissed he tried a new technique on her mouth that centered around those three basic elements.

“You’re tired,” she decided to say when she came to a traffic light. “Are you sure you want me to take you to the dealership to pick up your truck instead of taking you home? It might be a good idea for you to go to bed.”

He opened his eyes, titled his head and let his gaze fasten on hers. “If you were to take me home and I got into bed, would you get in there with me and keep me company?” he asked, his voice low and sexy.

She inhaled deeply. Although he had phrased the question in a roundabout way, technically he had just hinted at the possibility of her sleeping with him. “No. I’d take you home and put you to bed, but I wouldn’t get in that bed with you.”

He smiled. “Spoilsport.”

She chuckled and turned her attention back to the road when the traffic light changed. “I might be at that, but it seems I’m the one destined to keep us out of trouble.”

“Some trouble I might like,” he murmured in a low voice leaden with exhaustion, before closing his eyes again.

“And what if Marcus had that same attitude?”

“When he gets to my age he’s welcome to it, but while he’s underage, I decide what he likes and doesn’t like. And stop comparing us to our kids, Kylie. Like I told you before, we’re adults. They aren’t.”

“Sorry, I keep forgetting,” she said sarcastically.

“It will behoove you to remember. The next time you forget it will cost you.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Cost me what?”

“A kiss. Right then and there. Even if it’s in front of those two kids of ours.”

She frowned and took a quick glance at him and saw that his eyes were opened and he was staring at her. His expression was serious. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“I wouldn’t count on that if I were you.”

And Kylie was smart enough to know not to. She pulled her car into the dealership, parked it and turned to him.

“And just what would doing something like that prove?”

“It would prove that our kids wouldn’t have a problem with anything developing between us.”

“But I’d still have a problem with it. I won’t let any man use me to slake his sexual cravings.”

In a flash Chance snapped the seatbelt off his body and before she could get out her next breath he loomed over her. Blatant anger was carved in his features. “This isn’t about me slaking any sexual cravings, Kylie. But you’re so out of practice with men that you wouldn’t know that, would you? Well, let me tell you something, not about men in general but about this man in particular,” he said pointing to himself. “I won’t ever use you just to slake any sexual cravings, so don’t try making my wanting you as anything sullied or dirty.
“It’s the most natural thing in the world for a man to desire a woman and vice versa. I won’t apologize for it. When we do make love, Kylie, it will be a mutual thing. You’ll want it as much as I do, so don’t kid yourself into believing otherwise. And when it comes to me there’s something else you need to keep in mind.”

“And what’s that?” she asked softly.

“When there’s something I want, I won’t give up until I get it.”

“When we do make love, Kylie, it will be a mutual thing. You’ll want it as much as I do, so don’t kid yourself into believing otherwise…”

The words Chance had spoken earlier that day woke Kylie up more than once that night. This time she knew she had to deal with them before trying to go back to sleep.

Taking the pillow from the other side of the bed, she wrapped her arms around it and hugged it to her chest, wondering how in the world one man could be so utterly self-confident, so damn arrogant. The nerve of him making such a statement as if it was a foregone conclusion they’d go to bed together. Well, she had news for him, she thought bitterly.

After this camping trip was over she would put rules into place where their relationship was concerned. The only thing between them would be Marcus and Tiffany. As parents they would have some connection in order to keep their offspring on the right path, but that would be as far as things went. It wouldn’t bother her in the least if she never saw the infuriating man again.

Turning over on her side, Kylie gazed despondently at the digital clock on the nightstand. It was almost midnight, way too late to be having this sort of conversation with herself. She should be resting peacefully in a sound sleep, but thanks to Chance she was wide awake.

He had upset her so badly that afternoon that it had been a good ten minutes before she’d been able to pull herself together to drive away from that dealership. And twice during dinner Tiffany had asked her if anything was wrong.

And to think she would be spending an entire weekend in Chance’s presence. If there were any way she could cancel their plans without disappointing Tiffany she would, but she knew better than anyone how much her daughter looked forward to this trip.

The phone on her nightstand rang and not for the first time she wished that like the phone in the living room this one had caller ID. But somehow she knew it was Chance and reached out and picked it up. “Hello?”

“I need to apologize, Kylie.”

It was his deep, rich, husky voice, more than the words he had spoken, that sent a sensuous shiver through her. “Do you?”

“Not for everything—just for getting upset with you. I won’t apologize for our kisses. But your words caught me off guard. Never in my wildest dream did I assume you’d think I would want to use you that way.”

“Okay, Chance, maybe it was a bad choice of words, but what I was trying to say was that I’m being logical here. I don’t see things as you see them, and when it comes to a lot of man-woman stuff, you’re right, I’m way out of my league. You aren’t. So I have to protect myself.”

“You’ll never have to protect yourself from me, Kylie. I’d never hurt you, take advantage of you or use you. I give you my word.”

“Thank you.”

“But I won’t give you my word that I’ll stop pursuing you, stop trying to make you want me as much as I want you, stop trying to—”

“Get me in your bed?”

“No, I won’t stop trying to get you in my bed, Kylie, because I think that’s where you belong. And once I get you there I intend to keep you there for a long time. But it will be for all the right reasons.”

“When is an affair good for any reason?”

“When the two individuals agree that it is. You and I have a long way to go, Kylie. We haven’t even gone on what I consider a real date. I want that but you don’t.”

She sighed deeply. “It’s not that I don’t want it, Chance, it’s just that I don’t think it’s wise, considering the kids.”

“So you prefer that we do things behind their backs?”

“No, I prefer that we don’t do anything at all. Why is that so hard for you to understand?”

“And just what is it that you’re afraid of?”

She was taken aback by his question. “I’m not afraid of anything.”

“I think you are.”

“Then think whatever you want.”
“I will, and right now I think it’s time that I show you something, Kylie Hagan.”
She didn’t like the way that sounded. “Show me what?”
“What this man-woman thing is all about. Like I said earlier today, you’ve been out of the game for so long you
don’t know what’s acceptable between couples and what’s not. Maybe it’s time that I start teaching you a few things
and—”
“Teach me a few things?” she interrupted shortly.
“Yes, then maybe you’ll realize that you’re not immune to me as you want to believe. Good night, Kylie.”
The phone had already clicked in her ear before Kylie could recover her power of speech.

“Mom, isn’t this place simply beautiful?” Tiffany asked in a high-pitched voice that was filled with enthusiasm
and wonder.
“Yes, it is,” Kylie replied, trying to direct her gaze out of the cabin window and not on Chance and Marcus as
they brought in the items out of the truck.

Especially on Chance.
Instinctively, she took one hand and checked her pulse at her wrist, not surprised to find the strong beat racing
beneath her fingertips. Already Chance was having an effect on her. He had shown up at her place wearing a pair of
faded jeans and a T-shirt. The moment she’d seen him those wacky hormones of hers began soaring. She wished
there was some type of injection she could take to build an immunity against him.

“Mom, you don’t sound excited about being here. Are you okay?”
Kylie turned to meet Tiffany’s concerned gaze and suddenly felt guilty. The last thing she wanted was her
daughter worrying about her needlessly, which would place a damper on all the fun she’d planned for the weekend.

“Yes, sweetheart, I’m fine, and it’s going to be a wonderful and fantastic weekend. Now let’s put this stuff down
and go outside to see if Marcus and Chance need our help.”

Once they had stepped back outside, Kylie glanced around. The spacious log cabin that sat on the shore of a
huge lake blended well with the surroundings. Trees of all kinds provided plenty of shade, as did a sprawling front
porch that had several wooden rocking chairs and a rustic porch swing. Kylie had to agree with Tiffany’s earlier
assessment. The place was beautiful.

“The air is so crisp and clean here. I can’t wait until Marcus teaches me how to fish, and Mr. Steele said he
would help. Isn’t that nice of him?”
“Yes, that is nice of him.”
They walked back toward the truck while Tiffany excitedly rambled on about what fun she planned to have and
what a nice man Chance was.

“Need us to help carry anything else inside?” Kylie asked Chance and Marcus when they reached them.
“No, Dad and I can handle things, Ms. Hagan,” Marcus said, not giving Chance an opportunity to respond.

“But remember we don’t use electricity, so you and Tiffany might want to unpack and get familiar with the inside of
the cabin. Right, Dad?”
Chance smiled. “Right.”

Kylie could feel Chance’s eyes on her but she refused to look at him. She was beginning to feel ridiculous and
out of sorts because a part of her was still upset about yesterday. He, however, was acting like their conversation
never took place. To her chagrin, he was in the best of moods.

“So what’s for dinner?” Tiffany would have to be the one to ask.
“I thought it would be nice if we grilled something outside on the open fire,” Chance said. “Any ideas?”

Kylie saw the opportunity to make peace and seized it. She glanced over at Chance. “Anything but
hamburgers,” she said softly, as a tentative smile touched her lips.
Chance met her gaze, immediately recognized their private joke and smiled back. “Okay, no hamburgers.”
“What about a hot-dog roast?” was Tiffany’s suggestion.

“That’s a great idea and we have plenty of hot-dog sticks to use,” Marcus chimed in.
“Okay, all that sounds good,” Chance said, as an amused grin eased up the corner of his mouth. “But because I
need something a little bit more filling, I’ll throw a couple of steaks on the grill, too.”
He lifted the last box into his strong arms. “Come on, let’s go inside and get this show on the road.”

Kylie inhaled a deep breath as she stepped out of the bedroom she and Tiffany were sharing. More than a dozen
candles were strategically scattered about and a couple of huge lanterns blazed in the corners of the living room.
She couldn’t help but smile, thinking of all the fun they’d had so far. Chance had given both her and Tiffany a
quick lesson on camping and had shown them how to assemble a tent in case they ever needed to use one. Roasting
hot dogs on the stick had been fun but she’d appreciated Chance’s idea of grilling the steaks when Marcus and
Tiffany overcooked the weiners.

And then later, before it had gotten dark, Chance had taken her out in a canoe to the other side of the lake. The scenery there had been just as breathtaking with numerous trees, flowering plants and a catfish-filled stream. Kylie smiled and thought that a person could get spoiled by so much of nature’s beauty.

“Marcus is out like a light.”

Kylie’s smile froze when she turned and saw Chance coming out the bedroom that he and Marcus were sharing. She thought he had turned in for the night.

“So is Tiffany.” She gave him a curious look and said, “I thought you had gone to bed too.”

“Not without first putting out the candles and lanterns. Fire hazards, you know.”

She nodded. “I never realized there was so much to know about camping.”

“There is but it’s an excellent way to get back to nature. My mom agreed up to a point, which is why my parents purchased this place. She didn’t mind getting back to nature but wanted all the comforts of home while doing so.”

He grinned as he moved around the room to put out the candles and lanterns. “I hate to say this but we had more fun when we left her at home. Dad was too laid back to worry about us turning over in the canoe or eating berries off the bushes without washing them first. And the only reason we have hot and cold running water is because she refused to let us bathe in the lake. Good old Mom always came with a strict set of rules.”

Kylie chuckled. “Haven’t you figured out yet that’s one of the things we’re best known for? Your mother sounds like my kind of woman. I would love meeting her one day.”

And I intend for you to do just that, Chance thought as he glanced over at her. Mom would be happy to know that her oldest son has found love again.

All the candles were out but one, and the luminescent glow from that one candle seemed to focus on Kylie, making her skin shine with an ethereal radiance. Her hair had been up in a ponytail earlier but now she’d taken it down, and the mass of braids fell in soft waves around her shoulders.

“Well, I guess I’ll call it a night and—”

“Will you sit on the porch with me for a while?” he asked.

Kylie looked at him then shook her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

The corner of his mouth tipped upward into a smile. “Has anyone ever told you that you think too much?”

“Possibly,” she said slowly. “But I won’t absolutely admit to anything.”

Chance chuckled. “I didn’t think you would.”

“Now who’s thinking too much?”

“Oh, that’s real rich,” Chance said, laughing. “Come on. I think you’ll get a kick out of watching the stars.” He reached out and offered her his hand and, only after hesitating briefly, she took it.

Chance was right. She was getting a kick out of watching the stars. Sitting here on the porch and rocking in the chair made Kylie realize all the little things she’d hadn’t taken time to do before.

“Sure you don’t want to come over here and share this swing with me?” Chance asked.

She chuckled as she glanced over at him. “I’m positive.”

“But you aren’t sitting close to me.”

“I’m close enough, Chance.”

“I beg to differ.”

She shook her head grinning. “Tell me something. Are your brothers like you?”

“No, I’m one of a kind.”

“Thank God.”

“Hey,” he said with affront. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Let’s just say I’m glad after you were born that they broke the mold. I can’t imagine another one like you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You would.” After a brief moment of silence she said, “Tell me some more about your brothers.”

“All right. Like I told you that day at the Racetrack Café, Bas is eighteen months younger than me and he’s the troubleshooter for the company.”

“He’s also the one engaged to be married, right?”

“So we hear.”

She stopped rocking and looked over at him, studied his features from the glow of the moon. “Why do I have a feeling that it’s one of those ‘I’ll believe it when I see it’ deals?”

“Because it is. Cassandra Tisdale and Bas are as different as day and night.”

Kylie raised a brow. “Tisdale? As in Tisdale who owns a number of car dealerships around town? As well as
those two restaurants?”
“Yes, the dealerships belong to her father and the restaurants to her uncle. Same family.”
“Why do you think Ms. Tisdale and your brother aren’t compatible?”
“Because they aren’t.”
“He evidently thinks they are.”
“Remember you’re the one who thinks too much. In this case, I don’t believe Bas is thinking at all. But I have all the faith in the world that he’ll come to his senses before doing something stupid.”
Kylie frowned. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”
“Quite.” After a brief moment he said, “But only because I know my brothers, and Bas in particular. All through his life he’s been known as the ‘not so stainless Steele.’”
“Meaning?”
Chance frowned at the memories. “He was considered the black sheep of the family because he used to get into so much trouble. I guess you can say he went through quite a rebellious stage while growing up. You name it, he probably did it. It was a good thing my father was good friends with Sheriff Blandford since Bas had a penchant for straying to the wrong side of the law. Most of the time it wasn’t him but the crowd he hung out with. But you know what they say about guilt by association.”
Yes, she knew. “So when did his future change for the better?”
“When he was about twenty. He dropped out of college after deciding he wanted to see the world. He was gone for a year without us knowing where he was most of the time. All we know is that when he returned he had a new outlook on life. He went back to college, graduated with honors and then came to work at the Steele Corporation, starting from the bottom. He was determined to learn everything he could. Now he’s a vital asset to the company. I depend on him to keep me in the know and to put out small fires.”
“What about the other two?”
“Morgan is Morgan. He has this thing about finding the perfect woman and until he does he won’t settle for less. Then there’s Donovan, who thinks he was born to have fun. He’s serious enough while at work but otherwise there’s really never a serious moment with him. My mother predicts he’ll probably be the one who lives the longest because he enjoys life too much to get stressed about anything.”
“Does that also mean he’s having too much fun to settle down and get married?”
“So he claims. He just hasn’t met the one woman to tame his game.”
“Quite an interesting bunch.”
“Yes, they didn’t refer to us as ‘Forged of Steele’ for nothing.”
Kylie lifted a brow. “Forged of Steele?”
“Yes. We were known for our endurance. We thought we could outlast anything.”
She decided not to ask their endurance in what. “The possibility that Marcus might be a chip off the old block now has me worried. Should I be?”
Chance chuckled. “No, he’s a good kid.”
“Yes, I noticed and I’m appreciative of that. I was prepared not to like him, you know.”
“Yeah, I know, and it was likewise with me and Tiffany. But I like her. You did a good job raising her, Kylie.”
“So did you with Marcus.”
“Thanks.”
Kylie stretched and then stood. “Well, I think I’m going to call it a night.”
“Already?”
“It’s probably close to two in the morning, Chance, and I still have to take a shower. That checker game you played with the kids lasted quite awhile.”
“Only because your daughter didn’t know how to play. I’ve never heard of such a thing. That’s un-American.”
“Well, I hate to tell you but her mother doesn’t know how to play checkers, either.”
“Then I guess I’ll add that to my list of all the other things I intend to teach you.”
“Don’t do me any favors.”
“Trust me. It will be for my benefit as well as for yours. The more you know and understand, the better off we’ll both be.”
Kylie knew they weren’t talking about checkers but about the intricacies involving a male and female. But was she willing to learn?

Chance lay in bed and could only stare up at the ceiling as he heard the shower going, imagining Kylie, naked and standing beneath a full spray of water that flowed down her breasts, flat stomach, thighs…
He tried tuning out the sound and turning his attention to his snoring son, who was sleeping on the opposite
bunk. Damn, he sounded just like Donovan. Chance chuckled as he remembered that while growing up no one wanted to share a bedroom with Donovan because he snored.

After a few moments he released a groan and decided listening to Kylie in the shower was a lot better than putting up with Marcus. He smiled, thinking he had really enjoyed their conversation on the porch tonight. She seemed interested in his family, which was just as well, since if he had his way the Steeles would be her family one day.

God, he loved her.

Heat sizzled along his nerve endings at the thought of just how much. A slow, sinful grin touched his lips when he thought about what he’d told her last night. There was a lot she didn’t understand about man-woman relationships and he intended to teach her. Things had definitely changed since her last date, especially in the bedroom. If he remembered correctly, that was the year the Hubble Telescope was launched into space, Nelson Mandela was finally freed from prison and George Bush Senior was president.

Hell, she probably wasn’t aware that these days men and women who were in a serious relationship openly discussed such things as foreplay and orgasms, or that trying different positions in the bedroom was now the norm and not the exception. And she’d probably be startled to know that oral sex was pretty popular these days.

A slow smile rolled around his lips. Yes, he would enjoy teaching her all the finer things in life with one goal in mind: to make her fall as deeply in love with him as he was with her.
Chapter 9

“Well, Lena, how do I look?”

Lena stood with her hands on her hips and gave Kylie an assessing stare. The two of them had been shopping for gowns to wear to this weekend’s ball and it seemed as if Kylie had hit the jackpot.

“Girl, that dress is gorgeous and it looks fabulous on you,” Lena said. “But of course you have the figure for it. You have more curves than the Daytona Speedway. You’d be nuts not to buy it.”

With her courage bolstered, Kylie looked down at herself. Lena was right. The dress was a sexy black form-fitting georgette mini with a halter crisscross bodice and a low-cut back. She had to admit it did look rather flattering on her, though it showed more skin than she would like.

“You don’t think it’s too daring?” she asked Lena.

“Heck, no, like I said you have the body for it. Everyone can’t say that. I most certainly can’t.”

Kylie frowned at her friend. “Hey, there’s nothing wrong with your figure.”

“That losing fifteen more pounds won’t hurt?”

“Don’t complain. A lot of men like full-figured women. You have a small waist, nice size hips, a gorgeous pair of legs—”

“Strong bones and a good set of teeth,” Lena tagged on. They laughed, remembering other times they had gone shopping together when they were much younger and faced with the same dilemma. Kylie always thought she was too thin and Lena had made up in her mind years ago that at size sixteen she was too thick.

“So, are you going to buy it?” Lena asked as she walked around Kylie, admiring how the dress fit.

“Probably not,” Kylie said, still looking down at herself. She felt half-naked wearing it. “But it’s gorgeous, though.”

“And it has your name on it.”

Kylie glanced up at Lena. “You think so?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t. Besides, since you’ve decided to be my date for the ball what I say counts, right?”

“Right.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Kylie grinned. “I’m going to take it.”

An hour or so later they were back in Lena’s car and exiting the mall. “You never told me how things went last weekend with the camping trip,” Lena said.

Kylie glanced over at her. “Didn’t think I had to. I’m sure Tiffany told you everything you needed to know.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t mention anything about you and Chance.”

“Was she supposed to?”

“I guess not, if the two of you are keeping your affair a secret.”

Kylie gave her friend a direct stare, although Lena’s eyes were glued to the road and didn’t notice it. “Chance and I are not having an affair.”

“Oh. The two of you just meet every so often to lock lips, right?”

Kylie rolled her eyes heavenward. “So, we kissed a few times, no big deal.”

“I would think after fifteen years of abstinence that for you it was a big deal. And you even admitted he was a good kisser.”

“Oh, my gosh, he’s the best,” Kylie breathed and then regretted that she’d admitted it.

Lena laughed. “Bingo. So how did you manage to keep those overzealous hormones under control?”

“It was hard but I managed.”

“And the two of you didn’t kiss not even once?”

“No, not even once. Marcus and Tiffany kept us much too busy. They wanted to do everything and by the end of the day we were too tired to do anything but sleep.”

“Oh, how sad.”

Lena and Kylie looked at each other and burst out laughing again. A few moments later, Lena said, “You know he’s coming to the ball, don’t you?”
Kylie tried to keep her attention on an object outside of the car’s window. “What Chance does is his business.”  
“And he’s bringing a date.”  
Kylie jerked her head around. “What!”  
Lena laughed out loud. “Gotcha!”  
Kylie frowned. “That’s not funny, Lena.”  
“It is, too. You should have seen the way your head snapped around. It’s a wonder you didn’t break your neck. For someone who claims what Chance Steele does is his business, you were definitely interested in that piece of news.”  
“Well, is it true? Is he bringing someone?”  
Lena shrugged. “Don’t know. Cassandra Tisdale mentioned at committee meeting yesterday that her cousin was going to be in town that night from D.C. and she was going to ask Chance to be the woman’s date.”  
“Good for her.”  
“Umm, do I detect a little jealousy in your voice?”  
“Not on your life.”  
Lena smiled. “Okay, if you say so.”  

Lena was right, Kylie thought as she got ready for bed that night. She was jealous. Of all the nerve! She had to admit that Chance had been on his best behavior last weekend, probably because she didn’t give him the chance to be otherwise. After that first night when he had invited her to sit out on the porch with him, she had gotten smart and made sure the opportunity never presented itself again. She went to bed when Tiffany went to bed and she stayed there.  

Still, she thought things had gone rather well that weekend and Marcus and Chance had been perfect hosts. They had seen to all of her and Tiffany’s needs, and with Tiffany and Marcus carrying on more like siblings instead of a couple the majority of the time, it was as if the four of them were a family.  

Chance had been wonderful with Tiffany when he showed her the proper way to use a rod and reel, after Marcus had thrown up his hands and given up. And then there was the time Chance taught Tiffany how to paddle the canoe, and how he was the only one who actually seemed interested in her obsession with bird-watching. Seeing them together actually made her wonder if perhaps Tiffany had lost out by not having a father figure in her life all these years. At least Tiffany would have the chance to spend time with her grandfather this weekend. Kylie’s parents had called a few days ago and asked if Tiffany could go with them to Disney World for the weekend.  

Since both Friday and the following Monday were teachers’ planning days, things worked out perfectly. Kylie would put her on the plane Friday morning and then pick her up from the airport on Monday evening. That meant she wouldn’t have to worry about her daughter while she attended this weekend’s ball.  

The phone rang and Kylie glanced over at the clock, knowing it was Chance. How could he talk to her every night and not mention he was taking someone to the ball? It didn’t matter to her one iota that she hadn’t taken Lena’s advice and invited him herself. It was the principle of the thing.  

She frowned when she picked up the phone. “Hello.”  
“How did things go at work today?”  
This was how they began their conversation each night. He would ask her how things went with her job and she would ask how things went with his. They would hold a pleasant conversation for a good forty-five minutes and then they would say good night. Sometimes she wondered about the real purpose of them talking, other than to hear the other’s voice each day.  

“Things at the shop went okay. Business has really picked up this week. I got a lot of pre-Thanks-giving orders.” Then she said, “I closed early. Lena and I went shopping for gowns for the ball this weekend.” She wondered if he would mention if he were going, or more specifically if he had a date.  

“Did you find something you liked?”  
“Yes.”  
“What color is it?”  
“Black.”  
“I bet it looks good on you.”  
“Lena thought so.”  
“Did she?”  
“Yes.”  

There was a pause and then he said, “Marcus is going away this weekend.”  
Kylie raised an eyebrow. This was news to her since Tiffany hadn’t mentioned it. “He is?”  
“Yes. Cyndi’s parents are coming through on their way to—”
“Not Disney World?” she asked, immediately jumping to conclusions and hoping they were the wrong ones.
“No, Busch Gardens in Virginia.”

*Thank goodness.* “Oh.”

“Why did you think they were going to Disney World?”
“Because that’s where Tiffany is headed this weekend.”
“Ah. And you thought that perhaps they had manipulated their grandparents so the two of them could be in the same place and at the same time.”
“It’s been known to happen.”
“I’m sure it has but I doubt they would go that far.”
“Hey, you never know,” Kylie said.

There was another pause and then Chance said, “We’re going to have to start trusting them at some point, Kylie.”

Tucking a braid behind her ear, she took a deep, frustrating breath. “I know but for me it’s hard, Chance, because I remember all the tricks I used to pull to be with Sam.”

“Yes, but is it fair to judge them by what you did?”
“No.”
“Alright, then.”

Kylie tilted her lips in a smile. Even if he were bringing a date to the ball, she still enjoyed her nightly talks with him. Although she had decided that they could never be lovers, it seemed that he had made up his mind that they would be friends. And deep down she didn’t have a problem with that.

She’d always had Lena as another female to bounce her ideas and thoughts off of, but there had never been a guy she felt close enough with to do the same. Lately she had asked Chance’s opinions about a lot things, including how she should handle situations that had arisen at work. Being the savvy businessman that he was, he had always given her good, sound advice.

“So, how are things going at the Steele Corporation?” she asked.
“There was a development today that I wished could have been avoided.”
“Oh? What?”
“We had to let a man go who’s been with us for over ten years.”
She heard disappointment, as well as regret, in his voice. “Why?”
“We found out he’d been stealing from the company. He was padding figures and having the products delivered elsewhere. Bas had suspected him for a while but we only got the proof we needed today to do anything about it.”

They talked for the next thirty minutes or so and that night Kylie slept with an inner peace that she hadn’t known in a long time.

“So you think they will have their first date this weekend?” Marcus asked before biting into his sandwich.

Tiffany smiled. “Yes. They’re going to that ball although they aren’t going with each other. I can’t see how it won’t turn into a date with the both of us gone for the weekend. Didn’t you see how they were looking at each other last weekend when they thought no one was noticing? I think we did the right thing by contacting our grandparents.”

Marcus nodded. “I hope you’re right.”

Tiffany took another sip of her soda, smiled and said, “Just think, Marcus, if we actually pull this off, you’ll be the big brother I’ve always wanted.”

Marcus grinned. “Yeah, and then I can give Rhonda Denton my full attention. I think she likes me.”
Chapter 10

He wanted her.

That thought rammed through Chance’s mind the moment he saw Kylie enter the ballroom. His heart began hammering in his chest and he actually felt his pulse rate spike drastically. And if that wasn’t bad enough, his body got hard as a rock.

At that moment he was grateful he was standing behind a waist-high plant that could shield the physical evidence of just how much he desired her. That, coupled with the knowledge of how much he loved her, was setting his loins on fire.

The minidress she was wearing was definitely a shocker he could sum up in three words—short, sassy and sexy. It fit her body to perfection, showing off all her curves and the luscious length of her long, shapely legs. And if the dress wasn’t jaw-droppingly seductive enough, then there was the way she had her hair piled atop her head with a few swirling braids crowning her face.

“Who are they?” Morgan leaned over and whispered, while raising an impressive eyebrow. “I don’t know either of them,” he said as if it were his God-given right to be acquainted with every beautiful woman in Charlotte.

Chance studied his brother’s face for a second and noted his gaze wasn’t as glued to Kylie as it was to Lena Spears. That was a good thing since it would have been a waste of Morgan’s time to show any interest in Kylie. When it came to her he could get downright territorial. “The one in the black dress is Kylie Hagan, and she’s mine,” he said, deciding to state his claim here and now. “The woman in the fuchsia dress is her best friend, Lena Spears.”

“Spears? Where have I heard that name before?” Morgan asked.

“I have no idea. She’s a part of the committee that put on tonight’s ball and owns a real estate office in town.”

“Yes.”

Morgan glanced over at Chance after taking a sip from his wineglass. “You know her, then?”

“Yes.”

Morgan’s dark eyes sparkled in the glow of the huge chandelier that hung over their heads. “Good. I want an introduction.” He then glanced back over at the two women. “So the one in black is Marcus’s girlfriend’s mother?”

At Chance’s nod, he said, “Umm, definitely good-looking. But she doesn’t look old enough to have a fifteen-year-old daughter.”

“Well, she does,” Chance answered, with no intention of going into any details as to how that had happened.

For a brief moment Morgan didn’t say anything and then he spoke. “It seems she’s caught Derek Peterson’s eye. He didn’t waste any time going over there to talk to her. If I were you I’d go claim what’s mine.”

Chance had noticed the man’s flight across to the room to get all in Kylie’s face. Derek Peterson, twice divorced, had a reputation as a skirt chaser and it seemed that he wasn’t wasting any time making Kylie’s acquaintance. “I think I will.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend, Lena?” Derek Peterson asked.

“I’ll think about it,” Lena responded noncommittally.

Kylie raised an eyebrow. Lena was known for her friendly disposition. If she was giving this man the cold shoulder, there must be a good reason.

“Since Lena won’t cooperate, I guess I have to introduce myself,” the man said, capturing Kylie’s hand in his. “I’m Dr. Derek Peterson.”

Upon recognizing the name, Kylie understood her friend’s less-than-friendly attitude. Derek was a doctor who had at one time shown interest in Lena until he discovered she was her elderly mother’s caretaker. He’d told her there was no way the two of them could get serious since she came with “extra baggage.”

“And I’m Kylie Hagan,” Kylie said, in an attempt to be polite.

He gave her a smile that showed perfect white teeth. “Ms. Hagan, it is a pleasure to meet you. You must be new to town.”

Kylie decided she didn’t like him any more than Lena did, probably because his gaze was focused more on her chest than her face. “I’ve been living here for almost four months now.”

“What section of town do you live in?”
“Myers Park.”
“Myers Park?”
“Yes.” She heard his impressed tone. Myers Park, one of the first suburbs of Charlotte, featured large stately homes that were canopied in willow oaks. More than any other neighborhood in the city, Myers Park had preserved its true character over the years. The “front-porch” neighborhoods had the traditional sidewalks, funky shops and restaurants. The house she had purchased had cost a pretty penny but thanks to Lena’s negotiating skills, the owners, who’d needed a quick sale, had readily agreed to her offer.

“Then I must definitely get to know you. We’re neighbors,” Dr. Peterson said, “though I don’t ever remember running into you while out and about.”

Kylie was just about to tell him that she was both a fulltime mother and a working woman who didn’t have time to be “out and about,” when she felt a sudden quiver in her midsection. She knew without a doubt that Chance was in close range.

She didn’t want to seem too obvious when she scanned the crowded ballroom, but knew from the way her heart began hammering that she didn’t have to look far. He stood on a raised dais, staring directly at her. The person standing by his side was a man and not a woman, which gave her some relief. It was easy to tell the man was one of his brothers, as the resemblance was striking.

What was also obvious was the intensity in Chance’s eyes. She could almost drown in the look she saw there. Male interest. Male appreciation. Male longing. Even a novice like her could recognize the three. He was silently sending her a message, one her body fully understood. Her hormones were on ready, set, go. But she knew there was something else involved here; something she hadn’t counted on happening. It was also something she wasn’t prepared for.

Emotional feelings of the deepest kind.

Now she understood why she’d been having all those vibrant and uncontrollable urges since meeting Chance. And why her body was so aware of him whether he was with her in person or was talking to her on the phone. The thought that he easily ignited her fire had always bothered her because she hadn’t understood the why of it. Whenever he kissed her she got caught up in his special skill of tongue-play, as if his tongue was made for her and hers for him. She hadn’t wanted to get in the same fix she’d been in with Sam; something she now thought of as forbidden obsession.

She was old enough now to know better. She was at that age of maturity where she no longer took things at face value. She didn’t trust easily and had a tendency to expect the worst. But standing here being absorbed in Chance’s heated gaze she knew at that moment that it wasn’t about obsession, nor was it about lust. It was about love.

She had fallen head over heels in love with him.

“And what do you do for a living, Kylie?”

She tore her gaze away from Chance upon hearing Dr. Peterson’s question. “I own a florist shop.”

“Oh? Where?”

“In the newly developed section of town, Hazelwood.”

“That’s a nice area, but if you ever want to move to another location, a friend of mine owns a couple of buildings that he’s leasing downtown and—”

“Good evening, everyone.”

That deep, husky voice made the pounding of Kylie’s heart increase. She glanced up and met Chance’s direct gaze.

“Chance! It’s good to see you,” Lena said, deliberately showing a lot more enthusiasm upon seeing him than she had Dr. Peterson.

“Thanks, Lena, and it’s good seeing you as well.”

He then gazed back at Kylie and held out his hand. “Hello, I’m Chance Steele. And you’re…?”

Kylie wondered what game Chance was playing, but at the moment deciding to go along with him. “Kylie Hagan.”

“Well, Ms. Hagan, it’s nice meeting you. And I’d like to introduce my brother, Morgan.” He then proceeded to introduce Morgan Steele to both her and Lena. It was only then that she noted that he’d given Derek no more than a cursory glance. Kylie immediately felt the tension that surrounded the three men and was bewildered by it.

“Derek,” Chance acknowledged.

“Chance. Morgan. I thought you guys ran in packs. Where’re the other two?”

Chance’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Bas and Donovan are around here somewhere. Why? Are you looking for them?”

“No.” Derek then turned his attention to Kylie. “It was nice meeting you, Ms. Hagan, but I’m being beckoned
“And it was nice meeting you as well, Dr. Peterson.” The man quickly left. Once he was no longer in sight, Kylie turned to Chance to inquire what that had been about, but found her hand enveloped in the warmth of his when the orchestra began playing.

She met his gaze and all thoughts of Derek Peterson were forgotten as she was immediately swept away by the intensity in Chance’s dark eyes and the warmth of the smile that spread across his features. “Would you dance with me?” he asked quietly.

She wondered if he could sense her inner turmoil. Did he know the emotions she was feeling were real and far exceeded the ones she’d assumed she had felt for Sam all those years ago? What she’d felt then was the passion of a young, naive girl. What she was experiencing now was the passion of an adult woman who had discovered love for the first time and knew there was no place for her to run, and no place for her to hide. There was nothing she could do but accept her fate.

Love was staring her in the face in the form of Chance Marcus Steele.

“Yes, I’ll dance with you.” His hand on hers tightened gently and she felt the warm strength of his touch as he led her toward the dance floor.

Once there he pulled her into his arms, close to the solidity of his form, the heat of his body. She wondered how long she could continue to stand and not melt at his feet with all the sensations overtaking her. Finding out at thirty-one that you had the ability to love again was definitely a shocker.

“You look beautiful tonight, Kylie,” Chance said, claiming her absolute attention. “Without a doubt you are the most gorgeous woman here.”

Kylie lowered her gaze to study the Rolex watch on his wrist. “Your date might have a problem with you thinking that.”

“I didn’t bring a date.”

She raised surprised eyes to his. “You didn’t?”

“No. What made you think I did? Or even more important, what made you think I would?”

“Your brother’s fiancée mentioned to Lena that some woman in her family was coming to town and that you would be bringing her to the ball.”

He shrugged. “Cassandra did call and try convincing me to escort her cousin tonight but I refused.”

“Why?” she asked swiftly, then regretted doing so. It was really none of her business.

“Because the only woman I want to be with tonight was going to be here, although she didn’t ask me to be her date.”

Kylie couldn’t help but smile, elated he’d come alone. “Oh, a pity,” she commented teasingly.

“Yes, I thought so as well. But now that she’s here, right where I want her to be, which is in my arms, I’m declaring myself her date for the rest of the night.”

Kylie didn’t have a problem with that. “Are you?”

“Yes. That’s one sure way to protect you from the Derek Petersons of the world.”

The contempt she heard in his voice proved her earlier assumption had been correct. There was no love lost between Derek, Chance and Morgan. “You and Morgan don’t like him,” she said, stating what had been so obvious. “Why?”

“Let’s just say we don’t exactly appreciate the way he’s been known to treat women.”

Not wanting to talk about Derek Peterson any longer, Chance brought Kylie’s body closer to his. He drank in her softness, her nearness, her scent—everything that was woman about her. After seven years of doing without a woman in his life, the one he was holding in his arms made him feel complete.

“Why did you pretend that the two of us hadn’t met before?”

Kylie’s question invaded Chance’s thoughts. He gazed at her, thinking that her question was easy enough to answer. “Something you said a few weeks ago made me want to prove you wrong.”

She arched an eyebrow. “And what did I say?”

“You said that we had only met because of our kids and chances were if we’d been at any function together that I would not have given you a second look. It was your opinion that you’re not the type of woman I would have shown interest in.”

Kylie nodded, remembering she had said that. “And?”

“And I’ve proven you wrong, Kylie,” he drawled.

She gave him a bemused look. “How?”

“By being here with you tonight, seeing you walk through that door for the first time. Tonight has nothing to do with our kids. It’s a function where we are both in attendance, and I did give you a second look. You are definitely a woman I would be interested in. And to go even further, you are a woman I am interested in, Kylie. The only one
I’m interested in.”

His words touched her more than he would ever know and Kylie didn’t think she could feel more desired and more wanted than at that very moment. The way he was looking at her made her feel hot, feverish. The intensity in his eyes made her pulse flutter and a heat wave consumed her, sending blood thrumming through her veins. She felt her nipples puckering against his chest. What was passing between them was too arousing for a dance floor.

The music ended and she felt him curl his fingers around her upper arm to lead her toward the exit doors.

“Where are we going?” she asked breathlessly, trying to keep up with his long strides.

“Outside to get some fresh air.”

Kylie swallowed. She had a feeling that fresh air wasn’t the only thing Chance intended to get.

When Chance finally came to a stop beneath a cascade of low-hanging branches, he turned to Kylie and gently pulled her to him. And when his lips creased into that sexy smile that could automatically turn her on, she didn’t think twice about tilting her head back for his kiss.

Her breath escaped in a shallow sigh the moment he slanted his mouth across hers, causing her already heated body to become a blazing flame. And when the glide of his tongue across hers caused her stomach to clench, she reached up and wound her arms around his neck, bringing their bodies closer.

She felt his erection pressed so strongly against her, actually wedged between her thighs, and moaned in his mouth at the same time her body instinctively rocked against him. A part of her didn’t know what to make of her actions. She had never been this loose, this free with any man. The couple of times she and Sam had made out, she’d been too busy worrying about whether they would get caught to fully enjoy the experience.

Now getting caught was the last thing on her mind. If an entire ballroom discovered her and Chance outside kissing beneath a bunch of willow branches, then so be it. Nothing, and she meant nothing, could make her stop being a participant in this. She’d needed his mouth on hers, his seductive taste mingling with her own tongue more than she had known. She had been hungry and now he was feeding her with a skill that only he possessed. He tasted, stroked and tangled his way around her mouth, pleasuring her as only he could do.

And then she felt him smooth a hand up her silken thigh. As it eased beneath her short dress and inched its way to her waist, she moaned deep within her throat. The sensations his touch invoked overwhelmed her and instinctively she arched closer to him.

Slowly he released her mouth, raised his head and met her gaze, and she knew he saw the longing that was there in the dark depths of her eyes, mirroring what she saw in his. He reached up and skimmed a fingertip across her lips and she moaned against his finger. Heat shot down to the area between her legs.

“I want to leave here and take you somewhere to be alone with you, Kylie.”

She knew what he was asking. She knew what he was saying. He might not love her but he wanted her. And at that moment it was all that mattered to her. What he’d tried telling her all along suddenly made perfect sense. They were adults and they could do whatever they wanted to do within reason. Would it be so awful to take what he was offering? A chance for the two of them to be alone? She had lived the past fifteen years without a man in her life, she didn’t need promises of forever.

Right now the only thing she needed was him, the man she knew she loved. And for the first time in a very long time, she would be led by her heart and not her mind. Regrets, if there were any, could come later.

“I want to be alone with you, too, Chance.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he whispered, smiling. “I think we should go back inside, mingle, dance a couple more times and then leave. What do you think of that?”

She smiled up at him. The thought of being alone with him later made her heart beat in an erratic rhythm, and the pure male desire shimmering in his eyes wasn’t helping matters. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

The moment they stepped back into the ballroom a woman called out to Chance, claiming his attention. They turned and watched two beautiful, and gorgeously dressed women head their way. Chance’s hand on Kylie’s arm tightened and when she glanced up at him she could detect a frown that he was trying to hide behind a forced smile.

“Chance, I’ve been looking for you.”

“Hello, Cassandra. I’d like you to meet a friend of mine, Kylie Hagan.”

Cassandra barely spared Kylie a glance, until she noticed Chance’s hand possessively on her arm. Then, after a swift appraisal, she extended her hand. “Oh, hello. Have we met before?”

“I don’t think so,” Kylie said, noticing the woman’s immediate dislike of her. The feeling was reciprocal.

Cassandra then turned her attention back to Chance and to the woman at her side. “This is my cousin, Jamie, the one I told you about who’s visiting from Washington, D.C.”

“Hello, Jamie. Welcome to Charlotte,” Chance said politely. He then turned to Kylie. “And, Jamie, I’d like you to meet Kylie Hagan, a good friend.”
After introductions were made Cassandra didn’t waste time. “Chance, I think you and Jamie should spend time together while she’s in town,” she said, disregarding Kylie and Chance’s hold on her arm.

“Really? And why would you think that?”

“Because her father is Senator Hollis.”

Chance’s expression became barely tolerant. It appeared he didn’t appreciate Cassandra’s lack of manners.

“Sorry, but is that supposed to mean something to me?”

Cassandra tilted her head back to look at him. The glint in her eyes said she was annoyed. “Well, I thought it would since you’re a businessman interested in world trade and he’s on the Fair Trade Commission in Washington.”

“Well, that’s all rather nice,” Chance said, irritation evident in his tone. “But I don’t think I need Jamie to arrange a meeting with her father if I ever need to discuss business with him. After all, he is a paid politician representing all the people, right?”

Cassandra’s hazel eyes narrowed. “Right.”

“Okay, then.” In an attempt to save face, he changed the subject. “The committee did a wonderful job with the ball tonight, Cassandra. Kylie and I were headed over to the buffet table.”

“Well, enjoy,” Cassandra said, clearly not happy that she hadn’t gotten Chance to bend her way.

Chance gave Jamie a smile. “It was nice meeting you. Give your father my regards.” Tightening his hold on Kylie’s arm, they walked off.

When they reached the buffet table, Chance let out a long sigh. “That woman had a lot of nerve to suggest that I date her cousin while you were standing there. She was willing to use Jamie’s father’s political connection to set her up on a date. I’ve never seen anything so tacky. I’m sorry about that.”

Kylie chuckled as she picked up a plate. “Don’t be. I learned a long time ago that usually it’s people with money who lack real manners.”

“I hope you’re not grouping everyone with money in that category.”

She smiled up at him. “No, only some of them. The Cassandras and the Dereks of this world.”

Chance grinned. “I agree.” They remained at the ball for an additional hour or so, long enough to mingle and for Kylie to meet Chance’s three female cousins, and his other two brothers, whom she thought were as handsome and as well-mannered as Chance and Morgan. After meeting Sebastian Steele, she couldn’t picture him married to someone like Cassandra Tisdale.

“We’ve hung around long enough,” Chance whispered in her ear. “Ready to leave?”

She looked up at him, her smoldering eyes telling him she’d been anxiously counting the minutes. “Yes, I’m ready.”

They left the ball, then waited as a valet brought Chance’s car to them. It was then that he asked, “Did you need to find Lena and let her know you’ve left with me?”

She shook her head. “I think she’ll have an idea what happened when she doesn’t see me anymore tonight.”

He opened the passenger door on his car when it came. “Will her knowing bother you?”

“No. Will her knowing bother you?”

“No.”

“What about your brothers and cousins?” she asked.

“It wouldn’t bother me for anyone to know we’re together, Kylie,” he said, closing the door when she slid onto the smooth leather seat.

When he got inside the vehicle and slid beneath the steering wheel she said, “Nice car.”

He grinned. “Thanks. I decided to leave the truck home and bring my toy.”

She chuckled. A Mercedes sports car was some toy. “Where are we going?”

He glanced over at her. “Where do you want to go?”

They could go to either her place or his since there weren’t any kids at home. That thought made a girlish giggle escape her lips. He glanced over at her when he pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward the interstate.

“Are you okay?”

She grinned. “Yes. I was just thinking that with the kids away the parents will play. I feel like being naughty tonight, Chance.”

He surprised her when he braked and veered off to the shoulder of the road.

“Why are we stopping, Chance?”

“I feel like being naughty tonight too, starting now,” he replied simply, before leaning over and connecting her mouth with his again. Her lips parted without any hesitation and his aggressive tongue mingled diligently with hers. He tasted of the wine he had consumed earlier and it only raised her body’s temperature. She returned his intensity
with her own, and as their tongues mingled, her insides turned to molten liquid.

When he pulled back, they were both breathless. He captured her gaze, held it. “So, will it be my place or yours?”

She reached out and placed her palm against his cheek. “Mine. I want you in my bed, Chance Steele.”
Chapter 11

Less than a half hour later, they entered Kylie’s home. As she closed the door, a warm, tingly, tantalizing sensation began building up inside of her in anticipation of what was to come.

There in the middle of the room stood Chance. The dark eyes looking at her were smoldering and, as always, he looked the embodiment of extreme male sexuality. And there was no doubt that he was the most tempting sight she’d ever seen.

Neither of them spoke.

He continued to look at her, long and hard, making her already heated body that much hotter, making her fully aroused. When she thought there was no way she could stand the intensity of his gaze any longer, he smiled, that slow, sexy smile that was meant to warm her. Instead it ignited everything woman within her, making her body respond to his physical presence in the most primitive way. When she thought she couldn’t possibly take any more, he slowly closed the distance separating them.

“Are you sure about this, Kylie?” he whispered huskily, taking her hand in his and bringing her closer to him. So close that she felt his huge erection.

Kylie felt off balance and her mind became a mass of desire, of wanting, of need. “I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life, Chance,” she whispered back. “But…”

“But what?”

“But I don’t have any real experience at this and I don’t want to disappoint you.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer still. “Trust me, sweetheart, you won’t. There’s no way you can.”

He leaned down and took her lips, and seconds later she felt herself being lifted in his strong arms. He carried her up the stairs. “Which room is yours?” he asked when he’d reached the landing.

“The first door to your right.”

She had left a low lamp burning in her bedroom and now it cast an intimate glow in the room.

“I love that dress you have on but it’s coming off, Kylie,” he said as he set her on her feet. Without hesitation he stripped off his tuxedo jacket and bow tie, and unbuttoned his white shirt.

She tilted her head back. “If you want it off, you’ll have to take it off,” she said with sass.

He accepted the sensuous challenge in her voice. “I have no problem doing that, because it is coming off. I have a lot of plans for you tonight.”

She smiled. Whether he knew it or not, she had a lot of plans for him as well. “I take it you’re going to teach me a few things.”

“Yes,” he said, undoing the last of his buttons, exposing his muscular chest. She had seen his chest before, when they’d gone camping and he had taken a swim in the lake. And then, like now, she thought it was definitely a chest worth looking at, worth sliding her hands over, worth teasing with her tongue.

Her gaze followed Chance’s fingers as he removed his shirt and tossed it aside, but when those same fingers went to the fastener of his pants her breath caught. Still, she couldn’t avert her eyes. They watched as he eased his zipper down. A heaviness settled in her stomach and every nerve ending within her came vibrantly alive when he pushed those same pants down his hips.

She had never seen a man undress before. At sixteen she had actually closed her eyes when Sam had done it. As an adult she was now seeing a male in the flesh for the first time. She’d always suspected Chance had a nice body, but now, she saw first hand just how nice it was. And she saw just how aroused he was since the black briefs he wore showed the large ridge of his erection. She couldn’t help but stare when he proceeded to remove the last stitch of clothing.

“Now it’s time for your clothes to come off.”

Her gaze flew up to his face, fighting the panic of not knowing just how her body would be able to accommodate such a well-endowed man. But when her eyes met his, that sexy smile of his aroused her even more and she knew that she wouldn’t worry. The two of them would fit perfectly.

With slow and precise steps, he covered the short distance separating them and his hand, as gentle as it could be, reached out and stroked her arm. “Do you know how often I’ve dreamed about undressing you?” he whispered huskily as he lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm.
She took a deep breath to steady herself. The touch of his moist tongue on her hand only fueled the fire that was steadily burning inside of her. “No, how often?” she managed to get out in a raspy breath.

“How often,” he said, reaching behind her to undo the clasp at the nape of her neck. “And seeing you in this dress tonight didn’t help matters any.”

He took a step back, loosened the straps away from her neck and the black georgette material slid down her legs. And when he offered her his hand for assistance, she took it and stepped out of the dress. Now she was naked except for her thong, thigh-high hose and shoes.

His gaze, she noticed, was fastened on her breasts and she watched, as if in slow motion, when he reached out and fondled them, caressing them, shaping them to the feel of his hands.

At his touch, her breathing became erratic, and she leaned into him to grip his shoulders, for fear she would melt to the floor. She clutched him when he leaned forward and took a nipple into his mouth, licking and sucking first one then the other. Each and every tug sent sensuous sensations all the way to her womb.

“Chance,” she whispered, arching toward him even more. She gasped when he scooped her into his arms and carried her over to the bed, placed her on it. Gently he removed her shoes and then his hand slid up her legs to get rid of her hose. Taking off her thong was easy since there wasn’t much to it but Kylie saw how dark his eyes got when the most intimate part of her body became exposed.

His smoldering gaze focused on the mound between her thighs, and Kylie began to feel nervous with all the attention. Chance was definitely enjoying the view, but if he only knew how fast her heart was beating, he wouldn’t be looking at her this way.

“I want you, Kylie,” he said silkily.

She met his gaze and replied softly, “I want you, too, Chance.”

Her words, spoken honestly and seductively, zapped Chance of what little control he had. Placing a knee on the bed, he reached down and drew her naked body to his and kissed her with all the love he had in his heart. The moment he slipped his tongue inside her mouth she latched on to it, returning his kiss with an intensity he knew the both of them felt.

He reluctantly broke the kiss and began caressing her all over, becoming familiar with the soft feel of her body and the sexy scent of her arousal. He kissed her all over, starting with her breasts and moving down to her navel, but as he went lower still, he felt her tense. Knowing he was about to carry her through unchartered waters, he lifted his head and met her gaze. “Kylie?”

The eyes that met his were glazed with desire and shadowed in uncertainty. “Yes?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she responded in a breathy sound. “I trust you.”

“How much?” he asked, giving her one of those sexy smiles again.

Her voice was soft and throaty when she said, “Considering all you know about me, I trust you a lot. I haven’t been with anyone in fifteen years, Chance. That in itself should say something.”

“It does. And your trust in me is special. I want to make not just tonight, but this entire weekend special for the both of us.”

He must have read the question in her eyes, as he chuckled and said. “And no, I don’t plan on keeping you in bed all weekend. There’s going to be more to our relationship than sex, Kylie. I want to take you on our first official date tomorrow night. Will you let me do that?”

Kylie caught her bottom lip between her teeth. She still wasn’t ready for their kids to know they were involved, but with Marcus and Tiffany away for the weekend, she and Chance were finally free to do whatever they wanted to do. “Yes, I’d like that,” she said quietly.

He smiled. “Good. And another thing.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “What?”

“I want to introduce you to various types of lovemaking but I promise to take things slow and easy. And I also promise not to do anything you’re not comfortable with doing. I want to show you that making love is the most intimate act two people can share, as well as the most pleasurable. And I want to share every aspect of it with you.”

He reached out his hand and slowly traced it up her leg toward the center of her thighs.

The closer he got to a certain part of her, the harder it became for Kylie to concentrate and to breathe. “Every aspect?” she asked breathlessly.

“Yes. I want to take you to a place you’ve never been before. Pleasureland. I want us to go there together and participate in the kind of pleasure that only the two of us can generate.” His voice went lower when he asked, “Will you go there with me?”

She swallowed when his knuckles nudged her thighs apart and his fingers touched her—right there in what had to be her hot spot. And she knew he’d found her not only hot but wet as well. “Yes, I’ll go there with you,” she said,
barely able to get the words out.  
“Anyplace? At anytime... within reason?”

Chance was stroking her and she could feel pressure building inside of her. Pressure she needed to release.

“Yes.”

“My touching you this way is just the beginning,” he said as he continued to stroke her. “I want to take you on one hell of an adventure. Are you okay with that?”

Biting back a moan, she closed her eyes. “Yes, I’m okay with it.” The feathery touch of his fingers was slowly driving her insane. It seemed as if he was touching every sensitive cell that was located between her legs.

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“And what if I replaced my fingers with my tongue?” he leaned over and whispered hotly in her ear.

Her eyes flew open. And she knew the flush that had suddenly appeared on her face told him everything. She took a deep breath as she melted inside with the thought of him doing that. “Why would you want to do that?” she somehow managed to ask.

“Because I want to satisfy my taste for you in a way that kissing won’t do, Kylie.”

“But no one has ever...I’ve never...”

“Yes, I know,” he said silkily. “But I want to be your first. May I?”

Her heart pounded erratically in her chest. She had to swallow twice before she spoke. “Yes, if you’re sure you want to do that.”

“Oh, baby, more than anything, I do.”

As soon as he had spoken those words, Chance slid off the bed, gently brought her body closer to the edge and knelt in front of her open legs. Then he leaned forward, inhaled her scent and took her into his mouth.

Kylie’s body bucked at the first touch of his tongue. A deep groan escaped her throat when he proceeded to taste her with a hunger that appeared unquenched. She clutched the bedspread, needing something to hold on to. His mouth was literally driving her insane and she had to clamp her lips closed to stop herself from screaming.

Chance lifted his mouth only long enough to say, “Just let go, baby, and come for me.”

No sooner had he replaced his mouth on her, she did just what he had asked. The force of the climax hit her. And when it did she forgot everything except how all of her senses seemed to be gathered at this one particular spot, making it impossible to hold back. She screamed out his name when her body splintered into a thousand pieces. Waves and waves of pleasure washed over her and through her. She cried out several more times as her body, soul and mind were transported to a place where only pleasure resided.

Pleasureland.

It was a place that only Chance could take her.

Chance reluctantly pulled his mouth away and sat back on his heels, watching the last contractions of Kylie’s orgasm move through her. He had dreamed of taking her this way for so long, the only thing he could do for the moment was to sit there and inhale the womanly scent of her, savor her taste.

Hearing the woman he loved scream out his name had filled him with a joy he’d never felt before. But he knew for them, this was just the beginning of one hell of a weekend, one hell of a relationship, and one hell of a future.

Driven by an intense need to become a part of her in yet another way, he reached for the pants he had discarded earlier. He pulled his wallet out of the back pocket to get one of the condoms he’d put there. He quickly slipped it on, wanting to join their bodies while she was still in the throes of lingering passion.

He eased her back to the center of the bed and joined her there. When his face was mere inches from hers she slowly opened her eyes and met his gaze. A satisfied curve touched the corners of her mouth. “Hi.”

He smiled back. “Hi.”

“I came,” she said like it had been a miracle, a pleasure she would remember always. He smiled. “Yes, you did and I’m going to make you come again.”

She blinked at him as if such a thing wasn’t possible. “You will,” he assured her.

And then he kissed her, taking her mouth in a way that let her know just how intent he was on making it happen for her again. Moments later, his mouth left hers to skim down her jaw, past her neck, as it traced a damp trail toward her breasts, tasting them as he’d done earlier, while reaching down to sink his fingers in the flesh he had just tasted awhile ago.

“Chance.” She called out his name when she felt her body getting all heated again. He eased over her. “Open your eyes, Kylie, and look at me.” He wanted to be caught in her gaze the exact moment he joined with her. If she wasn’t quite ready to hear about his love, he wanted her to at least feel it.

Desire and love pulsed through his veins, made his erection just that much harder, thicker, and when she
opened her eyes he knew he needed to be inside of her, feel the length of him stroking her, claiming her as his, totally consuming her.

He raised her hands above her head and with their fingers laced together, their gazes locked, he slowly eased inside of her, finding her wet, ready, yet tight.

“Oh, Chance. I need this. I need you,” she whispered.

His response was a hard thrust that shook him to the core, and as he went deeper inside of her, she moaned out her pleasure. “Yes!”

And then her body arched beneath him and he began moving inside of her, in and out, as her moans grew louder, more intense, more demanding and the eyes holding his looked at him with amazement and wonder. She began moving with him, their bodies in perfect rhythm.

Then she came again.

He felt the explosion of pleasure rip through her. Her fingers dug into his back and her legs locked around his waist, and he kept making love to her. Reality was better than any dream he could possibly have. He moved in and out of her, intensifying both their pleasure with every movement, feeling the urgency building up inside of her again.

Her next explosion triggered his and he screamed her name the exact moment she screamed his. He took her mouth in one final deep kiss, putting into it everything that he had, everything that was him. And moments later when the waves finally subsided, he was too weak, too satisfied, too far spent to move. But not wanting to crush her with his weight, he somehow managed to shift while keeping their bodies connected. He wasn’t ready to sever the ties yet.

Feeling an aftermath of pleasure that he hadn’t ever felt before, he buried his face in her breasts and wrapped his legs around her to lock her body in place with his, as they both closed their eyes in sheer exhaustion. The only word he could think of to describe what they had just shared was incredible.

As Chance’s breathing began to slow, he knew that Kylie becoming a part of his life was a gift that he would cherish forever.
Chapter 12

Chance lay there and watched as Kylie awakened. Even before she fully opened her eyes, she covered her yawn, and it was then that he leaned over and gently pulled her hand away before capturing her mouth in his. Seconds later the same desire that was raging through him took over her. She sighed into his mouth and wrapped her arms around his neck, surrendering to the passion he evoked.

The mere memory of all the things they had done last night sent heat escalating through his body and making it harder not to take her again. The intensity of his love for her went well beyond the scope of his understanding, but as far as he was concerned it didn’t really matter as long as he was smart enough to accept it. And he did.

He couldn’t imagine ever being without her and while he’d watched her sleep, he had felt as if he couldn’t breathe unless he had kissed her again. Now he was getting his fill, as he’d done last night while making love to her. They had made love more times than he could count, but he wasn’t keeping numbers so it hadn’t mattered. The important thing was that each time he’d open his arms she had come into them willingly, without any hesitation or reservation, and that had meant a lot to him.

When he slowly released her mouth he watched as she dragged in a shaky breath. It was pretty obvious that she had never been awakened in such a manner before. “Wow,” she said softly. “What was that for?”

He smiled and brought her body closer to him. He wished he could tell her it was for being the woman he loved, but there was no way he could do that. At least not yet. “That was for being the special person you are, and for allowing me to spend so much time with you last night.”

A crooked smile claimed her lips as she remembered. “Yes, we did spend a lot of time together, didn’t we?” Even now the rock-solid feel of him pressed against her belly was making her hot and achy all over again.

His lips formed into a half grin. “Sweetheart, we did more than that. I spent so much time inside of you that a certain part of my body actually thinks that’s where it belongs. It wants another visit and is worse than a junkie in need of a fix.”

“Oh?” she asked, arching her back and automatically pressing her pelvis against his hard erection.

“Yeah, and if you keep that up—”

“What are you going to do?”

She gasped when he quickly took hold of her hips and lifted her leg to cross over his, locking their position. Before she could gather her next breath he shifted his body and entered her.

Once inside her warm depth, he began thrusting back and forth inside of her, while his hands, wrapped tightly around her waist, held her immobile. His mouth feasted on hers with the same intensity as the lower part of his body was taking her. Mating with her.

She reluctantly tore her mouth from his. “Wh-what about protection?” she asked barely able to get the words out.

He withdrew slowly and then sank back deep inside of her to the hilt. “I got it covered.” And then he took her mouth again and her hips automatically bucked against his, reestablishing the rhythm they had created the night before.

After last night he should have been exhausted, but after sleeping with her nestled in his arms, his entire body was primed with more sexual energy than he’d ever had before. He could mate like this with her for hours. She was just that wet and he was just that needy.

She tore her mouth from his and dropped her head into his chest and moaned with each thrust he made into her body.

“Had enough?” he asked, refusing to stop or slow down. The sensations flowing through him were giving him added stamina, making him greedy.

She lifted her head and looked him in the eye. “No.”

A single chuckle escaped him. “That’s good,” he said adjusting his angle. “Because I couldn’t stop now even if you asked me to.”

“What if I changed my mind and begged you to stop?”

“Forget it.”

He started making little circles around her lips with his tongue. And then he began thrusting his tongue back and forth inside his mouth, mimicking the action going on below, using the same rhythm.
“Chance!”

He latched his gaze on her face, saw the intensity in her features and knew she was about ready to explode.

“Let go, baby,” he coaxed, knowing whenever she came he would, too.

She arched toward him, locked her body tighter to his. It was obvious from the way she was digging her fingers into his shoulders that he’d hit gold again and zeroed in on her G-spot, that sexually sensitive area that he had discovered last night had made her have multiple orgasms back-to-back, several times over.

He grabbed hold of her butt and slowed down his strokes, although it tortured him to do so. But he was attuned to her pleasure. He stroked slowly in and out of her, hitting her in that very special spot that made her moans become louder and her breath deeper. When she glanced down and saw the way he was moving in and out of her, she began mumbling. “Oh, yes, that’s the spot. Go deeper, Chance. Please. Deeper.”

He did what she asked and she surprised him when she began flexing her inner muscles, milking him for all it was worth. He began feeling sensuous contractions inch all through his groin. “Aw, hell.”

He began stroking her with an intensity that almost bordered on obsession, intent on pushing her over the edge, the same way she was pushing him. She dropped her head back against his chest again and he was getting turned on even more from the way their bodies were vigorously mating.

“Had enough yet?” he asked, his voice ragged. He hoped she hadn’t.

She lifted her face and shook her head. Her eyes, glazed with desire met his and she arched into him, letting him know her answer before she said the words. “Not enough. More.”

“Be careful what you ask for, sweetheart,” he said. “I’m a Steele, remember. I’m made to last.”

And then he withdrew slowly, just long enough to adjust positions, and in a flash Kylie found herself on her back with her legs wrapped around the upper part of Chance’s shoulders. And then he thrust inside of her to the hilt, harder and faster.

She screamed out his name, clung to him and succumbed to him as a rush of molten heat speared through her. When he screamed her name and pressed her hips she knew he had gotten caught up in the same exhilarating passion as she had.

She nipped at the corner of his lip and he leaned down and opened his mouth fully over hers, deepening the kiss to taste as much of her as he could. And at that moment, Kylie knew if another fifteen years went by without ever having taken part in something like this, she would survive because in a mere twelve hours Chance had given her enough lovemaking to last a lifetime.

“You have a beautiful home, Chance,” she called out to him.

“Thanks,” he answered from the bedroom.

Kylie stood leaning against the marble counter in Chance’s kitchen. After enjoying their early morning delight, she had lain in bed, convinced that she couldn’t move, and had wondered if she would ever be able to do so again. But he had gathered her into his arms like a newborn baby and had taken her into the bathroom to shower with him. It was a shower she doubted she would ever forget. She managed a smile and shook her head thinking that even now it was hard to believe that the woman who had made love to him beneath the spray of water had actually been her.

She had changed into her favorite capri pants after their shower, then she had fixed them a quick breakfast and he had talked her into going with him to the gym to watch him and his brothers play their regular Saturday morning game of basketball. But first he needed to swing by his place to change clothes. Showing up on the courts wearing his tux would definitely give his brothers something to talk about for a long time.

On the drive over to his place he had told her that he’d had the house built a few years after his wife died, because he felt he could not get on with his life while still living in the home they’d shared together. Now here she was, waiting patiently while he changed into a T-shirt and jogging pants.

“Sure I can’t get you anything?” he asked, coming into the kitchen and setting his gym bag on the counter beside her.

A smile touched her lips. “No thanks. You’ve given me too much already.”

“You haven’t seen or felt everything yet,” he said, as he smoothed his hand over the bare skin of her arm before grabbing her curvy bottom to bring her closer to the fit of him. He dipped his head, kissing her still-swollen lips thoroughly.

“You know we can skip that game with my brothers,” he murmured softly against her lips.

“Hmm, and deny them the chance to work off their competitive frustrations? I wouldn’t dare,” she said, grinning.

He gave her one of his most charming smiles. “Forget my brothers. I promise if we were to stay here I’d make it worth your while.”

Her grin broadened. “There’s no doubt in my mind that you would, but I’m not sure I can keep up with you,
“Chance.”
He bent his head and nipped gently at her neck. “Hey, you’ve been doing a pretty good job so far.”
Her laughter was low and husky. “Thanks, but I have only so much energy to spare. I may be younger than you
but I’m definitely out of practice.”
He took her hand, raised it to his lips and kissed her fingers. “If you’re sure you’re not ready to try the springs
in my bed then I guess we’d better go.”
While walking her out to the car, he said, “I’ve made reservations for us tonight at Cedar Keys.”
She glanced up at him. “Cedar Keys?” She’d heard the place was rather expensive.
“Yes, Cedar Keys. My special lady deserves special treatment,” he said, opening the car door for her.
My special lady. A part of Kylie wished that she was indeed his special lady and then immediately regretted the
thought. Just because she was in love with him didn’t mean he had to love her back. She had to remind herself that
this weekend was about absolute pleasure. Love had nothing to do with it.
“Will your brothers wonder why I’m with you?”
Chance glanced over at her before starting the ignition. “They know we left the ball together last night, Kylie.”
The insinuation of his statement gave her a moment’s pause. “So chances are they know we spent the night
together.” It was a statement more so than a question.
“Not necessarily. For all they know I took you home and I went to my place after inviting you to join me this
morning. But will it bother you if they’ve figured things out?”
“I know that it shouldn’t,” she said quietly. “But I am the mother of the girl their nephew has a crush on.”
Chance lifted an eyebrow. “So?”
“So they might figure that I should be setting a better example.”
Chance frowned. He reached over and took her hand in his. “Hey, we’re spending time in Pleasureland this
weekend, remember? We don’t have time to take any guilt trips. Besides, there’s no need for one,” he said gently.
“One day you’re going to have to accept that what we do is our business, Kylie. And we don’t have to answer to
anyone.”
She drew in a long, unsteady breath. “I wish it was that easy for me to think that way, Chance. But after I got
pregnant with Tiffany, my parents made sure that all their friends knew they had nothing to do with the way I turned
out. I heard them call me a bad seed once. Since then I’ve tried so hard to be good and to raise Tiffany the right
way.”
He reached over and pulled her into his arms, hugging her close. “Oh, baby, you have. You’re being too hard
on yourself. No one is perfect, not even your parents. And they had no right to lay something that heavy on you. We
all make mistakes. I bet if you were to clean out their closets you’ll find something they’d rather leave hidden.”
She shook her head. “I doubt it. You don’t know my parents.”
“Yes, I think I do. They aren’t one of a kind, you know. There are others out there just like them.”
A smile she couldn’t contain curved her lips. “Yes, I know.”
“Then remember that. Always keep that thought in mind.”
He released her and Kylie thought she fell in love with him even more at that moment. “You’re good at that,
you know.”
He glanced over at her as he began backing the car out the driveway. “Good at what?”
“Soothing my ruffled feathers.”
He smiled. “Glad I could help.”

“Hey, man, did you have to bring your own personal cheerleader?” Bas whispered as he set a screen for Chance
to shoot.
Chance laughed as he made yet another shot and Kylie stood and cheered again. “Jealousy won’t get you any
points, Bas. You could have brought Cassandra.”
Bas frowned. “Are you kidding? Can any of you imagine her sitting over there on the bleachers watching me
get hot and sweaty?”
Donovan chuckled. “No, I don’t think we can.”
“Hey, will the three of you cut the crap and let’s get some playtime?” Morgan growled, pushing Bas out of the
way and getting the ball from Chance.
“He, that’s a foul, Morgan,” Chance called out, watching Morgan dribble the ball down the court to make a
shot. He then turned to Bas. “What’s his problem?”
“Seems like some lady he was interested in last night at the ball wasn’t all that receptive,” Bas said as they ran
down the court to retrieve the stolen ball.
“Who?”
The woman who could be Queen Latifah’s twin, Helena Spears. He asked her out and she declined. She’s probably the first woman who’s ever turned down a dinner date with him. He evidently doesn’t handle rejection well.”

Chance grinned. “Evidently.”
The game ended an hour or so later with Bas and Chance winning. Morgan, who’d made six fouls, would have gotten thrown out of the game had they been playing by real basketball rules.

Kylie sat patiently on the bleachers waiting for the men to come out of the locker room, where they had gone to shower and change. When Bas came out first, he crossed the gym to come over to talk to her.

“So,” he asked dropping in the seat next to her, “what did you think of our game?”

She couldn’t help but smile. “Interesting. A lot of rules were broken.”

Bas chuckled. “Yeah, better broken rules than broken noses. We need this game every week to work off frustrations. Otherwise, we’d be at each other’s throats at some point during the week.”

“So I heard.”

After a few moments of silence, Bas, who had a habit of shooting straight from the hip, said, “Chance has never brought a woman to watch us play before, so I figure you must be special.”

Kylie gave him a wry glance. “Do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“That’s good to know because I think he’s special, too.”

Bas shook his head and chuckled softly. “You don’t seem too happy about it.”

Kylie let out a sigh. “We should be concentrating on our kids.”

“Hey, Marcus is a smart guy and from what I hear your Tiffany is a smart girl.”

“Yeah, trouble used to be my middle name.”

Bas caught her bottom lip between her teeth. “Chance is a nice guy,” she said quietly. “Marcus is lucky to have him for a father.”

“That’s the same thing Chance said about you.”

Kylie glanced over at Bas. “What?”

“That you were a nice person and that Tiffany was lucky to have you as a mother.” Bas then leaned forward.

“Hey, do me a favor, will you?”

“And what favor is that?”

“You’ve made him happy and—”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I’ve never seen him in such a good mood. Sometimes I think that smile is plastered to his face.”

Kylie shook her head. “I have nothing to do with it.”

“Okay, you. At first he was all bent out of shape at the thought that Marcus’s attention had gotten off his books and shifted to a girl, but once he met you then he saw why.”

Kylie’s eyebrows pulled together in a frown. “What do you mean?”

Bas smiled. “He was so taken with you that he could see how Marcus could be taken with Tiffany.” When Kylie didn’t say anything, Bas said, “Now getting back to that favor—”

“Okay.”

“Keep making Chance happy. He’s had a lot of sadness in his life and if there’s anyone who deserves to be happy, it’s him. I think he’s a pretty great guy.”

Before Kylie could say anything, Bas stood, jumped off the bleachers to the court and called over his shoulder, “I’ll go see what’s keeping him.”

Kylie leaned back and thought about what Bas had said. Before she could give it too much thought, every nerve ending in her body came instantly alive when Chance walked out of the locker room. He had changed into a pair of jeans and another T-shirt. He crossed the gym to her with a heart-stopping smile on his face.

Catching her breath, she decided to go down to meet him. As soon as she got close he leaned down and brushed his lips over hers. “Sorry for the delay. I had to talk to Morgan about something.”

She nodded as he took her hand in his and led her out of the gym. “That’s okay. I enjoyed chatting with Bas while I waited. Is Morgan okay? He was playing a mean game today. He committed a lot of fouls.”

Chance’s smile curved into a full grin. “Yes, they were intentional. He had a lot of frustrations to work off.”

“Oh.”

Snaking his arm around her waist, Chance snuggled her closer to his side as they walked to the car. “What were your plans for today?”

“I was going grocery shopping.”
He laughed. “Hey, so was I. Do you want to go together?”

When Chance opened the car door and she slid inside, she glanced up at him and smiled. “Why not? It just
might be fun.”

Later that evening as Kylie finished getting dressed for dinner she thought that grocery shopping with Chance
had not only been fun, it had been educational as well.

He had known what fruits were in season, he made sure she checked the expiration date on everything she
purchased and he advised her to stay away from the generic brands, claiming there was a difference in taste.

And she had discovered that they liked the same foods, and the same flavor ice cream. In fact, they had almost
argued about who would get the last half gallon of chocolate-chip cookie dough until one of the store clerks assured
them there was a case in the back.

After their shopping adventure he had brought her home to unload her groceries and indicated he would return
around seven to take her to dinner. It was almost seven now and she was ready.

Kylie smiled as she glanced at herself in the mirror. She was wearing a dress she had purchased earlier that year
when she had attended her father’s retirement party. Her mother had complimented her on how good she’d looked in
it, and now she hoped Chance shared that same opinion. She was just about to add strawberry lip color to her lips
when the phone rang. She quickly picked it up. “Hello.”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Tiffany! I’m glad you called. How’s Disney World?”

“Disney World is fine but I think Gramma had too much of Mickey and Minnie for one day. Me and Gramps
are going to leave her at the hotel and go to Epcot later. How was the ball last night?”

Kylie was surprised her daughter remembered anything about the ball. “It was nice. Your godmother’s
committee did an excellent job.”

“Was Marcus’s father there?”

Kylie raised an eyebrow, wondering why Tiffany wanted to know. “Yes, he was there.”

“So you saw him?”

“Yes, I saw him.”

“Was he with someone?”

Kylie refused to answer that. “Tiffany, why are you asking me questions about Marcus’s father?”

“Oh, just curious. Marcus and I talked before I left and he’s concerned that his dad doesn’t date much.”

“It’s not the end of the world for a person not to date, Tiffany.”

“I know and that’s what I told Marcus since you don’t date, either. Okay, Mom, I got to go, Gramps is waiting
for me. Talk to you later.”

“Okay, sweetheart, have fun and tell Mom and Dad hello.”

After she hung up the phone Kylie decided to cover all her bases in case Tiffany hit up her godmother for
answers about the ball. She quickly picked up the phone and dialed Lena’s number. “Don’t be surprised if you
receive a call from Tiffany asking questions about last night’s ball,” she told her friend.

“What kind of questions?”

“Like who Chance was with.”

Lena chuckled. “He was with you.”

“Yes, but I prefer her not knowing that, Lena.”

“Sure, if that’s the way you want it.”

“It is.” Something in Lena’s voice made Kylie wonder if her friend was all right and she decided to ask.

“No, not really. I met this gorgeous man last night at the ball. He asked me out and I turned him down.”

“Why?”

“Kylie, you know the score. Do you know how many times I’ve been dropped, sometimes even before the first
date, when the guy finds out Mom and I come as a pair.”

“Not all guys will make a big deal out of it, Lena.”

“Yes, but I’m tired of trying to figure out those who will and those who won’t. I don’t plan on dating for a
while.”

Kylie frowned. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

Lena chuckled. “Looks who’s talking.”

“My situation is different and you know it. I don’t date because I prefer not to. You want to date but you’re
afraid to.”

“I am not.”

“You are, too.”
“Okay, so maybe I am. What’s wrong with me protecting myself against heartbreak?”
“You don’t know that will happen for sure. And if a man doesn’t want you because you care enough to see to your mother’s welfare, then screw him.”
“Umm, speaking of screw…where did you and Chance disappear to last night?”
Silence pulsed over the line for a brief second and then Kylie said, “He took me home.”
“And?”
“And what?”
“And why do I think there’s more to this story?”
“There is but I’d rather not discuss it now.”
“Okay, just know that I’ll be all ears at lunch on Wednesday.”
“I doubt if you’ll let me forget. Goodbye, and remember what to say if Tiffany calls asking questions.”
As soon as Kylie hung up the phone she thought about her conversation with Lena. Lena was her very best friend, but there was no way Kylie would confess to her all she’d done with Chance last night and this morning. Just thinking about it made her feel mortified on one hand and giddy with pleasure on the other. Still, some things had to be kept from even your best friend. She could just imagine the look on Lena’s face if she told her what had happened in the shower this morning, and how Chance had taken her against the wall while water sprayed down on them.
She glanced at the overnight bag on her bed. Chance had asked her to spend the night at his place and she’d agreed. Since this weekend was the only one they would share, she planned on making the most of it.
Chapter 13

“I hope you enjoyed tonight, Kylie.”

She glanced up from studying the wine in her glass, locked gazes with Chance and smiled. “How could I not? Everything was wonderful. The food, the service, the location…my dinner date. Thanks for bringing me here, Chance.”

A smile touched the corners of his lips. “I wanted our first real date to be special, somewhere that didn’t serve hamburgers.”

Kylie grinned. “And it was special.” She was suddenly filled with regret knowing this had been their first real date and also their last. There was no way they could continue seeing each other after Marcus and Tiffany returned, but she didn’t want to think about that now. They still had tonight and all day tomorrow.

“Do you want any dessert?” he asked, and she thought his voice had a kind of husky purr to it. The expression in his eyes wasn’t helping matters any, either. She’d have dessert later, she thought. Chance wanted the same thing she wanted. A bed with both of them in it.

“None for me tonight, but thanks for asking. What about you? Do you have a sweet tooth?”

He shook his head and grinned. “No, not exactly. I think I’ll pass, too.”

He leaned over the table to make sure she was the only one who would hear his next words. “What I really want is to take you to my place, strip you naked and make love to you. All night long.”

Only the flicker of her eyelids told him she had been shocked by such honesty. But then the heated look in her eyes told him how much she wanted what he wanted.

With self-control, she neatly folder her napkin and placed it on the table. Then she looked up and shot him a sexy grin. “Then I guess we should leave now, don’t you?”

Kylie found herself glancing around Chance’s home for the second time that day. She had given him her overnight bag and he had taken it to the bedroom.

He had surprised her. With the heated looks he’d been giving her all evening, she’d figured he would have pounced on her the first chance he got. She’d even expected him to pull the car to the side of the road like he’d done last night and kiss her senseless. If nothing else, she had fully expected him to strip her naked the moment she had stepped inside his home.

But he hadn’t done any of those things and she thought he was controlling himself admirably. So much so that she was tempted to see just how far that control could go.

“Would you like a cup of coffee or anything?”

She turned when he reentered the room. He had removed his dinner jacket and tie, and now her gaze lingered on his white shirt as she thought about the chest it covered and remembered how she had smothered her face in that chest while he’d rocked back and forth inside her body, making her moan, groan and scream.

“No, I don’t want any coffee. Thanks for asking. But there is something I want.”

“What?”

“A kiss. It seems I’ve gotten addicted to them.”

“Kisses?” he asked, slowly crossing the room to her.

“Yes, but only yours.”

When he came to a stop in front of her, he reached out and wrapped his arms around her waist. In response, her arms wound around his neck. She raised her chin and looked him dead in the eyes and almost melted at the heat she saw there. When he leaned forward, she lifted her lips up for the kiss she knew she would get.

As soon as his mouth touched hers, she let out a deep, satisfied moan that she felt all the way to the pit of her stomach. And when he began stroking her tongue, with all the mastery that he possessed, she moaned some more. He tasted of the wine they’d had at dinner and of the peppermint he had popped into his mouth while walking her to the car. She enjoyed the flavor of both. When he deepened the kiss she forgot everything except for the way he was making her feel.

His arms were no longer around her waist. At some point in time they had moved and his hands were now cupping her bottom, pressing her closer to him, letting her feel the strength of his growing arousal.

He released her mouth long enough for her to draw in a breath. The same breath that hitched when his lips
trailed to her throat and he branded her neck again.

“Chance,” she whispered.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

She tilted her head back and met his gaze. “I thought you wanted to strip my clothes off.”

“I do.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“You never said that I could.”

Kylie stared at him, remembering that last night he had asked if it was okay to undress her. It seemed that Chance Steele operated with a code of honor and that endeared him to her even more. “All right, then, I’m giving you my permission.”

He took a step back and she watched his gaze travel slowly over her body, from head to toe. When he looked up, his eyes lingered on the curves of her breasts visible in the low V-neckline. He realized she wasn’t wearing a bra. She could tell by the look in his eyes. That same look made her nipples harden, become sensitive to the point where she could actually feel desire roll around in her stomach.

His gaze then moved to the hemline of her dress. It was longer than the one she’d worn last night, but he seemed mesmerized by the front split, probably wondering what she had or didn’t have on underneath.

“Last night I thought you looked simply gorgeous in black. But tonight I think you look sexy as hell in red,” he said in a husky voice.

She blinked when she watched him back up a few steps and then walk over to the sofa and sat down. “Come here, Kylie,” he said in a voice that sounded strained even to her ears.

She stared at him, confused. How was he going to strip her bare while sitting down?

“Kylie?”

Deciding she would soon find out, she crossed the room to him.

“Lift your leg in my lap so I can take off your shoes.”

She did what he asked and he took off her shoes one at a time. When she was about ready to place her foot back on the floor, he kept it in his lap, resting against his hard erection while he slid his hand up her leg a little farther, going underneath her dress to touch the center of her thighs, only to discover her panty hose was a barrier.

Apparently deciding a pair of Hanes wouldn’t stop him from doing what he wanted, he placed her foot on the floor then eased to the edge of the sofa and reached both hands under her dress to work the panty hose down her hips. She stepped out of them and then kicked them aside.

“Now put your right leg back in my lap.”

Again she did as he requested and this time he was able to slide his hand a little farther up her leg than before.

She moaned out loud when his finger touched her center and slowly stroked her.

“Ahh, just as I thought,” he leaned in closer to say. “You aren’t wearing any panties.”

His words hardly registered. All she could think about was the feel of his fingers inside of her, making her even wetter.

“Let me see just what else you aren’t wearing tonight, Kylie.”

Before she could gather her next breath, he reached up with his free hand and yanked the top part of her dress down. Her breasts spilled free right in his face.

“Place your hands on my shoulders, bend your knee a little more and lean toward me.”

The moment she did so, he captured a breast in his mouth and his tongue stroked it, just like his fingers were stroking her.

She clutched at his shoulders, unable to hold back just how his mouth and fingers were making her feel. Chance definitely knew how to work both ends at the same time. She was melting from the inside out. If he continued doing this for much longer she doubted even his shoulders would be able to support her.

He let go of her breast and leaned forward. “Are you ready for me, Kylie?” he whispered hotly in her ear.

Unable to answer, she nodded.

“That’s good because I’ve been ready for you all day. And tonight at dinner it was hard for me not to spread you out on the table and make you the only entrée I wanted to feast on.”

At his words an all-consuming need raced through her body and she cried out his name when she felt the first sign of an explosion on the horizon. “Chance, I need you.”

“And where do you need me, baby?”

“Inside of me,” she whispered.

He suddenly lifted her in strong arms, and she closed her eyes and pressed her face against his chest.

Her eyes opened when she felt herself being placed on a hard, solid surface. He had sat her on his kitchen counter. “Chance?”
He smiled as he began taking off his shirt and removing his pants. “When I saw you in here today, standing in
this very spot, I knew I had to do this. I want to take you right here. Right now,” he said, quickly putting on a
condom.
“Here? Now? Are you serious?”
“Oh, yes.”
He then pulled her dress over her head and tossed it to the floor to join his own discarded clothing. Before she
could say another word, or let out another breath, he took hold of her hips, opened her thighs and guided his shaft
inside of her.
And then the thrusting began. She wrapped her arms around his neck as delicious sensations began engulfing
her. “This is insane,” she said, leaning forward and nipping the corner of his mouth.
“No,” he said in a husky voice as his body continued to mate with hers. “This is a dream come true. A fantasy
in the making. So enjoy.”
And she did. He drew her closer and she spread her legs wider to accommodate him. He kissed her deeply.
Then he released her mouth to pay homage to her breasts again, flicking his tongue across each nipple, sucking one
and then the other, causing a sensuous tension to coil deep within her womb.
“Chance!”
The explosion hit and she cried out, dug her fingers deep in his shoulders as sensation after sensation engulfed
her. She thought she would die then and there from consuming so much pleasure.
And then she felt his body jerk and knew he was experiencing one hell of an orgasm as well. She reached out
and held him as he shuddered uncontrollably with his release.
It was awhile before either could catch their breaths, and when they did, neither seemed inclined to move. So
she inched closer, and with as much strength as she could muster, she tightened her legs around him, enjoying the
feel of him still buried inside of her. When he was finally able to lift his head to meet her eyes, she gave him a sated
smile. “I’ve heard that things can get pretty hot in a kitchen, but this is a bit much, don’t you think?” she whispered
with barely enough breath.
He reached out and caressed her cheek. “And this isn’t as hot as it will get for us.”
That bit of news made her inch even closer to him. “It’s not?”
“No, it’s not. You haven’t seen or experienced anything yet.”
Kylie wondered what else there was. They had made love in a bed, in the shower, on the kitchen counter…
“You ever do it in a hot tub?”
His question got her immediate attention. “No.”
He smiled. “Good. Then this ought to be fun.”

Late Sunday afternoon after returning home, Kylie stood in front of her bedroom mirror and gazed at her
reflection. With her messed up hair, kiss-swollen lips and hickey’s on both sides of her neck, she definitely looked
like a woman who had let go and indulged in her sensuous side. Naughty was too mild a word to describe how she
had acted this weekend. Wanton and loose were probably better.
“Hey, what are you doing? Looking for a spot that I missed?” Chance asked, entering the room. He walked up
behind her, wrapped his arms around her and settled her body back against his.
Kylie thought him missing a spot was impossible. It had started out very innocent with them enjoying a bowl of
ice cream after lunch. Then for no reason at all he had squirted caramel topping all over her, and moments later
began licking every inch of her skin to get it off. And she had reciprocated, squirted him and licked every inch of
him. She had to admit that for once in her life she had thrown caution to the wind and yielded to temptation.
“What are you thinking about, sweetieheart?”
She met his gaze in the mirror and leaned back against him when he tightened his arms around her. “You. Me.
And what a wonderful weekend we had. I wish it didn’t have to end.”
“It doesn’t.”
She shook her head and grinned. “Yes, it does. Have you forgotten the kids will be back tomorrow?”
“No, I didn’t forget but that shouldn’t have any bearing on us.”
She turned around to face him. “Of course it does. Surely you don’t expect us to still swap beds with the kids
around?”
He frowned. “No, but I do expect us to continue to see each other. And if we have to be discreet whenever we
do share a bed, then we will.”
“And what about the kids?”
“Tomorrow we can tell them that we’ve decided to start seeing each other.”
She took a step back. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”
Chance rubbed his hand down his face. “Don’t tell me we’re back to that again.”

“As far as I’m concerned we never left it.”

“Then what was this weekend about, Kylie?”

“It was about us indulging in our fantasies. But now it’s time to return to the real world, Chance, and there’s no way I can let Tiffany know that I was involved in a weekend affair with you.”

Angrily, he reached out and gripped her shoulders. “A weekend affair? That’s all this was to you?”

She yanked away from him. “Why? Was it supposed to be something else?”

“I had hoped so,” he said quietly, trying to get his anger and frustrations under control. “The start of a committed relationship was how I saw things.”

“But I can’t become involved with anyone until Tiffany leaves home.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t!”

“Then let me tell you what I think is your reason, which in my opinion is a damn poor excuse. Your parents have convinced you that getting pregnant at sixteen was a bad thing, and every since then you have worked your ass off trying to be a good girl in their eyes. So much so that you won’t allow a man in your life. At first I thought it was all about the men in your life letting you down and not being dependable, and that still may be a part of it. But since you claim you trust me, why are you so afraid of letting me into your life?”

“I have to set an example for my daughter. Why can’t you understand that?”

He frowned. “And not having a real life, not having a man around to show her how two people can share a loving relationship is setting an example for her?”

“There’s more to life than people getting involved, Chance.”

“What about people falling in love? Would it mean anything if I were to tell you that I love you? That I fell in love with you probably the first time I saw you that day?”

Kylie’s eyes widened and then she shook her head and felt the tears that stung her eyes. “No, it wouldn’t matter because I could tell you the same thing, Chance. I love you, too. And I probably fell in love with you that day as well.”

“But then—”

“No. You loving me and me loving you won’t make it okay. We still have to put our kids first. They think they’re in love, too, and we can’t downplay their feelings just because we’ve discovered ours. Just think of how it will look. The father loves the mother and the daughter loves the son. How dysfunctional can that be?”

His frown deepened. “So what are you suggesting? That we wait to see what becomes of our kids’ romance before seeking our own? Well, I don’t plan to do that. If you love me, and I mean truly love me, you’ll know that we’ll work things out together. But you have to be willing to step out on love and believe it.”

She bowed her head and took a deep breath and then she looked back at him. “No, it won’t work, Chance. Please try to understand. There are times in life when sacrifices have to be made.”

“Well, if you’re willing to let your love for me be the sacrificial lamb then it must not be the real thing, Kylie, because I can’t think of anything that will ever stop me from loving you and wanting a committed relationship with you.”

Without saying anything else he walked out of the room, and moments later Kylie heard the door slam shut behind him.
Chapter 14

“Mom?”
“Hmm?”
“Are you sure you’re okay?”
Kylie pulled two bottles of apple juice out of the refrigerator before turning to her daughter. “I’m okay, sweetheart. What makes you think I’m not?”
Tiffany lifted one shoulder in a dainty shrug. “I don’t know. It’s just a feeling I have. Every since you picked me up from the airport yesterday you’ve been quiet.”
“Well, I guess I have a lot on my mind, but I’m okay.”
“Why are you still wearing that scarf? You usually don’t wear scarfs.”
Kylie’s hand automatically went to the scarf around her neck, the one she was wearing to hide the two hickeys that Chance had placed there. “My throat had gotten sort of scratchy with the changing of the weather, I guess. I thought I’d take all precautions. The last thing I need to catch is a cold.”
“But you’re wearing it in the house.”
Kylie gave Tiffany a pointed look. “I’m aware of where I am Tiffany. Is wearing a scarf in the house a crime?”
“No, ma’am.”
“Okay, then.”
The kitchen got silent and Kylie regretted having gotten upset with Tiffany when she was only showing her concern. With a mantle of guilt on her shoulders, Kylie crossed the room and sat down at the table opposite her daughter. “Hey, how about you and I going to a movie this weekend?” she asked, trying to reclaim the easy camaraderie they’d started recently, at least before this past weekend.
Tiffany smiled. “Oh, that’ll be neat. Will it be okay to invite Marcus and his dad?”
Kylie’s body tensed with her daughter’s question. The last person she wanted to be around this weekend was Chance. “I was hoping we could make it a girls’ thing. We could even invite Lena to come with us.”
“That sounds like fun, Mom, but I was hoping I could get to see Marcus this weekend.”
“Didn’t you see him at school today?”
“Yes.”
“And won’t you see him again tomorrow?”
“Yes.”
“And the next day and the day after?”
“Yes, Mom, but you and Mr. Steele promised that we could have supervised outings and it’s been almost three weeks since we went camping.”
Kylie sighed. A part of her regretted having made that promise but at the time both she and Chance had known it was the best thing to keep the budding romance between their offspring under control. “Okay, then I’ll take the both of you. There’s no need to bother Chance this weekend and—”
“Mom, if you take us, it’ll seem as if you’re babysitting us. If both you and Mr. Steele go then it will be a foursome and it won’t be so obvious that you’re there to spy on us.”
Kylie rolled her eyes. “I’d be there as a chaperone, Tiffany.”
“Same difference.”
Not wanting to get into an argument with her daughter, Kylie stood and said, “Have Marcus check to see if his father is free this weekend. Chance is a busy man and might have made other plans.”
Later that night Kylie lay in bed and every so often she would glance over at the phone. Chance had made it a habit to call her around this time every night, but she knew after Sunday chances were that he wouldn’t be calling any time soon, if ever. And a part of her thought maybe it was for the best. He thought he had all the answers, but he would never understand the guilt trip her parents had placed on her shoulders after she’d gotten pregnant.
As she cuddled under the covers she thought about the weekend she had spent with Chance. There was no denying that it had been a fantasy come true, and heat flooded through her just thinking about all they had done. In fact today at the florist when she’d been alone her body actually trembled with the memories that were so vivid in her mind.
Their first date had been everything a first date should be, and what he probably hadn’t even realized was,
although it had been their first date, it had been her first date period. She and Sam had been too young to actually date and she hadn’t gone out to dinner with any other man. So in reality, Chance had been her first in a lot of ways.

Tears blurring her eyes, she glanced over at the phone. She might as well get used to him not calling her ever again.

Chance threw onto his desk the document he’d been reading and glanced at the clock. Not that he was counting, but it had been three days, sixteen hours and forty-five minutes since he had last seen and talked to Kylie.

After what she had said to him on Sunday evening, she should have been the last person on his mind. She had decided that love or no love, there would not be a future for them.

Chance leaned back in his chair and hooked his hands behind his head. Dammit, he didn’t want that. He wanted a life with her, a life that included marriage. Kylie was being more than stubborn. She was being downright difficult.

He couldn’t help but remember their weekend together, and the days and nights they had shared. Those memories would sustain him in the coming months. He would need them.

He walked over to the window and stared out at Charlotte’s skyline. It was almost two in the afternoon. Kylie would be at her shop. Was she thinking about him the way he was thinking about her? Probably not.

But she had admitted that she loved him.

He should have known that when a woman gave herself as completely to a man as Kylie had done to him this past weekend that love was involved. One thing was for certain: there was still Marcus and Tiffany to deal with, and because of their kids, Kylie couldn’t put distance between them regardless of how much she might want to.

Whether she liked it or not, she hadn’t seen the last of him.

“I don’t know what, but something happened this weekend between our parents, Marcus,” Tiffany whispered.

Marcus, who was sitting across from her in the library, glanced around to make sure Mrs. Kennard, the librarian who had a strict no-talking policy, wasn’t anywhere close by. “Yes, I know,” he whispered back. “This weekend was supposed to get them to together, not pull them apart. What do you think happened?”

Tiffany shook her head. “I don’t know but I do know they spent time together this weekend.”

Marcus lifted a brow. “And how do you know that?”

“Because Carly Owens said she saw them together at the grocery store.”

“The grocery store? What were they doing at the grocery store?”

“Carly said they were actually shopping together. They didn’t see her but she saw them. She said my mom had her cart and your dad had his, but they had come together in the same car.”

“And she’s sure it was our parents?”

“Yes, she’s sure. She’s met the both of them before but at different times.”

“Umm, I find that interesting. If they were friendly enough to go grocery shopping together then what happened?”

Tiffany sighed. “I don’t know. And there’s also something else.” She leaned in closer to make sure the students sitting at the other table didn’t hear her. “My mom had a hickey on her neck and I think your dad put it there.”

Disbelief flickered in Marcus’s eyes. “You’re kidding.”

“No. She’s been wearing a scarf to hide it, but I saw it anyway when she took the scarf off thinking I wasn’t around.”

Marcus nodded. “That means they had to have kissed.”

“Right.”

“Then what happened to make them start acting funny?”

Tiffany shook her head. “Who knows? Adults can be weird that way. Did your dad say that he would be available to go to the movies with us on Saturday?” Tiffany asked.

“I haven’t asked him yet. He hasn’t been in the best of moods since I got back.”

“Neither has my mom. If after this weekend at the movies they’re still not getting along, then we have to do something. I know they really like each other, but now I’m worried because your dad hasn’t been calling at night like he used to do. I’ve been checking the caller ID every morning but your phone number isn’t showing up.”

“So what do you think we should do?”

Tiffany scrunched her forehead and then moments later a smile touched her features. “I have an idea but we may have to get an adult to help us pull it off.”

Marcus glanced around again for Mrs. Kennard, and then turned back to Tiffany. “An adult like who?”

Tiffany thought about her godmother and decided it wouldn’t be a good idea to solicit her help. “How about one of your uncles? The one you said who likes to have fun.”

Marcus sighed. “That’s Uncle Donovan, and this sounds serious.”
“It is. We’ll see how things go with them this weekend, but if they still aren’t on the best of terms, we go to Plan B.”

“What’s Plan B?” Marcus asked.

Tiffany leaned in closer. “Here it is, so listen up.”

Kylie chewed the corner of her lip as she watched Chance and Marcus get out of the SUV and begin walking toward her front door. That deep fluttering in her heart and the sensations that rolled around in her stomach whenever she saw Chance made her release the breath she’d been holding. She could only stand at the window and stare out at him, providing irrefutable proof of just how much she had missed seeing him these past few days, missed talking with him…making love with him.

A part of her questioned the sanity in not giving in to the love she felt for him. Even Lena had raked her over the coals during their lunch meeting that week when she’d told her best friend that Chance had admitted his love and she had admitted hers. Lena staunchly refused to agree with Kylie that this was one of those no-win situations where love wasn’t enough.

“Mom, are Marcus and Mr. Steele here?”

Kylie turned away from the window upon hearing the excitement in her daughter’s voice. “Yes, they just arrived.”

“Good. I’ll go open the door for them.” And then Tiffany raced off.

A few moments later Kylie could hear the deep sexiness of Chance’s voice all the way from the foyer, and the sound sent sizzling heat all through her body. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed her coat off the back of the sofa and left the living room to join everyone in the foyer.

The moment she rounded the corner she felt Chance’s gaze on her. And the moment her eyes locked with his dark brown ones, she almost forgot to breathe. For some reason she couldn’t look away.

“Hi, Kylie.”

“Chance.”

“You look nice.”

“Thanks.” She had decided to wear a lime-green linen pantsuit and instead of pinning her braids up she let them tumble about her shoulders.

She stared at the floor for a second and then glanced back up at him. “You look nice, too.” She decided not to tell him that she’d always thought he looked suave in a suit, but sexy as hell in a pair of jeans.

“You ready to go?”

“Yes.”

“And, Kylie, no matter what’s going on with us, let’s make sure the kids have a good time tonight, all right?”

“All right.”

They then walked out the door to join their kids in the SUV.

They saw the new Harry Potter movie.

Kylie was certain it had been a good movie but she hadn’t fully concentrated on what was happening on the big screen. Instead her concentration had been on the man who had sat next to her. They had barely exchanged a single word but all during the movie she could feel the weight of his heavy stare. More than once she had glanced his way in the semi-darkened theater to find him watching her.

Too often she had been tempted to reach out and slip her hand in his, filled with an intense desire to touch him, to feel his heat. It didn’t take much for her to remember that heat, how he had consumed her with it whenever he touched her, kissed her or made love to her.

“Wasn’t the movie awesome, Mom?” Tiffany said with enthusiasm in her voice as they left the theater and
walked through the parking lot back to Chance’s truck.

“Yes, it was nice.”

Then Marcus and Tiffany got into conversations about all their favorite scenes and left Kylie and Chance to do nothing but remain silent. He didn’t seem inclined to make idle chatter and neither did she. He opened the truck door for her and when their hands brushed she felt him tense the exact moment she did.

“Can we stop for ice cream?” Tiffany asked when everyone was inside the truck and buckled up.

“No,” Kylie and Chance called out simultaneously, and then glanced over at each other. Chance cleared his throat and said in a more subdued voice. “I’m going out of town on Monday and there’s a lot I need to do to get prepared for the trip.”

“And I need to look over my accounting books tonight,” Kylie added.

Both Chance and Kylie heard the disappointment in Tiffany’s and Marcus’s voices but decided that a movie had been enough. There was no way they could sit across from each other and eat ice cream without remembering what had happened the last time they’d done so. It had been the cause of their “lick me all over” party.

All it took was a memory—of Chance stripping her naked in her kitchen, licking sticky caramel sauce off her body—and Kylie’s palms started to tingle. Her breasts suddenly felt heavy, her nipples tight, and erotic sensations built up inside of her, settling right smack between her legs. She forced a deep breath of air into her lungs thinking that this was definitely not the time nor the place for arousal.

She glanced over at Chance, and as if he felt her gaze on him, he turned to her. From the heated look in his eyes she could tell he too was remembering what they’d done that Sunday afternoon in her kitchen.

Kylie settled back in her seat. This was going to be one long and extremely hot ride home.

It was time for Plan B.

Marcus and Tiffany wasted no time putting it into action. On Tuesday they had Donovan Steele’s full attention as they filled him in on the failure of Plan A. “So as you can see, Uncle Donovan, we need your help.”

Donovan leaned back and looked at the both of them. Marcus had contacted him on his cell phone asking that he meet them after school on the football bleachers.

Donovan shook his head. “Let me get this straight. The two of you aren’t girlfriend and boyfriend? You aren’t madly in love? And you only pretended you were to get your parents together?” he asked incredulously.

Both Tiffany and Marcus nodded. “That’s right,” Marcus said. “Tiffany and I are best friends and we thought it was a good plan. Things were going along smoothly but something happened that weekend the two of us left town.”

Donovan lifted a brow. “And what do you think happened?”

“We don’t know but before we left they were beginning to like each other a lot, but now we’re not sure how they feel.”

Donovan had heard the story from Bas and Morgan but he wasn’t about to share the information with these two. “So what do you need for me to do?”

“Help us,” Tiffany said.

Donovan was confused. “Help you do what?”

It was Marcus who answered. “Carry out our plan to get our parents together.”

Donovan crossed his arms over his chest, not believing what they were asking of him. He loved his nephew but was he willing to incur his oldest brother’s wrath? “I think you had better tell me about this plan first.”

Marcus nodded. “I’ll let Tiffany explain things since it’s her idea. But I think it’s a good one.”

Donovan doubted it was all that good but decided to listen anyway. Twenty minutes later a smile touched his lips. He hated to admit it but he liked their idea, although it could use a little tweaking here and there to make sure neither Chance nor Kylie panicked and got the police involved. There was no doubt that Chance would be mad in the beginning, but in the end odds were he would be a very happy man. “Okay, count me in. I’ll help but only on one condition.”

“What?” Marcus asked.

“That you modify your plan somewhat.”

Marcus and Tiffany quickly agreed.

Donovan then smiled and said, “Now, I think that this is the way we should handle things….”
Late Friday night Kylie glanced over at the clock on her nightstand the moment the telephone rang. It was almost midnight. She suddenly got a funny feeling in her stomach. Was it Chance? The last time she had seen him was Sunday night when they had all gone to the movies.

Deciding that answering was the only way to determine who her caller was, she reached out and picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Mom?”

Kylie shot straight up in bed. The voice sounded like Tiffany’s, but there was no way her daughter could be calling her when she was down the hall in her bed sleeping.

“Mom? Are you there? It’s me.”

“Mom, I’m fine.”

Kylie angrily began pacing her bedroom. “Fine, nothing! Where are you, young lady? No one gave you permission to leave this house. How dare you pull something like that!”

“Mom, please calm down. I’m fine. Marcus and I are together.”

“What?” Kylie screamed at the top of her lungs, before collapsing in the wingback chair in her room. “What do you mean you and Marcus are together? It’s after midnight. No one gave you permission to—”

“Mom, Marcus and I have been thinking.”

Kylie gripped the phone tightly in her hand. “Thinking? The two of you have been thinking? Fine, then think at your own houses. I want you home immediately!”

“No until you and Mr. Steele promise to become friends again.”

Kylie frowned. What was Tiffany talking about? “Listen, honey, Chance and I are friends. You need to come home.”

“The two of you didn’t act like it Sunday night. You barely said two words to each other. If Mr. Steele is going to be our in-law one day, then the two of you are going to have to get along.”

Kylie threw her head back and began silently counting to ten, not believing the conversation she and her daughter were having. “Look, Tiffany, I don’t know where you are but I want you to end this call right now and come home. Better yet, tell me where you are and I’ll come and get you.”

“No, Mom, I can’t do that. Marcus and I aren’t going to do anything we shouldn’t, so don’t worry about that.”

“But I am worried about that! You’re only fifteen, it’s after midnight and you’re out somewhere with a boy when you should be home sleeping in your bed. How dare you tell me not to worry!”

“Then maybe I should ask you to trust me, and to also trust Marcus. We’re in a safe location and we won’t do anything that you and Mr. Steele will be ashamed of.”

“That’s not the point!”

“It is the point, Mom. You and Mr. Steele are going to have to trust us. Marcus and I figured the reason the two of you can’t get along is because you don’t trust each other and you don’t trust us.”

Kylie struggled to keep her voice calm. “I do trust Chance and I’ve tried to stop being so uptight and to start trusting you more, but I see doing so was a mistake. You either come home within the next thirty minutes or I’m calling the police.”

“Mom, please don’t. All it will do is cause unnecessary embarrassment for me and Marcus.”

“Tough! The two of you should have thought of that sooner.”

“Mom, I’m serious. If you call the police then we won’t come back. All we need is time to talk.”

“And just what do the two of you have to talk about that you had to sneak out in the middle of the night to do it?”

“We need to talk about you and Mr. Steele and your inability to get along.”

“We can get along!”

“Then you sure fooled us. You were getting along, then something happened. We don’t know what but the two of you sure acted like you were avoiding each other on Sunday.”

“Tiffany, I—”

“Good night, Mom. We’ll call you in the morning and tell you our decision.”
Kylie’s stomach dropped to the floor. “Your decision about what?”

“About whatever we decide. Marcus has to call his father now. Goodbye, Mom. I’ll talk to you in the morning, and I promise Marcus and I won’t do anything.”

Before Kylie could open her mouth to say another word, there was a resounding click in her ear.

Kylie quickly snatched up the phone the moment it rang again five minutes later knowing it was Chance.

“Kylie, you okay?”

His deep, husky voice had a comforting effect on her. “Oh, Chance, what are we going to do?”

“You didn’t call the police, did you?”

“No.”

“Good. I got a chance to talk to the both of them and—”

“Can you believe what they’ve done? Just wait until I see them. I’m going to—”

“Calm down, Kylie.”

“Calm down? My child is out somewhere after midnight and you want me to calm down?”

“Calm down, Kylie. One good thing is that they’re together.”

“You think that’s a good thing?”

“I trust Marcus, Kylie. He won’t let anything happen to Tiffany. And he gave me his word that they won’t do anything they aren’t supposed to do.”

Kylie glanced out her bedroom window. A fist tightened around her heart knowing her little girl was out there somewhere. “Yes, that’s the same thing Tiffany said,” she murmured quietly. “And you’re right, we’re going to have to trust them.”

Kylie was quiet for a long while, then she said, “Did Marcus tell you why they did it?”

“Yes, he told me.”

“I thought we acted pretty normal on Sunday night,” she said.

“Well, even if they thought we weren’t on the best of terms, it wasn’t any of their business!”

“You finally agree with me about that?”

Kylie frowned. “I’m serious, Chance.”

“I’ve always been serious about that.” He then asked, “Where are you now?”

“In my bedroom.”

“How about going downstairs and putting some coffee on. I doubt if either of us will get much sleep tonight and if we’re going to worry, we might as well do it together. I’m on my way over.”

“All right. I’ll have the coffee ready when you get here.”

Chance made it to Kylie’s house in less than ten minutes. She met him at the door with a cup of steaming hot coffee.

As if it was the most natural thing to do, he leaned over and kissed her lips. “You okay?” he asked quietly, after taking the cup from her hand and following her into her living room, where he sat down on the leather sofa beside her.

“Yes, I’m okay. But I’m still worried about them, Chance. I didn’t think to ask how they were getting around. I assumed Marcus took his car.”

Chance nodded after taking a sip of his coffee. “Yes, he has it. Boy, he’s going to be grounded for life.”

“So is Tiffany and she hasn’t started driving yet. And just to think I had considered surprising her with a car for her sixteenth birthday. She might as well kiss that surprise goodbye.”

“And they pulled this just to make a statement that they didn’t like the way we acted on Sunday. If that doesn’t beat all,” Chance said.

“Yeah, I guess it means a lot to them for us to get along.”

“But it’s not like we argued or anything, Kylie.”

She inhaled deeply. “I know but I guess they were watching us more closely then we thought. You have to admit we were rather distant to each other.”

“Yes, we were,” he readily admitted it. “And I didn’t like it.”

She met his gaze and said, “Neither did I.”

After a few moments of silence she added, “Do you think we’re doing the right thing by not calling the police?”

“Yes. But I did contact my brothers. There was no way I could not let them know. At least I was able to reach Bas and Morgan. Evidently Donovan is still somewhere out on the town and he isn’t answering his cell. But I’ll talk to him tomorrow. And I notified my cousins, as well, in case Marcus contacts them.”
Kylie’s nodded. “I forgot about your basketball game in the morning.”
Chance shook his head. “Yeah, but there’s no way I’m going to go anyplace until the kids come home.”
“They will come home, won’t they, Chance?”
When he heard the trembling in her voice, he set his cup on the table and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. It felt good to hold her again. “Yes, they’ll come home. When they get hungry, they’ll be back.”
His words made Kylie smile. “Yeah, Tiffany definitely likes to eat.”
“And so does Marcus.”
Kylie cuddled deeper into Chance’s warm embrace. It felt good to be held by a man who cared about her. A man who’d told her he loved her. A man she knew she could depend on. “Where do you think they’ll sleep tonight?”
Chance shrugged. “Either in the car or at a hotel.”
Kylie pulled back and looked at Chance. “Are they old enough to get a hotel room on their own?”
“It depends on where they go. To some hotel owners, money and not age is the determining factor.”
Kylie really hadn’t wanted to hear that. More than anything she had to remember that Tiffany said she and Marcus wouldn’t do anything. She had promised.
“Come here and lay beside me. You must be tired.”
She automatically did what he suggested without thinking twice about it. He stretched out his legs on the sofa to accommodate her and gently held her as they lay side by side. Before he had arrived, she had changed out of her nightgown into a pair of silk lounging pants and top. Heat curled through her when he wrapped his arms around her. It felt good knowing she wasn’t alone now.
“Try to get some sleep.”
“I don’t think I can, Chance. I want my baby home.” A few moments later, sleepily she said, “Did I ever tell you about the first time I let Tiffany sleep somewhere other than her own bed?”
“No, I don’t think that you did.”
“She was two and my parents had finally acknowledged that they had a grandchild and wanted some bonding time. At first I wasn’t going to let her go but then Lena convinced me that I should. I barely slept that entire night knowing she wasn’t in the house. I finally was able to sleep only after going into her room and stretching out on the floor beside her little bed. Now isn’t that pathetic?”
“No, it sounds to me like you were a mother who had missed her child and needed the connection.” After a few moments he added, “It works like that for adults, too, you know.”
She lifted her head and met his gaze. “Does it?”
“Yes.” He reached out and stroked her cheek with one finger. “You slept in my bed that one night but that’s all it took for me to get used to your presence. All this week I found myself reaching out, as if you were still there, wanting that connection.”
Kylie’s stomach knotted when her gaze slipped to his mouth and she remembered how that mouth had driven her crazy in so many different ways. She remembered the taste of it, the feel of it. She also remembered something else. The amount of love she had in her heart for this one particular man.
“Oh, Chance.” She reached up and tightened her arms around his neck at the same time she leaned up for his kiss.
With agonizing slowness he took her mouth, claimed it, branded it. His tongue made love to her mouth. The more it did, the more she became fully aware of the steady, strong arms holding her. They were protective arms. They were arms that would shield her from any storm, whether raging or mild. They were arms that would always be there to hold her when she needed to be held. It had been late in coming but she realized that now.
Moments later when he lifted his mouth she let out a satisfied sigh. “Thanks. I needed that.”
He looked at her and smiled. “So did I.”
Determined to maintain control of the situation he then said, “Now let’s try to get some rest so we can be well-rested to give our kids hell when they come back home.”
“Yes, our kids.” Kylie said the words as if they suddenly had new meaning to her.
As he pulled her closer she settled against his comforting muscular form and believed that from this time forward somehow everything was going to be all right.

“Mom?”
“Dad?”
Chance slowly opened his eyes. Had he been dreaming or had he actually heard Tiffany’s and Marcus’s voices? The first thing he noticed was that he was stretched out on the sofa with Kylie lying beside him, her head resting on his chest. That would not have been so bad if his hand wasn’t possessively cupping her bottom or one of her legs wasn’t entwined with his. Even her hand was resting pretty darn close to the fly on his jeans.
He sucked in a deep breath, letting the scent of her fill his nostrils. She was still asleep, but he could remember a time that weekend when he had patiently waited for her to wake up so that he could—

“Dad?”

“Mom?”

Chance swallowed as he slowly glanced across the room and his gaze lit on two pairs of curious eyes. He blinked. No, make that three.

He quickly sat up and the movement startled Kylie out of a sound sleep. “Chance, what’s wrong?” she asked sluggishly, slowly coming awake.

He shifted his gaze from the three sets of eyes to her still-drowsy ones. “Wake up, sweetheart, the kids are back,” he whispered.

She blinked. “What?”

“The kids are home.”

She was off the sofa in a flash. He had to catch her to keep her from stumbling. “Tiffany! Marcus! We’ve been so worried about you,” she said hugging them so tight Chance wondered how they were able to breathe.

Then as if it finally hit her what they had done, she stepped back, placed her hands on her hips and gave them one hell of a fierce frown. “The two of you have a lot of explaining to do.”

“Seems they aren’t the only ones,” Donovan Steele said in a low voice, after clearing his throat.

Kylie jumped and jerked her head around. She hadn’t seen Chance’s youngest brother standing at the edge of the foyer. “Where did you find them?” she asked, tossing her mussed-up braids over her shoulders.

Before Donovan could answer, Tiffany said, “He didn’t find us. We were with him the entire time. We spent the night over at his house.”

“What?” That loud exclamation came from both Kylie and Chance at the same time.

“And we had so much fun,” Marcus said, smiling. “The three of us played video games until—”

“What the hell do you mean you were with him the entire time?” Chance shouted, coming to his feet beside Kylie.

“Dad, don’t get mad at Uncle Donovan,” Marcus said, rushing in. “I can explain.”

Donovan smiled as he leaned against the wall. “Yes, Chance, let him explain. And trust me, it’s a doozy. And I think you and Kylie might want to be sitting down when you hear it.”
Chapter 16

“Let me make sure I have this right,” Chance said as he paced back and forth in front of the two teenagers, who were now the ones sitting on Kylie’s sofa. To say they were in the hot seat was an understatement. “Are the two of you saying you aren’t madly in love and that you never were?”

It had taken the kids twenty minutes to explain to their parents what it had only taken ten to confess to Donovan a few days ago. But Kylie and Chance had stopped them periodically to ask questions.

“Yes, Mr. Steele, that’s what we’re saying. Marcus and I are good friends and have been since the first day I started at Myers Park High. One day while talking we decided that neither you nor my mom had a life that didn’t center around us, so we decided to give you one,” Tiffany said, smiling.

Chance frowned. “You decided? Just like that?”

“Yes, sir, we decided just like that. Wasn’t that cool?”

Kylie came to stand next to Chance. “No, that wasn’t cool. Did it ever occur to either of you that we liked the life we had?”

“Yes, it did occur to me, but then I wondered what you would do when I left for college in a few years, Mom,” Tiffany said quietly. “Just the thought of you being here all alone almost made me give up the idea of leaving home and going off to school. But then I figured it wouldn’t be fair for me to give up my life just because you didn’t have one. So I decided to help you find one. And when Marcus mentioned how handsome his dad was, and I told him how beautiful you are, we decided the two of you would make the perfect solid soul.”

Chance lifted a confused brow. “Solid soul?”

“Yes, it’s where two souls combine into one. A very solid one that can withstand anything.”

Kylie crossed her arms over her chest and glared at them. “The two of you deceived us. You had us almost pulling our hair out by pretending you were so much in love.”

“Necessary, Mom,” Tiffany cut in and said. “I’m not a child. I knew you were beginning to really like Mr. Steele. I could tell. And I could also tell that you wouldn’t let yourself like him fully because you probably thought I wouldn’t go along with it when all I ever wanted was someone to come into your life and treat you nice, take you places and make you smile. And Mr. Steele made you smile, Mom. I’ve never seen you smile so much as when you were around him or talked to him every night on the phone. And I knew our plan was working because Marcus said his dad was smiling, too.”

Marcus picked up their defense. “But we also knew something happened, Dad, that weekend Tiffany and I went out of town. When I got back to town the smile was gone and you were acting like you had lost your best friend. Tiffany told me that her mom was acting the same way so we figured the two of you had had an argument. We knew we needed to do something.”

Chance sighed deeply. “Is that the reason for the stunt the two of you pulled last night?”

“Yes,” Tiffany said softly. “I figured if you cared for my mom that you would come over and make sure she was okay. And you did just what I knew you would do, Mr. Steele.”

“In other words, we played right into your hands,” Chance said, frowning.

“No, you played right into each other’s hearts,” Donovan said, coming to stand next to Chance. “I think you’ve drilled them long enough, and yes, I let them talk me into being a part of their shenanigans because I saw the same thing they did. The two of you cared for each other and you were smiling a lot, Chance, when you were together.”

Donovan grinned. “You were even smiling when you weren’t together. You don’t know how many times when we were in your office for a meeting that Bas, Morgan and I were tempted to slap that smile off your face. The two of you were meant to be together.”

“That’s not the point,” Kylie snapped.

“Then what is the point?” Donovan asked crossing his arms over his chest. “Your kids cared enough about the two of you to do something. I admit their plan might have needed a little polishing but what the hell. It worked, didn’t it?”
The room got quiet. Chance met Kylie’s gaze and held it for a long moment. Then he said, “Yes, it worked. Only thing, Marcus and Tiffany, I really don’t like Kylie. And the reason I don’t like her is because I’m deeply in love with her. There’s a difference.”

Both Tiffany and Marcus smiled and pumped their fists in triumph. “Yes!”

“And how do you feel about my dad, Ms. Hagan?” Marcus asked a few moments later. Kylie knew all eyes were on her, especially Chance’s. He knew she loved him. She had admitted as much—but she had also declared that she wouldn’t act on that love. Now he was waiting to see if she would reconsider.

What he didn’t know was that she had reconsidered the exact moment she had opened the door to him last night. He had come to her when she had needed him most. He had been there with her and had shown her just what a dependable man he was.

And something else. What he’d told her was true. For the past fifteen years she had been trying to be a good girl for her parents. But even her daughter had been able to see something that she hadn’t. She needed a life that didn’t revolve around Tiffany or her parents. She was a grown woman and if she made mistakes they were hers to make.

She slowly took the couple of steps that brought her in front of Chance. “And I love your dad, too, Marcus. I discovered just how much I cared for him that weekend and it scared me because I didn’t think I was ready to take such a big step as that.”

“And are you ready now?” Chance asked her quietly, taking her hand in his.

She held his gaze and said softly, “Yes, I’m ready.”

Again Marcus and Tiffany grinned.

“Okay, time for me to take the two of you out for breakfast,” Donovan said, sensing his brother and Kylie needed to be alone. “And since we won’t be playing our basketball game today, I’ll go pick up Bas and Morgan and we can work out our competitive frustrations on the video games.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Marcus said, rushing for the door. “And now that Dad knows there’s nothing going on with me and Tiffany, I can give Rhonda Denton my phone number.”

“And I can give Brad Reagan mine,” Tiffany added, following right on Marcus’s heels.

Donovan turned to his brother and chuckled. “Boy, the two of you will have a lot to deal with after you get married, with two dating-age teens in the house.” He then patted Chance on the back. “We’re leaving so the two of you can settle things.”

Chance gave his brother an appreciative nod. “And give us a courtesy call before you come back.”

Understanding completely, Donovan laughed before he walked out the door, closing and locking it behind him.

“You admitted that you love me in front of them,” Chance said huskily, still holding Kylie’s hand in his. “I didn’t think that you would.”

She nodded. “I had to because it’s the truth and I couldn’t pretend otherwise.”

“You know what this means, don’t you?”

Yes, she knew what this meant. Chance had told her once that if there was something that he wanted, he wouldn’t give up until he got it. “Yes, I know and now, since you have me, what are you going to do with me?”

He smiled that sexy smile that could make her heart race and make her dizzy. “My long term goal is to marry you by next summer, if not before. But my short-term goal is to make love to you, right here and now.”

And with that said he captured her mouth in a soul-searing kiss that left her trembling. And then he began removing her clothes as well as his own.

“No visitors and no kids for a while,” she whispered when he had gotten her completely naked and stretched out on the sofa.

He smiled. “I would go get the caramel topping but that would be too messy, so I’m just going to have to use my imagination.”

He did and enjoyed taking the long, lazy swipes of his tongue over every inch of her body, liking the sound of her moaning and groaning while he did so. By the time he had slid back up her body he knew he was about to take her in a way he had never taken her before. He had already slipped on the condom and the moment he was poised between her thighs, he looked down at her and remembered the term Tiffany had used.

_Solid soul._

And as he began sinking deep within her silken heat, he knew that the love the two of them shared was solid soul. It was also something else. It was a love meant to be. A love destined to last a lifetime. A love forged in steel.

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes, then whispered a heartfelt request. “Marry me, baby.”

Kylie smiled at him and when he hit her G-spot at an angle that made her moan deep in her throat, he smiled and asked softly, “Was that a yes?”

Her darkened eyes took on a positive gleam when she tightened her arms around his neck and groaned a
resounding, “Yes.”
Epilogue

Chance couldn’t wait until the summer. He and Kylie were married on Christmas Day in the presence of family and friends. Considering how they had met, it seemed very fitting for Marcus to be his best man and Tiffany to be Kylie’s maid of honor.

The deafening sounds of cheers, catcalls, whistles and applause shook the room when Chance pulled Kylie into his arms and kissed his bride. It was evident to anyone looking on that the two of them were in love and extremely happy.

At least it was evident to everyone but Cassandra Tisdale. She leaned in and angrily whispered to Bas, “I can’t believe he married her when he had a chance with my cousin Jamie. Jamie is a lot prettier and has a lot more class. Kylie works at a florist for heaven sakes! Chance is the CEO of one of the largest corporations in Charlotte. He needs a wife that will complement him.”

Bas stared at her, not believing anyone could be that rude or snobbish. But he was seeing a side of Cassandra that he’d always seen. For some reason he’d convinced himself that he could live with it, but now he knew there was no way in hell he could. He wanted to one day have the same thing his brother had—a marriage built on love and mutual respect.

“So you don’t think them loving each other is enough?” he asked after taking a sip of his wine.

She gave a ladylike snort. “Of course not. Love is never enough and no one should foolishly think otherwise. According to my mother, who as you know is an expert on social decorum, a good wife, one with the proper breeding like I have, is to be seen and not heard. Her manners and refinements are so ingrained that her husband knows her job is to keep the household running smoothly and make sure they establish the perfect family tree.”

Bas lifted a brow. “The perfect family tree?”

“Yes, when they have children. Everything has to be skillfully planned.”

Bas thought he’d heard enough. He really didn’t give a damn for manners and refinements. Hell, he would settle for a woman oozing in scandal and sin to one who was nothing but a boring social trophy. And he would definitely prefer to come home every night to a wife who would be wearing sexy lace nighties than to one in a starched, buttoned-up-to-her-neck gown.

He shook his head knowing that later, when he took Cassandra home, he would give her the ultimate blow. There was no way in hell he would marry her. “Come on, they’re about ready to cut the cake.”

“It’s not much of a cake if you ask me.”

He had heard enough. “I don’t recall anyone asking you, Cassandra. If all you’re going to do is find fault and be negative, then I’d rather you keep your damn refined and proper mouth closed.”

Bas smiled, certain his statement had pretty much shut her up for a while.

Across the room Chance pulled Kylie into his arms. “I love you, Mrs. Steele.”

She smiled up at him. “And I love you, Mr. Steele.” She then leaned over and whispered, “So what do you think of my parents?”

He smiled. “I can deal with them. They might have preferred you as their good little girl, but frankly I’d rather have you as my bad one. In fact, I plan for the two of us to get downright naughty tonight.”

“You plan on teaching me some more moves?” she asked saucily.

“Yeah, among other things.”

Kylie’s gaze tangled intimately with his. After this small reception they would catch a plane for Hawaii. Chance’s parents had returned for the wedding and volunteered to watch Marcus and their newest grandchild Tiffany, who they were anxious to get to know.

“We are going to make one big happy family,” Chance said, leading Kylie over to the cake they would be cutting together.

“Yes,” she agreed as she paused to place a kiss on her husband’s lips. “One big happy family.”
Night Heat

Brenda Jackson
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Prologue

“What do you mean I need to take time off work for medical reasons?” Sebastian Steele asked, squirming uncomfortably under Dr. Joe Nelson’s intense gaze. It was that time of year again—the company physical. An event he detested.

Last year Dr. Nelson—who to Sebastian’s way of thinking should be staring retirement real close in the face—had told Sebastian that his blood pressure was too high and as a result he needed to adopt a healthier lifestyle, a lifestyle that included improving his eating habits, taking the medication he’d been prescribed, becoming more physically active and eliminating stress by reducing his hours at work.

Sebastian had done none of those things.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t taken the doctor seriously; it was just that he hadn’t had the time to make the changes the man had requested. Sebastian, better known as Bas, was single and used to grabbing something to eat on the run. Asking him to give up fried chicken was simply un-American. As far as taking the medication the doctor had prescribed, well, he would take the damn things if he could remember to have the prescription filled.

Then there was this thing about becoming physically active. He guessed having sex on a regular basis didn’t count. And even if it did, that would be a moot point now, since he’d broken his engagement to Cassandra Tisdale eight months ago and hadn’t had another bed partner since.

Last but not least was this nonsense about eliminating stress by cutting his work hours. Now that was really asking a lot. He lived to work and he worked to live. The term workaholic could definitely be used to describe him. The Steele Corporation was more than just a company to Sebastian; it was a lifeline. He thoroughly enjoyed his job in the family business as troubleshooter and problem solver.

“You heard me correctly, Bas. I recommend that you take a three-month medical leave of absence.”

Sebastian shook his head. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m as serious as a heart attack, which is what you’re going to have if you don’t make immediate changes.”

The muscle in Sebastian’s jaw twitched and his teeth began clenching. “Aren’t you getting a little carried away about this? I’m thirty-five, not seventy-five.”

“And at the rate you’re going you won’t make it to forty-five,” Dr. Nelson said flatly.

“Sebastian stood on his feet, no longer able to sit for this conversation. “Fine, I’ll take a week off.”

“One week isn’t good enough. You need at least three months away from here.” Dr. Nelson leaned back in his chair and continued his speech. “I know you don’t want to accept what I’m telling you, and of course you’re free to get a second opinion, but my recommendation will stand. And I will take it to the board if I have to. If you don’t make some major and immediate changes to your lifestyle then you’re a stroke or a heart attack just waiting to happen. I’m going to make sure you get to live to the ripe old age of seventy, like me,” Dr. Nelson ended, chuckling.

Bas snorted before walking out the door. He seriously doubted it.

“Your brothers are here to see you, Mr. Steele.”

Bas frowned, wondering what they wanted. Just as he’d known they would, they had bought into Dr. Nelson’s recommendation as though it had been the gospel according to St. John. He was thankful his brothers had given him a week to tie up loose ends around the office instead of the two days Dr. Nelson had suggested.

He stood, crossing his arms over his chest, when the three walked in. There was Chance, who at thirty-seven was the oldest Steele brother and CEO of the corporation. Then came Morgan who was thirty-three and the head of the Research and Development Department. Donovan, at thirty, was in charge of Product Administration. Of the three, Chance was the only one married.

“I take it that you’re still not excited about taking time off?” Chance said, dipping his hands in his pockets and leaning against the closed door. “But even I knew you were becoming a workaholic, Bas. You need a life.”

Bas glared. “When did you become an expert in my needs?”
“Calm down, Bas,” Morgan said, sensing a heated argument brewing between his two older brothers. “Chance is right and you know it. You’ve been spending too much time here. Time away from this place is what you need.”

“And I’m backing them up,” Donovan said, crossing his arms over his own chest. “Hell, I wish someone would give me three months away from here. I’d haul ass in a second and not look back. Just think of the things you can do in three months, all the women you can—”

“I’m sure he has more productive things planned,” Chance interrupted Donovan. Bas figured his eldest brother knew just where Donovan was about to go. But Chance’s other assumption was dead wrong. Bas didn’t have anything planned. Before he could voice that thought, there was a knock at the door.

“Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Steele, but this just arrived by way of a courier and it looks important,” his secretary said.

Bas took the envelope she handed to him and frowned, noting the return address. An attorney in Newton Grove, Tennessee. Seeing the name of the city suddenly brought back memories of a summer he would never forget, and of the man who had turned the life of a troubled young man completely around.

He ripped into the letter and began reading. “Damn.”

“Bas, what is it? What’s wrong?”

Bas glanced up and met his brothers’ worried, yet curious expressions. “Jim Mason has died.”

Although his brothers had never met Jim, they recalled the name. They also knew what impact Jim Mason had had on Bas. While he was growing up, Bas’s reputation for getting into trouble was legendary and he dropped out of college, deciding to go off and see the world. Sebastian had met Jim when he’d been around twenty-one. In fact, the older man had gotten Bas out of a tight jam when Bas had stopped at a tavern in some small Georgia town for a cold beer and ended up getting into a fight with a few roughnecks. Jim, who’d been passing through the same town after taking his two daughters to their aunt in Florida for the summer, had stopped the fight and had also saved Bas from going to jail after the owner of the tavern accused him of having started the brawl.

Jim had offered to pay for any damages and then advised Bas he could pay him back by working for his construction company over the summer. Having been raised to settle all his debts, Bas had agreed and had ended up in the small town of Newton Grove.

That summer Jim had taught Bas more than how to handle a hammer and nails. He’d taught him about self-respect, discipline and responsibility. Bas had returned home to Charlotte at the end of the summer a different person, ready to go back to college and work with his brothers alongside their father and uncle at the Steele Corporation.

“How did he die?”

“Who’s the letter from?”

“What else does it say?”

Bas sighed. His brothers’ questions were coming to him all at once. “Jim died of pancreatic cancer. The letter is from his attorney and it says that Jim left me part of his company.”

“The construction company?”

“Yes. I have a fourth and his younger daughter has a fourth. His older daughter gets half.”

Bas had never met Jim’s two daughters, Jocelyn and Leah, since they had been in Florida visiting an aunt all that summer, but he knew that the man had loved his girls tremendously and that they had held Jim’s life together after his wife had died.

Bas quickly read a note that was included in the attorney’s letter. Afterwards, he met his brothers’ curious stare and said warily, “Jim wrote me a note.”

“What does he want you to do?” Chance asked.

“He was concerned that his older daughter, Jocelyn, would have a hard time managing the construction company by herself, but would be too proud to ask for help. He wants me to step in for a while and make sure things continue to run smoothly and be there for her if she runs into a bind or anything.”

“That’s a lot to ask of you, isn’t it?” Donovan asked quietly.

Bas shook his head. “Not when I think about what Jim did for me that summer.”

For a long moment the room was quiet and then Morgan said, “Talk about perfect timing. At least now you know what you’ll be doing for the next three months.”

Bas met the gazes of his three brothers. “Yes, it most certainly looks that way, doesn’t it?”
Chapter 1

“A and there’s absolutely nothing that can be done to overturn Dad’s request, Jason?”

Jason Kilgore wiped the sweat from his brow. Over the years his office had survived many things. There’d been that fist fight between a couple who’d been married less than five minutes, and that throwing match between two land owners who couldn’t agree on the location of the boundary lines that separated their properties.

But nothing, Jason quickly concluded, would remotely compare if Jocelyn Mason took a mind to show how mad she was. Oh, she was pretty upset; there was no doubt about it. She had already worn a path in his carpet and the toe of her booted foot seemed to give the bottom of his wingback chair an unconscious kick each time she passed it.

“There isn’t anything you can do other than to offer to buy out your sister and Mr. Steele,” he finally said.

“Have you spoken to Leah about it?”

“No.”

Jason knew that in itself said it all. Jocelyn and Leah had always been as different as night and day. Jocelyn, at twenty-seven, was the oldest by four years and had always been considered a caregiver, someone who was quick to place everyone else’s needs before her own. She also believed in taking time out and having fun, which was why her name always came up to spearhead different committees around town.

Responsible Jocelyn eventually became the son Jim Mason never had, although he had tried to balance that fact by sending her each summer to visit an aunt in Florida whose job was to train her how to comport herself like a lady. Jason had seen her dressed to the nines in satin and sequins at several social functions in town, and then on occasion, he would run into her in Home Depot wearing jeans and a flannel shirt with a construction work belt around her waist. Jocelyn had managed to play both roles—lady and builder—while working alongside her father in the family business, Mason Construction Company.

Then there was Leah.

Jason readily remembered Leah as being one rebellious teenager. After her mother had died when she’d turned thirteen, Leah had become a handful and had given Jim plenty of sleepless nights. She had hated living in Newton Grove and as soon as she turned eighteen, she couldn’t wait to leave home and abandon what she perceived as a dominating father, an overprotective and bossy older sister, and a boyfriend who evidently had been too country to suit her taste. Her return visits over the years had been short and as infrequent as possible. But she had come for the funeral and it was a surprise to everyone that she hadn’t left town yet.

“Do you know of Leah’s plans? Do you think she’s going to stay?”

Jocelyn shrugged her shoulders. “Who knows? She’s welcome to stay as long as she wants. This is her home, too, although she’s never liked it here. You know that. But Leah is the least of my worries now since I believe I can buy her out. What I want to know is why Dad thought this Sebastian Steele deserved a fourth of the company.”

It was Jason’s turn to shrug. “I told you what your father said to me, Jocelyn. One summer this guy Steele worked for him. They became close, and leaving him a part of the company was a way to let Steele know how much your father thought of him.”

Jocelyn turned with fire in her eyes, placed her hands palm down on Jason’s desk and stared at him. “Why this Steele guy and not Reese? If anyone deserved a part of the company it’s Reese,” she said, speaking up for her father’s foreman.

Jason blew out a breath. Jocelyn had finally gone into a rant, and was definitely in fighting mode now. “He did leave Reese Singleton a substantial amount in his will,” Jason reminded her.

“Yes, but it wasn’t part of the company.”

“Jim had his reasons. He thought a lot of Reese and hoped the money he left him would set him up in his own business.”

Jocelyn knew her father’s reasoning. Although twenty-six-year-old Reese had worked as the foreman for Mason Construction for years, everyone in town knew of Reese’s gift with his hands. It was legendary what he could do with a block of wood, and her father always thought he was wasting his talent building houses instead of making furniture.

“Well, all your questions about Steele will be answered shortly,” Jason said, breaking into Jocelyn’s thoughts. “He’s due to show up any minute.”
Jocelyn sneered. “And I can’t wait for the illustrious Sebastian Steele to arrive.”
Jason loosened his tie a little. He didn’t envy the man one bit.

“Mr. Kilgore is expecting you, Mr. Steele. Just go right on in,” Jason Kilgore’s secretary said in a friendly
voice.
Bas returned the older woman’s smile. “Thanks.”
He opened the door and glanced first at the older man sitting behind the desk who stood when he entered. Then
out of the corner of his eye he saw that someone else was in the room and his gaze automatically shifted.
It was a woman and she didn’t look too happy. She was definitely a beauty, with a mass of shoulder-length
dark-brown curls that framed an oval honey-brown face with chocolate-brown eyes. Then there was the tantalizing
fragrance of her perfume that was drifting across the room to him.
“Mr. Steele, I’m glad you made it. Welcome to Newton Grove,” Jason Kilgore was saying.
Bas switched his attention from the woman and back to the man. “Thank you.”
“So you’re Sebastian Steele?”
Bas turned and met the woman’s frown. “Yes, I’m Sebastian Steele,” he answered smoothly. “And who are
you?” he asked, although he had an idea. He could see Jim’s likeness in her features, especially in the eyes. They
were dark, sharp and assessing.
She crossed the room to stand directly in front of him, in full view, and he thought that she looked even better
up close. She tipped her head, angled it back as if to get a real good look at his six-foot-three-inch form. And when
she finally got around to answering his question, her voice was as cool as a day on top of the Smoky Mountains, and
as unfriendly as a black bear encountering trespassers in his den.
“I’m Jocelyn Mason, and I want to know how you talked my father into leaving you a fourth of Mason
Construction.”

Jocelyn felt a tightness in her throat and couldn’t help but stare at the man standing in front of her. No man
should look this good, especially when he was someone she didn’t want to like. And that damn sexy cleft in his chin
really wasn’t helping matters. Standing tall, he had thick brows that were slanted to perfection over dark-brown eyes
that made you feel you were about to take a dive into a sea of scrumptious chocolate.
His cheeks were high with incredible dimples and his jaw was clearly defined in an angular shape. Then there
was his hair—black, cut low and neatly trimmed around his head. And his lean masculine body had broad shoulders,
the kind you would want to rest your head on.
Even with all those eye-catching qualities, there was just something captivating about him, something that
showed signs of more than just a handsome face. His look—even the one studying her intently—had caught her off
guard and she didn’t like the way her heart was pounding wildly against her ribs or the immediate attraction she felt
toward him.
Jocelyn took a quick reality check to put that attraction out of her mind and brought her thoughts back to the
business at hand—Mason Construction Company.
“Well, aren’t you going to answer, Mr. Steele?” she finally asked, her eyes narrowing fractionally. Inwardly
she congratulated herself for getting the words past the tightness in her throat without choking on them.
He lifted a brow and said, “Yes, but first I must say that I’m very pleased to meet you, Jocelyn, and please call
me Bas.” He extended his hand. The moment she placed hers in his he liked the feel of it. How could a woman who
worked in construction have such soft hands?
She pulled her hand away. “Now that we’ve dispensed with formalities, will you answer my question. Why did
my father leave you part of Mason Construction?”
He held her gaze. “What if I told you that I had nothing to do with it? Jim’s decision was as much a surprise to
me as it was to you and your sister.”
Jocelyn considered his words. Leah hadn’t been surprised. Nor had she been concerned. To Leah’s way of
thinking it had made perfect sense since she couldn’t imagine Jocelyn running the male-dominated company alone.
And as for Leah’s share of the company, she had no problem with Jocelyn buying her out. She had other plans for
her inheritance.
“Now that introductions have been made, can we all take a seat and get down to business?” Jason Kilgore said,
halting any further conversation between Jocelyn and Bas. “I’m sure Mr. Steele would like to check into Sadie’s
Bed and Breakfast in time to take advantage of whatever she’s fixed for lunch today. You know what a wonderful
cook Sadie is, Jocelyn.”
If Jocelyn did know she wasn’t saying, Bas noted as he took his seat next to her in front of Jason Kilgore’s
desk. Her mouth was set in a tight line and he could tell she wasn’t happy with his presence. Furious would
probably be a better word.
He continued to study her, her cute perky nose and beautifully shaped mouth. He’d always been a sucker for a woman with sensuously curved lips. They were kissable lips, the kind that could easily mold to his.
“I was explaining to Jocelyn before you arrived just what your function will be for the next couple of months, Mr. Steele.” Jason Kilgore yanked Bas out of his reverie.
“And I was telling Jason that I thought Dad got you involved prematurely,” Jocelyn quickly interjected.
“Do you?” Bas asked, noting just how dark her irises were.
“Yes. Dad taught me everything I know growing up and then he sent me to college to get a degree as a structural engineer. It was always meant for me to run the company.”
“And you think I’m standing in the way of you doing that?”
“For a short while, yes, and as I said, it’s all for nothing. When it comes to construction work, I can handle things.”

A dimple appeared in the corner of Bas’s mouth. For some reason he couldn’t imagine her on a construction site, wearing a hard hat and jeans and wielding a hammer and saw while standing anywhere near a steel beam.
“And you find all this amusing, Bas?”
In a way he did, but he’d cut out his tongue before admitting it to her. There was no need to get her any more riled up than she already was. “No, Jocelyn, I don’t.”
“Good, then I hope you’ll hear me out. I think it will save us a lot of time if you do.”
Bas nodded. “All right. I’m interested in whatever you have to say.”

“So, Bas, I hope you can see why you being here, keeping an eye on things, won’t work.”
Bas’s lips curved into a smile. Although she had spent the last twenty minutes stating her case, trying to explain why his services weren’t needed, he didn’t see any such thing.
He glanced over at Jason Kilgore. The man had stopped fighting sleep—or boredom, whichever the case—and was leaning back in his chair and dozing quietly. Unlike Kilgore, Bas had given Jocelyn his full attention. It was hard to do otherwise.

First she had paced in front of him a few times, as if she’d needed to collect her thoughts. He, on the other hand, had needed to rein in his. The sunlight filtering through Kilgore’s window had hit her at an angle that made her dark skin look creamier, her hair shinier and her lips even more tempting.
The woman had legs that seemed endless and the skirt she was wearing was perfect to show them off. Each time she paced the room, her hem would swish around those legs, making him appreciate his twenty-twenty vision. He loved what that skirt was doing for her small waist and curvy hips. And he couldn’t help but notice the gracefulfulness of her walk. Her strides were a perfect display of good posture in motion and the fluid precision of a body that was faultlessly aligned.
“Bas, are you listening to what I’m saying?”
He heard the frustration in her voice and with a sigh he leaned back in his chair. “Yes, but it changes nothing. Your father asked me to return a favor. I owe Jim big-time and I believe in paying back any debts.”
He knew his words weren’t what she wanted to hear and her expression didn’t hide that fact. “Mr. Steele, you are being difficult.”
He lifted a brow. Since she hadn’t gotten her way, it seemed he was Mr. Steele instead of Bas. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Jocelyn, but your father evidently felt the need for me to be here, otherwise he would not have added that stipulation in his will.”
“And what about your ownership in the company?”
“What about it?”
“I’d like to buy you out.”
That didn’t surprise him. “I’ll let you know my decision at the end of three months.”
“Three months? But you only have to be here for six weeks.”
He flicked a smile. “Your father’s will indicated six weeks as the minimum period of time. If I recall, there was no maximum time given.”

Anger shone in her features. “Surely you’re not going to hang around here for three months?”
“Hey, keep it up, Jocelyn and I’ll think you don’t want me hanging around at all.”
“I don’t.”
He shrugged. At least she was honest. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”
“I see that our talk today didn’t accomplish anything,” she said.
Oh, he wouldn’t go so far as to say that. Just watching her prance around Kilgore’s office had accomplished a lot.
“What about your own company?”
She almost snapped the words at him, reclaiming his attention. Not that she’d ever fully lost it. “What about the Steele Corporation?” he countered.

“Shouldn’t that be your main concern?”
He wished. “I left the company in good hands. My three brothers and my cousin know what they’re doing,” he said, thinking about Chance, Morgan and Donovan, as well as his cousin Vanessa, who handled public relations for the company. His other two cousins, Taylor and Cheyenne, pursued careers outside of the family business, although they served on Steele Corporation’s board of directors.

“Besides,” he decided to add, “it’s time for me to take a vacation anyway.” There was no need to elaborate on the fact that it was a forced one.

“By the time this is over, Mr. Steele, you’re going to wish you had gone to Disney World instead.”

“Possibly, but I’ll take my chances. And what about your sister?” he decided to ask her. From her expression he knew immediately he’d hit a nerve.

She frowned. “What about her?”

“Are you buying her out?”

“Yes. She’s never liked this town and I’m surprised she’s still here. I expected her to return to California right after Dad’s funeral.”

He nodded. “After I get checked in at Sadie’s Bed and Breakfast, I want to go over to the office and look around.”

“I wish you’d consider my offer,” she said.

“I can’t do that.”

Her eyes darkened. “In the end you’re going to wish you had.”

He stood, and when he took a couple of slow steps toward her, she had the good sense to take a couple of steps back. “I intend to carry out your father’s request. That said, I think it will be in our best interest if we got along.”

She glared at him. “I don’t see that happening.”

A tight smile spread across his face. “Maybe I should have told you that I like challenges, Jocelyn.”
Bas parked his car in front of Sadie’s Bed and Breakfast and glanced around. He certainly hadn’t expected this, all the changes that had taken place in Newton Grove since he’d last been here fourteen years ago.

It was still one of most beautiful, quaint towns he’d ever traveled to, but it no longer had that Mayberry look. He’d passed a Wal-Mart and Home Depot, certainly two things that hadn’t been here before. And the library had been given a face lift. But the drive-in theater appeared to still be intact, as well as the Newton Rail Station that provided a memorable excursion up into the Smoky Mountains.

And from what he saw it was still a favorite place with tourists, which meant the souvenir shops that formed a tight circle in the town square were still thriving. The county fair, which was always held the third weekend in August, was a major event and always brought enough excitement to last the townspeople until the fall festival in the middle of November. He smiled, remembering all the stories Jim had told about both events. Boy, had he enjoyed hearing them.

Bas got out of the car and shoved his keys into the pocket of his jeans, appreciating Jason Kilgore for making arrangements for him to have a place to stay while in town.

Just being back in Newton Grove was stirring memories of how closely he had worked with Jim that summer, the bond they’d made and the special friendship that had been forged. He took a moment to lean against the fender of his rented car and glanced around, reflecting. In his mind he could actually see Jim loading lumber into his pickup truck while preaching to Bas in that strong, firm, yet caring voice. He’d told him the importance of a man being a man, about handling your responsibilities and taking advantage of every opportunity. The memory tugged at Bas’s heart, and emotions swamped him. They were emotions that Jim had effectively shown him that it was okay to possess.

Bas suddenly blinked when the sound of a car’s horn reclaimed his attention. Sighing deeply he went to the trunk to get out his luggage, thinking of his encounter with Jocelyn Mason. If the woman had her way he would be headed back to Charlotte by now. He could almost feel the daggers she had thrown in his back when he’d walked out of Kilgore’s office.

He sighed again and glanced up toward the sky. “Jim, old friend, I hope you knew what you were doing because I don’t think your daughter likes me very much.”

“Aren’t you that same young man who used to give us trouble?”

Sebastian glanced up from signing his name in Sadie’s Bed and Breakfast’s registration book and met the old woman’s eyes. Something hard and tight settled in the pit of his stomach. It was a reaction he got whenever anyone recalled his less-than-sterling past.

If she had been someone from Charlotte, he would have shamefully admitted to it. But he distinctly remembered being on good behavior that summer while living in Newton Grove. For that reason he stared at her and said, “No, ma’am, you must have me mistaken for someone else.”

Evidently she thought otherwise and her blue eyes sparked as she said, “No, I don’t think so. I might be old—I’m pushing seventy—but I have a fairly good memory about some things. You worked with Jim, as part of his construction business one summer, over thirteen or fourteen years ago.”

Bas’s stomach began feeling unsettled again. She certainly did have a good memory. “Yes, but I didn’t get into any trouble,” he said defensively.

The old woman laughed. “Not any of your own making, trust me. But whenever you worked outside at a construction site on those extremely hot days, you drew an audience every time you took off your shirt.”

She barked out another laugh and continued. “Yeah, I do remember that summer. You had all the young women acting like silly fools whenever they could take a peek at you. And I remember Marcella all but salivating whenever she saw you.”

She studied him for a moment then said, “I understand you’re going to be helping out at Mason’s Construction again.”

He took his Visa card out of his wallet to hand to her. News traveled fast in small towns. “Yes, ma’am, I am.”

“I’m glad you saw fit to come help Jocelyn for a while now that Jim’s gone. Lord knows she wouldn’t ask for it, even if she needed it,” Sadie went on to say. “And I’m curious as to what Leah’s going to do. I expected her to
leave town right after the funeral.”

Bas put his charge card back into his wallet after she returned it to him. “She lives in California, right?”

“So we hear. Leah left here at eighteen. She hated this place, claimed Newton Grove was too small town for her. She wanted to see the world and headed to California.”

After a quick pause she added, “She broke Reese Singleton’s heart when she left. They’d been sweethearts. He’s a good man who didn’t deserve what she did to him. You’ll get to know Reese rather well over the coming months.”

Bas leaned against the counter. “I will?”

“Yes, he’s the foreman at Mason Construction. But he might not be there for too much longer.”

Bas lifted a brow. “Why not?”

“Because he’s better suited as a carpenter than a builder, and I heard that Jim left him a bunch of money to start his own business.”

Bas turned to follow Sadie up the stairs to his room. Once he got settled he would check out what was happening over at Mason Construction.

The nail was taking a beating as Jocelyn hammered it relentlessly into the wood. A part of her wished it was Sebastian Steele’s head.

If there was one thing she didn’t need it was aggravation, and the man had gotten next to her like nobody’s business. The nerve of him, thinking he could just waltz in and take over. Mason Construction was now hers and she would run things the way she saw fit, regardless of what he had to say.

It wasn’t as though she didn’t know what she was doing. Heck, she’d been reading blueprints practically since she could walk. Growing up, she’d spent hours at every job site with her father, learning each aspect of a builder’s trade, from the ordering of the supplies to the overseeing of each structural design. While many construction workers had their specialties, Jocelyn was truly a jack-of-all-trades. She handled a paintbrush just as expertly as any artist; she could fit a pipe together as well as any master plumber, and she worked with brick, stone, concrete block and structural tile with the skill of an accomplished mason. For years she had worked alongside her dad and his crew as a fill-in, doing whatever task was needed and learning just about everything she could, before school, after school, weekends, whenever. She practically lived at Mason Construction except for those summer months when Jim Mason would ship her and Leah off to Aunt Susan in Florida.

Their mother’s sister was as refined and proper as the words could get, and had been determined to pass those characteristics on to her nieces no matter how much they’d balked at the idea. After a while, Jocelyn and Leah discovered it was easier to just go with the flow and accept all the lacy, frilly dresses, the tea parties and the countless hours of walking with a book on their heads to perfect that graceful walk.

Now that she was a grown woman, Jocelyn appreciated her aunt’s teachings and guidance to a degree she’d never thought would be possible as a young girl. She was glad she’d had the chance to express her gratitude to Aunt Susan before she died a few years ago. Jocelyn thought about the deaths of the three people who’d meant a lot to her —her mother when she’d turned sixteen; her Aunt Susan around six years ago and now her dad.

“If you keep beating that nail to death you’ll whack it all the way through and bust up that board. Who ruffled your feathers today?”

Expelling a deep breath and clutching the hammer more tightly in her hand, Jocelyn decided Reese was right. There was no reason to take out her anger and frustration on a piece of wood.

She glanced up at him and knew he was waiting for an answer. It hadn’t taken much for the men who worked for her to tell she was in a relatively foul mood, which is the reason they had been avoiding her. Reese had been at lunch when she’d arrived. Evidently the guys hadn’t wasted any time giving him fair warning. Too bad all those deeply ingrained proper manners and stiff rules Aunt Susan had taught her weren’t working for her today, especially the one about a lady not letting a man get on her last nerve, at least not to the point of showing it. A lady kept her cool and handled a man with charm and diplomatic grace.

Today, thanks to Sebastian Steele, all she could say to that notion was hogwash!

After leaving Jason’s office she had gone home long enough to change into her work clothes, then joined the men at this particular jobsite. The only reason she hadn’t been here at the crack of dawn like they had was because the mayor had requested her presence at a meeting in his office at eight. He liked being kept abreast of the plans for the city’s Founder’s Day Celebration next month, and since she was this year’s chairperson, she had brought him up to date over bagels and coffee. And then there had been that ten o’clock meeting in Jason’s office, the one she wished she could delete from her mind.

Jocelyn put the hammer down, deciding at the moment it was rather dangerous in her hand. “If you must know, Sebastian Steele is the person who ruffled my feathers. He has to be the most infuriating man I’ve ever met.”
Reese smirked at her. “In other words, he wouldn’t let you have your way with anything.”

Jocelyn picked up the hammer again and hit it a couple of times in the palm of her hand. “You like your face, Reese?”

He grinned. “Yeah, I like my face, considering it’s the only one I got.”

And Jocelyn knew all the local girls thought it was a rather good-looking face, making him the most sought-after bachelor in town. But he was also the most elusive. She’d known Reese for six years, ever since his family had moved to Tennessee from Alabama when Reese was nineteen. The first time he’d seen her and Leah together out at the county fair, he had decided the then seventeen-year-old Leah, who was about to become a senior in high school, would one day be his wife. He was convinced he could erase the thought from Leah’s mind of ever moving away from Newton Grove.

He’d been wrong and had gotten a broken heart to prove it.

“Well, if you like it so much, then knock it off. I’m not in a teasing mood.”

“So I gather. Hey, this Steele guy can’t be all bad since Jim thought enough of him to leave him part of the company.”

Jocelyn frowned, narrowed her eyes, preferring not to be reminded of that. “Just because Dad liked him doesn’t mean that I have to like him, too.”

“No, but still I’d think you’d respect your father’s wishes and try to make things work.”

Jocelyn started hitting the hammer in the palm of her hand again. “You’re really making me mad. Don’t you have something to do?”

Reese grinned. “Yeah, but I thought I’d come over here to make sure you’ll be more help than a hindrance today. You know how I feel about going behind you and—”

Oh, that did it! He had really pushed her the wrong way, and just from the smile on his face she knew he was enjoying every single minute of getting her riled. She shot him a dark look. “Okay, just wait until you have to follow Steele’s orders and see how much you like it.”

Reese leaned against a window casement. “I don’t mind following orders as long as they’re solid and sound. And like I said Jim evidently trusted this man’s judgment or he wouldn’t be here.”

“And it doesn’t bother you that Dad didn’t leave you a part of the company?”

The smile on Reese’s face suddenly disappeared and he said in a quiet tone. “The only thing I ever wanted from your father was his baby girl. But that’s history. Some days I wish I had never laid eyes on Leah.”

Jocelyn nodded, understanding his feelings completely. Because of the four-year gap in their ages and the differences in their personalities, she and Leah hadn’t been particularly close while growing up and she could never understand how her sister could walk away from a man who loved her as much as Reese had.

She waited, knowing Reese had more to say. For years he had kept his battered feelings locked inside, refusing to talk to anyone, even her father, about Leah and the hurt she’d caused him. But they’d known and accepted that the main reason Reese had joined the army within months of Leah’s departure was to get away for a while. And he’d stayed away for two years.

“And why is she still hanging around? When is she returning to California?” he asked, with deep bitterness in his voice.

Jocelyn asked herself those same questions every morning when she awoke to find her sister still there. It wouldn’t surprise her if Leah left during the night without saying goodbye. That was how she’d done it the first time. Her father had been devastated, Reese heartbroken and Jocelyn left wondering if she could have done something, anything, to improve their relationship while growing up, if she should have been less overprotective and smothering as Leah had claimed.

“I don’t know why she’s still here, Reese. A part of me would like to think she’s finally decided to come home to stay, but I won’t get my hopes up wishing for that one.”

“And I’m hoping for just the opposite. I wish she would leave and go back to wherever the hell she’s been for the past five years.”

Jocelyn felt Reese’s pain and a part of her knew that even after all these years, he hadn’t gotten over what Leah had done to him.

“Hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

Jocelyn swirled around and her gaze collided with Sebastian Steele. She was surprised to see him, but should have known he would show up sooner or later. Her eyes narrowed. “Yes, your very presence is interrupting everything.”

And with nothing else to say, she walked off.

No woman, Bas quickly decided as he watched Jocelyn cross the floor into what would be a master bedroom,
should look that good in a pair of jeans. He scrubbed one hand across his jaw, pondering that phenomenon, as he
continued to stare at her. He had found her utterly attractive earlier that day in a skirt and blouse, but seeing her
dressed in work wear was having a more potent effect on him.

Well-worn jeans clung to her body like another layer of skin, but then gave a little with each step she took,
providing a comfortable fit. Then there was her T-shirt, the one that boldly advertised Mason Construction across
her chest, that made him appreciate, as he always did, a woman with a nice set of breasts.

The work boots and the bandana she wore around her head did nothing to detract from her femininity, and he
had to concede that no matter what kind of clothes Jocelyn Mason wore, she was one of the sexiest-looking women
he’d ever seen.

“I gather you’re Sebastian Steele.”

The man’s words pulled Bas’s attention back into focus and he shot him a curious glance. He had seen Jocelyn
talking to him when he’d arrived, and the conversation had seemed pretty tense. Did the two of them have
something going on more personal than business? “Yes, I’m Sebastian Steele.”

The man studied him a moment and then said, “And I’m Reese Singleton, Mason Construction’s foreman.”

Bas remembered the name and everything Sadie had scooped him on earlier that day. This was the man who
had gotten his heart broken by the other Mason female. He offered his hand. “Nice meeting you.”

“The same here. I heard a lot about you from Jim.”

“All good I hope,” Bas said, returning his gaze to Jocelyn. He could tell from her body language that she was
mad, from the way she was slapping the paintbrush against that wall as if she was brandishing a sword instead.

“She’ll be fine. Jocelyn has a tendency not to stay mad for long.”

Bas switched his gaze off Jocelyn and back to the man standing beside him—someone whose presence he had
momentarily forgotten. Reese was grinning, his dark eyes flashing amusement behind the lenses of his safety
glasses. “Is that right?” Bas asked, not liking the fact that Reese thought he knew Jocelyn so well.

“Yes, that’s right,” Reese said, hooking a thumb beneath his tool belt and leaning back against a solid wall.
“I’ve known Jocelyn for almost six years now and her bark is worse than her bite. She’s upset that her dad left you
in charge of things for a while, and also that you got part of a company she felt was rightfully hers. But like I said,
she’ll get over it.”

He studied the younger man and suddenly felt something he usually didn’t experience with men other than his
brothers—trust. For some reason, though, Bas knew that Reese Singleton was a man who could be trusted.

“I hope she gets over it because I have a job to do, one Jim left for me, and whether I want it or not, I plan to
see it through. I owe him that much and more.”

“Me, too,” Reese said, following Bas’s gaze as it moved to Jocelyn once more. “My family moved to the area
when I was nineteen. I worked for Jim in the day and took college classes at the university at night. He replaced the
father I lost at sixteen. He was my voice of reason when I didn’t have one, my mentor and a good friend. At one
point he stopped me from making a grave mistake, one that could have cost me my life.”

Bas nodded. It sounded as if at one point he and Reese had been tortured by similar inner demons and in both
situations it had been Jim who had helped to take them out of the dark and lead them into the light.

“How about if I introduce you to everyone?” Reese said, breaking into Bas’s thoughts. “The sooner you know
what’s going on, the better. Right now everything’s running smoothly but we can’t expect things to stay that way
since this is Marcella Jones’s house we’re presently working on and she’s known to change her mind a lot. This is
the third house we’ve built for her and her husband, and with this place she decided almost at the last minute that she
wanted to add a huge lanai off her living room and bedroom. If nothing else changes, we’ll be wrapping up things
here in about three weeks.”

“Thanks and yes, I’d like to meet everyone.”

Bas glanced around as they made their way over to a group of men who were working on the cooking island
that was part of the summer kitchen. Marcella Jones wasn’t just getting a glass-enclosed lanai; she was getting a
huge area that would be well suited for any and all her entertainment needs. He had to admit he liked the layout of
the house and had admired each and every detail while passing through earlier.

The open-beam cathedral ceilings and the floor-to-ceiling windows would make the home light and airy, and
provide a full mountain view no matter where you looked. In his mind he could see the finished product decorated
with the finest of furnishings and beautiful art work.

Bas glanced over at Jocelyn and caught her staring at him. In that quick instance, something passed between
them, and he felt it all the way to his gut. He frowned and told himself silently that the last thing he needed was to
get interested in any woman, especially Jim’s oldest daughter, no matter how tempting she was.

He had a job to do and he needed to get his mind on doing it and not on doing Jocelyn Mason.
Jocelyn swallowed back the knot that threatened to block her throat. Why did Sebastian Steele have to look so damn good? And those jeans he had on weren’t helping matters one bit.

She gritted her teeth, wondering why she found him so attractive, then quickly decided his good looks and well-built body definitely had something to do with it. She jumped when she felt the mobile phone in her back pocket vibrate. Putting aside the paintbrush, she pulled the phone out. A quick check of the caller ID indicated it was Leah.

For the past five days, ever since the funeral, her sister had mostly spent her time going through their father’s belongings and packing things up to give away. At first they had started doing the task together and then the memories had gotten too much for Jocelyn and she’d asked Leah to finish without her. Her sister had agreed. That was the one thing Jocelyn noticed about Leah since she’d been back. She was a lot more agreeable and less argumentative these days. There was a time when the two of them would disagree about almost anything, including the weather.

“Yes, Leah?”

“Just wanted you to know I cooked dinner and I thought it would be nice if we invited a guest.”

Jocelyn moved her shoulders in a nonchalant shrug. She definitely didn’t have a problem with Leah preparing dinner since her sister was a pretty good cook, but she did have a problem with the suggestion of a guest. She couldn’t help wondering if Leah was finally going to come out of hiding and face Reese by inviting him to dinner. She had done a pretty good job of avoiding him the few times she’d returned home over the past five years.

“And just who will this dinner guest be?” she asked, curious as to how many languages Reese would say the word “hell no” in when he got the invitation from Leah.

“Jason called for you a short while ago and happened to mention that Mr. Steele arrived in town today.”

“And what of it?” Jocelyn asked, leaning back against a wall she hadn’t started painting yet.

“I think it would be a good idea to invite him to dinner. After all, he was Dad’s friend.”

“But that doesn’t make him ours,” she snapped, looking down at the hammer she had placed at her feet. She then glanced across the room at Bas. It was a tempting thought but she quickly decided that nothing and no one was worth going to jail.

“But I want to meet him. Aren’t you curious?”

Jocelyn rolled her eyes. “I’ve met him and prefer not spending unnecessary time in his company.”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Earlier today at Jason’s office.”

“Well, what do you think of him?”

Jocelyn glanced back across the room. Bas was staring at her and it annoyed her that she felt a quick tightening in her stomach. She wished she could blame it on something like indigestion but knew she couldn’t. “There’s no way I could sum up what I think of him in twenty-five words or less.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

Jocelyn couldn’t help but smile. Now this was the Leah she was used to, someone always ready for a fight, and not the mousy person Jocelyn had picked up from the airport a couple of days before the funeral.

“Well, then,” Jocelyn decided to say, “how about infuriating, maddening, annoying, irritating, exasperating, galling—”

“Okay, okay, I get the picture, at least yours. I’d rather take my own snapshot and form my own opinion.”

“Fine, then count me out.”

“Aren’t you being a little immature?”

That did it. Taking a slow, steadying breath, Jocelyn walked around the wall into a bathroom whose fixtures had yet to arrive. What she had to say to her sister needed to be said in private.

Closing the door behind her, she braced herself against the area where the pedestal sink would be and said rather heatedly, “How can you of all people fix your mouth to call anyone immature, Leah? I’m not the one who acted like a spoiled, immature brat by up and leaving home without as much as a goodbye, leaving her family worried for over a week before we finally heard from her.”

Jocelyn knew now was not the time and place to unload feelings she’d held inside for years, but she’d done it and there was no way she could take back her words. Nor did she want to.

There was silence on the other end, and then Leah said in a somewhat quiet and unsteady voice, “There was a reason I left the way I did, Jocelyn, and maybe it’s time I tell you why. At least that’s what I’ve been told I should do.”

Jocelyn felt an uncomfortable feeling in the center of her stomach. “Told by whom?”
“Look, I’ll tell you everything when I’m able to talk about it, okay? Now getting back to Sebastian Steele, be
forewarned. I do intend to invite him to dinner before I leave, Jocelyn.”

“Leave? When are you leaving?” That uncomfortable feeling about being deserted by those she cared about
was becoming unnerving. She lifted a hand to her chest, feeling a tug at her heart at the thought that she was losing
her sister again, so soon after losing her father.

“I don’t know, but I won’t leave without telling you. I promise.”

Before she could say anything, Jocelyn heard the gentle click in her ear. She took a deep breath. Her palms
suddenly felt sweaty and she rubbed them against her jeans after returning the mobile phone to her back pocket. She
had a feeling something was going on with Leah. But what?

She swung around when she heard the bathroom door swing open and her gaze collided with that of Sebastian
Steele. She narrowed her eyes, madder than hell. “Don’t you believe in knocking?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders as he leaned in the doorway. “I figured you couldn’t be doing anything too
private in here without any fixtures.”

He was right, of course, but still. “Any closed door is an indication that a knock is warranted before entering,”
she retorted.

He shook his head. “Save your rules for another time. We need to talk.”

“We have nothing to discuss.”

She made a move to walk past him when he said, “Reese just let Manuel go on my recommendation.”

She stopped and swung around to him, nearly all in his face. “What?” she almost shouted at the top of her
lungs, not caring that her high-pitched voice didn’t at all sound professional. “Manuel’s the best and most
dependable worker I have.”

“Sorry, but you’re going to have to find someone to replace him.”

Jocelyn suddenly saw red, blood-red, and she fought the urge to go find her hammer and start knocking a few
heads. First Bas’s and then Reese’s. She couldn’t believe Reese had meekly followed Bas’s orders without first
consulting her. “How dare you think you can come in here and—”

“He’s an illegal immigrant.”

Jocelyn’s mouth snapped shut and her gaze widened as if she’d been slapped by Bas’s words. Impossible was
the first word that came into her mind. Manuel had worked for her father for almost a year. There was no way Jim
Mason would have broken the law by hiring an illegal immigrant. “I don’t believe you. We have his citizenship
papers on file at the office.”

Bas then said easily, “Any papers you have are bogus. When I asked to see his green card, which is the same
thing an inspector would have done had he shown up here, he got nervous and confessed the truth.”

Jocelyn couldn’t believe it. She didn’t want to believe it. She shuddered at the thought of what would have
happened if Duran Law had shown up. He was still plenty pissed about her continued refusal to go out with him. It
seemed each time she’d turned him down his pride had gotten crushed. He would just love to hit her with a stiff fine
and make her life miserable.

“And how did you know? I’m sure Manuel wasn’t wearing a painted sign on his forehead,” she all but snapped.
A part of her was grateful Bas had saved her from possible misery under Duran’s hands, but another part of her
resented that he had discovered something she hadn’t.

“I picked up on his nervousness when Reese introduced us. Trust me, in my line of work at the Steele
Corporation, I’m faced with this fairly often enough. I wished there was a way around it but the law is the law.”

She glared at him. “I know the law, Bas, and I don’t have to trust you. But still, I appreciate you finding out
about Manuel before I was faced with repercussions that I don’t want or need. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. I was merely doing one of the things Jim brought me here to do.”

And that was what bothered Jocelyn the most, knowing her father actually had brought him here and hadn’t
bothered to tell her. Jim Mason had been talking and in his right mind up to forty-eight hours before he’d died. Her
father of all people knew that she didn’t like surprises and should have told her about Bas.

“Fine,” she said and began walking, annoyed when he automatically fell in place beside her. “That’s a point for
you. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to speak with my crew.”

“They aren’t here.”

She stopped and stared at him as though he’d lost his mind. She quickly rounded the wall and looked around.
“Where are they? It’s only three o’clock. There’s another hour of work time left.”

Bas leaned back against an unpainted wall and crossed his arms over his chest. “I gave them the rest of the day
off.”

Jocelyn’s mouth dropped. She wondered why it hadn’t just fallen to the floor with his statement. “What do you
mean you gave them the rest of the day off?”
“You would have done the same thing. Manuel has worked with these guys for almost a year. They’re like family. All of them were shocked that he’s in this country illegally, but they still felt bad that he won’t be working with them any longer. They like him.”

Jocelyn inhaled deeply. Bas was right. Now that she thought about it, she would have done the exact same thing. “What’s going to happen to Manuel? He has a family. A wife and child.”

“Yes, and he also admitted to receiving public assistance benefits, public education for his son, public housing and other taxpayer-funded benefits over the past year without being detected.”


“Just stating the facts, ma’am. And something else you need to remember is that illegal immigration in this country is a crime that extends to anyone giving them a job.”

“I know that, and I’m sure Dad didn’t know he was an illegal. Like I said, Manuel’s papers looked legit.”

“I’m sure Jim didn’t know. As for what will happen to Manuel, I have a feeling he’ll be moving his family again. I agreed not to turn him in to the authorities.”

Despite herself, she appreciated him for that. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

For a long moment neither said anything else, but Jocelyn felt it just as clearly as if it was something tangible that she could reach out and touch. It was there, that same damn attraction she had felt from the first moment when her gaze had collided with his in Jason’s office. It was the same attraction that was there each time she’d stopped pacing on Jason’s carpeted floor and found him staring at her with those intense dark eyes of his.

And it was there now as he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, his head cocked to the side as if taking in the full view of her. A little more than a few feet separated them and whether she wanted to or not, she could feel his heat, and even at the distance she stood she could actually feel the warmth of his breath on her lips, coaxing her own to draw in his heat, mingle in his taste.

She inhaled deeply, thinking she must be losing her mind. She didn’t want to be attracted to the man who owned a fourth of her company. The man who would be a pain in the butt for the next few months.

A man who had her stomach sizzling and intense heat gathering between her legs.

Drawing in another deep breath, she took a step back, started to move past him and stopped when he reached out and grabbed her wrist, gently pulling her closer, bringing her toe to toe, body to body.

“And another thing,” he said huskily, before reaching out and lifting his hand to the knot in the scarf on her head. “I understand that on occasion you’ll wear a hard hat or a scarf like this when there might be a lot of dust in the air. But just so you’ll know, I really like seeing your head uncovered.” And with that, he expertly took off her scarf, which made her curly locks tumble to her shoulders. And, as if he was satisfied with what he’d done, he then handed the scarf to her.

She balled it in her hand, crushed it while wishing it was his neck. Tilting her head, she glared at him. “I don’t care what you like.”

“Then maybe you should,” he said, leaning in close, bringing his lips within a breathless inch. He smiled. “You have some temper and whenever I see you mad it makes me want to taste your anger.”

_Taste her anger?_ What he said didn’t make sense because she didn’t have a temper…at least not normally. Typically, it took a lot to make her mad. But she had to admit that for some reason he seemed to bring out the worst in her. When she opened her mouth to state that fact, he inched even closer and was within a heartbeat of closing his mouth over hers when the sound of a car door slamming had them quickly moving apart.

Jocelyn was grateful for the timely interruption before anything could happen. Something they would both regret.

“That’s probably Marcella coming to check on today’s work…as well as to make more changes. Goodbye, Bas,” she said, moving swiftly past him and walking as fast as her legs could carry her.
An entire week later, Jocelyn was still thinking about how close her and Bas’s lips had come to touching. It would only have been a kiss, she’d tried telling herself over and over again. No big deal, she’d locked lips with other men before, although she could count on one hand the times she had done so.

Still, it annoyed her to no end that even after a week she could feel every muscle of Bas’s body that had been pressed against hers. Then there had been his mouth, close, hot, ready. She could only imagine the taste of it. Her heart beat wildly in her chest at the mere thought. If Marcella hadn’t shown up when she had, there was no doubt in Jocelyn’s mind that they would have kissed.

Bas’s face had been close to hers, breathing in her scent the same way she’d been breathing in his. Never had any man gotten absorbed in her senses so quickly the way Sebastian Steele had. And then it seemed that once Marcella arrived he had vanished into thin air, leaving the job site by way of the back entrance, making her wonder if the entire thing had been real.

She had tried to avoid him, knowing he was spending time at the office going through files and records. She had no idea what he was looking for, but as long as he stayed out of her way that was fine. Twice she had seen him when she had stopped by the office to sign some papers. He had been so wrapped up in what he’d been reading that he’d barely acknowledged her presence, and she’d barely acknowledged his.

“That pork chop is already dead, Jocelyn. There’s no need to keep stabbing it to death.”

Jocelyn snatched up her head and met Leah’s gaze. Jocelyn had been so wrapped up in her thoughts that she had completely forgotten her sister was sitting across from her. They hadn’t exchanged a lot of conversation during dinner and eventually their dialogue had drifted to a dead end.

Leah was nervous, Jocelyn could tell. If she had been stabbing at her pork chop for the past few minutes, then Leah had been guilty of nervously nipping at her lips, an old habit when she knew she was about to get into trouble. Evidently Leah had something on her mind, something serious. Jocelyn wondered if her sister was ready to explain why she’d left home so abruptly. The explanation was five years too late, but then, better late than never.

She decided to go ahead and get the conversation started. “Last week you said you wanted to tell me something when you felt you could talk about it. Can you talk about it now?” Jocelyn asked, after taking a bite of her pork chop and savoring the taste. Evidently Leah had kept up her cooking skills during the five years she’d been away.

Whenever she’d come home—which had only been twice in five years—she’d only stayed for a couple days, as if passing through, and she never talked about why she had left Newton Grove or what she was doing in California. The only thing she would say was that she was fine and making it; she refused any money they offered her.

“Yes, I can talk about it now, but first tell me about Sebastian Steele. You haven’t mentioned him at all this week.”

Leah’s request caught Jocelyn off guard and she had to fight not to choke on the piece of pork she was chewing. She quickly picked up a glass of water to wash it down. She had to be careful, very careful, not to give anything away, like the fact she found him so damn attractive and that they had almost kissed.

“I haven’t had any reason to talk about him. He spends his days over at the office and I spend my time over at the job site. I haven’t seen him much and that’s the way I like it,” she said.

At the lifting of Leah’s brow it occurred to Jocelyn she really hadn’t answered her sister’s question. “All right, what is it that you want to know?”

“Well, when you talked about him he didn’t seem like a nice person, which makes me wonder about his relationship with Dad. Why would Dad strike up a friendship with such a man as Sebastian Steele?”

Jocelyn could understand Leah’s concern. She also knew it wasn’t fair for her to portray Bas as a totally awful person. His handling of the Manuel situation had proven him quite the contrary, and had certainly earned him Reese’s and the men’s respect. He could have easily called the authorities and had Manuel arrested but he hadn’t, and according to what she’d heard after talking to Reese later, Bas had even gone so far as to suggest that Mason Construction advance Manuel a full month’s salary in recognition of his hard work and dependability.

Although it would be a lot of effort on her part, considering her dislike of Bas, she needed to convince Leah that even though she didn’t know the full story, Bas was probably just the type of person her father would hook up with.

She leaned back in her chair and smiled. “I might have gone a little overboard in my description of him
earlier,” she finally said. “I was upset about the situation Dad placed me in with Mr. Steele and I immediately formed my own opinions of him. In the first few hours of our meeting I refused to consider that I might like him.”

“And do you like him?” Leah asked, taking a sip of her tea and watching her sister closely.

Jocelyn reached for another dinner roll. “To say I like him would be stretching it a bit since I don’t really know the man,” she said honestly. “Let’s just say I can tolerate him.”

“How long does he have to hang around and supervise?”

“Dad’s will indicated a minimum of at least six weeks. But Bas mentioned he would be around for at least three months.”

“Bas?”

Jocelyn glanced up and saw the curious light shining in Leah’s eyes and decided to put it out. She didn’t want her sister getting any ideas about her relationship with Sebastian Steele. “Yes, Bas is what he prefers to be called. It’s short for Sebastian.”

“Oh, I see.” After a few moments Leah added, “I’m glad you’ll be able to work with him, Jocelyn. And like I told you, I don’t want my share of the business, so the sooner you can buy me out the better. I have plans for what I’m going to do with my money.”

Although Jocelyn knew she didn’t have any right asking, she couldn’t help herself. “And what do you plan to do with it?”

To her surprise, Leah smiled and Jocelyn could see excitement shining in her dark-brown eyes. “I plan to open my own restaurant. For the past five years, I’ve been working as a cook while taking classes at a culinary school in San Diego to perfect the basics.”

Jocelyn opened her mouth in astonishment. Leah had been working as a cook all this time? She didn’t want to admit some of the things she’d wondered about what her sister was doing to stay alive. It had always been Leah’s dream to hit California by storm and become a model. Jocelyn had heard just how unscrupulous some modeling agencies could be and had hoped and prayed that Leah hadn’t gotten mixed up with one of them.

“What happened with your dream to become a model?” Everyone knew it had been Leah’s aspiration. Everyone except for Reese. Oh, sure he’d known it, but he had counted on his love for her and her love for him changing her mind.

Jocelyn watched as Leah began nervously nipping at her lips again. “I’d changed my mind about that before I even left here.”

Jocelyn frowned. Now she was confused. “Then why did you leave the way you did? If you wanted to become a cook you could have moved somewhere close by. There are a lot of good restaurants in Memphis and I’m sure Reese would have understood. Hell, considering how much he loved you, he probably would have moved there with you. The two of you could have made things work, Leah.”

Jocelyn studied her sister, saw the tears that suddenly sprang into her eyes and knew she’d hit a sensitive nerve. “Yes, and believe it or not I had decided on doing just that and was going to suggest it to Reese, but…”

When Leah’s voice drifted off and the tears began pouring more freely, more abundantly, Jocelyn immediately got up and went to her sister, leaned down and hugged her. “But what, Leah?” she inquired softly. “If you had planned to hang around, why did you leave the way you did and without telling anyone you were leaving? Especially Reese?”

Leah shook her head, trying to regain her composure before she could speak. “Something happened, Jocelyn, and I couldn’t tell anyone. Especially not Dad or Reese. Not even you.”

Jocelyn heard the trembling in her sister’s voice and the strong conviction, as well. Whatever had happened was something Leah actually thought she could not have shared with anyone. She pulled back and met her sister’s intense, tear-filled eyes. “What happened, Leah?”

Leah hung her head for a moment, then when she lifted her gaze, Jocelyn saw in it tortured memories, recollections Leah didn’t want to relive but was being forced to. Jocelyn felt a warning chill slowly work its way up her spine and thought that nothing could have been bad enough to make her sister flee into the night the way she’d done.

Jocelyn’s hold on her sister tightened and she hoped she was giving Leah the strength to get out whatever it was she needed to say. When she felt Leah respond by holding tightly to her hand, she knew that she was. For the first time Leah was accepting all the smothering, the babying, the overprotectiveness she had refused from her for so many years.

“What happened, Leah?” Jocelyn inquired again, in an even softer tone of voice than before. “What happened to make you leave when you did?”

Leah opened her mouth to speak. Then paused. She slowly opened it again as she met her sister’s intense stare. “I was raped, Jocelyn. Neil Grunthall raped me.”
If Jocelyn had been standing upright instead of leaning over with her arms around Leah, she would have fallen to her knees. If not the words her sister had just spoken, then the pain and suffering she saw lining Leah’s face would have definitely knocked her there. For a moment she began trembling, or was it Leah? No, she was certain it was her and she was trembling in anger.

“Neil raped you?” As she heard herself saying the words, she was stunned that the no-good drifter their father had hired on that spring had gone so far.

“Yes,” Leah answered softly, “and please sit down. It’s time I tell you about that time.”

Jocelyn moved around the table, still clutching Leah’s hand in hers, not wanting to lose the connection, the closeness, the need to exchange strength. When Jocelyn returned to her seat, she braced herself against the chair, needing support. “All right, tell me everything.”

Leah lowered her head and whispered, “I doubt if I can, but I will tell you what you need to know, okay?”

At Jocelyn’s nod of understanding, Leah began talking. “You know Reese and Neil never got along. Everyone wondered why Dad even hired Neil because he was nothing but a drifter and he was always causing trouble. Well, Dad finally fired him but I didn’t know it. Late that same afternoon I went to the construction site looking for Reese. I wanted to tell him that I had decided to accept his marriage proposal and wouldn’t be moving to California after all.”

A tear fell down Leah’s cheek, joining the others. “I arrived at the job site, thinking the work crew was supposed to be there, working on Alyssa Calhoun’s home. Instead I found Neil there, gathering up his stuff. I didn’t know Dad had fired him just a few hours earlier. Neil claimed Reese was downstairs in the basement, finishing up something and stupid me, I went looking for him.”

Jocelyn felt her sister’s palms getting sweaty, but she held them tighter, refusing to let them escape her grasp. “And when he got me alone in the basement, he raped me and dared me to tell Dad or Reese. He said if I did he would deny it and convince Reese I went along with it.”

“Reese would never have believed him, Leah, you know that.”

“Yes, but nothing could erase the shame I felt after being taken like an animal on that floor. I felt humiliated, disgraced and dishonored. Reese had been the only man ever to touch me and I felt dirty and unworthy of him.”

“So instead of telling anyone what happened, you left town,” Jocelyn said, knowing that was exactly what her sister had done.

“Yes. If Reese had found out the truth, he would have killed Neil, if Dad didn’t get to him first. And I couldn’t let that happen. Neither could I stand the thought of going to the police, pressing charges and facing the humiliation of Neil claiming it wasn’t rape. You remembered what happened to Connie Miller when she claimed that one of the Banks boys raped her. She became the town’s spectacle and eventually she and her family left disgraced.”

Yes, Jocelyn remembered. Everyone had known that Ronnie Banks had done it, but the Bankses had had enough money to make Ronnie the victim instead of Connie.

“But it didn’t necessarily have to turn out that way for you, Leah,” Jocelyn said, though she clearly understood why her sister would have thought otherwise. Although Neil had been a drifter with no family ties to the area, it still would have been his word against hers. And with him being the troublemaker that he’d been, and with his intense dislike of Reese, he would have loved to make it seem that Leah had practically begged for it.

It was through sheer will that Jocelyn didn’t curse the ground the man was buried under. “If he weren’t already dead I would find him and kill him.”

Leah’s trembling hands went still at the same moment she sucked in a deep breath. “Neil Grunthall is dead?” she asked in a shocked voice.

Jocelyn lifted a brow. “Yes, didn’t you know? But then there was no way that you would have since you left town that same night. He left town drunk and drove to that tavern on the outskirts of town and got even drunker. It’s my understanding that he was speeding, hit a tree and was killed instantly.”

Leah hung her head and said softly, “I never knew that. The few times I came home I could never fix my lips to say his name to ever ask about him. It took me years just trying to deal with being a rape victim before admitting I needed help. I finally went to a victim assistance program and I discovered what I felt wasn’t unusual. A rape victim feels ashamed, weak and wounded, and unless they get help they will continue to feel that way. The program I got into has helped me to come to terms with what Neil did, but I have some ways to go before fully recovering. Even to this day I haven’t been able to let another man touch me intimately.”

“Oh, Leah,” Jocelyn said, tightening her hand around Leah’s. “You shouldn’t have gone through that alone. Even if you didn’t want to confide in Reese and Dad, then what about me? You could have come to me.”

Leah shook her head. “No, I couldn’t have, Jocelyn. You were the one who always did the right thing. You would have gone straight to Dad and told him what happened and I couldn’t risk you doing that. Neil was crazy and
there was no way I was going to tell Dad or Reese what he’d done.”

For a long moment neither of them said anything, and then Jocelyn quietly asked the question she needed to know. “Are you going to tell Reese?”

Leah met her sister’s intense stare and shook her head. “No. I still can’t stand the thought of Reese ever finding out what happened, Jocelyn, and I don’t want his pity. This is something I have to overcome in my own way and time. Like I told you earlier, I can’t stand the thought of a man touching me that way. I can barely tolerate the times I have to visit the doctor for my physicals. Besides, I hurt Reese in a way he would never forgive me for.”

“No, but if knew the truth about why you left, then he—”

“No, Jocelyn, I won’t tell him. It doesn’t matter now because I can’t ever be that way with a man again even if he did understand. So it doesn’t matter. I won’t tell him and I want you to promise me that you won’t ever tell him, either.”

Jocelyn turned her head and gazed out the window. She knew how much Leah leaving without a word had hurt Reese, so much, in fact, that he had left town for a couple of years to get over it. Once he had served time in the army he had returned, and barely ever mentioned Leah’s name. Jocelyn had been nervous as to what his reaction would be upon seeing Leah again at their father’s funeral. She had watched him, had studied his expression the exact moment Leah had walked into the church. Jocelyn had seen the pain and the hurt that was still there, that five years hadn’t fully erased.

“Jocelyn, you have to promise me.”

Jocelyn turned and met her sister’s pleading gaze. Then she remembered the reason Leah hadn’t come to her the night she’d been raped was that she’d known that no matter what, Jocelyn would have done the right thing and told her father anyway. There was no way she would have let Neil get away with hurting her sister.

And although she didn’t agree with what Leah was asking her to do, it was her sister’s decision to make, and she would do as she asked. “I promise. I won’t tell Reese, but I’m hoping that one day you will.”

There weren’t too many places to go in Newton Grove when you wanted to get away for a spell, but Jocelyn was determined to find one.

When she came to a traffic light she stopped and rubbed the bridge of her nose with her fingertips, recalling what Leah had shared with her at dinner. Each time she thought of her sister being powerless under the hands of Neil Grunthall, she literally felt sick to her stomach. And to think Leah had endured alone the humiliation of being raped.

She sighed, feeling tears sting her eyes. Now everything made sense and she felt angry with herself for not having known something hadn’t been right. Before she’d disappeared, Leah had stopped talking about leaving Newton Grove. In fact her relationship with Reese had grown that much more serious. But Leah hadn’t shared with Jocelyn her decision to marry Reese. If she had, then Jocelyn would have known for certain that something was wrong when she just up and left town.

After dinner she and Leah had tidied up the kitchen together, then, as if she’d needed to be alone, Leah had taken a shower and gone to bed early. Jocelyn had needed to go somewhere and take out her anger and frustration on someone, anyone, and for the past hour had been riding around town trying to cool down.

It was times like this that she missed her dad something awful. He would have known just what to say to Leah. Then there was the issue of Leah not telling Reese. Jocelyn thought Leah was making a big mistake by not doing so.

Not having any particular place to go, but knowing she wasn’t ready to return home yet, she turned the corner toward the office where Mason Construction was located.

Jocelyn’s hands tightened on the steering wheel when she pulled into the yard and slipped into the space right next to a car already there. She recognized the dark-blue sedan and immediately the anger she had tried cooling for the past hour rushed back in full force. What was Sebastian Steele doing at the Mason Construction office at nine o’clock at night?

Barely waiting for her car to come to a complete stop, she quickly unsnapped her seatbelt and then yanked open the car door. There couldn’t be that many files that he had to go over to be practically spending the night here. Angrily, she grabbed her purse before slamming the car door shut. Just what was he looking for in those files anyway?

When she reached the top step, she could see through the glass door his profile as he sat at the conference table, and without even thinking of surprising him, she snatched open the door and then slammed it shut.

He turned from the papers he’d been reading and looked at her. And at that moment she wished he hadn’t. There was just something about those dark eyes whenever they lit on her that prompted an overpowering sensation to slide all the way up her spine. Of course she was imagining things but for a moment she thought she felt the floor move. Still, to retain her balance, in case she hadn’t imagined it at all, she tightened her fingers on the strap of her
purse and placed pressure on the soles of her feet when he stood up.

He was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt. She hated admitting it, but he looked good in black. It did something to the darkness of his eyes and the tone of his complexion. Just looking at him was such a mind-boggling experience that for a moment she forgot what she was upset about. Until a half smile curved his lips.

Then she quickly remembered.

“What are you doing here, Bas?”

Instead of answering her, he said, “I’m curious about something, Jocelyn.”

At the moment she didn’t give a flip what he was curious about and was hoping her expression told him so. Evidently not, since he then added, “Are you always in such a pleasant mood?”

She gave him a stony look, one that could probably solidify cement in an instant. “You’re going to see just how pleasant I can be if you don’t answer my question. What are you doing here? This office closes at five o’clock.”

His smile widened. “My work hours aren’t dictated by a clock. And as to what I’m doing, I’m still working.”

She glanced at the papers spread out on the table and the stack of files on one of the chairs. She then looked back at him. “Why?”

He lifted a brow. “Why what?”

“Why are you here working this time of night? And not only that, why do you feel the need to? You just got here a week ago.”

“Let’s just say I’m an eager beaver. I believe in getting the job done.”

Angrily, she shook her head and said, “But there isn’t a job here to do. You can go through whatever you want, but you’ll find everything is in order. Like I’ve said, there is no reason for you to be here.”

“And my response to that is still the same,” he said, taking his seat back at the table. “Evidently your father thought otherwise.”

That statement, as usual, triggered Jocelyn’s anger to the boiling point. She crossed the room and slapped her hands, palms down, on the table and leaned in toward him. Their lips were within inches of touching.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he beat her to it. “Be careful about getting too close, Jocelyn. I’m liable to bite.” And then in an even lower voice, he added, “I’m also known to lick, nibble, taste, sample. Should I go on?”

Bas watched as a deep color rose in her cheeks when she got the picture he’d painted. Unfortunately for her she didn’t pull back quick enough and when she unconsciously tilted her head at an angle that brought her mouth even closer, Bas decided to carry out his threat. She was mad anyway, and a little more anger wouldn’t make or break their already fiery relationship.

He locked his mouth to hers before either of them could take their next breath. And he felt her fingers reach out and curl into his shirt the exact moment his tongue entered her mouth. He heard her moan, not in protest but in surrender, and the sound spurred him on.

He had never indulged in a kiss that had made him forget his senses so quickly and so easily. He might have initiated it, but she was certainly adding a delicious topping.

From the taste of things it seemed that he was way over his head and sinking fast without any thoughts of a rescue. But there was only so much of Jocelyn Mason’s passion he could take, and, after giving her tongue one final, passionate suck, he hesitantly pulled back. His gaze stayed glued to her features, and he saw she was dazed and for the moment speechless. But not for long.

“How dare you,” she murmured angrily between moist lips.

“How dare I what? Kiss you or stop kissing you?” he asked, leaning in a little closer. When she didn’t speak up quickly enough for him, he clamped his mouth onto hers again, intent on showing her that he did dare, because from her response it was obvious that she was enjoying the exchange as much as he was. This time he savored her taste at a slow pace, licking, nibbling and tasting. He soon discovered that kissing her slowly wasn’t a good thing because he didn’t want to stop. There was something deeper, different, in her taste this time around. It was more succulent, heated, and it had him devouring her leisurely, at an unhurried pace, yet greedily, as if once the taste was gone, that would be it. It was either now or never.

He heard her protesting moan when he finally pulled back again. “Got enough or do you want more?” he whispered, finishing her off by taking his tongue and lining the outside of her lips.

“Enough,” Jocelyn said softly, shaking her head as if to clear any lingering passion that had gotten lodged in her brain. His kiss was everything she’d somehow known it would be and then some. She could only stare at him in amazement and wonder. How many practice sessions had he endured to become a fantastic kisser?

Deciding she was better off not knowing, she leaned back and took a step away from the table. She would certainly think twice before she ever got in his face again. Although the kiss had whopped her senses, all it took was seeing the files and folders he’d been going through to make her recall that she was still angry at him for being here.

She crossed her arms over her chest. It was either that or be tempted to reached out and grab him for another
kiss. Jeez, what was happening to her? She might not have asked for his kiss but she had wanted it, and would shamefully go so far as to admit that she had anticipated his taste since meeting him.

“I need to know something,” Jocelyn said slowly, struggling to understand why her father had thought Sebastian Steele was needed here.

He glanced up at her. “What?”

“Is there anything in particular you’re looking for here? Did Dad give you any indication that something is wrong with the business? Something that I don’t know about? Something that he didn’t want me to know?”

Bas shrugged his broad shoulders and his gaze was level and calm when he responded, “No.”

She lifted a brow. “Then explain the reason you’re here, because until I understand it, I will continue to fight you at every turn. Dad hadn’t been able to run the company for the past eight months. The chemo treatments took a toll on him. I’ve been in charge of things practically since the first of the year when the cancer was diagnosed, so why did he bring you in? Didn’t he think I could handle things here?”

Bas leaned back in his chair. Evidently she didn’t understand what he did for a living and the way he could benefit Mason Construction during the short time he’d be here. He held up his hand when she started talking again.

“First of all, let me assure you that my being here has nothing to do with your father’s lack of confidence in your abilities, Jocelyn. Over the years, whenever I spoke to Jim he was always singing your praises and telling me what a great job you were doing.”

What he had just told her was the truth and for some reason it was important to him that she believed what he said. He then decided to lean in closer to make sure she was taking in his every word. “I’m a troubleshooter, Jocelyn. Some corporations refer to us as consultants. After I dropped out of college I did a lot of odd jobs, working various places, so I had an in-depth knowledge of organization and customer support services. Your dad convinced me to return home, go back to school and become a part of my family business. When I did return to college, I concentrated on those areas I needed to polish and then went to work fulltime with my dad and brothers at our company. My job is to avert trouble before it can cripple a corporation, whether it’s in employee relations or customer services.” Giving her a confident smile he said, “And at the risk of sounding cocky, I’m pretty damn good at what I do.”

He motioned to the files he had spread out around him. “Already I can see several areas within Mason Construction that are red flags.”

He knew she wouldn’t like his observation. He saw the slow flaring of her nostrils, the way her eyebrows lifted ever so slightly, the way her lips turned down faintly. Maybe he was a sicko or something, but seeing the heat rise in her cheeks was actually turning him on. Was that crazy?

“What red flags?”

He studied her features and saw the fire in her eyes and the pout of annoyance around her mouth. He wanted to reach out and skim his fingers across those lips he had kissed just moments ago. Damn, but he really liked her mouth, the shape, texture and taste.

“Bas, I asked you, what red flags?”

His focus returned to her question with the sound of her impatient foot tapping against the hardwood floor. Not to get her dander up any more, he decided to answer. “Like this job for Marcella Jones for instance.”

The name of the woman who had that very afternoon given her even more changes to make caused Jocelyn to flinch involuntarily. “What about the Marcella Jones project?”

“All those changes are costing the company money and you didn’t allow for them.”

She absently rubbed the back of her wrist as her eyes narrowed. “There’s no way you can allow for them. Marcella makes changes. A builder gets to live with it. Everyone knows it and accepts it.”

“But why should you?”

Jocelyn breathed deeply. Unfortunately she was finding Bas’s voice sexy, which was something she didn’t like. She needed to stay focused on what they were discussing. “Because the contract pays big bucks. I’ve padded for some anticipated changes but there’s no way I can cover all of them. Everyone knows Marcella is a builder’s nightmare.”

“I suggest you handle it differently.”

Jocelyn’s eyes narrowed again. “And just how do you suggest I handle it?”

“Let her know that with changes come surcharges because they’re costing you time and money. Once you hit her with enough surcharges, she’ll lighten up.”

Jocelyn laughed. “What she’ll do is drop us like a hot potato.”

“I don’t think so.”

The only thing he had in his favor in making that statement, Jocelyn thought, was that he didn’t know Marcella. “And why wouldn’t she?”
“Because she would want the best outfit building her home, someone she knows will do it right. You said this isn’t the first home you’ve built for her, right?”
“Yes, it’s the third.”
“Then there’s a reason she keeps coming back.”
“Yes, to get on everyone’s last nerve.”
“But at some point it has to stop. I suggest we try it. The next time she makes changes tell her Mason Construction has implemented a new policy and then explain the surcharges to her.”

Jocelyn hated admitting that what he was suggesting sounded reasonable, but as she’d told him earlier, Marcella would never go along with it. Her family had money, the man she’d married had money, and she liked to flaunt that fact. She was used to getting anything she wanted, no matter whom she inconvenienced.
“Like I said, it won’t work.”
“Try it. What do you have to lose?”
“Her business.”
Bas chuckled. “I doubt if she would do anything that drastic this late in the building phase.”
Jocelyn sighed deeply. She didn’t relish the thought of Bas meeting up with Marcella, given her reputation as a married woman with a roving eye. But Jocelyn quickly decided that Bas was old enough to handle his own business and he deserved a confrontation with someone like Marcella. It would be the first real test he’d fail.
“Fine, if you want to tangle with Marcella then go right ahead, but don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she tossed over her shoulder as she moved down the hall.
When she got to her office, she closed the door behind her, immediately dismissing Marcella from her thoughts. Instead she thought about the kiss she’d shared with Bas. Okay, they had kissed and it was out of her system. She licked her lips still moist with his taste. Out of her system? Not by a long shot.
Bas tossed aside another folder before looking at his watch. It was close to midnight. He’d accomplished a lot in his first week and felt pretty good about it. As he’d told Jocelyn, already he’d come across several red flags. Luckily, none of them were major and all could be taken care of before they reached problem status.

And speaking of Jocelyn…

He frowned at the stillness, the silence, the complete lack of sound. At one point during the night he had heard the keys of a computer clicking, the opening and closing of file cabinets and the soft hum of a song from a feminine voice. But now he heard nothing and since she would have had to pass him to leave, he could only assume she was still here. And if she was, just what the heck was she doing?

Curiosity had him standing and making his way down the narrow hallway. The door to her office was ajar and he could see that the room was crammed with a desk, a computer and several file cabinets, not to mention a number of healthy-looking green plants. He knocked.

“Come in.”

He pushed the door open the rest of the way and stepped inside, glancing around. Jocelyn was stretched out on a sofa, flat on her stomach, in a comfortable position. And she was…coloring. He blinked, certain he was seeing things, but he wasn’t. She had a thick coloring book and a huge box of crayons in front of her and was diligently at work. Instead of a twenty-seven-year-old woman, she reminded him of a ten-year-old.

All it took was a look at those serious curves outlined beneath her jeans and blouse to know she was definitely no kid; however, there was something about her gliding that crayon across the page that gave her an air of innocence. At that moment some unknown force crept into him and he was touched by a degree of tenderness he experienced only on very good days and then solely for certain people. Unable to help himself, he crossed the room and stared down at her for a moment. “What are you doing?”

She glanced up as if annoyed at the interruption. “What does it look like? I’m coloring.” She then turned her attention back to her paper.

“Okay,” he said, as if the reason made perfect sense. He decided to press further by asking, “Why?”

She didn’t bother to look up when she responded. “Why what?”

Now he was getting annoyed. “Why are you coloring in a book at midnight? In fact, why are you coloring at all?”

She pushed the coloring book aside and pulled herself up to a sitting position. “I’m coloring because it’s something I like doing. Always have. It relaxes me.”

She studied him for a moment then asked, “Isn’t there something you used to do as a kid that you’ve carried into your adult life?”

Bas thought long and hard then answered. “Yes, now that I think about it, there is something.”

“What?”

“Basketball. My brothers and I grew up playing basketball together, and we still do every Saturday morning, although now we do it for a different reason. It’s no longer just for fun.”

Jocelyn lifted a brow. “What is it for now?”

He smiled. “To leave our egos on the court.” At the confused expression that crossed her features, he decided to explain.

“I have three brothers and all of us work at the Steele Corporation. We’re different in personality and temperament, and it’s not easy for us to work together because of our strong differences of opinions. Playing a game of basketball every Saturday morning helps get rid of any competitive frustrations we might have before the start of a new week. I’m really going to miss not being there to do that,” he said, chuckling. “It will give Morgan a chance to elbow someone else in the ribs for a while.”

“Um, sorry you’ll be missing the game each week, but if you’re nice I’ll let you borrow my crayons,” she said teasingly.

“Thanks but I’ll pass.”

“Hey, coloring is fun, so don’t knock it,” she said, placing a playful pout on her lips.

Looking at her mouth Bas couldn’t help but think about the kiss they had shared earlier. Now that had been fun. Kissing her had been such a delicious, intimate contact and had proven him right. She did have kissable lips.
The moment he had coaxed her tongue into his mouth and latched on to it for all it was worth, he’d thought he’d actually felt the ground shake. The softness of her tongue had made him want to continue kissing her, the taste of her had tempted him to do more. Self-control eventually made him end the kiss. And that same self-control was keeping him from leaning in close and reclaiming her mouth now.

“And you probably don’t watch cartoons either, do you?”

Her question intruded into his thoughts and he figured that was a good thing, since what he’d been thinking was liable to get him in trouble. “No, I don’t do cartoons, either.”

“Not even Finding Nemo?”

“Didn’t know he was lost, so no, not even Finding Nemo.”

He watched her shudder as if the very thought of anyone not having seen that particular movie was incredible. Pretty much the same way he felt about anyone not eating Kentucky Fried Chicken.

“So tell me, Sebastian Steele, just what do you do for fun?” she asked, regaining his attention.

“Fun?”

“Yes, fun. You know, the activity that you’re supposed to do when work ends.”

“Work for me doesn’t end. I enjoy what I do.”

“I enjoy what I do too, but not 24/7. Come on, get with it. Everyone is entitled to some fun time to just unwind, regroup and relieve stress. Don’t you believe in work/life balance?”

Bas chuckled. Work/life balance? Was there really such a thing? She was beginning to sound like his brothers, who thought too much work with no playtime was a deadly sin. If that was the case, then he was looking hell straight in the face, since he was used to working into the wee hours of the morning. As long as he could grab a few hours of sleep and wake up the next morning to a decent-tasting cup of coffee, then he was good to go.

Knowing that she was waiting for a response, he said, “I get my work/life balance when I go to sleep.”

“Oh. And how many hours do you sleep each night?”

He was beginning to dislike her questions. “I get enough sleep. And speaking of sleep, it’s late and I was about to leave.”

“Okay. Good night.”

He raised a brow and shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans. “Aren’t you leaving, too?”

“No, I plan to hang around awhile and color a few more pages,” she said, brushing aside a curl that had fallen on her cheek.

He frowned, not liking her answer and not liking the fact that he was tempted to reach out and curl that lock of hair around his finger and tilt her mouth to his and…

Damn. He quickly sucked in a deep breath, determined to bring his heated thoughts back on track. He then forced himself to concentrate on what she had said about not leaving yet. There was no way he was going to leave her here alone at this time of night. “What’s your day like tomorrow?”

“Since we can’t do anything at the Jones place until the inspector gets there to check things out, which probably won’t be until after lunch, I’m going to be at school in the morning.”

He cocked his head to one side, trying to figure out what she was talking about. “School? Are you taking a class or something?”

“No. I offer my assistance to several schools where they need more help in the classrooms. Budget cuts have made smaller class sizes impossible, so I do what I can to help out. It’s something I enjoy doing. For me it’s another fun activity. And then at noon I have a business meeting.” She raised her hand over her head as if to stretch the kinks from her upper body.

He tried not to notice how the stretching made her blouse tighten over her firm breasts. He cleared his throat. “Sounds like you have a rather full schedule tomorrow, which is all the more reason you should go home and get a good night’s sleep. Let’s go.”

When she didn’t move and sat there glaring at him, he lifted a brow. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes, there’s a problem,” she said, standing and placing her hands on her hips. “First of all, let’s get a few things straight right now. You are not my keeper so don’t tell me when to go or when to stay. Secondly, I don’t like interruptions during what I consider my fun time, and thirdly, why should you care about how much sleep I get? Your concern should be with Mason Construction, and I hope you’ll do what you came here to do then leave before getting too underfoot.”

“Too underfoot?” he growled, not liking what she’d just said. In record speed he crossed the room and before she could blink, he had her backed up against a wall, his body pressed intimately to hers. “You wouldn’t know underfoot if it bit you, Jocelyn. This is underfoot,” he said heatedly, roughly, with more than a tinge of anger. “And yet this isn’t as close as it can get.”

He leaned in closer and whispered across her lips. “Don’t push me,” he warned huskily. “Especially for all the
wrong reasons.”

She frowned, refusing to back down. “With you there won’t be any right reasons. And if I didn’t make myself clear the first time then I’ll repeat myself. You don’t tell me what to do."

Bas inhaled deeply. For some reason she was itching for a fight, but he wasn’t in a mood to accommodate her tonight. And she had no idea how close she was to being thoroughly kissed again. However, with her temper flaring, he knew better than to try it, although he couldn’t stop the images flashing through his mind of all the other things he would love doing to her. Since he hadn’t slept with a woman in over eight months he was horny as hell and it wouldn’t take much to tumble her back on that damn sofa and seduce the hell out of her. But he had to remember the key element he’d learned and one he hadn’t grasped during his teen years—discipline. He knew how to pull back and behave properly when he needed to, and this was one of those times.

His eyes met hers and he gazed into their angry depths. But he was experienced enough to see beyond the anger and notice something else, something she was trying like hell to fight—deep longing, need and heated desire. Those were the last things a man in his predicament needed to see in a woman’s eyes.

Mustered his self-control and discipline, he took a step back. “Look, it’s been a long and tiring day. How about if we call a truce tonight and go get some sleep, okay?”

Jocelyn sighed. Although she didn’t like admitting it, Bas was right. It had been a long and tiring day, and having to deal with what Leah had told her had definitely taken a toll. Besides, she heard the weariness in his voice and if sleeping was the only way he got his work/life balance, then she definitely didn’t want to stand in his way.

“Okay, I’ll leave but only because I want to and not because you told me to,” she said, putting away her coloring book and crayons.

“Here, take this. The temperature has dropped quite a bit since you got here,” he said, taking off his jacket and placing it around her shoulders before she had time to protest. But he saw the stubborn set of her chin and the indecision that lit her eyes, and for a moment he wondered if she would snatch his jacket off. He was a little surprised when she said, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

After locking up, they walked to their cars together, neither saying anything. After opening her car door and sliding behind the steering wheel, she was about to remove his jacket when he said, “No, you can keep it. I have another one.”

When she opened her mouth to say something, he held up his hands and chuckled. “A truce remember? And it’s too late to argue.”

She nodded. “Fine, but I’ll give it back to you tomorrow.”

“Do whatever you want and drive carefully tonight.”

Jocelyn watched while he walked to his own car, trying not to notice the way his jeans covered firm, muscular thighs and a too-fine butt. The tingle that suddenly spread through her was so strong that her grip tightened on the steering wheel and her breath whooshed out from her lungs.

She pulled herself together, and as she switched on the ignition she inhaled deeply to get her breathing back right again. Moments later she noted that he had no intentions of pulling away until she did. Glancing down at the black leather jacket, the one with the strong scent of man, she breathed in deeply once again. She’d had every intention of giving back his jacket when he had first placed it around her shoulders, but then the alluring aroma was absorbed into her nostrils at the same time her body was flooded with soothing warmth, and she’d decided to keep it on. The man could certainly be a gentlemen when he wanted to be.

“Okay, he’s nice but I still don’t like him,” she muttered out loud.

And as she backed out of the parking space and headed toward home, she had to reaffirm her dislike for him several more times.

“Are you taking your medicine like you’re supposed to, Bas? What about getting an adequate amount of rest? Are you eating right?”

Bas shook his head as he wandered out of the bathroom, where he had just finished taking a shower, and into the bedroom. After awakening this morning and downing his first cup of coffee, he’d figured he would have a pretty good day…at least he’d thought so until the phone rang. Before he could say hello, his sister-in-law was bombarding him with questions.

“Did Chance put you up to calling me, Kylie?” he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed. The sunlight was pouring in through the window and in the far distance he could see the Smoky Mountains.

“No, I’m just concerned about you.”

“I’ve only been gone a week.”

“Yes, but you know what a worrywart I am. Besides, Chance and I want to tell you our news.”
Bas lifted a brow. “What news?”

He could hear her throaty laugh. “Here’s Chance. I’ll let him tell you.” He heard her handing over the phone to his brother.

“How’s it going?”

Bas leaned back against the headboard. “Okay, Chance, what’s going on? What’s this news you and Kylie have to tell me?”

“Nothing major. Just the fact that you’re going to be an uncle…again.”

A huge smile spread across Bas’s face. His brother had remarried eight months ago after being a widower for seven years. “Hey, that’s wonderful. Congratulations. How do the kids feel about the upcoming addition to your household?” By kids he meant Kylie’s fifteen-year-old daughter, Tiffany, and Chance’s sixteen-year-old son, Marcus.

“They’re thrilled and already fighting over babysitting rights.” Chance laughed. “I’ll see how eager they are for the job when the baby arrives and they find out what changing diapers is all about.”

Bas talked to his brother for another ten minutes, filling him in on how things were going. “So, Jocelyn Mason wasn’t glad to see you, huh?” Chance asked.

“Nope, not that I figured she would be.”

“She sounds like a handful.”

Bas smiled. Yes, she was a handful all right, but at the moment he thought of her being a mouthful. At three in the morning he’d been wide awake remembering just how good that sassy mouth of hers had tasted. Even now the memory shot his pulse up a notch or two. And then there was the luscious scent of her perfume that he was convinced had gotten absorbed into his skin, since he could still smell her.

“Yes, she’s a handful for now, only because she sees me as a threat. Once she sees that I’m only here to help, she’ll be okay,” he said with more confidence than he really felt.

“I hope you’re right. The last thing you need is to get stressed about anything.”

“Trust me, Chance. The last thing I’d do is let any woman stress me out. You should know that about me.”

After a few more minutes of small talk with his brother and sister-in-law, who reminded him of the surprise party next month for his brother Donovan’s birthday, Bas hung up the phone then stood and walked over to the window and looked out. What he’d told Chance was the truth. He didn’t plan on letting any woman stress him out. If Cassandra Tisdale hadn’t done it during the six months of their engagement then such a thing wasn’t possible.

He smiled as he checked his watch. It was time for his workday to begin.

Jocelyn glanced over at the man sitting across from her and smiled. “I’m flattered by your interest in Mason Construction but it’s not for sale, Mr. Cody,” she said, sipping a glass of lemonade.

What she had told him was the truth. She was truly flattered. She had read enough articles in Black Enterprises to know that if Cameron Cody was looking at any company to add to his portfolio then there was a good reason for it, because he was fast becoming a powerhouse. He was a high-school dropout who had eventually gotten his act together to later graduate cum laude from Harvard Business School, and now, at thirty-four, he was one of the most success African-American men in the country.

Cameron Cody was a self-made millionaire who had a knack for investing in all kinds of profitable ventures. His latest was construction, after he, along with other noted celebrities, had combined their funds and formed a construction company to help rebuild communities in New Orleans destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. The success of that venture had given him the idea to purchase a number of construction companies in various parts of the country to build low-income housing. Jocelyn thought his idea was good as well as needed. But as she’d told him, Mason Construction was not for sale.

“If you change your mind,” Cody said, going into his pocket to pull out a business card, “please let me know. The offer will stand. The task force I put together was thorough in providing me with the names of construction companies around the country that have good, solid reputations. You should be proud that your company is one of them. That speaks highly of your leadership.”

Jocelyn smiled, placing her glass of lemonade back on the table. “Since I’m sure your task force did a good job of investigating Mason Construction, then you’re well aware that my father is the one who ran things up until eight months ago, so he’s the one who should receive all the credit. And yes, you’re right, the success of Mason Construction speaks highly of his leadership skills. Dad was well liked and highly respected in this community.”

Cameron Cody leaned back in his chair and Jocelyn thought that in addition to being successful, he was also extremely good looking, although she hadn’t experienced any of the sizzle she’d felt when she first met Bas. And she hadn’t felt that same jolt of current that had gone through her when their hands had made contact in a handshake as she’d felt with Bas. There had been no crackle or pop. She was a little daunted that it seemed her hyper-awareness
of Bas was somewhat unique and at the moment unexplainable. Evidently there was some ingrained reason why Sebastian Steele could send heat shimmering through her with just a mere look or touch. She was clueless as to what it was.

She and Cameron were enjoying lunch at Kabuki, a popular Newton Grove restaurant that had a reputation for fine dining. Any time of any day, one would find it crowded with locals as well as tourists.

“You’re not giving yourself enough credit, Ms. Mason,” Cameron said smoothly, interrupting her thoughts. “But from all accounts, you’ve been doing a pretty good job since taking over things. The men who work for you respect you as well as admire your abilities and your knowledge of construction. To me that says a lot.”

“Thank you.” Once again she accepted his compliment, since from what she’d heard he didn’t give them often.

As she took another sip of her lemonade she got the feeling he didn’t seem bothered that she had turned down his offer—an offer that had been rather generous. He had even gone so far as to assure her that the men who worked for her would remain employed with his corporation. She wondered if what she heard was true and that he had a telepathic sense when it came to good business deals. Did he think she would eventually change her mind?

Half an hour later she was walking through the front door of her home, hightailing it up the stairs to her bedroom to change clothes. She wanted to put in at least a few hours at the job site. After kicking off her shoes she wiggled out of her panty hose. While shimmying her skirt down her hips she noticed the red light blinking on the phone beside her bed. She quickly walked over to play the message.

“Jocelyn, this is Bas. I met with Marcella Jones this morning and explained the company’s new policy regarding changes with her. She understood our position and has agreed to be surcharged for any additional changes she makes.”

Jocelyn’s mouth dropped open. Was he talking about the same Marcella Jones that everyone in Newton Grove knew? There’s no way, she thought, quickly unbuttoning her blouse. If Bas had been able to get Marcella to cooperate, she couldn’t help but wonder how. Then a thought hit her as she slipped into her jeans. No doubt Bas’s good looks and perfect body had something to do with it; it was a known fact that even married, Marcella appreciated a nice piece of male flesh and had been involved in more than one extramarital affair. For some reason that thought didn’t sit too well with Jocelyn.

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She quickly pulled a T-shirt over her head and before taking off down the stairs, she grabbed Bas’s jacket off the chair by her bedroom door, fully intending to return it to him today. As soon as she picked it up the scent of him enslaved her, subduing her with memories of the night before. For the rest of her life she would remember that kiss, the way his tongue had captured hers, sucked on it greedily, licked the moisture from her mouth with a need that had nearly pushed her over the edge and had sent intense desire pounding in her head. Never in her life had she been kissed that way. The very air surrounding them had crackled with an intimacy she hadn’t thought possible.

Just remembering the kiss, she felt overtaken by something so erotic, so lustful and so plain feverish that she had to hold her head down for a moment to catch her breath and get her bearings. How could one man have such a profound and sensuous impact on a woman?

She didn’t want to think what would have happened if he had done more than kiss her. What if he had gone beyond the kiss and had touched her intimately? What if his fingers had gotten involved and had sneaked under her blouse to caress her breasts, eased down to her stomach and beneath the waistband of her jeans to slip inside her panties to stroke the area between her legs, and then—

“Jocelyn, are you okay?”

Jocelyn jumped at the sound of her sister’s voice and fought the urge to moan in total embarrassment. Leah was standing in the hallway looking at her with concern in her eyes. Barely able to breathe, Jocelyn made herself move quickly to the stairs. “Of course I’m all right. I was just thinking about something.”

“Must have been something intense. For a moment you seemed to be in another world.”

If only you knew, Jocelyn thought, taking the stairs two at a time. “I probably won’t make it back in time for dinner tonight,” she threw over her shoulder. “I want to use the computer at the office to check the Web for some arcade games we can lease for Founder’s Day.”

“No problem. I can always bring dinner to you.”

Jocelyn turned, surprised by Leah’s offer. Her sister had barely left the house since the funeral. Not only was she willing to venture out, but to the office, a place where she could very likely run into Reese. “Thanks. Are you sure you’re up to doing that?”

Leah shrugged. “Yes. I still have no intention of ever telling Reese what happened, but I can’t hide forever.”

Jocelyn walked over to her sister to give her the hug she felt she needed. “No, you can’t and I’m glad you finally realize that. But you know my feelings. I think that Reese deserves to know what happened.”

Leah pulled back. “No, and you promised.”

Jocelyn nodded. “And I plan to keep that promise, but I think it’s something you need to think about, Leah.
After you left, Reese was in a bad way. Do you know he hasn’t seriously been involved with anyone since you?”

Leah’s eyes widened in surprise. “No, I didn’t know that.”

Jocelyn smiled faintly. “And it wasn’t from lack of interest on the women’s parts, trust me. He refuses to let another woman get close enough to break his heart all over again.”

Jocelyn watched a lone tear escape from Leah’s eyes. She regretted having been so blunt but it wouldn’t be fair for Leah not to know the depth of Reese’s anger and pain.

Leah hung her head and said softly, “I never meant to hurt him, Jocelyn.”

“Yes, I know, and now since you’ve told me everything, I understand. I just want you to be prepared for his attitude toward you if your paths ever cross. He’s still hurt and rather bitter.”

Leah tilted her head up and met Jocelyn’s gaze. “Thanks for the warning.”

“No problem,” Jocelyn said, reaching out and touching Leah’s arm. “And as far as dinner goes, don’t worry about me. I ate a big lunch today.”

She turned to leave but decided she needed to say something more to her sister. She turned back around. “I’m glad you’re home, Leah, and more than anything, I don’t want you hurting anymore.”

She watched another tear fall from Leah’s eyes. “Thanks, Jocelyn. That means a lot.”

“Good.”

Finally, Jocelyn left, and by the time she made it to her truck she felt good that she and Leah had crossed another hurdle together.
Chapter 5

“Why didn’t you tell me about your meeting with Cameron Cody?”

Jocelyn turned and lifted the safety glasses from her eyes. All around was the loud noise of men busy at work. Drills and saws were buzzing and hammers and lumber were clashing, yet she’d been able to hear Bas’s question as if he’d been right on top of her shouting in her ear when in fact he hadn’t even raised his voice. However, she could tell from the expression on his face that he wasn’t a happy camper.

He leaned against a post with his hands shoved into his pockets, his feet crossed at the ankles, wearing faded jeans and a Carolina Panthers T-shirt. She wondered if the man had a patent on sexuality because whenever she saw him, no matter what he was wearing, he looked too damn good.

She swallowed back the bated breath that filled her throat. Having such a fierce attraction to a man was something she wasn’t used to. He was beginning to be a pain in the butt in more ways than one.

“You know,” she said, flipping her safety glasses back in place. “You’ve got a lot of nerve coming up behind a woman with a screwdriver in her hand.”

Her gaze then traveled down the length of his body and deliberately froze on the area just below the belt. “Especially a woman who wouldn’t mind giving new meaning to the term ‘tightening up nuts’ if she got angry enough.”

He glared down at her. “Just answer my question, Jocelyn.”

She glared back, not liking his attitude or his question. “I don’t have to tell you everything that goes on with Mason Construction.”

His step was quick and in two seconds, screwdriver or no screwdriver, he was standing directly in front of her. “Now that’s where you’re wrong. And since I prefer that the men didn’t see us at odds with each other, I suggest we take this discussion elsewhere.”

“Not interested,” she said, already turning back around. “Get interested. Let’s go.”

Before she could utter the next word, he grabbed her forearm and began tugging her along with him. She was grateful the men were too busy installing Marcella’s granite countertops to give her or Bas the time of day. But still…

“Turn me loose,” she warned him through clenched teeth. “Or you’ll find out just how it feels to really get screwed.”

That statement did the trick and he immediately dropped his hand from her arm. She was too ashamed to admit that her arm felt warm and tingly in the spot his fingers had been.

“We can use my car to go somewhere quiet.”

His words reclaimed her attention and she stopped dead in her tracks. “Excuse me, but I’m not going anywhere with you. I have work to do.”

His dark gaze clashed with hers. “Your work can wait. You owe me an explanation and I intend to get one. Have you forgotten that I’m also an owner in this company?” he asked tightly.

“A mere technicality. I’m buying you out just like I’m buying Leah out.”

His lips twitched and it was hard to tell if it was due to anger or amusement. She got her answer when he said, “I never agreed to sell my part of this company to you. In fact I’m giving serious thought to keeping it. I just might go so far as to talk to your sister about purchasing her share and be willing to match generously any offer you make. Then, just think, Jocelyn, if that happens, we’ll become equal partners.”

Jocelyn tipped her head. She could feel the steam coming out of her ears. Her hand, still holding the screwdriver, itched. She’d never been a violent person but Bas was putting some mighty mean thoughts into her head right now. If he planned to become an equal partner with her, then he had another thought coming.

“Now that I have your attention,” he said, looking down at her, “I think we need to go some place and talk.”

Irritated, annoyed and angered beyond belief, Jocelyn expelled a deep breath. “Fine,” she snapped. “We’ll go somewhere to talk. But we’ll take my truck.”

Without giving him a chance to say anything, she turned and walked to where her truck was parked. And just as sure as she heard his footsteps right behind her, she knew that she had underestimated Sebastian Steele. It would never happen again.
“Just where the hell are you taking me?”

When Jocelyn brought the car to a traffic light, she tilted her head to one side and stared at Bas. Glared at him was more like it. “Not where I really want to take you, trust me.”

Bas frowned. He’d never like smart-mouthed women.

“You wanted to talk so I’m taking you someplace where we can talk.” She gave him a smile. It was polite and phony all rolled into one.

Bas’s eyes narrowed. Not only did he not like smart-mouthed women, he liked even less women who thought they had the upper hand. “We don’t have to go anywhere in particular,” he decided to say, especially when he saw that damn screwdriver beside her on the seat. “We can talk just fine right now.”

“Not while I’m driving, we can’t,” she said, rounding a corner on two wheels. And if that wasn’t bad enough, she stepped on the gas to pass a speeding truck.

Bas had the good sense to reach out and spread his hands palms down against the dash. “Slow down. Are you trying to get us killed?”

She let out a short laugh that let him know she was still pretty pissed. “Now why would I want to do that?”

Yes, why indeed, Bas thought as he tested the shoulder harness of his seat belt. Okay, so maybe he should not have threatened to buy her sister’s share—not that he had any intention of doing it anyway. There was one thing he and his brothers would not tolerate and that was anyone trying to come between them, whether it involved a business deal or otherwise. And there was no way he would have caused problems between Jocelyn and Leah by doing that same thing.

But he had wanted to make a point. When it came to him, she had better not assume anything. The right to sell or not to sell Mason Construction would have been her decision and he would not have taken it away from her. However, she needed to understand that there was such a thing as business respect.

“Okay, we’re here.”

He snapped out of his musings when the truck came to a stop. He swore as he hissed out a breath. Where in the world was he? When she nodded her head to the left, he saw the house through the clearing. It was a two-story brick structure with a double garage set in a bevy of tall oak trees that provided a lot of shade. And he could see the clear blue waters of a lake in the back.

“You know the people who live here?” he asked, admiring the structure and the land, which had to be at least ten acres.

“I’m the one who lives here,” she muttered, opening the truck door and getting out.

He frowned as he watched her cross in front of the truck to get the mail out of a brick mailbox. She lived here? When she got back in the truck and thumbed through the letters, he stared at her for a moment then said, “I thought you lived in the house with Jim.”

She glanced up at him. “I moved back home when Dad got sick, but I’ve been out on my own since I turned twenty-one. I lived in town in an apartment for a few years. I bought this place a year and half ago to stop Reese from burning it down.”

Surprise glinted in the depths of Bas’s eyes. “Reese was going to burn it down? Why?”

Jocelyn blew out a breath before tossing the envelopes on top of the dashboard. “This was Singleton land. At least this is the parcel that once belonged to Reese. He had always envisioned him and Leah living here together as man and wife, and without letting her know, he began building this house and was going to surprise her with it on her birthday. She left town before that. Afterward, Reese didn’t have the heart to finish it.”

Jocelyn paused a moment as if remembering that time. It was moments later before she continued. “At one point he hated this place, swore he would never finish it and even threatened to burn it to the ground. Dad and I talked him out of it. Told him if he didn’t want it he should finish the work on it and sell it. And he did, to me.”

Bas rolled down the window, suddenly needing air. Since he had never allowed a woman to cause him any pain, he could only imagine Reese’s heartbreak. Hell, there wasn’t a woman alive who could drive him to burn anything, not even a hot dog.

“Does your sister know about this house?” He had yet to meet Leah Mason but already from all accounts she sounded like a selfish person to turn her back on the love of a good man.

“No, she doesn’t know everything.”

Bas lifted a brow. “What doesn’t she know?”

“She knows I bought the house from the Singletons but she doesn’t know it had been meant for her.” And now, after finding out the real reason Leah had left Newton Grove, in a way Jocelyn wished she wouldn’t find out. That would only add to the guilt her sister was already carrying around.

Starting up the truck again, she said, “We didn’t come here to talk about Reese and Leah.”
“No, we didn’t,” he said, as she parked her truck in the driveway.
“I come here at least twice a week to get the mail and check on things.” She tossed the words over her shoulder as she got out.
“When will you be moving back?” he asked, getting out the truck, as well.
“I hope in another week or so. I had planned to be back by now, but there’s still a lot of Dad’s stuff that Leah and I need to go through and I hadn’t counted on Leah staying this long past the funeral, although I’m glad she has. And with the cost of gas, living in town has been convenient for me, although I miss the seclusion.”
“You don’t mind living this far from town alone?”
“Nope. I’m surrounded by so many people during the day that a secluded lifestyle pretty much suits me in the evenings and at night. Besides, Reese’s brother and his wife live on the other side of the lake.”
Bas didn’t relish the thought of her living up here alone. His cousin Vanessa had bought a house in a rural section of Charlotte and it was awhile before he or his brothers got used to the idea. They still took turns checking on her every so often.
“Come on inside. I’ll fix a pot of coffee and we can talk. I need to get clothes for the rest of the week anyway,” she said as she started up the walkway.
Watching her stride toward the door was giving him a generous view of some very serious curves in her jeans, just like he’d gotten last night. But this time those curves were in motion and he could only stand and appreciate the sway of her hips. The sight was definitely holding him captive and he couldn’t help but take the time to admire her. Not for the first time he thought that Jocelyn Mason was a very beautiful woman. Beautiful and tempting. And he quickly reminded himself that she was feisty. Too feisty for her own good—as well as for his.
Evidently noticing that he wasn’t following meekly behind her, she stopped and turned around. “You got a problem?”
He recalled that was the same question he had tossed out at her last night. “No, I don’t have a problem.”
She nodded and began walking again. It was only then that he decided to follow. At least she had left that damn screwdriver in the car. For some reason he believed that if she got mad enough, she was a woman who made good on her threats.

Inside, Bas noted that the house was spacious, allowing a view of most of the rooms from the foyer, including a massive eat-in kitchen.
All the ceilings were vaulted and in the living room a brick fireplace was flanked by built-in bookcases. The furnishings were elegant, traditional, with the leather sofa, love seat, wingback chair and table lamps strategically placed facing the window to get a good view of the mountains. Every item in the room seemed to have a place and the beautiful splashes of earth-tone colors blended well with everything else, including the two oil paintings on the wall.
The dignified furnishings in this house, he noted, reflected a side of Jocelyn he hadn’t seen a lot of yet—her prim and proper side. It showed a woman who had good taste and who liked beautiful things. Even the polished wood floors had character.
He reached out and traced a finger along a mahogany curio, noting the intricate detail and the fine craftsmanship. “Nice place and super-nice furniture,” Bas said, glancing beyond the foyer and living room to the dining room where the furnishings there was just as elegant, traditional, sturdy.
“Thanks. Reese built all the furniture,” Jocelyn said as she shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans and leaned back against the wet bar that separated the dining room from the kitchen.
Bas’s gaze shifted back to her, surprised. “He did?”
“Yes. He has a gift when it comes to using his hands on wood.”
That, Bas thought, was an understatement. The man was definitely gifted. No wonder Jim had left him a tidy sum to start up his own business. He was wasting his talent at Mason Construction.
“This place was really too big for what I had in mind but like I said, I didn’t want Reese to get rid of it,” Jocelyn said, reclaiming Bas’s attention.
The late-afternoon sunlight was shining through the huge kitchen window and the view of the lake from where they were standing was wonderful. But he thought the picture of Jocelyn standing in front of that window was even more so. She was a picture of refined elegance, just like her home.
“I can make us some coffee if—”
“No, I don’t want anything,” he said, interrupting what she was about to say. He thought it was safe to remember why they were there and not let other thoughts filter through his mind.
“I just want my question answered, Jocelyn. Why didn’t you tell me about your meeting with Cody?” he asked, deciding to get down to business.
Jocelyn sighed as she stared at him. “The reason I didn’t tell you was not because of some sinister plot on my part to keep you out of the loop about anything. I had honestly assumed you would accept my offer of a buy-out like Leah’s doing. Why wouldn’t I assume that? You and your brothers own a major corporation, the largest minority-owned one in North Carolina. You employ over a thousand people so I’m sure you’re busy most of the time. To be quite frank with you, I’m surprised you’re even here now. Not too many people would just up and drop everything and leave the running of a corporation even on a temporary basis to spend six to eight weeks supervising a construction company.”

Bas nodded and shoved his own hands into the pockets of his jeans. “They would if the man who’d made the request was Jim Mason. Fourteen years ago I had left home with a chip on my shoulder and mad at the entire world. Your father helped me to turn my life around that summer and see things as they really were. If it hadn’t been for him, no telling where I’d be today. I owe him a lot.”

He decided it wasn’t any of her business to know his other reason for coming—his health.

“Well, because I assumed what I did, I didn’t think twice about not including you in the meeting since I had every intention of telling Cody that the company wasn’t for sale. He made me a good offer but I wasn’t interested.”

A question came into her head. “How did you know about my meeting with Cameron Cody?” She hadn’t mentioned it to anyone, not even to Reese.

“Cameron told me, and yes, I know him. He was interested in one of my cousins a few years back. I was surprised when I ran into him in town. Because he’s always on top of things, he was well aware I was one of the owners, but figured you were speaking in my and your sister’s behalf when you turned down his offer.”

Deliberately, Bas moved in front of her. “Okay, I’ll accept the way you were thinking, but in the future don’t assume anything, especially when it comes to me. I want to know about anything that involves this construction company, no matter how minor the detail. It’s a matter of respecting me as one of the owners. Understood?”

Jocelyn frowned. She didn’t like anyone talking to her as though she was a child, although he was right. She should have included him in her meeting with Cody. “Yes, I understand. Now it’s time for you to understand something, as well.”

“And just what might that be?”

“I’m not used to taking orders from any man except my father. In the future if you have a request, it will pay you to make it nicely.”

He lifted a brow. “Or else?”

“Or else it won’t happen. I tried to explain to you that with this outfit everyone can’t be a leader. Reese is the foreman and I respect his position, but when all is said and done, I’m still the boss.”

“Um, sounds like you have an ego issue.”

Annoyance rattled her at his words. “Sometimes in a man-dominated world women have to have one. But I don’t think I have an ego issue. I just refuse to let anyone push me around.” She stepped past him to walk over to the window. To Jocelyn’s way of thinking Bas was standing too close. She could feel his heat. She could breathe in his scent. And both were doing crazy things to her mind as well as to her body. She was experiencing that tingling sensation in the pit of her stomach again.

“Okay, since you think I need to work off my frustrations, I have the perfect game.”

He lifted his brow. “What?”

“Follow me.”

She led him through the kitchen to the basement, and when he reached the bottom stair he stopped, grinned and let out a long whistle. The place resembled a sports bar with a huge plasma television screen on the wall, a wraparound bar with wooden stools as well as several pinball machines, a huge dartboard and a card table. And you couldn’t miss the bold neon sign that read Jim’s Place.

She must have read the question in his eyes because she said, “You know what a sports fanatic dad was, especially when it came to football. When I bought this house I decided to turn this room into a place where he and his cronies could hang out and enjoy whatever game they were into.”

She chuckled. “On the weekends it became a regular hangout for him because there was always some game or another to watch on that huge television over there. It was nice seeing him and his friends have so much fun, and it
felt good having him underfoot.”

She swiped at the tears that suddenly appeared in her eyes and swore. “Damn, but I’m going to miss him.”

Bas was across the room in a flash and gently pulled Jocelyn into his arms. “Hey, it’s going to be okay. And it’s all right to miss him. He was a good man and from what I can tell you were a good daughter. He had to have been proud of this place that you provided here for him, his own entertainment spot. That was pretty nice of you considering I bet Jim and his buddies could get rather loud at times,” he said flicking her a teasing smile.

She chuckled. “If only you knew. I would be upstairs in bed reading with my ear plugs in. Still, it felt good knowing he was having a good time. They will be memories I will cherish forever, Bas.”

“And you should. My parents retired a few years ago to move to Florida and left me and my brothers in charge. My first thought was good riddance, we wouldn’t have to put up with Dad constantly checking our decisions or Mom forcing us to Sunday dinner. But they hadn’t been gone two weeks and we were all missing them like crazy. We even thought about calling and telling them to move back. But then we decided it would have been selfish on our part. It was their time to enjoy life.”

He squeezed her hand in assurance. “And from what I can see, you did that, Jocelyn. You gave Jim a chance to enjoy life.”

“Everyone should,” she said, moving around him to cross the room when she began feeling hot and tingly again. She stopped when she came to one of the pinball machines and turned around.

Her breath caught in her throat. He was looking at her the same way he’d been looking at her right before he had kissed her last night…and that wasn’t good. She tried getting her bearings and said, “So, are you ready to play a game?”

He leaned against the bar and she watched his eyes darken. “And just what sort of game do you have in mind?”

Evidently not the one you’re thinking about, she wanted to say. She might not have a lot of experience with men but she definitely could recognize one with heat in his eyes. “How about a game of pinball?”

He chuckled. “Pinball?”

“Yes. Don’t you know how to play?”

“Sure, I do.”

“Okay then, but I understand if you think you’re not up to holding your own against me and—”

“Not up to holding my own?”

“Yes.”

Still smiling, Bas crossed the room to where she stood. He’d planned to spend most of the evening at Mason Construction, going through some more files and working way past midnight again. But he refused to let Jocelyn think she could best him at a pinball machine. And this particular baby just happened to be a Stern Nascar. “Ms. Mason, you’re about to meet the king of pinball.”

She looked at him and grinned. “You think so?”

“I know so.”

Jocelyn figured now was not the time to let him know that last year she had won the local pinball competition. She began rolling up her sleeve and grinned at him. “Okay, Steele, you’re on.”
Chapter 6

“Are you always into keeping secrets, Jocelyn?” Bas asked frowning, after they had finished their last game and were walking back up the steps from the basement. “You should have told me upfront that you were a pinball champion.”

Jocelyn chuckled. “Why? And take all the fun out of winning?”

When they reached the landing he said, “Hey, champion or no champion, you only won because I wasn’t playing my best since I didn’t think I had to. I assumed this was an easy win.”

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and stared at him. “What were you saying earlier about assuming anything?”

Bas hooked a thumb into his jeans. “That was different.”

She smiled. “Of course you would say that.” She then checked her watch. “Give me a second to grab some clothes and I’ll be ready to go back to town,” she said turning toward her bedroom.

“Take your time. I need privacy to lick my wounds anyway.”

She paused in the archway between the hall and her bedroom. “Too bad you’re a sore loser.”

“I’m not.”

“You are, too. Admit it.”

“Okay, I like to win.”

“So do I.”

“You know I’m going to want a rematch.”

“We’ll see.” And with that said, she disappeared inside her bedroom.

Bas couldn’t stop the chuckle that escaped his lips. Damn, he had spent the last two hours racking up over a billion points and still had lost to a female hotshot. The number of bonus points she’d gotten was downright sickening.

He shook his head, not believing he had actually taken time away from work to play a damn game of pinball. It had been the weirdest thing how his adrenaline had gotten pumped up, practically the same way it did whenever he played basketball against his brothers. He hadn’t even thought about the files he had planned to go over at the office. The only thing he had thought about was whipping Jocelyn’s butt big-time.

And what a butt it was. It didn’t take much to remember her in front of the pinball machine, her stance sexy and stimulating as hell, and her display of excitement each and every time she deployed a ball. Just being able to ogle her undetected had been worth the loss. Once again he couldn’t help but think about the too-serious curves on her body and what they did to a pair of jeans and a top. Each time her butt had moved, he’d found it almost impossible to sit still, stand still or to stop a certain part of him from getting hard.

He had played enough pinball to know it was a mental game and if you weren’t focused there was no chance in hell you could win. Of course he hadn’t been focused. He hadn’t even used a lot of the skilled flipper work he often used when he played against his brothers.

It was difficult to concentrate when you were playing against a woman whose perfume smelled of seduction and whose body made you think of a different kind of scoring. He’d known that whenever her tongue licked her lips she was setting up her shots to score big. And he had wanted to capture that same tongue with his.

“I’m all set.”

He turned at the sound of her voice and crossed the room to relieve her of the load of clothes she carried. Their hands touched and an electric current quickly flowed through their bodies. Silence hung between them for a long moment until she finally said, “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“We’d better go.”

He sighed deeply. “Yes, I think we’d better.”

By the time Jocelyn had locked up and they had walked back out to her truck, Bas wanted to punch something. The desire to kiss her had been so strong he’d felt his self-control slipping, and for the first time in a long time he hadn’t wanted to do anything to regain it.

He didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to know that if he didn’t pull himself together he was headed for big trouble.
“So, what’re your plans for dinner?”

The truck had come to a stop at a traffic light and Jocelyn glanced over at Bas. “I don’t have any. Why?”

“After playing that game with you, I’ve worked up an appetite and thought we could stop and grab something
to eat.”

Jocelyn laughed. “I couldn’t help noticing how much you got into the game. You’re a good player.”

“Yet you won.”

“Yeah, but to give you credit I have to admit you played well. One of the keys to winning pinball is to
concentrate on what shots are going to give you the biggest points.”

He decided not to tell her the real reason he’d lost was because he’d been concentrating on her more than the
game. “I was serious when I said I wanted a rematch,” he said.

“I’m sure you were, and I don’t mind accommodating you if you can handle another loss.”

He laughed. “Kind of confident, aren’t you?”

She smiled. “When playing pinball one has to be.”

The sun had gone down and dusk was settling in, but even with the dim light in the truck’s cab, Bas could see
Jocelyn’s features clearly, and a funny feeling flowed all through him. He turned to look out the window, thinking it
was safer to do so. His attraction to her wasn’t good at all. In fact it was bad news.

“So what are your plans?”

Jocelyn’s question intruded into his thoughts and he glanced over at her. “Not sure, but I need something to
eat.” And nothing fried, he further thought, remembering Dr. Nelson’s words as well as the promise he’d made to
his sister-in-law. He’d gone a week without any fried chicken and it was about to kill him. Each time he passed a
KFC he had to keep his control in check and not go in and order the dark-meat special.

“That place up there serves good food,” she said, pointing to a restaurant just ahead.

“They have chicken?”

“Yes.”

“Baked?”

“Yes, and it’s pretty good. It’s nice to meet a man who doesn’t have to eat fried chicken. All that grease isn’t
good for you.”

He decided not to tell her that all that grease was what he wanted, but he’d been sentenced to a life without it
for a while. “Will you stop and have dinner with me?”

When she came to another traffic light, she settled her gaze on his, and he knew she was trying to make her
mind up about whether she would join him for dinner. “Come on, you’ve got to eat some time,” he coaxed.

Another smile touched her lips. “I had a big lunch, but I do know for a fact that restaurant makes a dynamite
salad.”

He couldn’t imagine anyone just having a salad for a meal, but he said anyway, “Okay, then what are we
waiting for?”

She eased the truck into the turning lane and laughed. “Not one single thing. Besides, I’m curious as to how
you got Marcella Jones to go along with those surcharges.”

For a Tuesday night the place was crowded, but fortunately, enough waitresses were working the tables and
within a few minutes Jocelyn and Bas had been seated.

“Um, I can just smell the fried chicken,” Bas said, inhaling the air and licking his lips.

Jocelyn raised a brow. “I thought you were getting baked.”

“I am.” He took a sip of coffee before picking up his menu.

“So how did you do it?” Jocelyn asked, glancing over her own menu. She wondered why she was bothering to
look at it since she knew exactly what she wanted. But then looking at the menu meant she didn’t have to look at
Bas, because looking at Bas made her insides sizzle. Something about the restaurant’s lighting made him that much
more eye-droppingly handsome. She couldn’t help noticing that the waitresses were definitely checking him out.

“How did I do what?”

His question reeled in her thoughts. “Get Marcella to cooperate.”

Blowing out a breath he said, “Trust me, it wasn’t easy.”

“How did you do it?” she asked again.

Bas decided it was best Jocelyn didn’t know all the gory details. Just like Sadie, Marcella had remembered him
from those summers long ago. She was brazen as hell and had actually told him how turned on she used to get
seeing him shirtless, and she more than hinted that she would like to see him without his shirt again, or his pants.

He had remained professional and had told her in a nice way he wasn’t interested in undressing for her and that
their only business was the building of her house. She hadn’t appreciated her sexual advances being turned down
and had tried being difficult. He had refused to let her get on his last nerve, and had finally said since the two of
them couldn’t see eye to eye he would deal with her husband. Evidently, she’d gotten concerned that Bas would
mention her less than estimable behavior to Mr. Jones, and decided to cooperate.

“At first she wasn’t having any of what I said, so I told her I would discuss the situation with her husband. In
the end, let’s just say Marcella Jones and I decided it was best to keep her husband out of it.”
Jocelyn’s lips quirked. “She came on to you, didn’t she?”
He lifted a brow. “Why would you think that?”

Jocelyn chuckled. “Because I know Marcella. Over the years I’ve heard the rumors. She came on to Reese
when we were building her first house and he had to put her in her place. Unfortunately for her it was during the
time Reese had sworn off all women. We were surprised she came to us to build another house for her. Rumor has it
that she likes them young.”

Bas took another sip of coffee. “She can’t be that old.”
“Try forty-five.”
Bas blinked at her. “You’re kidding.”
“Nope. I admit she wears her age well. Most people take her to be ten years younger at least.”
At that moment the waitress, who was all but drooling while looking at Bas, came back to take their orders.
“I’ll have a chef’s salad,” Jocelyn said, closing the menu.
The young woman nodded. She then turned her complete attention to Bas. Jocelyn couldn’t help noticing that
the waitress had undone the top button of her uniform and was now showing a lot of cleavage. And it was plain to
see she was wearing a push-up bra.

“And what will you have?” the waitress asked Bas, all but purring the words.
Jocelyn had always thought that jealousy was a complete waste of time and energy, but watching the woman in
action was almost too much. She glanced over at Bas while he gave his order. He either didn’t see how the waitress
was coming on to him or he was choosing to ignore it.

Feeling a little agitated, Jocelyn was about to excuse herself to go to the ladies’ room when Bas reached over,
squeezed her hand and said, after looking at the waitress’s name tag, “And if you don’t mind, Stacy, my fiancée and
I would like to be served as soon as the cook can get it ready. We’re in a hurry to get home.”
Jocelyn saw the disappointment in the woman’s eyes before she nodded and left. Jocelyn shook her head and
slowly pulled her hand from Bas’s. She didn’t want to think how good his hand felt encompassing hers.

“That woman had some nerve coming on to you that way with me sitting here. For all she knew I could have
been your wife.”
Bas smiled. “She probably thought you weren’t since you aren’t wearing a ring.”
Jocelyn frowned. “That shouldn’t mean anything. The mere fact that I’m here with you should have garnered
respect.”
“Yes, it should have.”
“You should not have had to pretend anything was going on between us.”
“No, I should not have.”
Jocelyn glared. “The way he was agreeing with everything she said irked her. “I’m not amused, Bas.”
His expression turned genuinely serious. “Neither am I, Jocelyn. We can always leave if she offended you. And
if you want to stay we can request another waitress.”

She shook her head. Another waitress would only drool like the last one had. In the woman’s defense, though,
she had to admit that cleft in Bas’s chin was patently masculine and completed the total sexy package. Not that she’d
say it aloud. “No, I’m fine. It just bothers me how brazen some women are. I would never be that bold.”
And a part of Bas appreciated that she wouldn’t. He couldn’t imagine Jocelyn ever handling herself
inappropriately. However, on the other hand, she could put you in your place if she felt the need.
“I think you’re going to enjoy your baked chicken,” she said a few minutes later.
Bas glanced over at the table next to theirs where a man had ordered fried chicken and seemed to be enjoying
it. Bas felt his stomach whine. Sighing deeply, he said, “I really hope so.”

Bas had to admit his food was delicious. He had been careful while ordering to stay away from the items on the
menu that Kylie had told him were a nono. He couldn’t help but smile, thinking about how his sister-in-law had
encased herself in his and his brothers’ lives.

Once she had found out that he needed to make a change in his eating habits, she had taken it upon herself to
educate him on the proper food choices. It was a good thing he was here in Newton Grove. Had he remained in
Charlotte he would be starving on some strict menu Kylie thought best for him.
“You’re smiling. Does that mean you think the food tastes good?” Jocelyn asked.

He glanced up and the smile on his lips widened. “Yes, it tastes good, but that’s not why I’m smiling. I was thinking about my sister-in-law.”

“Your sister-in-law?”

“Yes. Kylie,” he said, tossing his napkin down and leaning back in his chair. “She’s a very nice person and the best thing to ever happen to my brother in a long time. They’ve only been married eight months.”

“Which brother is this? You mentioned you had three.” From Bas’s smile Jocelyn could tell that he and his brothers shared a close relationship.

“Kylie’s married to Chance, the oldest at thirty-seven. Then there are Morgan and Donovan. Chance is the only one of us who’s ever been married. He was a widower for seven years and has a sixteen-year-old son named Marcus.”

Bas chuckled. “In fact, Marcus and Kylie’s daughter, Tiffany, who is fifteen, are the reason Chance and Kylie are together.”

Jocelyn wiped her mouth with a napkin before asking. “How is that?

“By playing cupid.”

For the next twenty minutes Bas told Jocelyn how Marcus and Tiffany had felt that neither of their strict parents had a life and had decided to do something about it by orchestrating a plan to shift their parents’ attention off them and onto each other.

Instead of using the napkin to wipe at her mouth, Jocelyn began dabbing at her eyes while laughing. She’d found the teens’ escapades totally hilarious. “Well, evidently their plan worked.”

Bas chuckled. “Yes, it did. Quite successfully.” He took advantage of the break in conversation to question why he was here, sharing dinner with Jocelyn, instead of back at the office going through files. Although he wanted to think that this entire afternoon had been a total waste of good time, he couldn’t. He had to admit that he enjoyed the time he had spent with Jocelyn, although it had started out pretty damn rocky.

He’d gotten a kick out of playing pinball with her even when she was slaughtering him in points, and dinner had been rather nice, as well. He felt comfortable talking to her, sharing tidbits about his family. The last woman he’d taken out had been Cassandra and they’d gone to an exclusive restaurant. She had spent the entire evening criticizing the outfits other women were wearing. To hear her talk, she was the only fashion plate in the place.

“You mentioned that Cameron Cody was interested in one of your cousins.”

Bas studied the dark liquid in his glass and grinned. After dinner they had ordered scrumptious cheesecake and a glass of delicious dessert wine to go along with it. “Yes, and I have a feeling he still is. I met Cameron a few years ago when he tried to take over the Steele Corporation.”

Jocelyn lifted a brow, not sure she had heard him correctly. “Cody tried forcing a takeover of your company?”

“Yes, and he would have been successful if my brothers and three cousins and I hadn’t stuck together, which proved what a unified force we were. The Steele Corporation was formed over twenty-five years ago by my father and my Uncle Harold. It was always understood that I and my three brothers, as well as Uncle Harold’s three daughters—Vanessa, Taylor and Cheyenne—would one day inherit the company. All of us are working there except for Taylor and Cheyenne. They decided to pursue careers outside of the corporation, although they sit on the board.

Uncle Harold passed away ten years ago and my father retired five years after that, leaving Chance as CEO.”

He took another sip of his wine before continuing. “As soon as word got out about my father’s retirement, several corporate marauders tried to force a takeover. Cameron’s company was just one of them.”

Jocelyn took a sip of her own wine. “But when you mentioned him earlier I got the impression the two of you are friends.”

Bas smiled and Jocelyn noticed each time he did so his dimples appeared and the cleft in his chin seemed even more profound. “We are. My brothers and I couldn’t help but admire Cameron’s accomplishments and give him the respect he’s due. He earned everything he has, and he’s built his empire by working hard. Anything he got he deserved. He is a hard man but fair. Once he saw that his attempt to take us over was futile, he pulled out and set his sights on another Steele—my cousin Vanessa. She heads our PR department. My brothers and I got over what Cameron tried to do and eventually became friends with him. However, Vanessa never could and as much as Cameron tried, he couldn’t break through the barriers she had erected.”

A half hour later, Jocelyn was returning Bas to the job site so he could get his car. It was almost ten o’clock.

“You aren’t thinking about going over to the office, are you?” she asked when she brought her truck to a stop next to his parked car.

He shook his head and chuckled. “No, not tonight. I think I’ll go home and come up with a game plan to beat you at pinball the next go-round.”

She returned his chuckle. “Come up with any game plan you want. The outcome will still be the same.”
“We’ll see.”
She looked at him and said smartly, “Yes, we will see.”

More than anything Bas wanted to kiss her. He still had memories of their last kiss, but he wanted to replace them with new memories. “Maybe,” he said, leaning a little closer to her across the truck’s bench seats, “we should consider a wager.”

“A wager?” she asked, her voice soft, low.
“Yes.”

“Sorry, but I don’t make bets.”

“But what if it’s for something you might like?” he asked, lifting his hand to cup her cheek and feeling glad that she didn’t pull back.

“Like what?”

“You tell me. What is it you want?” he asked, leaning even closer and hearing her suck in a deep breath.

“How about letting me buy you out so you can leave here by the weekend?”

He shook his head and released an easy chuckle. “Sorry, can’t do that. Think of something else.”

“What if I don’t want anything else?”

“Then you need to think harder.” His hand left her cheek and moved to the back of her neck.

“Can’t think harder.”

“Why not?”

“Because when you’re this close to me, you make it impossible to think at all.”

“Aw hell, Jocelyn.” The words slipped from between Bas’s lips just seconds before he captured her mouth with his. The moment their lips touched he remembered how good she had tasted the last time and was getting his fill of how good she was tasting now. That intangible chemistry they had been dealing with from the first day was back full force. If truth be known, it had never left. It was even more potent, compelling and intoxicating. That passionate moan she was making wasn’t helping matters one bit. But what really made him lose it was when she laid a hand on his thigh to keep her balance. Whether she realized it or not—and he believed she didn’t—her hand was too damn close to a part of him that was aching for her.

He deepened the kiss, their tongues mating, and he thought she was better than the dessert he’d had at dinner. They continued to kiss and for a while he thought he could spend the rest of the night doing just this. But he knew the last thing they should be doing was sitting in a parked truck at a vacant job site kissing, so he fought to regain control and slowly, with all the reluctance in the world, pulled back.

In the semi-darkened cab he saw her moist lips tremble, and he was tempted to lean forward and take them with his. The moment their lips touched he remembered how good she had tasted the last time and was getting his fill of how good she was tasting now. That intangible chemistry they had been dealing with from the first day was back full force. If truth be known, it had never left. It was even more potent, compelling and intoxicating. That passionate moan she was making wasn’t helping matters one bit. But what really made him lose it was when she laid a hand on his thigh to keep her balance. Whether she realized it or not—and he believed she didn’t—her hand was too damn close to a part of him that was aching for her.

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In the semi-darkened cab he saw her moist lips tremble, and he was tempted to lean forward and take them with his again. But he couldn’t do that. He needed to go somewhere to clear his head and figure out what there was about Jocelyn Mason that made him want to take her somewhere and make love to her. All night and all day.

And that wasn’t a good thought.

He sighed deeply. “I’d better go.”

“All right,” she said brushing her hair from her face and resnapping her seat belt. “I had fun with you today, Bas. You’re not such a bad guy.”

He smiled over at her. “Friends, then?”

She chuckled. “I wouldn’t go that far. I’m not Cameron Cody. I don’t make friends easily with the enemy.”

He lifted a brow. “And you see me as the enemy?”

His question hung over them for a few minutes before she said, “I don’t know how I see you,” she said honestly. “I don’t want you here and now you’re beginning to complicate things.”

“Why? Because of a few kisses?”

“Yes, because of a few kisses.” Not to mention all that heat that is surging between my thighs right now.

“How about a truce?” he interrupted her thoughts by asking.

“Another one?”

He chuckled. “They can only get better.”

That was exactly what she was afraid of.

“So what do you say? Truce?” he asked again, sticking his hand out.

She took it and immediately felt the heat between her legs get hotter. “Okay, another truce.”

At that moment Jocelyn hoped she hadn’t agreed to something she would later regret.
Jocelyn felt the tap on her shoulder and slowly turned around to find Leah smiling at her. “Here. You look like you need this.”

“I do and thanks.” Jocelyn smiled and accepted the cup of steaming coffee and took a sip. Yes, she really did need it and nobody could make coffee like Leah. That was another thing she had missed when her sister had left. Sighing deeply, she turned back to look out the kitchen window.

“I heard you pacing the floor last night.”

Jocelyn turned again and met Leah’s gaze. “You did?”

“Yes.” Leah walked across the kitchen to lean against the counter. “I know I agreed to sell you my part of Mason Construction, but is something going on that I should know about?”

Jocelyn frowned. “Something like what?”

Leah shrugged. “Um, I don’t know. Anything. You paced the floor for a good thirty minutes or more.”

Jocelyn knew it was more, although she hadn’t been keeping time. “No, nothing is going on,” she said, and then shifted from Leah’s curious gaze to glance back out the window again.

She hadn’t been able to sleep because thoughts of Sebastian Steele kept invading her mind. For the second time she had allowed him to kiss her, and there were things about him that she didn’t know.

Last night at dinner he had talked freely about his brothers and cousins, but he hadn’t mentioned anything about himself. In fact, he seemed very careful not to do so. She was pretty convinced he wasn’t married and never had been, since he’d mentioned his brother Chance had been the only sibling who’d ever tied the knot. But what about a girlfriend or even worse, a fiancée? Men who looked like Bas usually weren’t unattached, at least not for long.

“Well, I’m going to take your word that everything is fine,” Leah said, glancing down at her watch. “I need to leave or I’m going to be late.”

Jocelyn quickly turned around. “You’re going somewhere?” she asked, noticing for the first time her sister was wearing slacks and a blouse and had her purse strapped to her shoulder.

Leah smiled. “Yes, don’t you remember? I told you last night when you came in that I made an appointment at Kate’s Beauty Salon.”

Jocelyn nodded. Oh, yes, she remembered now. Leah had mentioned it but at the time Jocelyn’s mind had been overtaken with memories of Bas’s kiss. “That’s right you did. How are you getting it styled?”

Leah chuckled. “I told you that, too. I even showed you the model in the picture I tore out of a magazine. You must have really been out of it last night.” She tipped her head to the side to study Jocelyn. “Is Marcella Jones still driving all of you nuts?”

“No, it’s not Marcella.”

“Then it must be Sebastian Steele.”

Hearing her sister say Bas’s name had Jocelyn’s heart pounding. “Why would you think that?”

“Because I got the impression a few days ago that he was getting on your nerves and you hadn’t accepted him being here, not to mention his role with Mason Construction. I know how much you detest anyone looking over your shoulder. Just remember he’s here for a good reason and when he leaves you probably won’t ever hear from him again.”

Jocelyn noted that Leah was smiling brightly, as if what she’d said should cheer Jocelyn up, yet it didn’t. For some reason the thought of Bas leaving anytime soon was something Jocelyn didn’t want to think about, although she had asked him to do that very thing last night.

“Maybe you’re right.”

“More than likely I am,” Leah said as if to assure her. “I checked out the Steele Corporation on the Internet yesterday. Sebastian Steele is a pretty wealthy guy who is used to a big city like Charlotte. There’s nothing to keep him here. He’s probably itching to get back to the lifestyle he left behind.”

A half hour later, after Leah had left, Jocelyn was in her room getting dressed. Instead of reporting to the job site, she had a meeting scheduled with her Founder’s Day Celebration committee, especially those members working closely with her on the ball. The governor had accepted an invitation and Jocelyn wanted to make sure all their plans were on target.

She shifted her thoughts to the conversation she’d had earlier with Leah. Jocelyn herself had checked out that
same Web site and Leah was right. A man of Bas’s status would have no reason to hang around Newton Grove any longer than necessary, not that she wanted him to hang around, mind you. But there had been something about them sharing dinner that wouldn’t leave her alone.

Maybe it was the way he tipped his head whenever she was talking to let her know she had his absolute attention. Or it might have been the slow and methodical way he sipped his wine that had heat thrumming through her body each time she watched the liquid pass down his throat. Or maybe, just maybe, it had been the toe-curling kiss she couldn’t seem to forget. Each time his tongue got hold of hers it was as if he was branding it while she went soaring into mind-blowing passion.

Jocelyn groaned. She’d never let any man get to her the way Bas was doing. But then she had to reconcile herself to the fact that there was a first time for everything.

Across town someone was having a similar rough morning. Bas frowned when he looked down at the bowl Ms. Sadie had placed in front of him. Oatmeal?

He had been deprived of a good night’s sleep and he’d be damned if he’d be deprived of a good breakfast, as well. Where were the bacon, sausage, grits, eggs and toast whose aroma had awakened him that morning?

He glanced up and found Sadie Robinson looking at him with a smug smile. She had the nerve to say, “And if you drop by for lunch I’ll prepare you a luscious fruit salad.”

His frown deepened. When he thought of fruit he didn’t think of luscious. When he thought of Jocelyn he thought of luscious, which was one of the reasons he hadn’t slept well.

But that didn’t explain why he was only getting oatmeal for breakfast and fruit for lunch. He was more than certain Ms. Sadie hadn’t run out of food, since yesterday he’d noticed on his way out that she tended to cook a rather large quantity of everything. So what was going on?

Not taking his gaze off her, he asked in as calm a voice as he could, “Is there something going on that I should know about?”

Sadie never took her eyes off Bas either when she responded in a not-so-innocent voice, “Why would you think that?”

Ordinarily, Bas might let the matter go, eat the damn oatmeal and be merry about it. But not this morning after having had dream after dream of a woman he’d best leave alone. He might never make love to her in reality but in his fantasies he could still see the heated look in the depths of her dark-brown eyes each and every time he—

“Besides, oatmeal is good for you.”

Sadie’s words interrupted his thoughts. A frustrated gush of air shot from his lungs and he leaned back in his chair and stared at the older woman with a look that usually told his brothers and cousins to back off. Evidently she didn’t get the message because she continued talking.

“It’s a good thing I noticed your medication while cleaning your room yesterday or I would never have known you were on a restricted diet. And now that I know I—”

“You were in my room yesterday?” he interrupted her, leaning forward in the chair and piercing her with an even deeper look.

“How else do you think it got clean?”

Bas’s scowl deepened but it didn’t seem to affect Sadie Robinson any. “So you snooped into my things?” he asked incredulously.

She waved her hand in the air. “Of course not. The pill bottle was right there on the counter in the bathroom. I had to pick it up and move it to clean off the area. Of course, when I did I couldn’t help but notice you’re taking the same medication my Albert used to take.”

_Her Albert?_ Bas hadn’t realized she was married. “And where is your Albert?”

“Dead.”

Out of respect, he bit back the word _damn_ as he rubbed a hand down his face. That was all he needed to know. Her Albert who used to take the same medication he took was dead. Although Bas wished he could move on without asking the next question, something inside him made him inquire anyway.

“And how did he die?”

“He had high blood pressure and although the medication helped, he refused to give up some of his favorite foods that were killing him. And knowing what happened to Albert, I can’t in good conscience allow the same thing to happen to you.”

Bas lifted a brow, sure he’d heard her wrong. “Excuse me?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I said I won’t allow the same thing to happen to you. My Albert only thought of himself. He should have cared enough to want to live longer so he could be here with me while we spent our retirement years together. But he didn’t take care of himself and now he’s gone. We were married almost fifty
years and had four beautiful children and he didn’t live long enough to be around for the first great-grand. I tried to tell him to eat healthy. I even offered to prepare him all the foods that were better for him. But he refused to give up that steak twice a week, as well as the potatoes, the bread and let’s not talk about the desserts.”

No, Bas didn’t want to talk about the desserts. He didn’t want to talk about food period. “But I’m not your husband, Ms. Sadie,” he decided it was time to point out.

“No, but some day you’ll be somebody’s husband if you live long enough. You’re young, too young to be worried about some nasty ailment like high blood pressure, which can lead to other problems like heart disease. It’s best that you get a handle on things now before it’s too late. And while you’re living here I intend to help you. I owe it to my Albert and your mother to do so.”

Bas shook his head in frustration. “But you don’t know my mother.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’re all members of the ‘Mothers Club’ and I know wherever she is, she’ll thank me for trying to save her son from an early grave.”

Bas sighed deeply, recognizing the stubborn glint in the woman’s eyes. It was the same glint he’d seen in his own mother’s eyes several times, and the one he had seen in Kylie’s the day she had confronted him after finding out about his medical issues. Ms. Sadie was right. Once a mother, always a mother. All mothers shared a bond to make their kids’ lives miserable.

Bas decided to use another approach. “Ms. Sadie, don’t you think getting involved in my medical business is carrying things a little too far? I’m just a resident here for a while. I’m a grown man—thirty-five. Shouldn’t my eating habits be my decision to make?”

“Yes.”

Bas nodded, glad they were finally getting somewhere. “And don’t you think you’ve crossed the line by serving me oatmeal instead of the breakfast you gave to everyone else this morning?”

He watched as the older woman pushed a curly lock of gray hair away from her face and in that instant he saw it—the look of stark worry in her eyes. She actually thought his fate could be sealed like her Albert’s if he didn’t eat differently. Aw hell. All he needed was the old woman worrying to death about him. And although she had agreed that what he ate was his business, he knew as far as she was concerned, to feed him the high-calorie foods he liked would be like signing his death warrant.

Bas knew there was only one thing he could do and that would be to find another place to stay as soon as he could. He refused to hang around Newton Grove for the next three months and live under the same roof with an older version of Kylie Hagan Steele.

It just so happened he had run across a place for sale the day he’d been out riding around with Reese. It was a quaint little cabin just outside of town on a small lake in the mountains. If nothing else it would be a nice piece of investment property. He would see a realtor about it first thing tomorrow.

He met Ms. Sadie’s gaze. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll eat the oatmeal every morning if it makes you happy.” Just until I get that cabin, he decided not to add.

Her worried look brightened into a smile. “Thank you and it will. And when you live to your late seventies with kids, grands and great-grands like me, you’ll be grateful that someone cared enough about you to make sure you stuck to a proper diet.”

“But you don’t know my mother.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’re all members of the ‘Mothers Club’ and I know wherever she is, she’ll thank me for trying to save her son from an early grave.”

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“Not a chance,” Bas muttered under his breath as he scooted back to the table to eat his oatmeal.

Leah smiled as she looked at herself in the oval mirror she held in her hand. “I think even after all these years no one can take care of a woman’s head like you can, Kate.”

The older woman chuckled and waved her hand as if refusing to accept the flattering comment. “Doing your hair has always been easy. I’m glad you didn’t put all that crazy dye in it while living out in Los Angeles. That would have damaged it for sure. Your hair is just as thick and healthy as it’s always been.”

Leah smiled at the compliment. “Thanks.” Kate had been doing her hair ever since Leah was a teenager and her dad had agreed to let her get a perm. Kate was right, Leah’s hair had always been thick and healthy, but what Kate had been too nice to add was that it had also been unmanageable. While Jocelyn could get by with going to the hair salon every two weeks, Kate was sentenced to see Leah on a weekly basis.

Leah couldn’t help but remember those times. Jocelyn had been close to their father and she had been close to their mother. She’d died when Leah had been only twelve, and all Leah could remember was how empty she’d felt. Jocelyn had always been Daddy’s girl and hadn’t experienced the same sense of loss as Leah had. From the day they’d placed her mother in the ground, Leah couldn’t wait to move away from a town filled with loneliness for her without the mother she had adored.

“I was sorry to hear about your dad, Leah. Everyone around here was. He was a good man.”

Leah nodded. She hadn’t realized just what a good man he was until she’d found herself alone, hurt and out in
California on her own. More than once she’d come close to picking up the phone and telling him what had happened to her and why she’d left the way she had. But shame had kept her from doing so.

Her only saving grace was actually someone with the name of Grace. How she had ended up on the woman’s doorstep one night, she still wasn’t sure. All she knew was that she was convinced she’d heard footsteps behind her while walking home alone from the restaurant where she’d worked. Remembering what had happened to her before, she had gone almost stone-crazy and had run to the first house she’d come to and begged for help.

Help had come in the way of an older woman, no bigger than a mite, who had offered her safety. Grace Thorpe had been a godsend. After making sure Leah was safe, she’d offered her food to eat and a place to stay, much better than the dump where she’d been living.

Grace’s two sons had threatened to move their mother in with them and their wives on a rotating basis, not wanting the old woman to live alone anymore. What Grace had needed was a companion, someone to be there with her during the day and to do the grocery shopping and drive Grace to church on Sundays. Since Leah worked at the restaurant at night, she grabbed the opportunity.

Half an hour later after leaving the hair salon, Leah was strolling through downtown Newton Grove, checking out the various shops and noticing what changes the town had made over the years. After living in the hustle and bustle of L.A. for five years, she appreciated the solitude and quiet a place like Newton Grove offered. She’d never realized how much she missed living in this town until now.

Tossing her hair out of her eyes, she kept walking, remembering a place close by that used to sell breakfast and wondering if it was still open. She had gotten up early and had started a pot of coffee but hadn’t made breakfast for herself, or her sister, who rarely took the time for breakfast.

Jocelyn.

Leah couldn’t help but wonder what was going on with her sister. There was never a time she didn’t think her older sister was in control and made things happen just the way she wanted. But now, at twenty-three, Leah was seeing things through different eyes, more appreciative and caring eyes, and she hoped that whatever had caused Jocelyn to walk the floor last night would go away.

Leah passed in front of a store window and stopped. Then she noticed what had grabbed her attention. It was a baby store with a number of items on display. She pulled her jacket closer around her and not for the first time she remembered the dream she’d had to let go of years ago.

She would never have the baby she always wanted. A little one she could bounce on her knee, sing lullabies to and sprinkle with the scent of baby powder. She had dreamed about this child of hers for so long and how he would look up at her with dark-brown eyes and the same smile that had gone straight to her heart—like his father’s had done six years ago. There was nothing that could even make her think of staying in Newton Grove until she had met Reese the summer before her senior year of high school.

Love and caring hadn’t meant a damn thing to her until then. The only thing she wanted to do was hurry up and graduate and haul ass, go as far west and away from Tennessee as a plane ticket could take her.

Then, in a slow, methodical process Reese had broken down her defenses. He had done something no one else had been able to do—he’d understood her loss. He had listened when she had wanted to talk about her mother. He had understood her pain and sense of loss because he had experienced those same things himself when he’d lost his father at sixteen. With patience, care and understanding, he had made her fall in love with him in a way that was so complete that she hadn’t thought of leaving town. The only thing she had wanted to do was to hang around, marry him and have his babies.

But now that was a dream that would never come true. Although there was no physical reason why she couldn’t have a child, she would never be able to let a man touch her that way. At one point she had thought about artificial insemination, but a lot of things prevented that. First, she didn’t have the money and her insurance would not cover such a procedure. Second, she would still have to take off her clothes for the procedure, and she couldn’t do that in front of anyone. Third, the thought of carrying a baby from someone she didn’t know was a turnoff for her. The only man’s baby she’d ever dreamed of having was Reese’s.

Feeling a knot settling in her throat, she wiped a hand across her face, swiping at the tears that she couldn’t stop from flowing down her cheeks. Life was cruel, but considering all the hard times she had given her father while growing up, maybe in the end she had gotten everything she deserved. With that thought more tears began to fall.

Reese had just walked out of the café holding a steaming cup of coffee. It was early and the air was brisk, but nothing smelled better than fresh roasted brew in the morning. He headed for his parked truck, determined to be at the construction site before the men got there this morning. He needed to go over yet another change Marcella Jones had made, but at least thanks to Sebastian Steele, it was a change she would be paying for.

He liked Steele, although he knew Jocelyn hadn’t yet gotten used to the guy hanging around. But he felt fairly
certain that once she saw he wasn’t one of the bad guys she would be okay. His handling of Manuel’s situation had proven that he did have a heart.

Reese was about to unlock his truck door and get in when something made him look to the right. He blinked, thinking he was seeing things. Standing a few doors from the café was a woman whose profile so closely resembled Leah’s that it was startling. And the more he stared at her, the more he began to realize that it was Leah.

He would know her anywhere, the woman who years ago had stolen his heart, just like he would always remember the one night he had made her his in a way no other man had. It had been special for the two of them and

He immediately forced the thoughts from his mind. That night had been special for him, but evidently not for her, because less than a month later she had left town without looking back. He would never forget the pain he had felt when she’d left. It was pain that still lived in a place deep in his heart, although he wished it would get out of there and leave him alone. He knew that until he was able to let go he would never be worth a damn to any other woman. The thought that Leah had done that to him left a bitter taste in his mouth.

A part of him just wanted to get in the truck and drive away and pretend he hadn’t seen her. But for some reason he couldn’t do that. The only way he could eradicate Leah from his mind and heart forever finally was to come face to face with her again. He no longer wanted to know why she’d left the way she had, since nothing she said now would matter. He just had to be convinced that he could look her in the face and then turn and walk away.

He took slow steps toward her, and the closer he got the harder his heart began pounding. And when he finally came to stand behind her, he stood without moving since she hadn’t noticed his presence. She was too busy studying the items in the store’s window. He glanced beyond her to see what had her absolute attention and frowned. It was a baby shop and she was looking at baby clothes. Why would she be doing that?

The next question that skated through his mind was who was pregnant? He didn’t like the answer he suddenly came up with. Could the reason Leah wasn’t in a hurry to return to California be because she was pregnant?

A blade, sharper than any knife he’d ever handled, sliced through his insides at the thought that she could possibly be carrying a child that wasn’t his. He hung his head as pain clouded his thoughts, and he knew he had to get away from there. But something held him transfixed and he knew he had to do this. He had to confront a part of his past that he wished at that moment had never taken place.

Sighing deeply, he took a step closer and noticed Leah was trembling and her shoulders were shaking. Evidently, she was a lot colder than he was.

Deciding not to prolong things, he forced her name from his lips. “Leah?”

Leah’s body went stiff, and she hoped more than anything she had imagined the sound of the deep masculine voice. The last thing she needed at that particular moment was to come face to face with the one man who still had a clamp on her heart. The one man she had never stopped loving. The one man she had hurt deeply. And the one man she would never deserve to have again.

“Leah?”

When he said her name a second time, she knew fate was being more than cruel to her today. It was being outright merciless. Pulling in a deep breath, as deep as she could inhale, taking one final swipe at her tears and bracing herself, she slowly turned around while asking God to give her the strength to endure what she knew was going to be one of the hardest moments of her life.
Chapter 8

Nothing could have prepared Reese for the impact of looking into the face of the woman who had shattered his heart into a thousand tiny pieces. Bitterness, anger, hurt and the pain he hadn’t been able to let go of suddenly hit him full force, and he almost crushed the hot cup of coffee he held in his hand.

All he could think was that standing before him was the woman who’d once told him she loved him. The woman he had thought he would forever share his life with. The woman destined to be the mother of his children, and the one woman who even now had the love he hadn’t been able to share with any other.

The thought that he still loved her, hadn’t gotten over her, although he had tried, left a bitter taste in his mouth, left his joints achy with humiliation and made everything within him want to strike out and hurt her as much as she had hurt him. But something was keeping him from doing that. He frowned, seeing the wetness of her eyes and the single tear she’d tried to quickly swipe away. Leah was crying. Why? And why was he even giving a damn?

Then he remembered. She was standing in front of the display window at a baby store. Something about babies had her upset. He quickly jumped back to his earlier suspicion. Was Leah pregnant, and was that the reason she was hanging around?

“Reese, it’s good seeing you.”

Her words cut into him. The sound of her voice used to send excitement buzzing through every cell in his body. Now it hit a brick wall of resentment. How could she fix her mouth to say it was good seeing him when this was the first time they had come face to face in five years?

He sighed deeply. “I wish I could say the same thing, Leah,” he said, his voice low while he fought to keep it steady. “But at the moment, it’s not good seeing you again.”

Although his words hurt, Leah knew they were what she deserved, and she stood still, feeling the intense anger radiating from him. Jocelyn had warned her, but nothing could have prepared her for this degree of anger. Not from the man who had taught her how to love. The man who had shown her it wasn’t always about her but the people she cared about and who cared for her. She’d never got a chance to let him know she’d learned the lessons he had so lovingly taught. The night she was going to commit her heart and soul to him was the same night Neil had assaulted her.

She felt a tear she couldn’t fight back slide down her cheek as she met his hostile gaze and said, “I’m sorry you feel that way, Reese.”

She watched the frown that formed between his thick eyebrows and saw the narrowing of his eyes. “Why haven’t you left yet? There’s nothing here for you anymore. You made that decision five years ago, didn’t you? That none of us were worthy of your time, consideration…and love.”

Her heart clutched as a sharp pain ripped through it. He would think that, wouldn’t he? And since he would continue to think that, there was nothing she could say or do to ease the pain or soothe his anger. The best thing to do was to leave.

“I think I’d better go now,” she said, not wanting to argue with him. Besides, seeing the fury in his eyes was too much. Reese had always been one of the most easygoing, gentle and loving people she knew. To know he had become a ball of anger because of her was more than she could handle.

“Yeah, go, Leah. Walk away. Leave and don’t look back. You’re good at that, aren’t you?”

She felt more tears well up in her eyes, tears she refused to stand before him and shed. “Yeah, I guess I am. Goodbye, Reese.” And as quickly as her legs could carry her, she turned and began walking away. And although it broke her heart, she didn’t look back.

“What do you mean we got the wrong tile?”

“Because it’s not what we ordered,” Harry Henderson answered Jocelyn in disgust. “The box says it’s what we ordered but the color is off a shade. See for yourself.”

Shaking her head in frustration, Jocelyn put down the saw and went to inspect the box in question. Mason Construction had used Harry exclusively for all their tile work for as long as she could remember. Over the years the older man had brought his son and his grandsons into the business, however, he refused to give up the work and retire.

She often wondered how, at seventy-one, he was able to get on his knees to lay tile. But she had to admit he
was still good at what he did and could be depended on more than a lot of the younger workers.

She glanced back at Harry. “How much of the wrong tile did we get?”

Harry rubbed his bald head, reluctant to tell her. “All thirty boxes, which was supposed to cover over threehundred square feet.”

The entire foyer. Jocelyn breathed in deeply. It was either that or scream. “Let’s get the store on the phone.”

“I did that already. They apologized for their mistake but said when they called the distributor they were told
it’s a popular shade that wouldn’t be available for six weeks.”

“Six weeks! But it was their mistake.”

“That’s not good enough,” Jocelyn said, seeing red. And it didn’t help matters that she hadn’t gotten a good
night’s sleep. “Marcella wants to move into this place in two weeks. Let’s skip the distributor and go straight to the
manufacturer.”

“I did that, too. It’s their policy to deal only with the distributor.”

“I don’t give a hoot about their policy. Give me the number. Give me the number,” she said, snatching the cell phone out of her back
pocket and punching in the numbers Harry was calling out to her. This was definitely not her morning. They’d had
to cancel the committee meeting because three of the members had called at the last minute to say they couldn’t
make it. And then the traffic light on the corner of Rondell and Marlborough had been out, which had backed traffic
up for almost an hour.

Jocelyn sighed when she encountered an auto prompter and had to punch in some more numbers. She glanced
up and saw that Harry had had the good sense to get lost for a while after sensing she was getting hotter than fire.

Reese would normally handle discrepancies such as this, but the guys told her he’d left to pick up supplies. They’d
further told her that he was in a bad mood. She couldn’t help but wonder what had Reese’s dander up.

A half hour later, her head was spinning and she’d gotten nowhere. The six-week delay still stood.

Jocelyn snapped the phone shut. Didn’t businesses believe in providing good customer service anymore?

“So, what’s going on?”

She looked up and her eyes collided with those of Bas. For some reason, seeing him made more anger spike
through her. He was the reason for her not getting the proper rest last night, and seeing him reminded her of it.

And to make matters even worse, the midday sunlight that was streaming through those windows they’d
installed a couple of weeks ago was hitting him at an angle that made an uncomfortable quiver pass through her
stomach, not to mention the flush of heat that spread through her body. As usual, he was wearing a pair of jeans and
a T-shirt. This time the shirt was rooting for the Pittsburgh Steelers. She frowned, wondering if he had a real
allegiance to any team. To any woman.

She shook her head, getting even angrier that she would wonder about such a thing; his love life was no
concern of hers.

“Bas to Jocelyn,” he said, waving a hand back and forth in front of her face. “Can you read me? You seemed to
have zoned out.”

Even angrier than before, she folded her arms over her chest. “And where have you been?”

He leaned back against the fireplace mantel and smiled slowly. “I didn’t know you wanted me.”

What he said and the way he said it sent her pulse into overdrive. It wasn’t fair. The man had a sexy physique,
he was handsome as all outdoors, and on top of everything else he had a sexy voice that could rival Barry White’s
any day.

“What’s the name of the distributor?”

“Tough. We’ll go to the manufacturer.”

Did he think she hadn’t tried that already, too? “I did that,” she all but spat out. “And I got nowhere.”

“What’s the name of the distributor?”
Jocelyn blew out a sharp breath. “Arnett Distributors.”

“Arnett Distributors?” He almost laughed. “Then there shouldn’t be a problem.”

He sounded so convinced she couldn’t help but ask, “And why shouldn’t there be a problem?”

He smiled again as he met her gaze while pulling out his cell phone and punching in numbers he evidently knew by heart. “Because the Steele Corporation is one of their biggest clients.”

Jocelyn nervously chewed the insides of her cheeks. Could it be possible that Bas had enough clout with Arnett to rectify a major screw-up? She couldn’t help remembering the last house they’d done for Marcella Jones and how she claimed the kitchen fixtures hadn’t been the ones she’d ordered. She’d pitched such a fit that Jim had taken the six-hour drive to Birmingham and back to pick up the ones Marcella claimed she was supposed to have. Jocelyn didn’t relish the thought of having to tell her about the tile.

“Mark Arnett, please.”

Bas’s words intruded into her thoughts and she wondered how he’d gotten past the auto prompts. She wondered too if he’d gotten any more sleep last night than she had. He didn’t seem tired and grouchy this morning. Evidently he hadn’t had a restless night remembering how they had indulged in such a mind-blowing kiss. Maybe it had been mind-blowing just to her. Maybe for him it was just so-so.

“Mark? How are you? This is Sebastian Steele. Yes, I’m fine.” Then cutting to the chase he said, “Look, I need your help and I want you to put it to the top of your list.” He nodded. “Good. There’s been a mix-up with a supplier of one of our subsidiary companies and I need it straightened out. I need a particular style of marble tile sent to me right away.” There was a pause. “How soon? Overnight if you can.” Another pause. “Here’s the style number,” he said and began reading the information off the invoice.

“Think you can handle that?” he asked without missing a beat. “Great. Here’s the address I want it sent to.”

Five minutes later Bas was hanging up the phone, smiling. “Any other fires you want me to put out?”

Not unless he wanted to drop a gallon of water on her head, Jocelyn thought as intense heat ran through every part of her body. While he’d been on the phone with Mark Arnett, trying to save her company from Marcella Jones’s wrath, she’d been studying him like a teenager in lust. Every time he moved his body, she got the full effect of seeing him in his tight-fitting jeans and saw how they contoured to his muscular thighs. And if that wasn’t bad enough, that Pittsburgh Steelers T-shirt was clearly emphasizing muscular arms, a firm flat chest and nice wide shoulders. Display Bas on a poster and she would buy whatever he was advertising.

“Jocelyn?”

Snatched out of her reverie, she lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. “No, there aren’t any more fires you need to put out. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” He glanced around. “Where’s Reese?”

“Doing a pickup.”

He blew out a breath and frowned. “When do you expect him back?”

She lifted a brow. “Not sure. Is anything wrong?”

“No, just have him call the office when he returns.”

For some reason Jocelyn felt he wasn’t telling her everything. Why did he want to talk to Reese? He was just the foreman. She was the one in charge of things. Maybe she needed to remind him of that.

“Look,” she said, leaning closer and looking intently at him.

“Yes?” he said, and she felt the force of his own gaze back.

“You do remember who’s in charge, don’t you?”

He smiled. “Yeah, I think so, but do you want to remind me again?”

She frowned, and suddenly wanted to find the hammer and clobber him. “I’m trying to be nice.”

“You shouldn’t have to try so hard. It should come naturally,” he said and reached out and tweaked her nose.

“I’ll see you later.”

She was ready to throw out an angry retort when she saw that Harry had reappeared and the two of them were talking with obvious familiarity. Evidently they remembered each other from that summer Bas had worked with her father. Jocelyn decided what she had to say to Bas could wait. There was no need to put him in his place in front of Harry. She would have enough time to read him later.

She was pulled away from those thoughts when her cell phone rang. “Yes?”

“Is Reese there?”

She recognized Leah’s voice immediately. “No. Why?”

“Because I saw him this morning.”

She could tell from the tone of her sister’s voice that there was more. “And?”

“And we had words.”

Jocelyn felt her throat tighten. “Not so nice ones, I gather.”
“You gathered right.”
Jocelyn nodded. No wonder Reese was in a bad mood. Now she understood why the men thought he was angry about something. “Are you okay?” she asked, concerned.

“Yes, but barely. And you were right. He hates me.”
“I never said he hated you. I said he was still hurting.”
“Same difference, since I’m the one who hurt him.”

There was a pause because Jocelyn didn’t know what to say. No, that wasn’t true. She did know what to say, but she also knew Leah wouldn’t want to hear it. She trailed a finger along the fine craftsmanship of the wooden banister Reese had completed last week. “I still think you should tell him the truth.”

“I can’t.”
She decided not to press when she heard the trembling in Leah’s voice. She didn’t have to see her sister’s face to know she’d been crying and probably still was. “Hey, how about the two of us doing something tonight?”

“Like what?”

“Going to a movie.”

“A movie?”

“Yes, a movie. When was the last time we went to a movie together?” She could just imagine Leah bunching up her forehead trying to remember.

“Um, I think it was when Aunt Susan took us to see Titanic.”

“Hey, you’re right,” Jocelyn said smiling as she remembered. “She really liked that picture, didn’t she?”

“Yes, she did. We sat through it twice. After that I didn’t care if I ever saw the ocean again.”

“I felt the same way.” Jocelyn laughed.

“You know,” Leah then said in a quiet voice, “I wish she had been around five years ago. I would have gone to Florida instead of California. For all her proper ways, Aunt Susan was pretty special, wasn’t she?”

Jocelyn nodded. “Yes, she was.” After a brief pause she said, “So how about it? Do you want to do a movie?”

She heard Leah chuckle and liked the sound. “Will going to a movie help you sleep better tonight?” Leah asked with a hint of teasing in her voice.

Jocelyn glanced across the room to Bas. He was still talking to Harry. And as if he felt her eyes on him, he tilted his head and looked at her. The deep intensity of his dark gaze was pinning her to the spot, heating her even more.

It was hard for Jocelyn to keep her voice steady when she replied, “No guarantees there, but it’s worth a try.”

Bas threw the file aside and glanced at his watch. It was almost four in the afternoon. He had a ton of files he still needed to review so there was no reason for Jocelyn Mason to be on his mind.

But she was.

Muttering a curse he leaned back in the chair and picked up a file he had placed to the side. He had done the accounting three times and still the figures weren’t right, but before he jumped to any conclusions, he would do as Jim had instructed him in another letter that Kilgore had dropped off a few days ago. All the note had said was: Talk to Reese first about any discrepancies you may find in the bookkeeping records.

Then, just that quickly, he dismissed the note from his mind as his thoughts wandered to Jocelyn again. He had known she was troubled by something the moment he’d seen her. It was there in her face. She’d had that worried look. And ridiculous as it seemed, something deep within him had wanted to get rid of whatever was causing her stress.

Luckily all it had taken was a phone call and the use of his connections to make things right and to remove her troubled frown. But as usual, they had almost gotten into another argument, something he hadn’t been up to. After talking with Harry he had quickly left, eager to be gone from Jocelyn’s presence before she found another bone to pick. After a sleepless night and dealing with Sadie that morning, he hadn’t been in the best of moods, either. The last thing they needed was to be at each other’s throats…or lips.

Damn, but he couldn’t get their kiss out of his mind! He shook his head remembering. Whoever said ‘out of sight, out of mind’ didn’t know what the hell they were talking about, he thought, reaching for an apple from the basket of fresh fruit Sadie Robinson had dropped off a few moments ago. The woman had stayed only long enough to lecture him on how much better fruit was than some of the other snacks she’d noticed him gobbling up. He hadn’t found her spiel amusing but Noreen, Mason Construction’s secretary, had.

Noreen Telfair.

The woman’s name suddenly made him recall the accounting issue and why he needed to talk to Reese. The one thing he’d noticed about the attractive woman was that she appeared to be a good worker who didn’t have much to say. He knew that she was in her late forties, a divorcée with a teenage daughter, and that she had moved to town
three or four years ago from Atlanta. He’d discovered that bit of info from reading her employee records, which was something he had taken the time to do on everyone who worked at Mason’s.

“The guys said you were looking for me.”

Bas glanced up when Reese walked into what used to be Jim’s office. Bas took one look at Reese, saw his tense expression and immediately knew something was bothering him. “Hey, man, you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said, closing the door behind him and crossing the room to sit in a leather chair. “Today’s been a rough one.”

Bas chuckled. “Tell me about it.” He was pretty good at reading people, and although Reese had said things were fine, Bas knew that something wasn’t. But he was a person who made it a point not to get involved in anyone else’s business unless he was asked.

He leaned forward, remembering why he needed to see Reese. “I was going through the accounting records and found several discrepancies. Kilgore delivered a letter to me a couple of days ago that Jim left. In it were instructions that I talk to you first if I found problems with the books.”

Reese sat up straighter in his chair as a confused expression covered his face. “Jim said that?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder why. As far as I know I’m not privy to any information regarding Mason Construction’s accounting records. What’s the discrepancy?”

“Several deposits of large amounts were placed in an account for Noreen. The last one was a couple of months before Jim died. I verified the signature and he signed off on all of them, but he doesn’t note in the records what they were for.”

“Oh,” Reese said and then sat back and smoothed his hands along the arms of the chair. “I don’t know exactly what they were for, but I have an idea.”

“All right,” Bas said, sensing Reese’s hesitancy in discussing the matter. “Was it a loan? Blackmail? Help me to understand, Reese. We’re talking about a total of over a hundred thousand dollars here.”

Reese shifted nervously in his chair and met the intensity in Bas’s gaze. “No one was supposed to know and I only found out by accident.”

Bas lifted a brow. “You found out what by accident?”

Reese shifted in his chair again and lowered his eyes when he spoke. “That Jim and Noreen were lovers.”

Bas didn’t so much as blink since that had been one of his suspicions. “Why did they keep it a secret? Jim was a widower and Noreen is divorced.”

Reese shrugged and met Bas’s eyes. “Yes, but there’s the issue of the difference in their ages. We’re talking about fifteen years. And besides that, this is a small town that sometimes feeds on gossip, and Noreen has a teenage daughter they wanted to protect. They were very discreet and most of the time they planned out-of-town trips. They had been together a couple of years before I found out. I happened to be visiting a cousin in Atlanta when I ran into the two of them in a hotel there. Needless to say, it was a very uncomfortable moment because it was the last thing I’d suspected.”

Bas nodded. “Did Jocelyn know?”

“I doubt it. At least Jim and Noreen assumed she didn’t know. I really don’t think she would have had a problem with it had she known. But like I said, Jim was uncomfortable about the difference in their ages. Noreen didn’t have a problem with it.”

“And they were lovers until he died?”

“Yes, and I really thought things would come out then, but Jim made Noreen promise not to say or do anything to give them away. That part was pretty hard on her.”

“I’m sure it was.”

“And he didn’t want to leave her a big chunk in his will like he did for me, to give everyone a reason to speculate why. That’s why he set up a special account for her in this bank in Memphis. She didn’t know he was doing it until right before he died.”

“I see.”

“That’s probably why he wanted you to come in and check out things before Jocelyn got a mind to call in an independent accountant to audit the records.”

Bas leaned back in his chair. “Thanks for sharing that with me. That clears up a lot.”

“Well, Noreen and Jim cared a lot for each other and although their affair wasn’t made public, they made each other happy, and to me that’s all that mattered. For some people happiness is a rare commodity these days.”

Bas said nothing for a moment after hearing the rancor in Reese’s voice. He remembered having to deal with his brother’s Morgan’s bitterness a few months ago when a woman he was interested in refused even to discuss the possibility of them pursuing a relationship.
Bas quickly made a decision about something. He might as well call it a day since he wasn’t thinking about work much anyway. “So, what are your plans for the rest of the day, Reese?”

Reese stood. “I’m going over to the gym to work out awhile. I feel like hitting something and I prefer it to be a punching bag than a human being.”

Bas nodded. He knew the feeling. He remembered passing the gym when he arrived in town. It seemed like a pretty new facility. He couldn’t remember the last time he gave his body a good workout. “Mind if I join you?”

Reese smiled. “No, not at all.”

“Good. I’ll run by Sadie’s and get my gear and then meet you there in about thirty minutes.” Bas locked the files in the drawer for the night.

Beating up on a punching bag wasn’t such a bad idea.
Chapter 9

This was the part of construction she loved the best. The finish. Or in this case, the part that was pretty close to being finished, because with Marcella Jones you never knew for sure. But since Bas had explained their pay-if-you-make-any-changes policy, she had kept the changes to a minimum. In fact she had made barely any at all.

Jocelyn glanced around with her hand on her hips. This was indeed a beautiful home and she could imagine how grand it would look furnished. Marcella wasn’t known to skimp when it came to getting what she wanted so there was no doubt in Jocelyn’s mind that this house would be the talk of the town for a while…at least until Marcella saw another design for a home that suited her fancy in one of those magazines of hers. Then there would be house number four.

“It looks nice, doesn’t it?”

Jocelyn turned and smiled at Reese. “Yes, it does, and from the look of things, we’ll finish on time. That marble tile came this morning and Harry and his crew have already put it down. They’ll be back tomorrow to grout it.”

She then studied Reese with concern in her eyes. She hadn’t seen him yesterday and wondered if he was okay. “And how are you, Reese? Leah told me you saw each other yesterday.”

Jocelyn watched as bitterness lined his lips. “Yes, we did. I should have been prepared but I wasn’t,” he said quietly.

“And I don’t think she was prepared, either.”

Reese’s dark eyes flashed. “Then that’s tough for her, isn’t it?” He inhaled deeply and said, “Look, Jocelyn, I’d rather not discuss Leah, but there is something I need to know. If you can’t tell me, then I’ll understand.”

“What?”

Reese hung his head and studied the gleaming wood floor for a second then met Jocelyn’s gaze again. “Is Leah pregnant? Is that the reason she’s not in a hurry to leave here?”

Of all the questions she had expected him to ask that sure wasn’t one. “What gave you an idea like that? She definitely doesn’t look pregnant.”

“No, but yesterday morning I walked up on her staring into the display window of that baby store in town…and she was crying.”

“Oh.” Jocelyn pressed a hand to her chest as if she could feel her sister’s pain. Poor Leah. She hadn’t been crying for what she had, but for what she thought she could never have—Reese’s child.

“Well, is she pregnant?”

She heard the anger in his voice and the pain. The thought that Leah might be pregnant with another man’s child had to be hurting him deeply. At least that was one pain Jocelyn could take away. “No, she’s not pregnant.”

“How do you know for sure? She might be and just hasn’t told you.”

“Because I know,” she snapped, feeling the need to come to Leah’s defense, considering everything. “She can’t be pregnant.”

Reese frowned deeply. “You don’t know that.”

“I do know that,” she said, rounding on him angrily. “She hasn’t been involved with anyone since you and—”

Jocelyn stopped abruptly, fearing she might have said too much.

“What the hell do you mean she hasn’t been involved with anyone since me? Do you actually believe that lie?”

he asked incredulously. “I never thought you of all people would be that gullible.”

Jocelyn’s eyes flashed fire. “Yes, I believe it because…”

He lifted a brow. “Because what?”

Disgusted with herself and the entire situation and knowing if Neil Grunthall wasn’t dead already he would have been by the end of the day, she released a frustrated sigh. “Look, Reese, forget I said anything.”

“What are you not telling me, Jocelyn?” he asked, grabbing her arm.

She snatched it back, although it cost her to do so. She would love for him to know what she wasn’t telling him. “Look, let it be, okay? All you need to know is that Leah isn’t pregnant.” She turned to leave but Reese called out to her and she turned back around. “What?”

“Just in case I don’t see you in the morning, I’m cutting out a little early tomorrow. Two of Bas’s brothers are coming in and I plan to take them up to Cedar Springs for the weekend to do a little fishing.”
“Fine,” she said, shoving both hands into the pockets of her jeans. “Enjoy yourselves.”
Then she turned back around and continued walking.

“Thanks for a great weekend, Reese,” Bas said on Sunday afternoon as he got out of Reese’s truck and gathered his belongings. “There were good lodgings, good company, good fishing and damn good beer. What more can a man ask for?”

“Nothing’s wrong with a good woman every now and then,” Reese answered, grinning.

“Hell, but not on a fishing trip. They get too squeamish and want you to have pity and throw your catch back. Women and fishing don’t mix.”

Reese gave a smooth laugh. “You must have never gone fishing with the right woman. Leah could handle just —” He stopped suddenly, then said. “Oh, hell, dammit to three degrees. I promised myself that I wouldn’t mention her name, much less think about her this weekend. She’s not worth the effort.”

Bas shook his head. “Evidently she is. What has it been? Five years? And you’re still carrying a torch? That was some kind of love.”

Reese’s hand tightened on the steering wheel. It would be useless to deny he was still carrying a torch. “Yeah, and she didn’t deserve any of it.”

“Seems you haven’t convinced your heart of that yet. See you around, buddy.”

Moments later Bas entered the cabin he had purchased with his brothers’ blessings as investment property for the Steele Corporation. Reese, Morgan and Donovan had helped him to move in Friday afternoon then they had left to go fishing Saturday morning.

He couldn’t help but ponder the fact that Reese was still in love with a woman who had torn out his heart and stomped on it. Bas was damn grateful he had never been in love. Even when he was engaged to Cassandra, he’d liked her, been fond of her, but not once did he think he loved her. Their marriage would have been a sort of business arrangement. With thirty staring her in the face, she wanted a husband who could keep her in the lifestyle she was accustomed to, and he’d wanted a proper lady who was refined as well as beautiful. What he hadn’t been looking for but what he’d found in Cassandra had also been snobbery to a degree he just couldn’t tolerate.

Half an hour later, after taking a very relaxing shower, Bas walked out of the bathroom. Wrapped in a towel, not yet ready to put on any clothes, he crossed the room to look out the window, liking the view. Mountains in the distance and a small stream out back provided a picturesque scene. This could be a place he, his brothers or cousins could use when they just wanted to get away. Privacy was golden sometimes, and everybody needed it on occasion.

When he’d told Ms. Sadie that he had purchased the cabin and would be moving, she had smiled and made him promise to eat properly. But he had a feeling she would continue to show up at the office at lunch time with a fruit basket for him. In a way he looked forward to her visits, even realizing he actually enjoyed eating fruit.

After a few moments, Bas suddenly felt antsy and considered driving to the office to work on more files, but he quickly decided against it. This had been a relaxing weekend, and he didn’t want to spoil it. He couldn’t help the smile that touched his lips at that moment. He had been glad to see Morgan and Donovan, although he would never admit it to them. And Reese had been the perfect host. The four of them had fished to their hearts’ content, drunk as much beer as their bellies could hold and talked about anything and everything…except women. They hadn’t had much time to think of women, either.

But now, back in the privacy of his little place, Bas’s mind was once again filled with thoughts of Jocelyn. He couldn’t help wondering what she was doing. Had she thought of him any this weekend? Was the kiss they’d shared a few nights ago still seared on her brain the same way it was on his?

His lips quirked. There was only one way to find out. He wanted to see her. He needed to see her. Damn, he needed to kiss her again. He grinned. This was the first time he’d ever gotten addicted to a woman’s taste and he wasn’t sure what he was going to do about it other than feed his habit.

“So you’re Sebastian Steele.”

Bas nodded. If the woman who’d opened the door to him was Leah Mason, then he could understand why after five years Reese hadn’t been able to eradicate her from his heart. She was a woman a man wouldn’t be able to forget easily. But then so was her sister.

“Yes, I’m Sebastian and you’re Leah, right?”

“Yes, I’m Leah. I’m glad I finally got to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Bas refused to throw out the cliché “all good I hope,” since he knew if it came from Jocelyn that would not have been the case. “And I’m glad I finally got to meet you,” he said slipping his hands into his pockets. “I was wondering if Jocelyn is home.”

Leah smiled. “Yes, she’s home but not here. She’s at her place right outside of town. Do you know where that
"Yes, I think I do." In all honesty, the day she had taken him there he had been too busy trying to survive the truck ride to care about the direction in which she’d been driving.

"It’s real easy to find," she said, giving him instructions.

"Thanks."

"You’re welcome. I’d like to invite you over for dinner one night when you’re free. Dad thought a lot of you and I’d like to get to know you better."

"Thanks and the same here. Good night."

"Good night."

When she closed the door, Bas turned and quickly walked back to his car. More than anything he wanted to see Jocelyn.

Leah smiled, wondering if she should give Jocelyn a call to prepare her for Sebastian Steele’s visit, then decided not to. Whether her sister admitted it or not she knew something was going on between those two. She smiled and went to the sofa to settle back down with her book.

She’d never known Jocelyn to have a boyfriend. Oh, she had gone out on dates but had never gotten serious about anyone. Now it looked like that history was about to change.

Jocelyn tapped a finger to her lips as she glanced around the room. She had gone shopping yesterday and purchased this beautiful hand-carved vase, and she wasn’t quite certain of the best spot for it.

The coffee table or the bookcase?

She was leaning toward the coffee table when her doorbell sounded. She automatically assumed it was Rita, Reese’s brother’s wife from across the lake.

Instead of asking who it was, she snatched open the door, only to find Sebastian Steele. His tall, broad-shouldered frame lounged against her porch rail, a dark silhouette, barely distinguishable in the faint light spilling out from her foyer.

Caught completely by surprise, she needed a moment before she could say anything. When she found her voice she said, “I usually don’t open the door before finding out who it is first. I assumed you were my neighbor.”

His lips twitched briefly. “I thought we had a serious discussion about the dangers of assuming anything.”

She tipped her head and stared at him. Emotions she didn’t need or want began clogging her throat. “What are you doing here, Bas?” she asked tightly. She hadn’t seen him in three days and she wished to God she hadn’t been counting. But she had.

Bas pushed away from the rail and took a couple of steps forward. He figured if he were to tell her the real reason for his visit—that he wanted to devour her mouth—the door would get slammed in his face, so instead he said, “It’s early. I didn’t want to go to the office, and I wasn’t ready to go to bed yet. We had a great weekend down at Cedar Springs and I could only think of one way to end it.”

“And what way is that?” Jocelyn’s fingers tightened around the doorknob. Her mind was suddenly filled with forbidden yet romantic thoughts. Bas’s gaze was locked on hers and she was beginning to feel this luscious, hot sensation flow all through her. She even felt the floor beneath her feet give way a little. A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and in response she felt something tug deep in the pit of her stomach. Her world began to rock and she waited with bated breath for his reply.

“A rematch. I want to play another game of pinball with you.”
Chapter 10

Jocelyn drew a breath, leaned in the doorway and stared at Bas. She guessed she should have been grateful that a game of pinball was all he had in mind but still... It wasn’t helping matters that since meeting him and sharing two kisses, her body had become somewhat treacherous whenever he was around.

Her system automatically went on overload and it took everything she could muster to retain the common sense she was born with and had kept intact over the years. But another part of her being reminded her that she’d been celibate for a very long time... ever since senior year in college over six years ago. Why let the explosive spontaneous combustion she felt with Bas go to waste?

Because you’re too sensible and dignified to play the games men want to play, she assured herself immediately. Although she was single, mature and unattached, with basic human urges like the next person, that didn’t mean she was into casual sex. When the time came for a man to touch her again, by golly it would mean something and not be an appeasement of curiosity like the last time, which had left her totally disappointed.

“So you want to play pinball?” she finally asked, cocking her brow. “Didn’t you learn anything from our last game?”

He flashed a quick grin. “Oh yeah, I learned a lot. I know not to let my guard down again.”

“Is that what happened?”

“Yes. I concentrated more on you than the game.”

She hadn’t expected him to admit that. “So what’s your game plan this time?”

“Do you really expect me to tell you?”

She chuckled. “No, but I thought it wouldn’t hurt to ask.” She stepped aside. “Come on in and let the game begin.”

An hour or so later Jocelyn glanced over at Bas and narrowed her eyes. He was leading by over one hundred thousand points and she was the one who was finding it hard to concentrate on the game. Frustration began to surface. It wasn’t that she didn’t like losing; she just didn’t like the reason she was losing—her inability to focus.

“Winning this rematch means a lot to you, doesn’t it?” she finally asked when he scored once again.

He grinned over at her. “Worried about losing?”

“No. But it does seem like you’re deliberately dragging this game out.”

“While staying ahead in points.”

“For the moment, yes.”

“Um, I’m just consolidating my shots and economizing my ball time,” he said. “A strategy that works best for me.”

“You’re working too hard as usual,” she said coming to stand close to him, but not close enough to mess with his concentration. “All I do is focus on the shots I can hit consistently and patiently repeat them. In a game of pinball you can never lose control.”

“Or concentration, so please step back, Jocelyn. Your perfume is getting to me.”

“What?”

“Yes.”

“In what way?”

His eyes flashed to hers. “I don’t think you really want to know.”

Jocelyn raised an arched brow. Did she or didn’t she? She was pulled out of her thoughts by his muttered curse.

He hadn’t used his flippers fast enough and it was now her turn.

“Move over Steele. Time for me to recoup.”

Deciding not to crowd her, Bas took the chair a few feet away and watched her in action. He liked seeing the way her eyes sparkled with the feel of victory and the way she licked her lips each time she deployed a ball. Then there was that simple turn of her head, the smile that tilted her lips whenever she hit a shot that made the machine flash.

And last but definitely not least was the way she leaned her body just so to the machine, breasts perked, hips aligned at an angle that had heat drumming through him. Even with her trying to best him at this game, he detected a gracefulness in the ease in which she was attempting to do so. The woman had style, something he noted even when
she was holding a hammer, saw or a drill.
  She had taste. And she tasted good.
  He rubbed a hand over his face wishing he hadn’t thought about her taste.
  When the machine flashed that the game was over, he barely heard her unladylike curse, which let him know he had won this go-round.
  “Want to do another game?”
  He smiled. “No, we agreed on five and I won four of the five, which means I’m on top of you this time.”
  Although Jocelyn knew what he meant by those words, her mind suddenly conjured up something else and heat clawed viciously at the lower part of her stomach. She could just imagine him naked and on top of her beneath silken sheets. “Okay, so now I want a rematch,” she said, needing to get her mind back on track and wondering how she had allowed it to veer into such an outlandish fantasy in the first place.
  “I’ll think about it.”
  Her eyes flamed. “What do you mean you’ll think about it?”
  He stood and slowly walked in front of her. “Just what I said.” He smiled. “Now who’s the sore loser?”
  “I’m not a sore loser,” she denied.
  “Then why are you mad?”
  “I’m not mad.”
  “If not, you’re awfully close,” he said in a husky tone.
  He reached out and took her hand in his, letting his fingers run across her wrist to feel her pulse. “Those are anger beats.”
  “They’re not,” she said, refusing to let the feel of his finger on her wrist unnerve her, stoke a desire she didn’t want to acknowledge.
  “And why are your eyes getting so dark if you aren’t mad?” he asked in an even deeper tone of voice.
  “They aren’t getting dark.”
  “Yes, they are and getting even darker as we speak.” The hand that wasn’t stroking her wrist reached up and framed her face. “And why are your lips trembling if you aren’t mad?”
  She frowned. “You’re seeing things.”
  He leaned in a little closer and let a single fingertip trace a path down to the base of her throat. “No, Jocelyn. I’m feeling things and I think it’s time you felt them, too.”
  Suddenly, the air around them seemed to thicken as he leaned closer and lowered his mouth to hers. The moment their lips touched, lust of an intensity Jocelyn had never known flamed to life, and everything inside her, every cell, every pore, quivered with totally unique and unexpected pleasure.
  When his tongue plundered her mouth, she felt her knees slipping and her nipples tingling against her blouse. Just as before, his tongue was in control, taking, giving and sharing. It was the most conducive pleasure mechanism she had ever felt, and with each and every stroke it was hitting its mark. She was beginning to feel drunk, intoxicated, just plain loose. He smelled good. The scent of him was going straight to her head and the taste of him was getting absorbed in areas she’d rather not think about. This kiss was different from the others, though. It was slow, deep, provoking. And overwhelming. Each time he mated his tongue with hers, captured it, sucked on it, she heard herself moan.
  Reluctantly Bas broke the kiss, inhaled deeply before drawing her closer to him. He needed that. He needed her. He wanted to touch her a little while longer, let his hands skim slowly across her back. Apparently she felt at ease in letting him do so because she stood still, wrapped in his arms, in his heat.
  Moments later, she pulled back, angled her head and gazed up at him and smiled slowly. Her eyes were still dark, her lips moist from his kiss. “If you’re trying to make me forget that I want a rematch, forget it.”
  He released a soft chuckle and leaned down to let his lips brush against hers again, needing the taste, the feel, the touch. “Then I’m going to have to perfect my technique.”
  She doubted he could perfect it any more, but she wouldn’t tell him that. “You can try.”
  “And I will.” Bas smiled. He liked the art of seduction as much as the next guy, although he hadn’t had to contemplate a plan in quite a while. They weren’t talking about pinball anymore but something else, and they both knew it.
  “Don’t consider it, Bas,” she warned, as if reading his thoughts. “We’ll drive each other crazy. I like enjoying life, having fun. You’re determined to work yourself to death.”
  He shook his head. “Hey, I’ve loosened up some.”
  She chuckled. “So I see, but you need to do it even more. Just think of all the fun you’re missing.”
  He gazed at her for a moment. He had enjoyed the workout at the gym with Reese the other day. He had definitely relieved a lot of stress. And going fishing this past weekend had been great, and playing pinball tonight
had been just what he’d needed. But nothing could compare to kissing her. That had been like putting the icing on the cake. An idea suddenly popped into his mind.

“You want to show me how to have fun?”

He could tell his question surprised her, and he watched as she lifted a brow. “Not sure that I can.”

He leaned closer to her and let his lips brush against her moist ones again. “Don’t you want to try?” he asked, nibbling on her neck. “Unless you don’t think you can handle me.” He knew that would be a challenge she couldn’t let slide.

“Oh, I can handle you, Sebastian Steele.”

“Prove it,” he whispered in her ear. “Teach me how to have fun, Jocelyn.”

A deep, gentle trembling in the pit of her stomach answered before her lips could. “Be careful what you ask for Bas…but since you did ask, I’m going to take you on.” She took a step back. “The first thing you have to do is stop work every day at five o’clock.”

He looked at her as though she had lost her mind. “Five o’clock?”

“Yes.”

He thought again about the time he’d spent at the gym. He could do that a couple of days a week in the afternoons. No big deal. “All right.”

A frown drew Jocelyn’s brows together. He was being too agreeable and she was wondering what was going through his mind. “And you can’t arrive at the office before nine in the morning,” she decided to add just to cover all her bases.

She saw the defiance that sparked his eyes and grinned in spite of herself. He had only agreed to quit work at five because he’d intended to arrive at some ungodly hour every morning. She could tell he didn’t like that she was one step ahead of him.

“And next weekend, there’s a jazz festival in Memphis. You want to go have fun?” she asked, deciding to make him see that she meant business.

He shrugged. “Sure.” And then he asked, “When do I get to come up with some of our fun activities?” A gleam shone in the depths of his eyes. “I think we should take turns coming up with stuff.”

She nodded, thinking that would be only fair, but of course she would monitor the stuff he came up with. She knew men had a tendency to take advantage of what they perceived as a golden opportunity. “I don’t have a problem with that. Do you have something in mind?”

He smiled as he grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair and slipped his arms in the sleeves. His gaze held hers when he said, “Yes, I have a few ideas.”

She lifted a brow. “Should I be worried?”

He chuckled. “Of course not. You’re going to have to trust me like I’m going to trust you.” He leaned over and kissed her again, slow, thorough, and as if he desperately needed the memory.

“Come walk me to the door,” he whispered and she shivered when his tongue snaked out and trailed a wet path from her lips to an area beneath her ear.

Jocelyn could barely walk up the steps on unsteady legs and knew that after Bas left it would take the rest of the night to recover from his visit.

“So, I take it Sebastian Steele found you last night.”

Jocelyn lifted her eyebrows and gazed across the breakfast table at her sister. Jocelyn had arrived at her father’s home a little more than thirty minutes ago to find Leah preparing breakfast. “What made you think he was looking for me?”

Leah smiled. “Because he came here first and then I directed him to your place. He’s a cutie.”

“Yes, he is,” Jocelyn muttered and went back to eating her meal.

Amused, Leah watched her sister. She knew Jocelyn wouldn’t volunteer any information so she decided to go ahead and pick it out of her. “So, are the two of you an item?”

The thought of that made Jocelyn choke on her toast and she quickly grabbed her glass of juice and took a gulp. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

Leah shrugged. “The obvious. He’s good-looking and so are you. He’s unattached and so are you. He’s—”

“What makes you think he’s unattached?” Jocelyn asked, setting down her juice glass.

Leah waved her left hand. “No ring. That’s a sure sign.”

“But not a concrete one.”

Leah’s eyes lifted. “You think he’s married?”

“No, I don’t think he’s married.”

“Then you think he has a girlfriend?”
“There’s that possibility.”
“Have you asked him about it?”
“No.”
“Then I most certainly will.”
“Why would you want to know?”
Leah rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to know for myself. I want to know for you.”
Jocelyn pushed her plate aside and leaned forward. “And why would you want to know for me?”
“Because you’re interested in him. I can tell.”
Jocelyn narrowed her eyes. “I hate to tell you that you’re wrong, but you are. I admit Bas is handsome, but he’s not my type.”
“If you say so.”
“I do, so let’s change the subject.”
“All right.”
Jocelyn didn’t miss how her sister’s lips curved in a smile. “So, did you decide whether you want to go to the jazz festival in Memphis this coming weekend? I invited Bas along.”
“You want me to make it a threesome?”
Jocelyn shook her head. “I told him it’s nothing like that. In fact I’m supposed to show him how to have fun.”
“Sounds interesting.”
“It is, so do you want to go?”
“No, I’ll pass. Besides, I need to start packing.”
Surprise showed on Jocelyn’s face. “You’re leaving?”
Leah sighed deeply. “I wish I could move back home, but I can’t.”
Jocelyn didn’t need to ask her why. “Leah, if you were to tell him what—”
“No. And I don’t want to talk about it, Jocelyn,” Leah said in a clear and distinct voice.
Jocelyn drew in a deep breath. She wanted so much for Leah, more than her sister was willing to accept as a way of life. If only she would tell Reese the truth.
“To hang around here any longer will be a mistake, Jocelyn.”
“So you’re planning to leave?”
“Yes, in a few weeks. I’m going to start checking out airline tickets later today.”
“I really do wish you’d consider staying.”
“And I really wish that you’ll understand that I can’t.” That said, Leah rose gracefully, proving all of their Aunt Susan’s teachings were still intact, and left the room.

“You’re going to Memphis this weekend with Jocelyn?” Reese asked, tipping his head to one side to stare at Bas.
Bas pushed aside the stack of files. It was four-thirty and if he intended to keep his word to Jocelyn, he had thirty minutes left before calling it a day. “Yes. And if it wasn’t for that, I’d love going to the horse races this weekend with you and your brother.”
Reese’s lips twitched in amusement. “I can’t wait until Duran Law hears about you and Jocelyn’s weekend plans. He’s been trying to get her to go to that jazz festival with him in Memphis for years and she’s always turned him down. Now, just like that,” he said, snapping his fingers for effect, “you breeze into town and talk her into going.” Reese chuckled. “Yeah, old Duran is going to be pretty pissed.”
Bas leaned back in his chair. “Actually the trip was her idea. She thinks I need to incorporate more fun into my life.” Then, without missing a beat he asked, “And who’s this Duran Law anyway? An old boyfriend?”
Reese snorted. “He wished. Duran’s been a pain in Jocelyn’s ass since high school. I guess he figures sooner or later he’ll wear down her defenses, and he’s too into himself to see that something like that won’t happen.”
Bas frowned, not liking the man already. “How are things going over at the Jones place?”
“Great. We hope to have our walk-through next week. But keep your fingers crossed. We’re yet to have one on time for Marcella. She likes finding things for us to correct or change at the eleventh hour.”
“Yeah, we’ll all keep our fingers crossed.” Bas then glanced at his watch.
“Ready to head over to the gym?” Reese asked.
“In a few seconds. I need to touch base with my brother about something.”
“Okay, I’ll meet you over there.”
“Will do.”
Bas pulled out his cell phone, pressed one number and within seconds he heard his brother Chance’s deep voice. “Bas? What’s going on?”
Before Bas could answer, Chance said, “Hey, hold on and let me take this other call.” And then he clicked off.
Bas knew what a busy schedule his brother had as CEO of the corporation, but he smiled, thinking that time restraints hadn’t gotten in the way of him pursuing Kylie once he’d become interested. To kill time while waiting for Chance, Bas glanced around Jim’s office. There were numerous trophies proclaiming him to be Builder of the Year and several plaques awarded for his community service and involvement in such worthwhile organizations such as the Boy Scouts, Big Dads of America, the Newton Grove Mission and others. Apparently Jim hadn’t had any qualms about occasionally putting his work aside to become involved in things he felt were important to him, activities that gave him enjoyment and the chance to do something other than work. Fun things.
“Sorry about that, Bas. That was a call I was waiting on from the Evans Group.”
Bas lifted a brow. The Evans Group was currently in a bitter labor dispute with the Teamsters Union regarding a number of their employees who had been laid off. “Something going on I need to know about?”
“No, not now, but I’ll keep you posted.”
“Yeah, you do that. I know you’re busy so I won’t hold you. I just want to know if things are still on for Donovan’s birthday party.”
“Yes, Vanessa and Kylie are taking care of all the arrangements, but as far as I know they’re on track. I talked to Taylor and Cheyenne and they’re both flying in. Should be nice. You are coming home for it, aren’t you?”
“Yes, and I might be bringing somebody with me.”
“Oh, who?”
“Jocelyn Mason. I haven’t asked her yet, but it’ll be my turn to come up with some fun activity for us to do.”
“Fun activity? Bas, what are you talking about?”
Bas chuckled, knowing his brother was confused. “I’ll explain things the next time we talk. Just let Kylie and Vanessa know that I might be bringing a guest. I’ll know for certain after this weekend.”
“Okay, I’ll pass on the word. Take care, Bas.”
“You do the same.”
After putting his cell phone away, Bas glanced at his watch. It was five o’clock on the dot. He bade Noreen a good afternoon when he passed her office, and walked out of the building while it was still daylight. Amazing.
The September evening was rather chilly and he pulled his leather jacket tighter around his body. He hadn’t seen Jocelyn that day and had avoided dropping by the job site. It would be hard seeing her and not wanting a repeat performance of the kiss they’d shared last night. The art of kissing had always interested him, and depending on his partner, he usually varied his technique. Cassandra had gotten put off by the use of too much tongue. She liked her kisses the same way she wanted everything else they did that was connected to sex—in moderation. According to her, a true lady didn’t get carried away with passion, especially with a kiss. It was just unthinkable.
He chuckled, glad not all true ladies thought that way. And Jocelyn was a true lady, hard hat, jeans, work boots and all. There was that gracefulness about her even when she was wielding a hammer. She was soft but not mushy. Regal but not overly so and she definitely wasn’t a snob. But what he enjoyed most was how much she liked kissing—just as much as he did. And because she did, he’d never enjoyed kissing any woman as much as he enjoyed kissing her. One aspect of that realization disturbed him, while another kept constant heat drumming through his body.
Smiling, he couldn’t help but look forward to the coming weekend.
“If I didn’t know better I’d think you were trying to avoid me this week.”

A slow smile curved Jocelyn’s lips as she snapped her seat belt in place. She glanced over at Bas and squinted her eyes against the glare of the sun peeking over the mountains. “Now why would you think that?”

Bas stared out of the windshield of his car for a second before tilting his head to meet her gaze. “Because this is the first time I’ve seen you since Sunday night.”

“But we talked on the phone Wednesday,” she reminded him.

“Yes, all of five minutes,” he murmured, backing the car out of her driveway. “And that was to tell me this would be an overnight trip and you had made reservations for us at a hotel. With separate sleeping arrangements.”

Jocelyn grinned and leaned over and tweaked his cheek. “Didn’t want you to get any ideas, Steele.”

An innocent look flashed across Bas’s face before he gave her a warm smile. “You think I’d do something like that?”

“I’m not sure and I decided not to take any chances. This is supposed to be a fun weekend. Our definitions of fun might be vastly different.”

His smile widened as he recalled the kisses that had flooded his mind all week. He just couldn’t shake the memory of how her lips had felt beneath his, the taste of her, how their tongues had mingled, chased each other back and forth. “Oh, I think our definitions might be the same.”

“You think so? Then how about telling me what you have planned for us next?”

Bas glanced over at her when he came to a stop sign. “I want to take you home with me.”

She lifted a brow. “Excuse me?”

He smiled. “My family is giving my youngest brother Donovan a party for his thirty-first birthday next month and I’d like you to go with me.”

“To your family’s function?”

“Yes, as my guest.”

A tiny flush warmed her cheeks. In the good old days when a man took a woman home to meet his family it meant something, but she knew that in this day and age of modern dating, the rules had changed and so had the expectations. You no longer needed a formal date to become romantically involved. The two of you could just meet somewhere and get it on. She’d even heard of the concept of video mobile dating. It seemed “try before you buy” was the way to go now.

“How will your family handle something like that?” she couldn’t help but ask.

He grinned over at her before easing the car onto the interstate. “Seeing you will raise a few brows, I’m sure. I haven’t seriously dated since I ended my engagement eight months ago.”

She was about to tell him that he wasn’t seriously dating now when the last part of his sentence stopped her. “You were engaged?” she asked, trying to stop her head from reeling and her eyes from spinning.

“Yes. You sound shocked. Don’t you think I’m marriage material?”

He shrugged her shoulders. “For some reason I can’t see you sitting by the fireplace with a pipe in your mouth while reading to the kiddies.”

“Get rid of the pipe and go with the scene. I love kids and want a couple of them one day, and when I do settle down and marry, I plan to give my wife and children my absolute attention.”

“Really. Then, what happened?”

“Let’s just say Cassandra and I determined we weren’t compatible after all,” he said easily. Too easily for Jocelyn’s way of thinking.

“How long were the two of you engaged?”

“Six months.”

“And how long did the two of you date before becoming engaged?”

“Almost a year.”

“Jeez, it took you that long to discover the two of you didn’t fit? You don’t come across to me as slow, Bas.”

He didn’t know whether to take her comment as a compliment or an insult. He chose the latter. “I’m not slow and there were reasons I hung in there for as long as I did.”

Jocelyn sighed softly, wondering if love had been the reason. Had he loved this Cassandra person so much that
he’d been determined to make things work between them? Did he still love her? “Do you think the two of you will ever work things out and get back together?”

“Excuse my French, but hell no. There’s no way I’d consider such a thing.”

Brushing her hair back from her eyes, Jocelyn glanced over at him. He certainly didn’t sound like a man who was still in love. But then she was comparing him with Reese. Although Reese was bitter and angry with Leah, Jocelyn could still detect the deep love in his voice whenever he spoke about her sister. With Bas just now, all she heard was disgust.

“So, will you go home with me to Donovan’s party, Jocelyn?”

She wasn’t ready to give him her answer yet. “I’ll let you know. And thanks for offering to do the driving,” she added, feeling the need to change the subject.

“No problem. Just put your head back and relax. I’ll have you in Memphis before you know it.”

She smiled and tilted her seat back. “Just stay within the speed limit. I’m not sharing the cost of a ticket with you.”

Bas chuckled. “You are the last person to give someone advice about speeding.”

A small giggle slipped from Jocelyn’s lips as she closed her eyes.

The hotel Jocelyn had chosen was right in the thick of things and as soon as they dropped their overnight bags off at their respective rooms, they met downstairs in the lobby, ready to explore, enjoy and have fun.

Memphis was known for its food, entertainment and hot spots. But this particular weekend it was all about jazz. What had begun a few years ago as an outdoor concert was now a full weekend of numerous blues and jazz events.

As if it was the most natural thing to do, Bas and Jocelyn wandered the streets holding hands as they shared meals and listened to music from jazz greats as well as students from the University of Memphis music department. One concert displayed a variety of cultures with the native music of the Caribbean, the Middle East and the rich musical heritage of the African-American culture blended together in a way that was soul-stirring at its best.

With vendors on each side the streets were narrow, and more than once Bas had to pull Jocelyn closer to his side to let others pass. Each time his hand touched her waist she would gaze up into the depths of his chocolate eyes and could only smile as an unnerving degree of heat slithered down her spine. Whenever she looked at him her thoughts wandered into forbidden territory and her mind was actually whirling with possibilities of how their night would end.

She clutched the bag filled with the purchases they had made, determined not to go there. Tonight she would go to her room and Bas would go to his; it was that simple. But a warm blush crept into her cheeks when she admitted that likely wouldn’t be the outcome at all. Something was happening to her. With very little effort Bas was doing something no other man had done—awakening her deepest desires. He was connecting to a part of her she had long denied existed. She inhaled deeply. Where was all that poise, self-control and composure she’d always prided herself on?

It was past midnight when they called it a day and began walking back toward their hotel, still holding hands. She recalled they’d even held hands through all the concerts they had attended.

“Did you have fun today?” she asked as they walked lazily through the streets. The crowd on the sidewalks had thinned out a lot. It was evident the people passing them by were party animals, still in a festive mood on their way to some nightclub or other.

Bas smiled at her. “Yes. This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time.”

She grinned and leaned in closer to him. “Even more fun than the fishing trip last weekend?”

He chuckled. “This was a different sort of fun. I hadn’t realized how much I’ve missed by not going to a jazz concert. CDs are nice but there’s nothing like being right there in the audience, having the strings of a guitar and the melodic tune of a piano slowly hum through you. The vitality of it was awesome. Thanks for suggesting that we come.”

She smiled, pleased. “You’re welcome. I’m glad you enjoyed yourself.”

When they reached the entrance to the hotel he suddenly stopped, turned toward her and slid his arms loosely around her neck. He leaned in closer, his mouth barely an inch from hers. “In fact, I may have had too much fun. I’m not ready for the night to end. Feel it?”

“Feel what?” The only thing she felt at that moment was the slow sizzle in her blood from the way he was looking at her. He was so close she could see the dark rings around his pupils, and that look made a deep-rooted longing uncurl inside her.

“Night heat.”

She swallowed against the thickness that suddenly settled in her throat. “Night heat?”

“Yes. Maybe it’s the sound of all that jazz, being surrounded by it while it works inexplicable sensations all
through you. But I honestly think it’s something else.”

“What?”

“You. Me. Here. The night. The heat. The connection,” he breathed against her lips. “Close your eyes and feel it.”

Jocelyn closed her eyes and she began to feel it. She mentally savored the sounds around her, the conversations in the distance, the jazzy music that wasn’t ready to end and the breathy sigh that escaped from between her own lips.

A sultry breeze made her sniff the air and she took in the smell of Cajun food, spicy barbecue ribs, the steamy aroma of blue crabs. Then there was the scent of man, at least of the man standing in front of her. Of all the things she had taken in, he was the one thing that made the night steamy. Hot. He was everything she imagined night heat was about—a male rich in sensuality, masculinity and irresistible charm. A man who could make her heart pound from just one heated look. A man who gazed at you as though he was a predator and you were the object of his intent. “Yes, I can feel it,” she murmured truthfully, before opening her eyes.

Her senses were jolted with the sudden feel of his mouth on hers. Hot and quick. His tongue captured hers before she could take her next breath and then just as quickly, he pulled away.

“There’s a nightclub in the hotel. Do you want to go dancing?”

Jocelyn suddenly felt light-headed, dazed. The air surrounding them flickered softly across her skin, adding to the odd feeling she was experiencing. And at that moment she knew she too wasn’t ready for the night to end. Trembling with a mixture of sensuality and excitement, she met his gaze, smiled and whispered, “Yes, I want to go dancing.”

A deep tremor passed through Bas the moment he took Jocelyn into his arms on the dance floor. The air surrounding them was thick. The jazzy music encircling them was rich and smooth, and she was soft.

If she had been any other woman he would have suggested that they go up to his room instead of going dancing. Holding her against him, moving his body with hers to the sway of the music only intensified the temptation he was trying like hell to fight. He had been feeling something practically all day, but it had become more prevalent when night had set in. He wanted her to feel it, as well. He wanted her to acknowledge its existence as he had. From the first, this heat between them had been there. That was the reason he couldn’t forget her kisses and the reason he wanted to hold her here now, sliding his body intimately against hers, wanting her to feel his desire, his longing, his want. He wanted to touch her all over and had to steady his hands, force them to remain at her back, stroking, caressing, although they were desperate to do more.

But he couldn’t stop his lips from wanting to taste her, so he brushed them against hers, lightly, building passion one degree at a time. He doubted that he would ever get tired of kissing her, whether the kisses were light and breezy or deep and demanding. As he continued to delight her mouth with slow, easy kisses, he felt her body become almost weightless in his arms. He wanted to sweep her off her feet, into his embrace and take her to his room or hers to give her pleasure so intense she would remember this night for the rest of her life.

Damn. Something was happening to him. Emotions he was known to keep bottled up inside of him were fighting to seep out. In the past he’d been too busy plowing himself with work, but lately he’d had a lot of undemanding time to think and appreciate, to begin to enjoy life. And he was beginning to like having free time on his hands. He was enjoying having fun, leaving work on time and going to the gym and going fishing with Reese and his brothers. He couldn’t recall the last time he had allowed himself the time to indulge in such simple pleasures.

After that summer with Jim, when he had returned home to finish college and work in the family business, he had placed himself on a rigid schedule that he’d gotten addicted to over the years. But now it seemed that Jocelyn Mason intended him to incorporate some fun into his life, and he was actually looking forward to it. He was even eager to settle down and start working on that paint-by-number kit she had talked him into purchasing today from one of the sidewalk vendors. It was a picture of a woodland chalet with snowcapped mountains in the background, a scene that reminded him of Newton Grove. He was excited to get started on it. More than anything, he’d enjoyed taking the time off this weekend to spend with Jocelyn.

The breath rushed out of him when he realized he was beginning to feel something for the woman he held so close to him. She had the ability to fire a need within him that he hadn’t felt in years, if ever. And it wasn’t all sexual, although he did have this vivid mental image in his mind of how wonderful it would be to have her in his bed to play out all those fantasies and dreams he’d had of her lately. Thinking about them only made him want her more. Being here with her, dancing with her, holding her in his arms while her cheek rested on his chest, seemed as natural as breathing, and a satisfying sensation skittered all the way down his belly.

“Bas?”
He barely heard her whisper his name. “Yes?”
“Can we go somewhere else?”
Her request heated the desire he felt through his entire body. “Where do you want to go?”
“You decide.”
And with a low growl, he did. He took her hand in his and led her off the dance floor and out of the nightclub to a place where they could finish what they had started.

“You’re beautiful.”
Bas whispered the words the moment he stepped into Jocelyn’s hotel room and swept her into his arms. The heat that had been simmering within her all day had escalated during the ride in the elevator and what seemed like a long, endless walk down the hall to her room.

“If I’m beautiful, then you are, too,” she said truthfully. There was just something about him that stirred her blood, awakened desires within her and sent rushes of heat thrumming all through her.

Jocelyn had stopped fighting the feeling and was willing to surrender to the inevitable. Since that day in Jason’s office the attraction had been great, bigger, it seemed, than both of them. She hadn’t planned for anything to happen between them this weekend; it was to be fun on her terms. She had gone through life without intimacy with a man, and she assumed she could certainly go on in the same way a while longer. But hadn’t Bas warned her about assuming anything?

“Let’s dispense with all the compliments,” he said, moving toward the sofa instead of the bed. He saw her confused look and gave her a sexy smile that touched her all the way to her toes. After he’d sat down with her cuddled in his arms he said, “I won’t go that far until I’m certain our definitions are the same, Jocelyn.”

She frowned. “They are,” she said, her voice raw and thick.
“I’ve got to be sure it’s not just the night.”
Her frown deepened. It was the night but that wasn’t all it was. “I don’t understand.”
“When you wake up in the morning I don’t want you to have any regrets.”
“And you think I will?”
“Not sure. All I know is that when you left Newton Grove this morning you had no intentions of sleeping with me.”

“Can’t a girl change her mind?”
“Yes, but I have to know it’s for the right reason. I won’t assume anything.”

He saw the flicker of disappointment in her eyes and his lips curved into a seductive smile. “If only you knew how much I want you, how much I want to be inside you, take you with every breath in my body, while replaying every dream I’ve had of you since the first day I laid eyes on you, you’d know how much not making love to you is killing me.”

“It doesn’t look like you’re dying to me,” she said with a bit of sting in her voice as she broke eye contact with him. She just couldn’t figure men out. They wanted you when you weren’t willing and didn’t want you when you were.

As if he read her thoughts he reached out and placed a finger at her chin to lift her gaze back to his. “This is not a game I’m playing, Jocelyn. I want you so much I hurt, and to show you just how much, I’m going to leave you with something to remember me by tonight.”

And then he kissed her with a demand that had her body shuddering all at once. He entered her mouth with a force that claimed it as his, totally, irrevocably. She felt him shift her body in his lap and ease the jacket from her shoulders while not breaking contact with her lips. And then his hands were on her, caressing her through her blouse, and then slipping his fingers beneath it to cup her breasts. He slowly stroked his thumb in the center, across her bra-clad nipple and captured in his mouth the ragged sigh that escaped from deep within her throat.

He eased his mouth from hers. “I want to taste you here,” he whispered, seconds before capturing her around the waist and lowering his face to her chest. His mouth immediately latched on her breasts, kissed them until her nipples ached. He knew exactly
wet. She was grateful for the strong, solid arms holding her upright or else she would have crumpled to the floor from the shockwaves that were tearing through her.

He slowly pulled back, got down on his knees and began working at the snap of her jeans. He glanced up, held her gaze while he eased the denim down her hips, pausing to help her step out of her shoes before taking the jeans completely off her and tossing them aside, leaving her standing in front of him in just a pair of black lacy boxer-style undies.

He leaned back on his haunches, and she wondered if he had changed his mind after all. Seconds later she knew he hadn’t when he reached out and slowly eased her panties down her hips, inhaling deeply while doing so.

“You smell good,” he said in a tone filled with so much desire it made her body tremble. He leaned forward, held her gaze and whispered, “I need to taste you. Now.”

He trailed hot, wet kisses across her belly before moving lower, and with the palms of his hands he gently eased her legs apart. Jocelyn stopped breathing, anticipating his next move. He didn’t disappoint her. He leaned closer and gripped her hips, then buried his face in her. When he slipped that same hot, wet tongue inside her, she released a moan that came from so deep in her throat she actually felt her knees buckle beneath her.

But his solid grip held her in place while his mouth made love to her, tasting, devouring, feasting. He was unashamedly greedy, intent on getting his fill, making her dig her nails into his shoulders. Unable to control the shudders racking her, she threw her head back and forced air through her lungs before screaming out his name.

“Bas!”

Her entire body shook, came apart with the force of the climax. Never had she encountered such a fierce, powerful reaction, an earth-shattering explosion. She held his shoulders tight and writhed helplessly against him, while his tongue did things to her no other man had ever done.

And as she continued to soar to a place she had never been before, she knew that Sebastian Steele was more than a troubleshooter and a problem solver. He was the epitome of what female fantasies were made of. He was temptation at its finest, a man who delivered with action, a man with one incredible mouth, a man who knew just how to pleasure a woman.

And at that moment, while aftershocks slithered down her spine, she was blinded by the staggering realization that if she didn’t stop herself, she could fall deliriously and passionately in love with him.

“Umm.” With a deep, satisfying moan Jocelyn shifted her body in bed as delicious dreams continued to filter through her sleep-induced mind. Strong, firm hands parted her thighs, and the urgency that filled her with profound emotions made her body brace for a joining she needed, one she craved and one that had every inch of her braced in anticipation for—

The sharp ringing of the phone had her bolting upright. She rubbed her hand across her face and snatched up the phone then hung it back up. It had merely been the hotel’s wake-up call.

She settled back in bed and remembered her dream. Some of it had been a dream and some of it reality. She closed her eyes, remembering the part that had been real, and the memory wrenched a serious moan through her lips. Bas had kissed her all over, devoured her, made her come, then he’d picked her up, carried her over to the bed and tucked her in. Before leaving, he had kissed her, sending shudders through her body long after he’d left. And then she had drifted off to sleep, only to finalize in her dreams what he had refused to do during her wakeful moments.

Still, she felt wonderful.

Sighing deeply, she forced herself up in bed again and ran her fingers through her hair. They were supposed to meet downstairs for an early breakfast before heading back to Newton Grove. How was she supposed to face him knowing what he had done to her last night? What she had let him do? But she had no regrets. The pleasure she still felt was too intense for her to be repentant. He had wanted her and she had wanted him; yet he had maintained his control, assumed nothing and had given her pleasure while withholding his own.

As she slipped out of bed she released a long-drawn-out sigh. Aftershocks of passion surged through every part of her body. Her blood felt hot, her body hotter and more than anything she wanted him to finish what he’d started. But she’d get her chance this coming weekend to prove that although neither of them should assume anything, some things were a gimme. What Leah had said a couple of weeks ago was right: when Bas finished what he came to do he would be gone. There was nothing to hold him in Newton Grove, and she had to remember that.

But for now she wanted to enjoy whatever he was offering, and when he did leave she wouldn’t have any regrets.
Leah glanced up from her book when she heard the sound of a drill outside the house. Pushing out of the chair, she crossed to the window and gasped when a man’s face came into view.

Reese!

She clutched her chest, wondering what on earth he was doing outside her window. Not her window exactly. She had driven over to Jocelyn’s house to finish doing laundry when her dad’s washing machine had suddenly gone on the blink.

Reese had seen her through the window at the same time she’d seen him and through the glass she could read his expression. His frown spoke volumes. He wasn’t happy at seeing her and within minutes he had made his way to the front door and was knocking hard.

She crossed the room and snatched it open. “What are you doing here, Reese?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I could ask you the same thing.”

She decided biting each other’s heads off wouldn’t accomplish anything so she said as calmly as she could, “Jocelyn went away for the weekend and when Dad’s washing machine broke down I decided to come over here and use hers. And I thought she mentioned that you and your brother were going to the races in Kentucky this weekend.”

“Is little Danny okay?”

He resented hearing the concern in her voice. “Yes, it’s just a stomach virus but Rita almost went bonkers because he’s rarely sick. Since the trip was cancelled I decided to fix that floodlight outside that’s been giving Jocelyn trouble.”

“Oh. Then don’t let me keep you.” She was about to shut the door when he stuck his foot out, halting it from closing.

“You think you can just dismiss me like that? After all these years don’t you think you owe me some type of explanation, Leah?” he asked angrily.

Leah breathed in sharply. Coming face to face with Reese again a little more than a week after their first encounter wasn’t good. There was nothing she could tell him, nothing she could say to make things right, so it was best not to say anything at all. “No, I don’t owe you an explanation.”

She made an attempt to close the door on him again, but in anger he shoved it open. She took a step back when he stormed in and slammed it shut behind him. “The hell you don’t,” he roared as if all the anger he’d been holding inside him had suddenly snapped.

“Have you lost your mind, Reese?”

“I lost my mind years ago since I must have been crazy to get mixed up with the likes of you in the first place,” he said, anger seeping out of his every pore. “You are one ungrateful, selfish, self-centered human being.”

“Get out!”

“Make me. I won’t leave until I’ve had my say.”

“I won’t listen.” She turned away and walked toward the kitchen.

He was right on her heels. “Oh, you’ll listen. When I think of all the time and love I put into this place for you and for you to treat me like dirt and—”

She turned around, almost coming nose to nose with him. She stared at him in shock. “What are you talking about?”

“This house, damn you, was supposed to be ours. I built it for you and was going to surprise you with it on your birthday but you hauled ass. You left without looking back, letting me know I was nothing more to you than a trinket to play with. You cared nothing for me. All your words of love were nothing but lies!”

Leah went completely still, frozen in place. She blinked her dazed eyes. “What do you mean you built this house for me?”

“Look around, Leah. This house has everything you always said you wanted in a home. I built it with my own hands for you. I worked with your dad during the day and worked here late at night, sometimes past midnight, and on weekends, sometimes tired to the bone, just to give you what you wanted, or what you claimed you wanted—a place to live with me as my wife, to raise our children. But you never meant any of it.”

His words were too much. She hadn’t known. No one had ever told her about the house. How could Jocelyn
and her father not tell her? Just as the hold on his temper had broken earlier, so did the floodgates of pain she had held within her for five years. She wanted to scream and fist her hand into her mouth to stop from doing so, but that didn’t stop the fierce tremors that racked her body.

“What the hell’s wrong with you, Leah?”

Reese’s temper cleared enough for him to see that something strange was happening to Leah. It was as if all the coloring had left her face and she was shaking. He reached out and touched her and she pulled back from his touch. She resembled a creature gone wild and began backing away from him, looking at him as if she didn’t know who he was. She had a crazed look in her eyes. He took a step toward her. “Leah, what’s wrong?”

“No, don’t touch me again. Don’t come near me. No! No! Please no.”

He swore and took a step toward her, concerned. “What’s the matter with you, Leah? Tell me what’s wrong. Why are you looking at me that way? I wouldn’t hurt you, you know that.”

“No! Don’t come near me. Don’t you dare touch me again. I belong to Reese and you can’t do that to me. I won’t let you. I hate you!”

Reese wasn’t entirely sure what was going on here but he knew Leah had gone into some kind of shock, as if she was reliving something bad that had happened. The thought of what that could be was like a punch in his stomach.

“Who do you think I am, Leah?” he asked quietly, deciding to use another approach. “Who do you think I am?”

“I know who you are, Neil. And I won’t let you hurt me again. You won’t ever force yourself on me again.”

Neil? Reese frowned. The only Neil he knew was Neil Grunthall, but the man was dead. In fact, come to think of it, he had died around the same time Leah had disappeared. His eyes flamed as a thought entered his mind. It was one he didn’t want to consider but was forced to, knowing what a bastard Neil Grunthall had been and how the man had hated his guts. “Did Neil touch you?” he asked with deadly calm.

It was as if she hadn’t heard him. She kept backing up and when he walked toward her she picked up a vase off Jocelyn’s coffee table and held it high like a weapon, ready to throw it at a moment’s notice. “You come near me and I’ll kill you. I couldn’t defend myself before but I can now.”

“Oh, Leah.” Her words, spoken in such a heart-wrenching and tortured tone, broke everything inside of Reese and there was no way he could not go to her at that moment.

“No! I said not to come near me!”

When he got close she made good on her threat and threw the vase at him. He ducked out of the way, and it shattered on the hardwood floor. The sound made her jerk and that was all the time Reese needed to close in and grab her.

“No, Neil, let me go!” she cried out. “I belong to Reese. Don’t do this. Don’t hurt me again. I love Reese. Please let me go!”

She fought him, kicked and bit the knuckle on his left hand, but his arms wrapped around her like steel beams, refusing to let her hurt him or herself. “It’s okay, baby. I’m Reese and you do belong to me,” he whispered quietly against her struggles. “Neil is dead, Leah, and he won’t hurt you again. He won’t hurt you again.”

He said the words over and over before he finally began getting through to her. When he did, she broke down and began crying in earnest. The tortured sound, similar to the sound of a wounded animal, tore at his heart and brought tears to his eyes. “It’s okay, baby. It’s okay.”

When she went limp he picked her up and walked over to Jocelyn’s spare bedroom. Shoving open the door with his shoulder, he carried her over to the bed and placed her there.

He drew back and gazed down at her. She refused to open her eyes and look at him. “Leah,” he said gently, “rest and we’ll talk.”

She turned away from him and faced the wall. “No, please leave,” she said quietly, sounding defeated, humiliated and embarrassed. “I want to be alone.”

Her words tugged at his heart. There was no way in hell he would leave her alone. He remembered Jocelyn saying that she would be returning to town around noon that day and he intended to stay put until she got there. “I’m not leaving, Leah. I’ll be in the living room if you need me. Try and get some rest.”

He then turned and walked out of the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

When the car came to a traffic light Bas glanced over at Jocelyn. They were about to get on the interstate to head back to Newton Grove. She had the seat reclined to a comfortable position and was resting with her eyes closed. At least he thought they were closed but he couldn’t tell beneath the dark sunglasses.

During breakfast she hadn’t had a whole lot to say and had avoided discussing what they’d shared last night. But with all the memories flooding his mind, he couldn’t think of anything else.

She looked different this morning. More rested and relaxed. Her hair fell in glossy curls around her shoulders
and the lime green of her skirt and matching sweater made her dark coloring that much more beautiful. He remembered last night and how she’d stood there while he’d loved her with his mouth. He hadn’t regretted anything about what he’d done and wondered if she had. There was only one way to find out.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

She glanced over at him and smiled. “Yes. Is there any reason why I wouldn’t be?”

He shrugged. “You’ve been quiet this morning.”

She sighed and stared ahead. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh. You want to share your thoughts?”

She glanced back over at him. “I was wondering how to convey my thanks to you for giving me something really special last night.”

He felt a rush of pleasure that she didn’t have any regrets about what they’d shared. “Conveying your thanks isn’t necessary because you gave me something special, as well.”

She raised her brow. “What?”

“A chance to savor a special part of you.”

Heat sizzled her skin and a yearning erupted in the pit of her stomach when she thought of how he had done so.

“Yes, but you took things a step further when you exposed me to your incredible experience and masterful skills.”

He chuckled. “Did I do that?”

She angled her face toward him. “Yes, you did.” Moments later she said, “And I’ve decided to go to your brother’s party with you after all.”

He smiled then, pleased with her decision. He glanced over at her when the car came to a stop at another traffic light. He wished she didn’t have her sunglasses on because he wanted to look into the depths of her dark eyes, see if they held some clue as to why she’d made that decision.

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“Mmm, I was just thinking that you have such a pretty face.”

She laughed. “Thanks, and if you keep saying such nice things, I might want to keep you around.”

He grinned. “That’s what I’m hoping.”

An angry Reese paced Jocelyn’s living room, getting angrier by the second. Why hadn’t anyone told him what had happened to Leah? How could they keep something like that from him? And to think that for five solid years he had hated her, despised her, tried to eradicate her from his memory…his heart.

The scene that had played out in this very living room less than an hour ago had his stomach in knots. Neil Grunthall had forced himself on Leah! The thought of her defenseless against Neil made Reese’s entire body shake in rage.

He sighed, trying to recall what Jocelyn had almost let slip the other day when she’d come to Leah’s defense. She was certain her sister wasn’t pregnant because, according to Jocelyn, he was the last man Leah had been involved with. What she hadn’t said was that someone had forced himself on her.

He doubted he would forget for as long as he lived the crazed look in Leah’s eyes when he had touched her. Hell, he could just imagine what had played out in her mind. He’d watched a special episode on rape victims on CNN once and according to the reporter, some women never fully recovered from such an ordeal and were encouraged to seek some type of professional counseling. He wondered if Leah had done so.

Had that been the reason she had left town all those years ago, he wondered. Considering the timing of everything, a part of him knew that it had been. Why hadn’t she come to him and told him what had happened? It would have given him sheer pleasure to kill Neil Grunthall with his bare hands. If the man wasn’t already dead, there was no way he would be living now.

But hating Neil wouldn’t undo what he’d done to Leah. The woman he loved was now his main concern and yes, he loved her. He had never stopped loving her and he vowed then that if her spirit was still broken from all of this, he intended to repair it.

More than anything he wanted Leah to know he would always be there for her, no matter what.

Pleased that Jocelyn had no regrets about last night, Bas set his mind on getting them back to Newton Grove. She had mentioned a baby shower for a friend she wanted to attend that afternoon.

He picked up the cup of coffee and took a sip, appreciating the taste, and smiled when he thought of another taste he appreciated—the one belonging to the woman sitting beside him who had dozed off to sleep. With the windows up, her luscious scent filled the confines of the car and he couldn’t stop the desire that quickly encircled his gut. It was difficult to recall the last time he’d wanted a woman so much.

He tried to rationalize his attraction to her. She was a beautiful woman but he had met beautiful women before.
What was there about Jocelyn that made him feel emotions he’d never felt before? In his book she was P and P: proper and passionate.

He’d seen her proper side one evening when she hadn’t been aware she was being observed. It had been a social ball a couple of weeks ago that Ms. Sadie’s group of older ladies had given for some debutantes. Sadie hadn’t been able to get her car started and when he’d come in from a workout at the gym, she had asked if he would drop her off. He had pulled up in front of the Civic Center in time to see a very sophisticated-looking Jocelyn meet and greet all the other guests. She hadn’t seen him, but he had seen her and what he’d called her proper side.

He smiled, knowing that beneath that proper side was a passionate side, one yet to be explored to the fullest. She was definitely a woman who could make his blood run hot. She was a distraction but a distraction that he liked.

It suddenly hit him why he felt that way, and emotions he’d tried analyzing for the past couple of weeks instantly became crystal-clear. He was falling in love with Jocelyn. And if he wasn’t careful, she could become the person he loved more than anyone in his entire life.

But that thought didn’t bother him and he hoped to hell it didn’t bother her when she discovered how he felt. He wouldn’t shock her by declaring his affections, at least not now. He wanted them to spend more time together, to have what she considered fun, before he broached such a serious subject with her. He had discovered that Jocelyn didn’t handle surprises very well.

“If you’ve done a thorough review of the company books, then I guess you know that my dad and Noreen were having an affair.”

Her words, spoken out of the blue, surprised the hell out of Bas. He jerked his head and stared at her. “You knew?”

She smiled. “Yes, even though they thought I didn’t. Believe me, they were very discreet, but there were some things you couldn’t help but notice—like the looks they gave each other when they thought no one else was around.”

“Did you have a problem with it?”

Jocelyn shrugged. “I did at first. No girl wants to imagine her parent being sexually active, but then I saw how happy he was, and what a great mood he was in whenever he returned from one of his mystery trips out of town.”

She chuckled. “After spending a weekend out of town with you I have an idea of just how he felt.”

An hour later, after arriving back in Newton Grove, Bas was driving them through the city. “Do you want me to take you home or to your father’s house?” he asked, glancing over at Jocelyn when he came to a stop at a traffic light. She looked refreshed from her nap, and the desire he’d been holding at bay suddenly kicked into high gear. Combined with the love he felt for her, the emotion completely overwhelmed him.

“You can take me on home and I—”

Before she finished whatever she was about to say, Bas leaned over and brought his mouth down on hers, effectively snatching both breath and words from her throat. She responded and when his tongue darted into her mouth, she captured it with her own, sucked on it before he could pull back.

When he straightened up in his seat, he smiled at her. “You’re coming up with some pretty masterful skills yourself.”

She chuckled as she raked her fingers through her hair. “Only because I have a good teacher. I was just following his lead.”

Bas’s pulse rate increased and he couldn’t wait until he got to her place. His goodbye kiss would be one she remembered for a long time. Well, maybe not, he thought moments later when he pulled into her driveway and saw the two vehicles parked there. She had left her car for her sister to use and he recognized the truck as Reese’s.

“Looks like you have company.”

Jocelyn glanced up. When she saw the two vehicles, a deep frown settled on her face. “Oh, no,” she said, unsnapping her seat belt before Bas brought the car to a stop. “What are the two of them doing here together?”

Her question, as well as the worried expression on her face, confused Bas. “Maybe they’re trying to patch things up.”

Jocelyn shook her head. “It won’t be that easy.”

He lifted a brow. “Why?”

“Because it won’t. Please stop the car, Bas.”

Upon hearing the panic in her voice, he stopped the car and the minute he did she threw open the door and raced toward her house. Not knowing what the hell was going on, he took off after her.

Before she could use her key to open the door, it was snatched open and an angry Reese came out and glared at Jocelyn. “Damnit why didn’t you tell me, Joce?”

She didn’t answer. Instead she tried to move past him to go into the house. “Where’s Leah?”

He blocked her path. “She’s asleep, but I want to know why you didn’t tell me.”
“Not now Reese, I have to—”
“No! I want to know why you didn’t tell me.”
Bas heard the anger in Reese’s voice, anger that was directed at Jocelyn. He also noted that Reese was blocking the way into her own house. Bas stepped forward. “Calm down, Reese. What’s going on? What has you so upset? Is something wrong with Leah?”
Reese’s glare left Jocelyn and moved to Bas. “Yeah, something is wrong with her all right, something I didn’t know about until today.”
He then moved his gaze back to Jocelyn. The eyes that looked at her were filled with a mixture of rage and anguish. “My God, Jocelyn, why didn’t you tell me that Neil Grunthal had raped her?”
Joselyn’s eyes widened. “Leah actually told you?”

Having his suspicions confirmed was like a kick in Reese’s gut, and it took everything he had not to ram his fist into the nearest post. “She didn’t tell me willingly,” he said with fury lining his every word. “I confronted her about why she left and when I told her about this house she started shaking uncontrollably. I reached out to calm her down, and when I did all hell broke loose. She went berserk as if she was reliving those moments with Neil and actually thought I was him.”

Reese paused long enough to rub a tortured hand down his face. The eyes that looked at Joselyn again were hard and angrier than before. “Why didn’t you or your dad tell me?”

Joselyn inhaled deeply, hearing the hurt, pain and despair in his voice. “Dad never knew and I only found out myself a few weeks ago, Reese,” she said softly. “And she made me promise not to tell you.”

Reese’s head fell back against the wooden post and he looked up at the sky as if the clouds held some kind of comfort for him. Then he looked back at Joselyn. “Tell me what happened. Please, I need to know.”

Joselyn slid her gaze from Reese to Bas. He was staring at her just as intently as Reese, although he hadn’t said anything. She knew Leah was still in love with Reese just as Reese was still in love with Leah. If anyone could break through the barriers Leah had erected, it would be Reese.

“All right,” she said wearily. “But I want you to promise you’ll be patient and understanding and—”

“My God, Joce, of course I’ll be patient and understanding. I love Leah,” he said in a tortured moan. “I’ve never stopped loving her even when I thought she had done me wrong. If you think I’ll turn my back on her now, knowing what she’s been through, then you don’t know me.”

Joselyn inhaled deeply. She did know him and she knew how much he loved her sister. Somehow, through it all, his heart had remained intact even when his mind had assumed the worse.

Assumed.

She shook her head. Bas had helped her to see how that one little word could cause a world of trouble. “Okay, I’ll tell you what she told me.”

“On that note I think I’ll wait out in the car,” Bas said, turning to leave, thinking he’d heard more than he should have already. This was a private matter between Joselyn, Reese and Leah.

“No, please stay, Bas,” Joselyn said, not understanding why but knowing she needed him there.

Bas turned back around and met the silent plea in her gaze and knew at that moment he could deny her nothing. He glanced over at Reese. “You’re okay with me staying?”

Reese nodded. “Yeah, man. I’m okay with it.”

Moments later, after telling the two men everything, Joselyn shifted her gaze from Reese. It was hard not to see the tears that filled his eyes without getting misty-eyed, as well.

And then there was Bas. She had seen him ball his fist in anger several times, and although he hadn’t said anything, the tightening of his jaw and the fury that lined his eyes had said it all.

“Did she get any professional help?” Reese asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes, but there are still issues she’s trying to work through, hurdles she’s yet to cross. It takes time recovering from an ordeal such as that.”

“No matter how long it takes, I’m going to be there with her,” Reese said in a firm voice. “We’re going to work through this thing, Leah and I. Together.”

Joselyn smiled. “She’s not going to make things easy for you, Reese. Already she’s talking about returning to California in a few weeks.”

Reese nodded, and although he didn’t say anything, Joselyn knew he had no intentions of letting Leah go anywhere. “She’s sleeping now, but I want to be there when she wakes up, to talk to her, Joselyn. Alone.”

Joselyn knew what he was asking of her. The mothering instinct in her demanded that she see to her sister herself, but she knew Reese was right. He was the one who needed to be there for Leah. “Okay.” She then glanced over at Bas. “Do you want to go grab some lunch?”

Bas smiled. She had a feeling he agreed wholeheartedly with her decision to let Reese handle Leah in his own way. “Yes, lunch sounds good and I know just where I want to take you.”
Leah came awake, remembering where she was. Then she recalled her argument with Reese and...“Oh my God!” She covered her face with her hands when it all came tumbling back to her. He knew. There was no way he would not have figured things out.

“Are you okay?”
She jumped then turned in the bed to face Reese, her eyes going wide. He was standing in the doorway. “What are you doing here?”
“I told you I wasn’t going anywhere, Leah. Besides, I think we should talk.”
No! She didn’t want to talk. She wanted to be as far away from him as she could. Knowing that he knew what had happened to her was too much. She quickly slipped off the bed. “I just want to finish my laundry and leave. Jocelyn should be back any minute and—”
“Jocelyn is already back. She and Bas went somewhere for lunch. They knew I wanted to talk to you alone.”
“We have nothing to talk about.”
He ignored her and took a step into the room, and she automatically backed up. Her seemingly frightened retreat almost broke Reese’s heart. “Why didn’t you tell me what Neil had done to you? Why did you run away instead? Didn’t you think I had a right to know?”
“Why? So you could kill him with your bare hands and go to jail? He wasn’t worth it, Reese. He was nothing but a troublemaker and I knew I couldn’t tell you or my father. Besides,” she said, lowering her voice, fighting back her tears, “he wasn’t your problem.”
He took another step into the room. “You were mine, Leah. I loved you. I was going to marry you. Your problems were my problems. We would have worked things out.”
“No, I had to leave. I felt dirty. Used. I felt unworthy. Don’t you understand how difficult it is for me now, knowing that you know?”
“You should have told me. It would have changed nothing.”
Leah turned away from him, trying to block whatever emotional reactions she was having to his words. Why couldn’t he understand that she couldn’t tell him? At the time she had felt battered, bruised and confused.
“Leah, please don’t shut me out. I love you. I always have. I still do.”
She turned back around, her eyes filled to capacity with tears. His admission of love was the last thing she wanted to hear, the last thing she wanted to know. Knowing he loved her and that he’d built this house for her was too much. “No, we can’t go there, Reese. We can’t go back. Too much has happened. After I left and went to California, I had a hard time dealing with things. If a man looked at me, I panicked. Finally, I knew I needed help and sought out professional assistance. With the aid of counselors and a very special support group, I began to see that I wasn’t alone. There were other women who’d been violated like I had. And then there was Grace, the older woman who was kind enough to give me a place to stay in her home. She became the mother I had lost, the grandmother I’d never had and the friend that I needed. I’ve come a long way but I still have a long way to go.”
“And we’ll go there together. I love you too much to let you leave me a second time.”
The sincerity in his words touched her and nervously she placed her lower lip between her teeth and met his gaze. He was being honest with her, leaving her no choice but to be completely honest with him, as well. “And I love you, too, Reese. Too much for you to get involved and waste your time with me. The love I knew you had for me is what helped me keep my sanity over the years. But each time I came home I knew that love was turning to hate and I had to learn how to get stronger without your love as a crutch because it wasn’t there anymore and I couldn’t pretend that it was.”
She wiped the tears from her eyes before continuing. “I still haven’t gotten over things to the point where I trust men. In fact, the thought of one ever touching me makes me ill. Even you. Knowing that, how can I even consider us picking up where we left off?”
“Like I said, we’ll work through—”
“No, there’s nothing to work through. In a few weeks I’m returning to California. I’m going to use the money I’m getting from Jocelyn to open a small restaurant there. My life, the one I do have, is in California. There’s nothing for me here.”
“I’m here, Leah,” he said quietly. “The man who loves you.”
She shook her head. “No, I can’t take what you’re offering. I can’t and I won’t.”
Not giving him a chance to say anything else, she walked around him and out of the room.

Jocelyn replaced her cell phone in her purse and glanced over at Bas when he brought the car to a stop at the traffic light. “That was Reese. Things didn’t go with Leah the way he’d hoped, but he’s determined to help her through this.”
Bas nodded. “He loves her very much.”

“Always has. At one time I actually envied what they shared, it was so special. And I’ve always known that if there was one person who could get Leah to change her mind about leaving Newton Grove it was going to be Reese, just like I truly believe he’s the one person who can heal her hurt.”

“I’m going to have to agree with you on that.”

Jocelyn had been waiting to hear from Reese, and with the phone call from him out of the way, she took the time to study her surroundings out the car’s window. Lifting a brow, she glanced back over at Bas. “I thought we were headed back to town for lunch. Where are we going?”

He smiled although he couldn’t take his eyes off the road to look over at her. “My place. I’m treating you to lunch.”

Jocelyn blinked. “Your place? I thought you were staying at Sadie’s Bed and Breakfast.”

“I was, until Friday. While I was out riding around with Reese a few weeks ago, I saw this cabin on the outskirts of town and thought it would be a nice piece of investment property for the Steele Corporation. All of us like to get away every once in a while and we all love the mountains. Our parents own a cabin that we use occasionally, but this one is bigger.”

“So you bought it? Just like that?”

He risked glancing over at her before returning his eyes to the road. Just for that instant he felt his heart slam hard in his chest. He did love her. He was no longer falling in love with her; he had fallen—and hard.

“Yes, just like that,” he said, feeling like a man on top of the world. He would feel even better if the woman who held his affections felt the same way, but he knew that she didn’t. But he had time to spare, and pretty soon she would see that Reese wasn’t the only man on a mission to win over the woman he loved.

“So what’s for lunch?” she asked.

“I thought I’d keep it simple and fix a couple of sandwiches. I haven’t had a chance to do any real grocery shopping yet, but I do have stuff to make a nice sandwich.”

“What kind of sandwich?”

When he brought the car to a stop in front of his cabin, he cocked his head and shot her a smile that tilted the corners of his lips. “I hope you like peanut butter and jelly.”

Jocelyn had to admit that the peanut butter and jelly sandwich and glass of iced tea were good. She hadn’t eaten since breakfast so her hunger might have been what had made it so delicious. But then she thought of something else that was delicious, something she liked—Bas’s kisses.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Oh.” A blush stained her cheeks. She’d thought he was using the restroom. She hadn’t known he’d returned and had been staring at her. “I—” She paused, wondering what she could say. “I was just thinking about Reese and Leah,” she lied, figuring he would believe that.

“And the thought of them is what had you smiling?”

“Er...yeah,” she said, compounding her lie. “I can remember happier times.”

“Don’t give up on them. The happier times will return.”

“You think so?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. “When two people love each other, things will work out for them.”

She lifted a brow. “You sound like someone who knows.”

He shook his head. “Trust me, I’m not, but I believe it, and I’ve seen it happen. Take my brother Chance and his wife, Kylie. They butted heads from the start, but finally they decided to give love a try and eventually got married. And I don’t know two happier people.”

Jocelyn nodded, glanced around. For a place that had been moved in to a mere three days ago, Bas’s place looked lived in. The three-bedroom, two-bath two-story log cabin with cathedral ceilings, sat secluded on a stream with hardwood trees all around. It also had an extraordinary view of the mountains, a wood-burning fireplace and a covered porch with an outdoor hot tub.

“You still planning on going to that baby shower later?”

She turned, not knowing he had crossed the room and was standing so close. “No, I’m not in the mood,” she said softly, barely realizing what she was saying. Being this close to Bas was as usual stirring her senses, all five of them.

There was the scent of him, strong and manly with a come-hither aroma that should be bottled. The sight of him, especially in his jeans, was provocative enough to make a woman’s mouth water...And speaking of mouth, the taste of him from last night was still on her tongue. Even the peanut butter hadn’t been able to eradicate it. Her taste buds were sensitive, tingling, anticipating kissing him again. Just thinking about it was putting another sense to work
—her hearing. She could hear the pounding of her heart against her chest.

And then there was the sense of touch, something she hadn’t quite explored to the fullest when it came to him. A soft sigh escaped her lungs at the thought of touching him intimately, taking him in her hands, feeling him harden beneath her fingers.

“You’re smiling again,” he said, resting his hip against his kitchen counter. “Still thinking about Reese and Leah?”

Jocelyn chewed the inside of her cheek, wondering what his reaction would be if she told him what she’d really been thinking about. She swallowed, deciding not to chance it. So she told him something that wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the full truth, either. “I was thinking about this weekend.”

Bas smiled. “Now isn’t that a coincidence. So was I.”

“And what was your favorite part?” she asked him, wondering if it was the same as hers.

He deliberately licked his lips and eased up closer to her. “I can’t believe you have to ask me that, sweetheart,” he said in a low voice.

Heat suddenly seemed to bubble up in Jocelyn’s throat. The sight of his tongue was sending unflagging warmth all through her. “You enjoyed that, huh?”

“Most definitely,” he whispered, leaning in closer to her.

Jocelyn breathed in, remembering the nights she hadn’t been able to sleep because of thoughts of him, and she knew there was something she wanted to know.

Something she had to know.

Last night she had had an orgasm standing up. She wondered how one felt lying down in a bed. A slow burn began building between her legs at the thought of finding out. And she knew she couldn’t leave this cabin until she did.

A part of her knew that she and Bas would never be a real couple. His home was in North Carolina and hers was here. There was nothing to keep him in Newton Grove when it was time for him to leave. But there was something the two of them could share while he was here. It was something she had never shared with a man before. A hot and torrid love affair. It would all be in the name of fun. In the end there would be no hard feelings and no regrets.

She could do this. She wanted to do this. She needed to do this.

Bas had awakened feelings and urges within her that she’d never had to deal with before. Not only had he awakened them, he had stirred them up real good and hot. She knew if she wanted to take things to the next level it would be up to her to make the move. He probably assumed that if he made them, she would accuse him of moving too fast. Hadn’t he told her about the problem with assuming things?

Making the decision to take matters into her own hands, she smiled and pointed past him. “Have you used your fireplace yet?”

He glanced over his shoulder and then back at her. “No, why, are you cold?”

“No, I’m not cold.” She sighed deeply. For God’s sake, she told herself, don’t lose your nerve now. Remember that article you read in Today’s Black Woman? Sometimes it’s up to you to let a man know what you want, Jocelyn Isabella Mason. She smiled, thinking that although she wasn’t named after her father, together her initials spelled JIM.

“But I think a fire would be nice,” she decided to say. She wanted this man and she intended to have him, for whatever time she could.

“Okay. Just make yourself comfortable.”

“Thanks, I will,” she said walking over to the sofa and taking a seat.

It didn’t take Bas any time at all to get the fire started, mainly because one had already started to flame, right in his gut. He wasn’t born yesterday. He could recognize seduction a mile away. But in this case it wasn’t a mile away, it was right smack in his living room and sitting on his sofa.

He stood and turned around and the flame in his gut suddenly blazed. Jocelyn had her legs crossed in a way that made her skirt rise higher on her thighs. They were the same luscious thighs he had held on to tightly last night while tasting her.

He tried not to stare. He even tried to stop his body from getting hard, but it was no use. There were some things that a man couldn’t control and a physical reaction to a beautiful and sexy woman was one of them. Especially when he happened to be in love with that woman.

He met her gaze, saw the heat in her eyes and saw how she suddenly took her tongue and licked her lips. At that moment all he could think about was taking that tongue, sucking it into his own mouth and having his way with it. He then watched as she switched positions and recrossed her legs, giving him a quick view of her panties. They were white.
He growled low in his throat, not even aware he’d made the sound until a pleased smile touched her lips.

“You’re trying to tempt me, aren’t you?” he asked.

Jocelyn sat back and smiled. “You think so?”

“Yes.”

She laughed. “Sounds like you’re assuming things, Mr. Steele, and what’s your position on people assuming things?”

*Positions.* Now *that* was something he didn’t want to think about at the moment. But then maybe he did…

He slowly crossed the room, not taking his eyes off her, and when he came to a stop in front of where she sat, he reached out for her arm and tugged her unresistingly to her feet, pressing her body to his and gazing deeply into her eyes. “But this time, I’m assuming right.”

Jocelyn shivered, feeling the thickness of him pressed against her center. Nice. Hard. Forged of steel. “If you’re assuming right, then what are you going to do about it?” she whispered.

His gaze remained locked on hers, and she was struck by passion so intense it was hard for her to swallow. She watched as his eyes darkened. “Don’t ask unless you really want to know, Jocelyn.”

She sucked in a deep breath when she felt him harden even more against her belly. “I really want to know, and I’m asking,” she said, pushing her lower body even closer to his for a more intimate fit.

Now it was Bas who sucked in a deep breath. Bas whose arms wrapped around her tightly. Bas who leaned closer to make sure she saw the desire in his eyes. He moved in closer still and when his mouth was just inches from hers, he snaked out his tongue, slid it sensuously across her lower lip, then the upper one and watched her shudder in response.

“Well, since you really want to know…it’s show time,” he whispered huskily, before greedily taking her lips with his and picking her up into his arms.
Bas pulled his mouth from Jocelyn’s the moment he placed her on the king-size bed, feeling the insistent throb of desire running rampant all through him.

He hadn’t intended to move this fast so soon. He had wanted to give her a chance to get used to him, to accept the place he intended to claim in her life and the intense love he had for her, before they shared ecstasy together. But now fate had stepped in and the need to stamp his claim, brand her as his, was as elemental as breathing. But first, he needed just to hold her, to feel her close to his heart, the heart she now possessed.

“Come here for a second,” he said softly, opening his arms to her. And when she slid across the bed to him, into his opened arms, he held her tight, enveloped her into his warmth. She laid her head on his chest, and he knew she could hear the fast beating of his heart, but what she didn’t know was that it beat at that pace just for her.

Emotions were churning through him, emotions he’d never before felt for a woman, and now he understood what Chance had meant when he’d said falling in love with Kylie had been like being hit with a ton of bricks. It had happened so fast Chance hadn’t been expecting it.

It has been the same for Bas. Love was the last thing he had been looking for when he’d arrived in Newton Grove, but the one thing he’d found with Jocelyn. There was one thing that couldn’t be denied with the Steele men. When they found love they knew how to accept it and claim the woman as theirs. At least, it seemed it was that way for three of them. There was no telling how Donovan, who was slow to accept anything at face value and prone to be the most resisting of the four, would handle love once he found it.

Bas’s attention was reclaimed when Jocelyn raised her head and smiled at him. Her smile triggered something deep within him. He had to touch her, feel her, taste her all over, have her naked beneath him and join her body intimately with his, make love to her until they were both out of their minds, crazy with need.

And he wanted her now.

He stripped and reached out and began removing her clothes, first her blouse and bra. When her chest was completely bare, the sight of her firm breasts quickened his pulse. He leaned forward, took them in his hands and stroked them, licked them, exhaled hot breath over the hardened dark tips.

And then his hands moved down her waist to remove her skirt while his brain could still function. And when she lay before him in nothing but a pair of white lace panties, he reached out and let his fingertips trace along the edge before touching her moist center. He heard her quick intake of breath, her quiet yet ragged moan. She caught hold of his shoulders as his fingers continued to stroke her with slow caresses. His fingers slipped beneath her panties to touch her intimately, stirring her scent, flaming her heat.

“Bas.”

His name was a whispered groan. An earth-shattering moan. And when a purr of pleasure rippled from her throat, he leaned back to pull the scrap of white lace down her legs. Her scent was intense and filled the air surrounding them. A shudder passed through him, the need to mingle in her wet heat became overpowering. But first he wanted to reacquaint his tongue with her taste.

He leaned forward, reached for her hips and lifted her up gently toward his mouth. The moment his tongue entered her she screamed, but he ignored the sound as his tongue continued to push inside her, deep, and then he kissed her intimately, savoring her taste, needing to make love to her in this special and profound way again.

Jocelyn uttered an intense moan while her hips involuntarily rocked against Bas’s mouth. No man had ever done this to her before him, and he was making her body crumble into a thousand pieces. She felt every bone in her body melt, and she was filled with intense heat. Her fingernails were digging into his shoulders but she couldn’t help it. She was too delirious to do anything but moan in pleasure.

And then he pulled back, cupped her face into his hands and kissed her while easing her back down on the bed, covering her body with his. She felt the ridge of his erection, powerfully aroused, press against the place where his mouth had left its mark, making her thighs tremble. The sensation of his tongue inside her mouth, kissing her deeply, had her moaning incoherently.

When he pulled back she opened her eyes and looked at him, saw the deep-rooted desire in his gaze. She also saw something else in the dark depths, something she couldn’t put a name to. “Now I make you mine,” he whispered, nudging her legs apart. With a primal growl he eased inside her while leaning closer and trailing the dampness of his tongue around her earlobe.
Automatically her hips arched and a sizzling groan poured from her lips when he buried himself inside her to the hilt. Their connection, their joining was absolute, complete and so unerringly whole. And at that moment she thought there could not be a more perfect union between two individuals.

“You okay?” he asked, going still to glance down at her.

“Yes,” she said while her feminine muscles clamped him, clutched him and claimed him. The sensations she felt were almost more than she could bear. A growing tension, one she didn’t understand, begin to stir within her, right there at her center. And as if he knew exactly what she needed, he began to move, rock into her, thrust back and forth, stroke her with a rhythm that made her entire body quiver, fulfilling all her secret desires, her most wanton needs.

Her climax, more intense than any of the others, slammed into her and she screamed his name. She was aware of him driving harder into her, sending her even farther over the edge. She closed her eyes and tightened her muscles around him, milking him and making him groan aloud. She wanted everything she could get from him, determined not to deny herself anything. She wrapped her legs around his waist and locked him in. She had waited too long for this. Too long for a man like him.

“Jocelyn!”

Bas screamed her name while fighting for control. Spasms of ecstasy began tearing through him, and the way her inner muscles were clutching him, draining him, was sending him over into the realms of oblivion. She had stolen his heart and now she was taking over his body, leaving him defenseless and filled with a need he could barely comprehend.

This was love, pure and unadulterated. He had never felt this way before. Nothing had been this intense, invigorating and passionate. And when she let out another scream that split the air, he felt his body explode once again as sensations ripped through him, toppled him over into another world. He lost all sense of everything, except the acceptance that the woman beneath him, to whose body he was intimately joined, was in total possession of his heart, body and soul.

Jocelyn came awake to the sound of Bas’s heartbeat. Lying with her head resting on his chest, with his arms wrapped securely around her, and their legs entwined, she felt totally exhausted. But who wouldn’t after what they had shared? After making love again in the bed, they had taken the top covers off and moved to a spot in front of the fireplace where they had made love again before falling asleep in each other’s arms.

It was still barely light outside and she figured she would have slept right through the night if the growling of her stomach wasn’t a reminder that she hadn’t eaten anything since lunch.

“Hungry?”

Jocelyn glanced up. Bas was awake and smiling down at her. The flames from the fireplace provided an austere glow to his features. The tone of his voice was sensual and in response to it, she felt a tightening in the lower part of her body. “Yes, I’m hungry,” she said, trying to make her voice sound natural.

This was the first time she had awakened in a man’s arms after hours of lovemaking. The last time, in college, she had asked the guy to leave her room as soon as it was over, thinking it had been a complete waste of time. But that hadn’t been the case with Bas. With him nothing was wasted. They could have been like the Energizer Bunny and kept going and going and going.

“I better feed you or you’ll think I’m not a very good host,” he said, rising to his feet.

Jocelyn swallowed as she gazed at him. He was stark naked, unashamedly so. He saw the way she was staring at him and flashed a teasing grin. “If you keep looking at me like that, you might not get dinner after all.”

“Then what will I get?” she asked, deciding she might not be as hungry as she’d thought.

“Anything you want. I’m easy.”

She moved her gaze lower to a certain part of him. A smile tugged at her lips. “No, you’re not. Right now I’d say you’re extremely hard.”

He chuckled. “You noticed.”

“Staring me right in the face, how can I not?”

“Should I apologize?”

She shook her head. “No. What you should do is come back down here and let me take care of it.”

He slowly dropped to his knees and then crawled over toward her. “And what do you have in mind?” he asked huskily.

She leaned up and pushed him on his back, then straddled him. “Oh, trust me, Mr. Steele. You’re about to find out.”

“I can’t remember the last time I ate a bowl of chicken noodle soup,” Jocelyn said, taking another spoonful into
her mouth.

A deep laugh vibrated from within Bas’s throat. “Hey, I offered to take you into town to one of those restaurants and you turned me down.”

She smiled. “Only because I’m not ready to put my clothes back on. No pun intended but I think we’re on a roll.”

And that, she thought, was the truth. After making love again in front of the fireplace, they had gotten into the hot tub and made love once more before deciding they needed to eat something to keep their strength up. Bas had let her borrow his robe and together they had gone into the kitchen, where, after checking his empty cabinets, they had found a couple of cans of soup amongst his fishing gear. While the soup had been warming on the stove she had taken the time to call Leah. Her sister hadn’t been very talkative, and had, in fact, cut the conversation short, after assuring Jocelyn she was all right.

Satisfied that she had at least spoken to Leah, Jocelyn and Bas had sat down at his kitchen table to enjoy soup and crackers and relish the aftermath of their enjoyment of each other.

Jocelyn figured if she never made love again in her life that would be okay because within the last six hours she had made up for whatever she’d missed in the past and stocked up on what might not be coming her way in the future. But a part of her couldn’t imagine sharing anything so intimate with anyone but Bas. Everything the two of them had shared had been utterly amazing. He was definitely a highly charged sexual man.

“Want some more?”

She glanced up at him and smiled. “Some more of what?”

“Jocelyn,” he said warningly, “haven’t you gotten enough?”

“Of what?” Her tone was innocent. “Soup or you?”

He was sitting across from her at the table wearing just a pair of jeans, and her gaze slid over his bare chest. He was as fine as fine could get and the memories of all those orgasms he’d given her had her body tingling inside out. She wanted to go to him, curl up in his lap, run her hand down his belly, inside his jeans and—

“You’re staying all night?”

She moved her gaze back to his face. “Is that an invitation?”

“Yes.”

She took another spoonful of soup then asked, “What about clothes?”

“We never did take your luggage out of the car.”

“How convenient.”

He gave her a knowing look as a smile touched the corners of his mouth. “Yeah, I think so.”

Leah finished folding up her laundry and decided that although it was still early she would go upstairs to bed. She heard the doorbell ring and sighed deeply, hoping and praying it wasn’t Reese. They had nothing more to say to each other and she wouldn’t be able to handle seeing him again that day.

Crossing the room, she wondered who it could be. At the door she asked, “Who is it?”

“Delivery for Leah Mason.”

She glanced out the peephole and saw a man of about twenty standing there with a bouquet of flowers in his hands. Still, she had grown cautious over the years. “Do I need to sign for anything?” she asked through the door.

“No, ma’am.”

“Please leave whatever you have on the doorstep.” She watched as the man did as she requested then walked away. She moved to the window to make sure he got back in his van and drove off. Taking a deep breath, she walked back over to the door and opened it.

She couldn’t help but smile upon seeing the beautiful arrangement of calla lilies, her favorite, and knew immediately who’d sent them. Couldn’t Reese see what he was trying to do was useless? She would never be the woman that she used to be, a woman who’d enjoyed making love to him anytime and anywhere.

She picked up the bouquet and went back inside the house, locking the door behind her. She placed the arrangement on the table before pulling off the card.

When you hurt, I hurt. Give me a chance to take the pain away. Reese.

Leah continued to read the card, over and over. Why was Reese Singleton so stubborn? Didn’t he understand what she’d told him earlier that day? Didn’t he get the picture; she was incapable of allowing another man, even him, ever to touch her?

She almost jumped when the doorbell rang again. She went to the door and glanced out of the peephole and her heart began pounding. It was Reese.

A part of her wanted to ignore him, but she knew Reese refused to be ignored. Besides, he evidently hadn’t comprehended what she’d been trying to tell him earlier. Maybe if she’d had the help of counselors or a support
group earlier than she had, she would be a lot stronger now. But she hadn’t. Instead of opening up and talking about it, she had tried to go through life without dealing with the rape, and in so doing she had erected this physical and emotional shield against all men.

Although she already knew the answer, she asked, “Who is it?”

“It’s Reese, Leah. Please open the door so we can talk.”

Telling him they had nothing to discuss would be useless. It was best to let him in so they could talk and then that would be the end of things.

She slowly opened the door and took a step back and Reese entered, closing the door behind him. She’d seen the look in his eyes the moment he’d gazed at her. The pity she’d expected wasn’t there, but what she saw was what she remembered so many other times—desire. The thought that he still found her desirable, even after knowing about what Neil had done, was both flattering and frustrating.

“What did you come, Reese?”

“Did you think I would stay away?”

No, she really hadn’t thought that since he’d always gone after what he wanted. But she just couldn’t understand why and how he could still love her after all these years. Especially now.

As if he’d read her thoughts he smiled and said, “Hey, don’t even wonder about it, Leah. You knew you had my heart from the first.”

She couldn’t help but release a humorless laugh. “It was either me or Kristi Alford, and you deserved better.”

He chuckled. “Yes, and you were definitely it. I have no regrets.”

Neither had she. Still, all the good times they’d shared in the past could not wipe out everything that had happened.

“Leah, I—”

When he reached out to touch her arm, automatically she pulled back and fear jumped into her eyes as her entire body went rigid against his touch. She saw the surprise in his gaze and released a frustrated sigh. “I told you I get filled with revulsion at the thought of any man touching me, no matter how innocent. I think it will be better if you leave now.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not leaving and I’m not going to let you put distance between us. I understand the barriers you’ve put up, but I won’t let it stop me from proving something.”

“Proving what?”

“That to you I’m not a regular guy, Leah. I’m the man you loved and by your own admission, the man you still love. Somehow I’m going to remind you of that and break through those walls you’ve erected. I’m going to be the one man who’ll make you want to be touched again.”

She hugged her arms to her breasts and glared at him. “You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

He smiled. “Yes, and I’m pretty sure of you. You could never resist me when I laid things on thick.”

No, she couldn’t, but things weren’t the same anymore. “But that was then.”

“And it could be now if you let it. I want us to get back together. I want to marry you, give you babies we’ll both love, and I want to be there for you until the day I die.”

The sincerity in his words touched her and she couldn’t help the tears that formed in her eyes. Whether he knew it or not, he was offering her a chance to reclaim her dream. But still…

“It won’t work, Reese,” she said quietly, again trying to make him see reason.

“How do you know if you won’t give it a chance? Give us a chance. We can take things slow, start off by going out to eat, to the movies, take walks…and I promise to keep my hands to myself. In fact I will keep my hands to myself until you say you’re ready for something more.”

She lifted a brow. “No kisses?” She remembered how much they’d liked to kiss.

He smiled softly. “And as much as it will probably drive me crazy, no kisses.”

They stared at each other for a long moment and Leah thought about his words, his offer. She met his gaze, studied the expression on his face, looked into the depth of his eyes. “Why do you want to do this? There are other women in town who’d jump at the chance to—”

“You’re the one I want, Leah. You’re the only one I’ve ever wanted. You spoiled me for anyone else.” He chuckled quietly. “I didn’t know just how messed up I was until you left. I haven’t been able to get involved with anyone else and it’s been a long time.”

For him it was a long time, since she knew just how passionate he was. “Why?” she asked.

“Because I couldn’t imagine making love to anyone but you.”

Leah wondered if he knew what that admission meant to her. But then, if he was putting all his hopes in her, he still might not be making love to anyone. “Reese, I—”

“No. Just say we can make a go of things again, Leah. We’ll take thing slow but we’ll still make a go. Although
we enjoyed the time we were together, for us it was never just about sex anyway. Remember?”

   Yes, she did remember. The sex had been good, but they had shared a special friendship, as well. “And you’re sure you want to do this?” she asked, needing the reassurance.

   “Yes, I’m sure. Let’s start off tomorrow. Early. Invite me to breakfast. I miss your pancakes.”

   She couldn’t help the tiny smile that touched her lips. And with the memory she recalled a time when she had prepared pancakes at his place one morning, and how they’d got sidetracked and ended up with more batter over them than in the skillet. Of course they’d had to shower together and she remembered what had happened after that....

   Leah blinked. That memory had been totally unexpected. It was the first time she’d been able to recall a man touching her body and not get sick at the thought. And on that particular day Reese had touched her all over.

   “So are you going to feed me pancakes in the morning?”

   His question reclaimed her thoughts. “Yes, I think I can manage that.”

   “Good. Well, I’ll leave so you can go on to bed and get your rest. See you in the morning, Leah.”

   After Reese left, Leah felt an inner peace for the first time in a long while.
Jocelyn gazed down into her coffee before taking a sip and smiled. It didn’t seem possible but two weeks had passed since that night she and Bas had spent together and now they were definitely an item. They continued to do a lot of things together. Fun things.

During the day they went their separate ways with him working in the office the majority of the time and with her on the job site. Then, in the afternoons while he was at the gym, she used that time to visit with Leah, at least it had started out that way. But now Reese was dominating a lot of her sister’s time and although she knew the two were taking things slowly, just the thought that Leah was spending time with a man, especially the man Leah loved, was gratifying.

Then at night Jocelyn and Bas would meet up somewhere in town, usually at some restaurant or another and enjoy a delicious meal. And since Ms. Sadie had taken Jocelyn into her confidence about Bas’s health issues, she made doubly sure whatever he put in his mouth was good for him.

When night came they stayed over either at her place or his. All she had to do was close her eyes to recall any one time his hard male body had entered hers, taking her breath away, preparing her for the orgasm that he could so effortlessly give her, several times over.

At first it was awkward for her, letting a man dominate so much of her time, but pretty soon she got used to him being around. He was considerate, thoughtful and understanding and seemed to know just when she needed her space. He would give it to her, but not for long. It was as if he wanted her to know that what they were sharing was something he intended to make last until the end.

The end.

She knew they were working against a clock and soon he would be leaving to return to Charlotte. She didn’t want to think about how her life would be when he left. But she had to be realistic enough to know what they were sharing wasn’t forever. He had his life and she had hers. He belonged to the Steele Corporation and she belonged to Mason Construction. Her life was here and his was there. There was no middle ground.

“You’re quiet this morning.”

Jocelyn glanced up and met Leah’s curious stare. “I was just thinking.”

“About Bas?” Leah asked, leaning back against the kitchen counter.

Jocelyn opened her mouth to reply, then stopped. She looked closely at her sister. Growing up they had never shared confidences like some sisters who had close relationships. Maybe it was time they did. “Yes, I was thinking about Bas.”

“The two of you have been spending a lot of time together.”

Jocelyn lifted a brow. “And how do you know that?”

Leah laughed as she poured a cup of coffee. “Hey, give me a break. I wasn’t born yesterday. You aren’t spending the night here anymore and I doubt you’re spending a lot of time at your home in your own bed, so what am I to think?”

After taking a sip of coffee she added, “And don’t forget when Reese first became my boyfriend you hadn’t even started showing any interest in guys. You much preferred playing the part of the builder and holding on to your virginity.”

Jocelyn leaned back in her chair. “Yeah, well, I wish I had held on longer so that Bas could have been my first. I guess in a way he was.”

“Yeah, I’m glad Reese was my first as well,” Leah said quietly, as she came to the table to sit down.

Jocelyn waited a moment before asking, “And how are things going with you and Reese? I can’t help noticing the two of you are spending more and more time together.”

Jocelyn watched a tiny smile touch the corners of Leah’s lips when she said, “That man is so stubborn.” A frown then replaced the smile. “If it was left up to me, we wouldn’t be seeing each other at all. It’s so unfair to him.”

“In what way?”

“Reese is everything a woman could want in a man, and I of all people should know. He’s handsome, kind, considerate and understanding. He should be dating someone who can give him the things he needs, instead of someone like me, a woman who can’t even think about letting him touch me.”

Leah’s finger caressed the handle of her cup before she continued. “We’ve been spending time together for a
couple of weeks now and I still can’t let him kiss me, although I know he wants to. And he’s keeping his word by not asking. He gets here at seven every morning to share breakfast with me and before he leaves I know he’s hoping that I’ll open up, be responsive and let him, but I can’t.”

Jocelyn took another sip of her coffee and then said, “At some point you’re going to have to try and put behind you that one bad time with Neil and remember all those other great times with Reese.” Jocelyn’s lips quirked and she added, “I remembered some of your dreams and how you would moan in your sleep. Hell, it made me wish I could have been a fly on the wall during one of those times the two of you were together.”

Her comment had Leah laughing and Jocelyn felt good hearing it. When Leah’s amusement finally cleared she leaned back in her chair. “Trust me, a fly would have died from too much heat. Reese was all that and then some.” A sad smile then touched her lips. “God, I’d love to share some of those times with him again.”

“And you can, Leah. Reese is making it possible for you to do that. All you have to do is reach out to him. Don’t let what Neil did destroy the most precious thing that mattered to you—your love for Reese Singleton.”

A few moments later Jocelyn said, “You know, I use to envy what you had with Reese.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew the two of you were in love, all into each other, and I wasn’t there yet with anyone. In fact, I thought the guys who tried talking to me were annoying. I was a daddy’s girl who wanted to build things just like he did. I didn’t have time for relationships. But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t occasionally wonder how things could be between a man and woman.”

Leah gave her a wry smile. “And I’m sure with Bas you’re making up for anything you missed out on.”

Jocelyn laughed, thinking of all the things she and Bas had done over the past few weeks; some were outright scandalous, but he had assured her whatever a couple agreed to do in the bedroom was their business. “Yes, you can say that, but what I’m sharing with him isn’t forever.”

“It can be if you want it. I’ve seen the two of you together. I think he’s quite taken with you. Even Reese mentioned that he was.”

Jocelyn shook her head. “Bas is taken with the moment just like I am. We’re mature enough to know that one day he’s going to pack up and return to that life he has in Charlotte. And I have a lot to do here. This is where I belong, here in Newton Grove, keeping Dad’s dream alive.”

“And what about your dream? What about love?” Leah asked quietly.

Jocelyn shrugged. “I don’t have any dreams and I have no desire to fall in love. I live for the moment. That way you don’t worry about what happens when things don’t turn out the way you want. And as far as love is concerned, maybe the bug will hit me one day but I’m not in a hurry. What Bas and I are sharing is for today. I’m not planning on any tomorrows.”

“And what if he is?”

Jocelyn chuckled. “Trust me, he’s not. Bas likes the way things are just as I do.”

Leah gazed at her sister a moment before saying, “I think it’s all a smoke screen for you, Jocelyn. You do have dreams and you want to fall in love but you’re afraid to.”

“That’s not true.”

“I think it is. You missed Mom as much as I did but instead of withdrawing like I did, you turned your attention to Dad and began clinging to him. And then we had Aunt Susan. Now that both Dad and Aunt Susan are gone, you don’t want to risk falling in love for fear of eventually losing that person, as well.”

Jocelyn stared at her sister for a moment, and then shook her head. She had thought the same thing once and had dismissed the thought entirely from her mind, refusing to find a reason for her lack of interest in falling in love over the years. “I’m not afraid of falling in love or having dreams. I just have more to do with my time than indulging in either.”

Leah nodded, and Jocelyn wasn’t sure her sister believed what she’d said or not.

Later that night Jocelyn stood at the window staring out. It was dark and cold and according to the news report a little snow might be coming their way. She wouldn’t mind the snow, but bad weather wasn’t good for a construction company. At least Marcella’s house was finished and they had done the closing that day. To everyone’s surprise it had gone off without a hitch.

“So this is where you went off to,” Bas said, coming behind her and placing a hand around her waist, pulling her back against him. Her turned her into his arms and placed a kiss on her lips. “I missed you.”

Jocelyn chuckled. “You didn’t even notice me gone, you were so busy painting.”

He took her face into his hands. “Trust me I noticed you were gone, but I am enjoying that paint-by-number set.
I’m glad you talked me into getting it.”

She reached up and slid her arms around his neck. “Umm, paint by numbers today and who knows, you might be asking to use my coloring books tomorrow.”

“Not hardly.”

She threw her head back and laughed. She and Bas had been having honest-to-goodness fun and she didn’t want it to end, but she knew that one day it would. She pushed the thought away, not wanting to dwell on it. “You want to go down in the basement and play a game of pinball?” she asked.

“No, I want you to come back to bed,” he whispered huskily against her ear.

Moments later, in bed, Jocelyn wondered how often a woman could come apart in a man’s arms. How often could she get filled with so much intense pleasure? The thought of not being able to share this with Bas almost frightened her.

But then Bas leaned over and kissed her, and once again her mind went blank and she let herself drown in the emotions he was making her feel. And when he slid his body over hers, entered her with one long, penetrating sweep, she became totally aware of the size of him as well as his strength.

“That’s it. Move with me, baby,” he whispered as he began thrusting in and out of her. She moved her hips, clutched him with her thighs, locked him in with her legs and clench him with her inner muscles, pulling everything she could out of him.

“You’re getting it all,” he said huskily. The dark sensuality of his voice made her clench him tighter.

“Payback.”

And the way he paid her back had her moaning out loud. His hands cradled her hips, he pushed deeper inside her, angling her center so he could hit a spot that built pressure near her womb, causing flames to flare to all parts of her loins.

“Bas!”

“Get ready, cause here I come,” he whispered hoarsely.

And he came.

His body jerked, bucked, spilled into her, filling her with the essence of him. He threw his head back, breathed in tight before screaming her name. And Jocelyn knew this moment would be engraved in her memory forever.

The next morning Jocelyn was almost too tired and weak to get out of bed, so she decided to stay put just for a little while, and cuddle close to the masculine body that was spooning her naked backside.

She let out a shuddering breath when she thought of last night and all the other nights they had shared.

“You’re awake?”

She smiled, wondering if he was asking her that for a particular reason. She turned over and met his drowsy gaze. “Depends on why you want to know.”

He wrapped his arms tighter around her. “I need to tell you something.”

He sounded serious and she wondered if he was going to tell her that he was leaving. Pretty soon his six weeks would be over and although he claimed he would hang around for at least three months, he really didn’t have to. Was he needed back in Charlotte?

“What do you want to tell me?”

“First I need to get my good-morning kiss,” he said, leaning over and capturing her lips with his, drinking the essence of her mouth.

When he released her lips, she smiled and said, “Keep that up and we’ll never get any talking in.”

He slowly pulled back and met her gaze. He reached out and traced his finger along her chin. “I feel things with you that I’ve never felt before with anyone, Jocelyn, and that can only mean one thing.”

She lifted a brow. “What?”

“I love you.”

His words, spoken simply, made her think she hadn’t heard him right. But then all she had to do was stare into the clarity of his eyes and see both seriousness and sincerity in their dark depths. She felt flooded by emotions she wasn’t ready for, and had to swallow a lump that suddenly formed in her throat. “No,” she whispered softly. “You can’t love me.”

Bas reached out and touched his fingertips to her lips. “Yes, I can and you won’t believe just how much I do. I want to marry you and—”

Jocelyn pulled away. “Marry me? How can you think such a thing? We can’t get married.”

Bas’s lips tightened in a grim line as he witnessed her reaction to his words. “Yes, we can. Why would you think that we can’t?”

Jocelyn pulled herself up in bed. “Because I don’t expect you to move here and surely you don’t expect me to
just up and move to Charlotte. My life is here. The company is here. This is where I belong, Bas.”

“Fine, then I’ll move here.”

Jocelyn lifted her chin. “And do what? You belong back at the Steele Corporation. Coming here for a while I’m sure was a nice diversion for you but you’re going to leave and go back.”

Bas blew out a heated breath. “Surely you knew I was falling in love with you, Jocelyn. What do you think these past few weeks have been about?”

“Fun. We were having fun.”

“And that’s all I’ve been to you?”

She glared. “I didn’t say that, Bas, so don’t put words into my mouth. We were indulging in a short-term affair. I’m old enough to know that. I wasn’t expecting anything from you, and I most certainly didn’t think you were expecting anything of me.”

“Well, you assumed wrong.”

“And it won’t be the first time,” she snapped.

The silence between them stretched, and then Jocelyn finally spoke. “Look, it’s not that I’m not flattered by your offer because I am. But I can’t marry you. My life here is all I know and all I want. Leah was the one who always wanted to leave and move away. I was contented to stay right here. Nothing’s changed. That’s what I want.”

His gaze met hers and the pain she saw there almost pierced her heart. She hadn’t meant to hurt him, but she had. She reached out and touched his arm. “Bas, please understand that—”

“No,” he said, pulling away and getting out of bed. “There’s nothing left to say. I think you’ve said it all.”

“Breakfast was good as usual, Leah,” Reese said pushing the plate away.

She glanced up at him and smiled. “Thanks. I wasn’t sure how you would like the mango pancakes. It’s a new recipe I tried.”

He chuckled. “Hey, I love all pancakes and yours are the best.”

She shook her head. “It’s a good thing you’re as active as you are with how much you consume at breakfast. Going to the gym every day is paying off.” And that was true. Reese was in the best shape he’d ever been. The proof was in his jeans. She didn’t know of any man who could wear them better or could look sexier in them.

“So what are your plans today?” he asked.

This was how their day started, Leah thought. Reese would arrive for breakfast each morning around seven and she would have everything ready. While he ate a mountain of pancakes and sipped coffee he would tell her his plans for that day and ask about hers. They would then make small talk about the weather, any happenings around town and any other topic of interest. When it was time for him to leave she would walk him to the door and tell him to have a nice day.

When it was time to walk him to the door today, she had just finished telling him about another recipe she planned to try. “Well, don’t work too hard today,” she said, reaching out to open the door.

“Yes?”

She turned around and met his gaze. He didn’t say anything, but then he really didn’t have to. Despite years of separation she could still read the look in his eyes.

“Nothing. Don’t you work too hard, either,” he finally said.

Leah nodded and stood back for him to walk out the door. But some part of her knew she had to make this morning different for them. Jocelyn was right. She couldn’t let what Neil had done destroy the one thing that had been so right in her life, the one thing she had cherished the most. Reese’s love.

“Reese?”

He turned around. “Yes?”

She didn’t say anything at first, then she slowly leaned toward him and, without touching him, brushed a kiss across his lips. She heard his sharp intake of breath and the sound spurred her to go a little further. So she deepened the kiss a little, and when he moaned, she closed her eyes and slipped her tongue inside his mouth.

She got just what she expected and exactly what she wanted, the tantalizing and rich taste of Reese Singleton. This is what time and distance hadn’t been able to erase from her memory. Nor had Neil Grunthall.

With excruciating slowness and painstaking thoroughness, she kissed him, leaning into him but careful to keep their bodies from touching. But she needed this. After wondering for years if she’d ever be able to kiss a man again, she had her answer.

Leah slowly pulled back, or at least she tried to, but Reese’s mouth followed. He gently leaned toward her, recaptured her mouth, letting her know how much he enjoyed this. So did she. So they kissed again, passionately, thoroughly. And somehow, at some point, he wrapped his arms around her and she didn’t reject his touch. She was too caught up in the feel of being in his arms.
Her mind was humming that this was Reese, the man she loved, had always loved and would always love. Finally, he pulled back slightly, then began brushing kisses along her jaw. When he pulled his mouth away, their eyes met and although neither said anything, they were both aware of the importance of what had taken place.

“Thanks for making my day special,” Reese said. “It was well worth the wait.”

Leah nodded. She then lifted her hands to his chest. “Yes, it was, and please kiss me again.”

Reese smiled and lowered his head. He was more than happy to oblige her request.

“The boss is in a bad mood,” Tommy Grooms whispered to Reese when he arrived at the work site sometime later. This was their first day on a new project. The post office needed expanding and they had been awarded the job.

Considering he was in a damn good mood, Reese walked over to where Jocelyn was wielding her hammer. He waited until she was finished and tapped on her hard hat. “What?”

“We need to talk.”

Jocelyn mentally swore as she placed her hammer aside and followed Reese into a deserted area of the room.

She pulled off her safety glasses and hard hat. “What’s this about?”

Reese leaned against a metal post. “You tell me. The guys think you’re in a bad mood.”

Jocelyn put her safety glasses back on and glared through them. “I am.”

“Then you need to leave.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I said you need to leave and pull yourself together. This job is no place for negative emotions right now.”

Jocelyn’s angered flared. “You’re a fine one to talk.”

“Yes, and I learned from experience. Go ahead. Take an extended lunch. Come back when you feel better.”

“I feel fine.”

Reese chuckled without any real amusement. “You might feel fine but you look like hell. It’s plain to see you’ve been crying. What’s going on, Jocelyn? You and Bas have a lover’s spat?”

She glared. “Don’t mention his name.”

Reese lifted a brow. “Wow, that sounds deep.”

Jocelyn’s lips twitched in anger. “Men. All of you are nuts. You want affairs then you don’t want affairs. And when you do fall in love, you expect everyone to follow suit like good little soldiers. Well, not everyone wants to fall in love,” she snapped.

“Then don’t,” Reese countered. He then smiled. “But you know what I think, Joce? Whether you want to admit it or not, you’re already in love.”

Jocelyn decided to have lunch at one of the local sandwich shops in town. Reese had been right. She’d needed time alone. She released a long sigh and thought about what Bas had said that morning. He loved her.

Any other woman would probably have been elated at his confession, but why was she so frightened? She sighed again as the answer came back to her. Mainly because of the unknown. To fall in love with Bas meant uprooting her life here and going somewhere outside of her comfort zone. Other than her visits to Aunt Susan every summer in Florida, this was where her life had been. This was where she’d always felt she belonged.

All because of personal insecurities she’d always managed to hide.

Leah was right. The main reason she’d never formed an attachment to a man was because of the fear of eventually being left alone. That was why she’d never been involved in a serious relationship.

Before now. Before Bas.

But he wanted to take her away from here, and as much as she loved him…

Jocelyn’s heart began hammering fast and furious in her chest. Reese was right. She was already in love. Suddenly the thought of not being with Bas was something she didn’t want to think about and at that moment she knew to deny her love for him was a mistake. She did love him and she had to believe that things would work out and that no matter where he went or where he lived, her place was with him. He was her future as well as her present.

Later that evening Jocelyn knocked on Bas’s cabin’s door as she went back and forth in her mind what she would say to him. She knew she needed to explain why she had freaked out this morning when he’d told her he loved her, and to make sure that he believed she loved him, as well.

After having lunch she had dropped by to visit Leah, only to find her sister in the best of moods. Leah shared the reason with her. Jocelyn was truly happy for her sister and proud of the progress she’d made with Reese. Now Jocelyn knew she had to get things right with her man, as well.
The door opened and she saw the surprised look on Bas’s face. “Jocelyn. I didn’t expect to hear from you, especially after this morning.”

“I know. May I come in?”

“Sure,” he said, stepping aside. She walked in and closed the door behind her.

Bas went to stand in front of the fireplace while Jocelyn remained in the center of the room. “I need to apologize about this morning, Bas.”

He held her gaze. “Evidently I hit a sore spot.”

Jocelyn nodded. “Yes, the thought of ever loving anyone has been a personal insecurity I’ve refused to acknowledge. For some reason I’ve equated falling with love with eventually losing that person. So, to play it safe, I never allowed myself the luxury of truly loving anyone. Until you.”

He raised to his lips the glass he was holding in his hand and took a sip, never letting his eyes stray from hers.

“And do you? Do you love me, Jocelyn?”

She smiled, hoping he would see the truth in her eyes. “Yes, I love you, Bas. Reese sent me away from the job site this morning so I could go someplace and rationalize things, and I did. I can’t let life pass me by without having dreams, and without having love. I love you, Bas, and if your offer still stands, I want to be your wife.”

Bas set his drink on the mantel and came to stand in front of Jocelyn. “The offer still stands, sweetheart,” he said in a husky voice, reaching out and cradling her face in his hands.

“There’s one thing you’re going to discover about a Steele, Jocelyn. When we find the woman we want, that’s it. We don’t give up until we have her. I heard what you said this morning but there was no way I was going to give you up without a fight. What I have to offer you is my love for the rest of your days, Jocelyn. I believe in my heart there was a reason your father wanted me here and now I know what that reason is. You. All I’m asking is that you trust me enough to know that I love you, I’ll take care of you and keep you safe for the rest of my life. And I meant what I said. I don’t have to return to Charlotte. I’ll be content living right in this town with you, as long as the two of us are together.”

Tears sprang into Jocelyn’s eyes. This beautiful man was willing to make sacrifices for her. “No, everything is worked out now. I’ve talked to Reese and Leah. They’ve agreed with my decision to sell the company to Cameron Cody, granted he agrees to all of the concessions I want him to make. That way Reese can use the money Dad left him to start his own business. Leah plans to stay and if things continue to work out, she will eventually open a restaurant next to Reese’s shop.”

She then smiled brightly. “It seems that Reese and Leah are making progress, so I’ll be selling Reese back their home. That means I won’t have a place to live. Any ideas?”

Bas took a step closer to her. “Baby, I have plenty. But are you sure you want to sell the company? I know how much Mason Construction means to you.”

“Yes, but it was Dad’s dream and not really mine. My dream is to be with you, Bas. To love you, marry you and start a family with you. I want lots of babies.”

Bas laughed and pulled her into his arms. He held her for a moment before pulling back slightly and capturing her lips with his. The kiss seemed to last forever. When it ended, he pulled her closer into his arms and whispered against her hair, “You want lots of babies, do you?”

Jocelyn chuckled. “Yes, plenty of Steeles.”

Bas swept her into his arms and headed for the bedroom. “That’s good because I’m ready to give you everything you want, sweetheart.”
“I like her, Bas.”
Bas smiled at Chance over the rim of his wineglass. “Glad you do because I happen to love her.”
Chance chuckled. “That doesn’t surprise me.”
“I figured it wouldn’t.”
Chance took a sip of his own drink before asking, “So, have you asked her yet?”
Bas’s smile widened. “Yes, and she’s said yes. We’re planning to wed before the end of the year. That will give her time to wrap up a few things she has going on in Newton Grove, which includes selling the construction company to Cameron.”
Chance nodded. “When are you going to tell the family?”
“Later tonight after the party.”
“I wish you all the best.”
“Thanks and every time I look over at Jocelyn, I know that she is just that. The best.”

Later that night, after Donovan’s birthday party, Jocelyn snuggled closer in Bas’s arms thinking how her day had gone. She had fallen in love with his family the moment she’d met them all, his brothers, cousins and parents. Chance’s wife, Kylie, was simply too nice for words, and Kylie’s best friend, a Queen Latifah look-alike named Lena Spears, was also kind. Jocelyn smiled when she thought about his female cousins, Vanessa, Taylor and Cheyenne. There hadn’t been a dull moment with the three of them around.
Jocelyn had noticed the heated looks Cameron Cody had given Vanessa all evening, and the same held true for the looks Morgan Steele had given Lena.
“So what do you think, Bas? Which couple will it be?”
Bas pulled her closer into his arms. He knew what she was asking since she had shared her observations with him earlier. “It will be awhile for Cameron. Vanessa is a hard one to thaw so he has his work cut out for him. My brothers and I are hoping it will be Morgan and Lena. The more she resists him, the moodier he gets. But like I told you, a Steele eventually gets what he or she wants.”
Jocelyn lifted her head and gazed down at him. Her expression was suddenly serious. “And did you get what you wanted, Bas?”
He pulled her back down to him, wrapped his arms around her. “I got everything I wanted and more, Jocelyn. I love you.”
“And I love you.”
And when their mouths connected they knew that they were once again about to generate a little night heat.
Beyond Temptation

Brenda Jackson
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Chapter 1

“Mr. Steele, your two o’clock appointment has arrived.”

Morgan Steele’s pulse immediately kicked up a notch with his secretary’s announcement. He inhaled deeply and deliberately cleared his mind of everything except the woman who was about to walk into his office. Helena Spears.

“Give me a few minutes, Linda, before sending her in.”

“Yes, sir.”

After clicking off the line he stood and threw the papers he’d been reading into his briefcase before snapping it shut and inwardly telling himself to relax. Getting Helena to his office had been the first hurdle, and he was determined to make it over the rest. He was smart enough to know that if at first you don’t succeed you try again, and today he was a man with a more defined plan.

Putting his briefcase aside he found himself glancing toward the door, his pulse kicking up another notch as he remembered the night—a little more than a year ago—when he had first seen her as she walked into that charity ball wearing a very sexy fuchsia-colored dress. There had been something about her entrance that had momentarily taken his breath away, left him awestruck, mesmerized. And moments later when he had gazed into the warmth of her cinnamon-brown eyes, he had felt it. It had happened just the way he’d known it would once he found her—the perfect woman he had been holding out for all these years.

The only thing that hadn’t happened as he’d assumed it would was her acceptance. Lena, as she was known to her family and friends, wasn’t seeing things quite his way. She’d tried to explain to him, in a nice way and more than once, that she wasn’t interested in a man-woman relationship of any kind. She liked her life just the way it was and had no intentions of wasting her time indulging in a meaningless affair. Nor, she’d gone further on to add, was she interested in a meaningful one, either. She had been there, done that, and she’d learned a valuable lesson and had no intentions of doing a repeat.

All that was well and good but she wasn’t dealing with any regular man. At thirty-three he could admit to being arrogant, methodical and unwilling to bend in his pursuit of anything. Once he saw something he wanted and made a decision to have it, he refused to give up until he got it.

And the bottom line was that he wanted Lena.

He had wasted enough time and starting today he intended to use a different approach. He glanced toward the door again when he heard the sound of the knob turning. The moment it opened and his “perfect” woman walked in he couldn’t help but release a breath. He felt the sizzle as heat shimmered all through him. She was wearing a periwinkle-color business suit and she looked good in it.

“Lena, please come in,” he said cordially as his gaze floated over the rest of her with an analytical eye. She had just the right amount of makeup on her strikingly attractive medium brown face, which placed emphasis on the honey brown curls that flowed around her shoulders, giving her the appearance of a Queen Latifah look-alike.

She was five feet ten, just the right height for his six-three stature. Her body was stacked, well endowed in all the right places, full breasts, wide child-bearing hips, voluptuous thighs and the most gorgeous pair of shapely legs he’d ever seen on a woman. He’d once overheard a conversation she’d had with his sister-in-law Kylie, who happened to be her best friend, about what she thought was a weight problem. As far as he was concerned, she didn’t have one. When he looked at her, what he saw was a full-figured, thirty-one-year-old attractive and desirable woman who could start anything and everything inside him to stirring. The woman was temptation at its finest; however, when it came to her he was prodded to look beyond temptation and see something a lot more lucrative and worthwhile. Little did she know but he intended to open up a whole new world for the both of them.

“Thank you, Morgan,” she said, closing the door behind her, and breaking into his thoughts. “I’m here for our two o’clock appointment.”

From the sound of things she intended to be all business, and that was okay for now. He would give her this time because in the coming weeks he intended to get his. She would find out soon enough that she had just walked into a “Steele cage” and there was no way out. He had failed at plan A, but he had just put plan B into full motion.

Lena pressed her lips firmly together as she looked across the room at the man leaning against his desk.
Morgan Steele.
She thought the same thing now that she did that night she’d first met him. He had to be the most gorgeous human male to grace this planet, which prompted her to put her guard up even more. The last thing she needed in her life was a man, especially one like Morgan. She’d learned her lesson a few years ago that when it came to “pretty boys” and “fine as a dime” men, she had to watch her step.

But still…although she tried not to stare but couldn’t help herself. She’d been attracted to him from the first. Maybe it was the beautiful coloring of his skin, which reminded her of deep rich chocolate. Or it could have been the long lashes and dark eyes. And heaven forbid if she left out the chiseled jaw, high cheekbones, low-cut black hair and a pair of lips that were too provocative to be attached to any mouth.

The first night they’d met he’d surprised her by coming on to her and asking her out. She had turned him down flat. To this day she really didn’t know why he’d bothered since men who looked like him didn’t go for Amazons. They were usually seen with the slim, willowy, model types. Evidently, once she’d turned him down he’d seen her as a challenge and had asked her out several times after that. But each time she would decline. Finally, she had felt the need to put an end to whatever game he was playing by explaining her position on dating to him. She was too caught up in other things she considered more important than to be added to another man’s list as his flavor for the month.

As with any potential client she had done her research, which really hadn’t been necessary since Morgan’s oldest brother, Chance, had married her best friend, Kylie, over a year ago. Besides, most people who’d lived in these parts for a relatively long period of time knew about those four Steele brothers who ran their family business, the Steele Corporation.

Chance at thirty-seven was CEO. Sebastian Steele, nicknamed Bas, who had gotten married just a few weeks ago, was thirty-five and the corporation’s problem solver and troubleshooter. Morgan was thirty-three and headed the research and development department of the company; and Donovan, at thirty-one, headed the product development division.

Then there were the three female cousins of whom only one—Vanessa—worked in the company as head of PR. The other two, Taylor and Cheyenne, had established careers outside of the family business but maintained positions on the board of directors.

“May I offer you something to drink, Lena? Springwater, juice, coffee?”

Morgan’s question pulled her thoughts back in and she licked her suddenly dry lips and tightened her hand on her briefcase as if it were her block of strength. “No, thanks,” she said, moving closer into the room. “And since you’re a busy man I’m sure you want us to get right down to business.”

“Yes, I prefer that we do since I have another meeting in about an hour.”

She nodded, glad they were on one accord. She hadn’t known what to expect when he’d set up the appointment. From past encounters she assumed he was a laid-back sort of guy. It was refreshing to know he could be strictly business when the situation called for it.

“Would you like to have a seat so we can get started?” he asked, pushing away from the desk and pulling her thoughts back on track.

“Yes, thanks,” she said, forcing the words out from a constricted throat. He was dressed in a business suit that made him look like he belonged on the cover of an issue of Sexy Man magazine. She took the seat in front of his desk, and as soon as she sat down she noted once she tilted her head up she had a direct aim to his face, specifically his let-me-seduce-you dark eyes.

A sensuous shiver glided down her spine when their eyes met. She cleared her throat, determined to stay on track. “I understand you’re interested in purchasing another home,” she said to get the conversation going.

“Yes, I am and you come highly recommended.”

She couldn’t help the smile that curved her lips. “By Kylie?”

He chuckled. “Yes, her too, but I would expect that since she’s your best friend. Actually the person who’s been singing your praises has been Jocelyn. According to her, you found her and Bas the perfect house.”

Lena chuckled. “Finding the right home for Jocelyn was easy. She knew exactly what she wanted.”

“Then I should be easy as well since I know exactly what I want, Lena.”

There was something about the way Morgan had said the words that had heat flowing hot and heavy through her bloodstream. Was she imagining things or had his voice dropped just a little when he’d made the statement? Deciding she was imagining things she took a deep breath and said, “I need to know your likes and dislikes, and to find those things out there’re a series of questions I need to go through to make sure we’re on the same page as to what you’re looking for in a home.” She reached for the briefcase she had placed by her chair, opened it and pulled out a tablet.

“Ready?” she asked, glancing back up at him.

“Yes, ask away,” he said, moving around his desk to take the chair behind it.
“Okay. Are you interested in a single-story or a two-story structure?”
“Two-story.”
She nodded as she jotted the information down. “Do you anticipate doing a lot of entertaining?”
“Why?”
She glanced up. “Because if you are, you might want to consider a home with a courtyard, a swimming pool or a larger-than-normal living room area.”
“Umm, I have a swimming pool at my present home so I’d want to purchase a house with another one. Do you swim, Lena?”
She looked surprised by his question. “Yes.”
He nodded. “I’d like another pool and a nice yard. It really doesn’t matter how big the living room is as long as the house has a nice-size bedroom. That’s where I plan to spend most of my time.”
_Figures_, she thought, jotting the information down. She couldn’t help the visual that suddenly flashed through her mind of a sleeping Morgan tangled in silken sheets. “What about the size of the kitchen?”
“What about it?”
She tried not to roll her eyes to the ceiling. “Do you cook a lot? If so, then you might want a home with a large kitchen.”
He shrugged. “No, I don’t plan on spending a lot of time in the kitchen but my wife might.”
She lifted her head from the paper and met his gaze. “Wife?”
“Yes, or perhaps I should say future wife.”
“Are congratulations in order?”
“No. But I’m making sure I cover all bases since I don’t intend to move again. Whoever becomes the future Mrs. Morgan Steele will be moving into that house with me.”
“What if she doesn’t like the decor?”
“Then she’s free to change it.”
Lena nodded. “What about your present home?”
“I want you to sell it.”
“All right. Anything other than the swimming pool and large bedroom that you’re looking for in the new house? Do you have a preference for carpet or wood floors?”
Again he shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me. Which do you suggest?”
She shrugged her own shoulders. “Either is fine, it’s a matter of taste.”
“All right, I guess you can show me both.”
“That won’t be a problem. Now, for your present home, I would need to see it and I prefer that you’re there with me when I do.”
“Why?”
“So you can point out some things about it that I might overlook, key selling points. We can do a tour and you can tell me things you like most about your house that might hook an interested buyer.”
“Okay, you can arrange a date and time with my secretary,” he said, trying not to sound too anxious. “I’m flying out tomorrow on a business trip and won’t be back until the end of the week.”
“That’s fine and I’ll get on this right away.”
“Thanks, I’d appreciate it.”
She stood and glanced over at him. “Any particular time frame you’re aiming for to be in your new home?”
“Not particularly. How long do you think it will take?” he asked, coming to his feet as well.
“I don’t anticipate it taking long. There are several new subdivisions going up around Charlotte. Is there a certain price range I need to stay in?”
“No. If it’s something I want, then I intend to get it.”
Another heated sliver passed down her spine with his comment. It seemed he had been looking directly in her eyes when he’d made the statement, but of course she knew she was again imagining things after studying his impassive expression. “All right, then. I’ll be in touch when you return. I hope you have a nice trip.”
“Thanks.”
She gathered her briefcase and headed for the door.
“Lena?”
She glanced back over her shoulder. “Yes?”
“How’s your mother?”
Lena couldn’t help but smile. No matter when she saw Morgan, he was always kind enough to inquire about her mother. “Mom is fine. Thanks for asking.”
“You’re welcome.”
Lena quickly made it to the door. Without looking back she opened it and stepped out, grateful for her escape. She could handle only so much heat shivering down her spine.

When Lena made it to her car she leaned back against the seat, letting her neck relax against the headrest before snapping her seat belt in place. She had been in Morgan’s presence less than thirty minutes, but from the way her heart was beating it seemed longer.

There were times when a part of her longed not to be the responsible and sensible person she was. Every once in a while she was tempted to become her Gemini twin, the one who wasn’t the good girl; the one who wouldn’t hesitate to let her hair down, throw caution to the wind and walk boldly on the wild side. And the first thing she would do is take on a man like Morgan Steele and see if she could hold her own with him. Just the thought of having a one-night stand to feed the sudden, intense hunger she would get whenever she watched a romantic movie, or indulged in those romance novels her secretary would pass on to her, made her breasts tingle.

If she ever became her wannabe mischievous twin, that meant having the courage to trade her sensible four-door sedan in for that two-seater convertible she always wanted—and turning her nighttime fantasies into reality by behaving in such a way that would blow a fuse just thinking about. She didn’t want to dwell on all the naughty pleasures she would have.

Lena immediately dismissed the thoughts of her less than sensible twin, knowing she could never do anything like that. Her life was what it was and she couldn’t change it. She wasn’t the mischievous twin, she was the good one who had responsibilities that took precedence over anything else, including her desire to have Morgan Steele in her bed. Her mother came first.

She was her mother’s sole caretaker and had been since her father’s death six years ago. Her mother’s health had been failing her soon after her husband passed, making it hard for her to get around at times. A part of Lena believed it was due more to loneliness than anything else because a lot of her mother’s problems were more emotional, especially the bouts of depression.

Her parents had had a rather close marriage and Lena was born after they had already been happily wedded for close to twenty years. A number of miscarriages had convinced her parents they would spend the rest of their lives childless, and Lena had been a big surprise to her forty-three-year-old father and her forty-year-old mother.

Growing up in the Spears household, she had always felt loved and cherished by her parents and she missed her father dearly. For that reason she clearly understood the depth of loss her mother felt and the bouts of occasional depression that had followed. Even now on occasion, Lena would wake up during the night and hear her mother calling out for her father in her sleep, and it always brought tears to Lena’s eyes that anyone could have loved someone that deep and strong. It was on those nights after getting her mother settled back down that she would acknowledge the depth of her own loneliness and restlessness and give in to her fantasies of Morgan.

She inhaled deeply as she started her car. She glanced at the clock on the dashboard. In a few hours it would be time to pick her mother up from the adult day care. She went there twice a week for social enrichment and interaction on the recommendation of her mother’s social worker. Although it had put a huge dent in her budget, so far it had been a month and Lena hadn’t received a call from the day care’s director letting her know her mother had begun withdrawing, which usually was a clear sign that she was headed for another bout of depression.

Lena smiled thinking she had an idea as to why. Her mother had been talkative a lot lately when Lena had picked her up, and had told her about Ms. Emily, a newcomer to the day care. It seemed that she and Ms. Emily, who was also a widow in her early seventies, had struck up a friendship and Lena was glad about that. Her mother was someone who didn’t warm up to people easily.

And speaking of warming up…she allowed her thoughts to return to Morgan. Everything about him spoke of the dynamics of a man who was used to having his way. Well, unfortunately, she had shown him the few times he’d come on to her that she wasn’t putty in any man’s hand. The only thing the two of them could ever share was friendship. And after her last serious talk with him about three months ago, he hadn’t asked her out again, so she could only assume that he’d finally gotten the message if today was anything to go by. He had acted strictly business.

The last few men she’d fancied herself as possibly having a serious relationship with had painstakingly informed her that as long as she came with extra baggage—namely her elderly mother—no man in his right mind would be interested in marrying her.

She had decided if that was the case, then she would live the rest of her life single and not worry about indulging in a committed relationship because she and Odessa Spears were a package and would remain as such until their dying days.

Deciding she didn’t want to spend the rest of the day thinking about the things she would never have, she shifted her thoughts to the things that she could have—namely a big sale if she located Morgan the house he wanted,
and if she sold the one he now owned. Pulling off such a feat would pay a hefty commission and she would do her best getting him just what he wanted. And she knew exactly what she would do with the money. She would get her mother involved in even more enrichment programs for senior citizens as well as plan a cruise for the both of them. It had been a while since they’d gone on a vacation together, and it was time that they did.

“You’re late, Morgan. You know I don’t like keeping Shari waiting.”

Morgan slid into the booth across from his brother and glanced up into Donovan’s annoyed features and rolled his eyes. “Shari today, Kari tomorrow, whatever. Besides, it couldn’t be helped. I had an important meeting that I needed to keep.”

Morgan glanced around. The Racetrack Café was a popular place in town to grab something to eat and to wet your lips with a drink. Owned by several race car drivers on the NASCAR circuit, it had become one of Donovan’s favorite hangouts mainly because his best friend, Bronson Scott, was now one of the drivers on the NASCAR circuit.

Donovan finished off what was left of what he was drinking. “So you did have your meeting with Lena?”

Morgan frowned. “How did you know about our meeting?”

Donovan gave his brother one of his cocky smiles that was known to grate on his nerves before motioning for the waiter to bring him another drink. “To answer your question, I knew something was up with you this morning at the meeting in Chance’s office. Most of the time you sat there like you were zoned out. I figured you either had had a rather good night or you were finally putting together a solution to your problem.”

They paused in conversation long enough for the waiter to drop Donovan another drink off and to take Morgan’s order before Morgan turned narrowed eyes back to his brother. “My problem?”

Donovan chuckled. “Yeah, and don’t play dumb. All of us know how you have the hots for Lena Spears.”

The hots didn’t come close to covering it, Morgan thought, leaning back in his seat. However, Donovan, who didn’t yet know the meaning of one woman for one man, was the last person who needed to know that. “And just who is all of us?”

Donovan grinned. “Me, Chance and Bas, mainly. We’re the ones who’ve been putting up with your bad-ass moods since meeting the woman. Some days you act like it’s our fault that she’s not interested in you.”

Morgan didn’t like Donovan’s assumptions. “She is interested.”

“Could have fooled me. In fact she’s doing a good job of fooling a lot of people since she hasn’t given you the time of day. How many times has she turned you down for a date, Morgan?”

“None of your damn business.” The waiter placed his beer in front of him and it was right on time, Morgan thought, taking a swallow straight from the bottle. It was either that or smashing Donovan’s face in.

“Well, you know how I feel about any man running behind a woman. Downright disgusting. It should be the other way around,” Donovan said, taking a sip of his drink. “And I understand you’re going out of town for a few days to hang out with Cameron in Atlanta. I’m sure sometime during your visit the two of you will have a pity party since he’s just as messed up over Vanessa as you are with Lena.”

Morgan’s features grew dark as he glanced across the table at Donovan. “Cameron and I are meeting to discuss a business venture we’re both interested in and not for any damn pity party.” When Donovan merely shrugged Morgan felt the need to add “I hope I’m around when you suffer your first heartbreak.”

“Sorry to disappoint you but it won’t happen. There isn’t that much woman in the world, Morgan. Why settle for just one when the world is filled with so many of them? And now that the Steele Corporation has signed on as one of Bronson’s sponsors for NASCAR, and I get to go to many of the races, the pickings are even better. I never knew so many good-looking women were interested in fast cars. Man, if you could only see them. They look just as good with their clothes on as they do with them off. There’s this one sista who has a tattoo on her—”

“Hey, spare me the details, Donovan,” Morgan said, holding up his hand.

“You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Morgan shook his head. “Trust me, I believe I do.”

Donovan leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin as he studied Morgan. Within a year’s time two of his brothers had made it to the altar, and it seemed Morgan was hell-bent on making it three. He liked his sisters-in-law true enough and was happy for his brothers, but his dream girl was one who was no more interested in marriage than he was. Like him the only thing she was interested in was a good time.

“So tell me, Morgan, why did you want to meet here instead of back at the office?”

“Does there have to be a reason?” Morgan asked, putting his bottle down.

Donovan released a long-suffering sigh. “For you, yes. So spill your guts. Get it out.”

Morgan glanced away for a moment and when he returned his gaze to Donovan he saw the questions lodged in the darkness of the eyes staring back at him. Knowing he couldn’t waste any more time he said, “There are two
reasons that I wanted to meet with you. The first is to let you know that I met with Edward Dunlap again.”

Donovan nodded and lightly rubbed his chin, regarding his brother intently. “Does that mean you’ve finally made a decision about running for that city council at-large seat in the fall?” he asked his brother.

He’d known that for years a number of the African American leaders around town wanted Morgan to strongly consider a political career. He had charisma, charm and an ingrained sense of doing what was right. His community service—as well as his public service record—was astonishing and included such notable accomplishments as leading Charlotte’s Economic Development and Planning Council.

Another plus was that Morgan had been born and raised in Charlotte. The Steeles were one of the first families to begin a black-owned business that now employed a lot of people and who didn’t hesitate to pay their employees a very decent salary.

Another plus Donovan knew Morgan had in his cap was the Steele Corporation’s infrastructure. They were a company that believed in being loyal to the people who worked for them. When they had a chance to make a bigger profit by outsourcing a lot of their production department, they had refused since it would have meant putting over five hundred people out of a job.

Yes, there was no doubt in Donovan’s mind that if Morgan ever decided to seek a political office he would get it. Some even had him pegged as the man who would eventually become the city’s first black mayor.

Only a selected number of individuals were born to be public servants, and he’d always felt that Morgan was one of them. And although Morgan downplayed such, Donovan knew that deep down Morgan did want to become a political candidate mainly because of his ingrained sense of always wanting to help people.

“No. I haven’t made a decision, but I am giving it more thought than I did before. Dunlap feels the time is right. He’s also afraid if I don’t run, Roger Chadwick will, and both you and I know if that happens he will hurt the city more than help it.”

Donovan chuckled harshly. “That’s an understatement.”

“I have to know that I have certain things in place before making my final decision, and one of them involves you,” Morgan said.

“Me?”

“Yes. You. I’d like you to be my campaign manager if I do decide to run.”

Donovan smiled proudly. That meant Morgan being a candidate was a high likelihood. “Consider it done.”

Morgan nodded. “Thanks. Now for the other reason I wanted to meet with you. I met with Lena today because I’ve decided to sell my house and plan to buy a new one. She’ll be handling both transactions for me.”

Donovan looked at him and shook his head. “It’s your house to do as you please with, but I’m surprised you’d want to sell it. You’ve always talked about how much you like your home. According to you it was the ‘perfect’ house.”

Donovan chuckled harshly. “That’s an understatement.”

Donovan leaned back in his chair. The expression on his face was one indicating he was clearly confused. “Evidently, I’m missing some point here, so maybe you ought to go ahead and tell me what I got to do with you selling your house.”

Morgan picked up his beer bottle and took another sip. “Lena mentioned that once I put my house on the market she’d probably begin showing it to a lot of people.”

Donovan rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. “Yeah, that’s usually how it works.”

“That’s all well and good,” Morgan said, ignoring his brother’s sarcasm. “But I don’t want anybody to buy it.”

“Then why in blazes are you selling it?”

Donovan waited for him to answer and when he saw Morgan wasn’t quick with any answers, he couldn’t help but laugh when he figured things out. “You’re pretty damn desperate to resort to putting your house up for sale just to get on Lena’s good side.” Donovan’s brows shot up. “But you still haven’t told me what any of this has to do with me.”

Morgan took another pull from his beer bottle. “I want Lena to try to sell it, but in the end I want to feel comfortable knowing the person buying it will take care of it.”

“And?”

Morgan sighed. “And I want you to be the one to buy it.”

First a grin spread across Donovan’s face as he thought Morgan was joking. But after studying his brother’s features and seeing Morgan was dead serious, Donovan began shaking his head adamantly. “No can do, man. I don’t need a place as large as your house. My condo is just fine.”

“But don’t you want your space?”

Donovan took another swallow of his drink and said, “I have enough space, thank you very much. I do one woman at a time, so that’s all the space I need. Besides, your house is on an acre of land. I don’t do yards. I never
got along with grass. I don’t own a mower and don’t plan to buy one. It doesn’t bother me to pay those exceedingly high association fees for the golf course in my backyard, although I’m not a golfer. It goes with my image, one I want to keep. Besides, I always thought your place was too big for one person. I still do.”

“I need you to buy it, Don.”

“Aw, hell, Morgan, why me?”

“Because Chance, Bas and Vanessa already have homes, and Taylor and Cheyenne never stay in one place long enough to own anything but the clothes on their backs. You’re my only hope.”

“But I don’t understand. If you like your house, why are you selling it in the first place? You never did answer that question, although I have an idea.”

For a moment Morgan didn’t say anything. Then he said, “And your idea is probably right. Selling my house is part of my current plan and that’s all you need to know. I’m really hoping things don’t get that far, that Lena will realize my present home is the perfect one for us. But just in case things don’t go the way I want, I need to have a backup and I want you to be it.”

Donovan leaned back in his seat and released a long sigh, the second one in a matter of less than thirty minutes. He studied his brother, the one known to want the perfect everything. Three years ago he had built what he’d touted as the perfect house, and now he was willing to risk losing it for what Morgan saw as the perfect woman. Go figure.

“Is she worth all this, Morgan?” Donovan asked, truly needing to know.

Morgan didn’t say anything for a moment. It wasn’t that Donovan’s question had him thinking, it was just that he didn’t know what he could say to make his brother understand. But he believed that although Donovan didn’t have a clue how it felt to be undeniably drawn to one woman, one day he would. But for now the only thing he could do was answer the question as truthfully as he could.

“Yes, Donovan, Lena Spears is definitely worth it.”
Chapter 2

After glancing around the room for the second time, Lena finally looked over at Morgan. “How can you even think of selling this place? Your home is simply beautiful.”

Morgan smiled, pleased with her compliment. Her question was similar to the one Donovan had asked him last week, but of course he couldn’t provide her with the same answer. However, it sent a jolt through his stomach that she liked his home. He’d been hoping she would. “I’ve outgrown the place and would like something bigger, more elegant. Your job is to find me something more perfect than what I already have.”

He watched as she scanned the room again. It was just the living room. She hadn’t seen the rest of the house, and he couldn’t wait until she did. More than one person had offered to buy his home on the spot after seeing it, yet he had never once considered selling…until now, and only as a last resort. A part of him was still holding out that Lena would love it and want to live in it with him. But if she preferred living some place else, then he would gladly move.

“I’d like to know how you can outgrow something like this,” she said, reclaiming his thought. “In my line of business I’ve been through plenty of homes, but none ever took my breath away from the moment I walked through the front door like this one did. There’s no way this place won’t sell quickly.”

Her last statement was something he didn’t want to hear, which was the main reason he’d gotten Donovan involved. “Come on and let me show you the rest of it.”

An hour later he and Lena were sitting in his kitchen sipping glasses of iced tea. He tried not to make a big deal that technically this was the first drink they’d shared together alone. They had shared a drink that night at the charity ball, a glass of punch, while standing near the buffet table. And then at Chance and Kylie’s wedding they had stood next to each other drinking champagne. The same thing had occurred at Bas and Jocelyn’s wedding. But now he had her alone on his turf, and as he sat across from her watching her take slow sips of her tea, he couldn’t help noticing how her eyes seemed to take on a darker shade in the March sunlight. Seeing her eye color change did things to his insides. And then there was her scent, a luscious fragrance that nearly had him groaning.

“I know you get tired of hearing me say this, Morgan, but your home is gorgeous,” she said, breaking into his thoughts. “I’ll be able to find a buyer with no problem, but to be honest with you I’m not sure I’ll find a place better for you to live. It’s just something about your home, the way you have it decorated, the layout. Even the yard is huge and just take a look at this kitchen.” She glanced around. “It’s a cook’s dream. Any woman would love to lose herself in here. How long have you lived here?”

He pulled his gaze away from her mouth. He’d been watching every word flow from it while thinking of a million things he’d love to do with it, and every one of them was increasing the rate of his pulse. “For about three years now. I bought the land six years ago but didn’t get around to building the house until then.”

He decided not to go into details that it had taken him three years from the time he had purchased the land to finally approve a design from the architect he’d hired. In his book everything had to be perfect. His brothers would often tease him about always wanting things just right, to the point that it would drive them crazy at times, but he always ignored their taunts. He couldn’t help that he was a stickler for how he wanted certain things he deemed important.

“I might as well tell you that Donovan might be interested in buying this place,” he said, deciding now was as good a time as any to make that part known. He watched her arched brow rise in surprise.

“He is?”

“Yes, but I don’t want you to concentrate on him as a potential buyer just yet. Show it to others, see what they think and how much they’re willing to pay before I seriously consider Donovan’s offer. I promised him first dibs, but I want to be sure if I do I’m offering him a fair price.”

She nodded. “That sounds reasonable,” she said, glancing down at her watch.

Morgan noticed the gesture. “Do you have another appointment this afternoon?” he asked, knowing she didn’t. She had told him earlier that he was the last person she was scheduled to see that day, other than the lunch she had planned with Kylie around one.

She glanced up and met his eyes. “No, sorry if I appeared distracted for a moment but I was thinking of my mother. She went on a field trip with her adult day care today and usually I would have heard from them by now letting me know that she didn’t fare well. With no phone call I’m hoping that means she had a good time.”
He nodded. “Where did they go?”
“The zoo. How was your trip out of town?”
Sensing her need to change the subject he said, “It was great. I had a business meeting with a friend named
Cameron Cody. I believe you met him at both Chance’s and Bas’s weddings.”
She nodded as she took another sip of tea. “That’s the guy who tried to take over your company at one time,
right?”
Morgan chuckled, which he did every time he was reminded of that. “Yes, he’s the one. In the end Cameron
wasn’t successful in doing that, but he was in forging a friendship with all of us…at least everyone except Vanessa.
She never got over it.”
“But you and your brothers did?”
“Yes. We couldn’t help but respect a man like Cameron, a self-made millionaire. Although he was determined
to add the Steele Corporation to his list of acquisitions, he wasn’t ruthless about it. He’s a sharp businessman, and
the four of us couldn’t help but admire him for it. After it was all over we all became good friends.”
“I get the feeling Vanessa doesn’t care for him much.”
Morgan smiled. “No, she doesn’t.” He decided not to mention that after spending time with Cameron in Atlanta
this weekend it seemed they had the same intentions regarding finally taking matters into their own hands to start
relentlessly pursuing the women they wanted.
“I’d better be going. I don’t want to take up too much more of your time,” Lena said, coming to her feet.
It was on the tip of his tongue to try his luck and ask her out again, but he knew like all the other times chances
were she would turn him down. Besides, the key to his plan being a success was getting her to assume he was no
longer interested in her.
“You’re not taking up any of my time unnecessarily. I like this place and want to make sure whoever buys it is
worthy.”
He stood and then asked, “So what’s the next procedure?” He watched as she opened her folder.
“As far as this house goes, it’s as good as sold. It has too many strong points for it not to be a quick buy. All the
expensive moldings, the marble in the bathrooms and the bathrooms period. They’re beautiful and spacious and
you’re using all the cabinet space to the best advantage. This house is rather large for one person. You’re evidently
someone who likes his space.”
He shrugged. “Not really. I don’t mind sharing my space with the right person.”
“Well, to answer your question,” Lena replied, “what’s next is the installation of a lockbox. You don’t have a
problem with me showing your home when you’re not here, do you?”
He wasn’t crazy about the idea but knew he couldn’t tell her that. “No, I don’t have a problem with it.”
“Good. I’ll try to call before I drop by with anyone.”
“That’s fine. Do whatever you need to do.” He came around the table to stand in front of her. “I’ll walk you out
since I need to leave myself. I have to drop back by the office to finish up some paperwork and then I’m expected to
show up for dinner later at Bas and Jocelyn’s place.”
Lena smiled as she stood. “I can’t help but smile every time I think of how Bas talked Jocelyn in changing their
wedding date from June to February.”
Morgan grinned. “Chase did the same thing with Kylie. Both Jocelyn and Kylie got cheated out of June
weddings because of my eager brothers. I’m glad Jocelyn was able to finalize everything she had to do so she could
move from Newton Grove to here permanently. Otherwise, we would have been tempted to ask Bas to take another
leave of absence or he would have driven us all nuts.”
“They seem so happy.”
“They are, and so are Chance and Kylie. Marriage seems to agree with some people.”
“Well, yes, I’m sure it does.”
He watched how she quickly gathered up her belongings. He got the distinct impression that his closeness was
bothering her. “I better get going,” she said.
“Okay, I’ll see you out.”
As he walked her to the door he said, “I’d like weekly updates. Will that be a problem?”
She glanced over at him. “No, that won’t be a problem. I’m checking on an area of homes a few miles from
here. It’s a new subdivision but I don’t think the property is more than what you have now. You like a lot of land,
don’t you?”
“Yes, more yard for my children to play.”
He could feel her gaze on him. “You want children?”
“Sure, one day. Don’t you?”
“Yes, but…”
He turned to her when they reached the door. “But what?”
“Umm, but nothing. I’ll see you later, Morgan,” she said, offering him her hand for a business handshake. “And I appreciate you allowing me to handle things for you.”
He glanced at her hand before taking it. “Like I said, you come highly recommended. One thing you’ll discover about me, Lena, is that I choose my business associates carefully.” As carefully as I choose my lovers, he decided not to add.
He saw the expression on her face the moment their hands touched. He also felt her response. Although she might wish otherwise, the chemistry between them was still there. He was tempted to lean in and kiss her. Take her mouth the way he’d thought of doing so many times. Once he slipped his tongue between her parted lips, there would be no stopping him. A kiss could be defined as friendly or intimate. Any kiss they shared would definitely be intimate.
The moment he released her hand she turned and he watched as she quickly began strolling down the brick walkway to her car, liking the sway of her hips as she did so. Today she was wearing another powerhouse business suit. This one was a mint green and brought out the rich brown coloring of her skin tone. Something else it brought out was the primal male inside him when he’d gotten close enough to notice she was also wearing a mint-green bra, which made him wonder what else under her clothes was the same color.
He sighed deeply as she pulled back out of his driveway. Part of his plan was to take things slow so she could get to know him, but all he could think about while sitting across from her at that table was speeding things up a bit, saying the hell with slow and taking her into his bedroom and making love to her like there was no tomorrow.
But he knew doing such a thing would only result in a satisfaction of overstimulated hormones and he wanted something a lot more out of a relationship with Lena. So for now the between-the-sheets fantasies had to take a backseat to what was really important, even if the waiting killed him, because everything he was doing now would be all worth it in the end.

Lena let out a deep breath as soon as Morgan’s home was no longer in sight. Talk about temptation, she thought, coming to a stop at a traffic light and pursing her lips. Each time her gaze had met his she had been tempted to reach across the table and trace her fingers across those delectable lips of his. That would have given her only a little contentment. What would really have satisfied the woman in her was to have plastered her mouth to his and kissed him the way she often thought of doing.
But that wasn’t all. She could vividly recall when he had shown her his bedroom. The moment she had seen the king-size bed with royal-blue satin sheets, an all-consuming need had spread all through her body. And when he had left her side to show how the remote to his window blinds worked, her gaze had devoured him, appreciating how his lean and firm thighs fit his designer trousers and how his broad, muscled shoulders fit the white shirt he wore. And just for a moment, when he had leaned across the bed to brush a piece of lint off the bedspread, she had imagined herself in that bed, tangled in those sheets with him. By the time she had taken a gulp of that ice-cold tea he’d prepared, she had needed it to cool off.
Inwardly she groaned when the traffic light turned green. She had to let go of this obsession since it would lead nowhere. She glanced at her watch again. She and Kylie had their regular lunch date, and today they would plan for Kylie’s baby shower.
She smiled thinking that her friend was having another baby after almost fifteen years. But this time the pregnancy would be totally different. Kylie was not that sixteen-year-old who had found herself facing a teenage pregnancy alone after her parents had turned their backs on her. Now she was a woman married to a wonderful man who loved her and who would make her baby a wonderful father.
Lena couldn’t help but be happy for her best friend, and inwardly she could admit she was a little envious although such happiness could not have happened to a more deserving person than Kylie. But still, that didn’t stop Lena’s heart from aching from what she didn’t have. Here she was, at thirty-one still the bridesmaid but never the bride, still the godmother but never the mother. And what was so sad was knowing she would never be a bride or a mother.
She inhaled deeply, refusing to give the state of her future any more thought that day.

“What’s this I hear about you selling your home, Morgan?”
Morgan lifted a brow. He highly suspected that Bas had heard the news from Donovan, not that it was a secret.
“Yes, you heard right,” he said, accepting the glass of wine his brother was offering him.
“How come?”
Morgan gave a sigh of relief. At least Donovan hadn’t told Bas everything. “What do you mean how come?”
“Just what I ask,” Bas said, dropping into the lounge chair across from where Morgan sat. “How come? You
love that house. As you’ve told us so many times, it’s perfect for you.”

Jocelyn was in the kitchen and Morgan could only hope she wasn’t privy to their conversation. “Things change.”

“Bullshit. Tell that to someone else. Things might change but you don’t. You’ve had this obsession with things being ideal in your life for as long as I can remember. So what’s really going on with you, Morgan? What’s the real reason you’re selling your house? Discovered you’re sitting on a gold mine or something?”

“Wished it was that simple,” Morgan managed to say finally, studying his glass of wine for a moment before lifting his gaze to Bas’s curious one. “Colin Powell once said, and I quote, ‘There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work and learning from failure.’”

Bas rolled his eyes. “Will you give it to me straight, Morgan?”

Morgan smiled as he momentarily traced his finger around the rim of his glass. Bas was a troubleshooter; he looked for problems where there weren’t any. Morgan glanced back up and met his brother’s gaze. “Okay, Bas, you want me to give it to you straight? Then here goes. Lena Spears.”

Morgan watched his brother’s expression. For a moment he looked genuinely bewildered. Then slowly, Morgan saw the exact moment he figured things out. For a while there Morgan had gotten worried since Bas wasn’t normally a slow man.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Bas said sharply, narrowing his eyes at him.

“Trust me, I do. I want her, Bas.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, Morgan. That’s been evident now for over a year. It’s also been evident to everyone but you, it seems, that she doesn’t want to be wanted…at least not by you.”

“Then it’s up to me to convince her otherwise.”

“And you’ll go so far as to sell your house to do it?”

“Whatever it takes. Wish me luck.”

Bas shook his head, smiling. “You need more than luck, brother. You need prayer. I get the distinct impression that Lena likes her life just the way it is.”

“I got that impression too, and I wanted to know why such a beautiful woman would not want a man in it.”

“Did you ask Kylie?”

“Yes.”

“And what did she say?”

“At first she was tight-lipped, like she didn’t want to betray Lena’s confidences or something. Then she mumbled something about the men in Lena’s past not being able to get past the fact that she and her mother are a package deal.”

Bas frowned. “If that’s true, then those weren’t men, they were assholes who must have been hatched. Who in their right mind would even think about making a person choose between a lover and a parent?”

“How about someone like Dr. Derek Peterson?”

Bas’s frown deepened. “He’s a good example that what I said is true since everyone knows he’s an asshole.”

Morgan chuckled. Derek, who’d always taken ego trips even while in high school, was not a favorite of the Steele Brothers since that night a few years ago when he’d tried pulling his aggressive macho ways on Vanessa.Ignoring their advice she had gone out with him. The date had ended rather quickly when she had to resort to kneeling him in the groin when he proved he didn’t know the meaning of the word no. He never forgave Vanessa for using that technique on him, and to this day was still pissed at the Steele brothers for having taught her how to use it.

“Well, he must not have been the only one for Lena to have developed a complex about it to the point where she thinks the majority of men think that way. I intend to prove otherwise, and certain things can’t be rushed. Using her as my Realtor will buy me some time.”

He took a sip of his wine, determined to make Bas understand as he’d done Donovan a few days ago. “I’m serious when I said I want her, Bas. But more importantly,” he said, meeting his brother’s gaze, “I intend to have her.”

“So, Mom, how was the trip to the zoo?”

“It was nice. Mr. Bannister got sick again and Ms. Lilly wanted Mr. Arnold to share his wheelchair but he wouldn’t.”

Lena nodded. She knew Ms. Lilly was an older woman in her early eighties who had begun showing signs of Alzheimer’s last year. On several occasions she had assumed Odessa Spears was her daughter and would try to make her follow her commands. “What about Ms. Emily? How did she do today?” she asked, and glanced over and watched her mother smile.

“Why, Emily did just fine with this being her first trip and all. But she had company. Her granddaughter and
great-granddaughter went with us as chaperones. Did I ever tell you that she had six grands and two great-grands?”

Lena’s stomach tightened since she knew where this conversation was headed. “Yes, Mama, you told me.”

“And Emily agrees with me that it’s a shame that I don’t even have a grand. She said she can’t believe a young woman as pretty as you can’t find herself a man.”

Lena sighed deeply. There was no way she could tell her mother that men were out there a dime a dozen and she didn’t have to “find” one. The problem was hooking up with one who didn’t have stipulations that weren’t acceptable to her. Lena knew her mother’s heart would be crushed if she ever discovered the real reason men didn’t come calling and those who did usually stopped real quick, as if in a hurry once they discovered her role in her mother’s life.

“Mom, like I told you, my job keeps me busy.”

“No job should keep a woman too busy for a man. You’re thirty-one. I was married to your father before my twenty-first birthday and we were so happy together. That man was my life. You came along twenty years later and then the both of you became my life. A woman couldn’t have been happier. A husband and a child have a way of fulfilling a woman’s life.”

“I’m sure that’s true, Mom, but—”

“And take a look at Kylie. I love Tiffany dearly with her being your godchild and all, but a new baby is nice and it didn’t take Kylie long after her marriage to do her duty.”

Lena shook her head. *Her duty.* She didn’t want to think about what her mother figured her duty was.

“But I don’t want to talk about Kylie. You’re my daughter and I want to talk about you.”

Lena sighed. Her mother hadn’t been this talkative in a long time. A part of her was happy about it, but she would be even happier if they discussed another subject. “Mom, we’ve talked before. They don’t make men like they used to,” she said, coming to a stop at a traffic light.

She glanced over at her mom and met her gaze when Odessa asked, “Is that what’s bothering you? Are you figuring there isn’t a man out there like your daddy was? Probably not, but it’s the woman who usually makes the marriage and not the man. You just have to let him think that he does. Why, I can recall when your father…”

Lena pulled off when the traffic light changed to green as her mother relived pleasant memories. She was grateful for the change in subjects, because if they had stayed on their same conversation path, there was no way she wouldn’t eventually have lost it. Having lunch with Kylie and seeing how pregnant she looked made her unconsciously rub her stomach wishing more than anything a baby could be there.

She cleared her throat in an attempt to keep her tear ducts from working. For some reason she’d been in a melancholy mood lately, but she knew it would eventually pass and she would snap out of it.

Considering everything, she really didn’t have much of a choice.
Chapter 3

Lena glanced around when she entered the restaurant. She had been on her way to the Steele Corporation for a meeting with Morgan when she received a call from her secretary saying Morgan wanted to meet with her here instead of his office.

She sighed, feeling tired from a restless night. Her mother had had another outburst for her father and it had taken a while to get her settled back down. It always pained Lena to watch her mother relive her grief. After taking her mother to the day care this morning she had stopped by to visit with Delphine Moore, her mother’s social worker.

Delphine had explained that the reason her mother kept having her bouts of grief, even after six years, was that she hadn’t yet found anything to fill the void in her life left by her father. God knows it hadn’t been for lack of trying on Lena’s part. According to both Delphine and Lena’s mother’s family physician, Odessa’s issues, both mentally and physically, stemmed from the same thing. She needed something motivating in her life, something that would give her the will and desire to keep living.

Something like a grandchild.

The conversation she’d had with her mother a few days ago was still firmly embedded in Lena’s mind. She knew her mother was lonely and that was understandable. She also knew her mother probably saw her life slowly drifting away without the love of a grandchild to cherish. A part of Lena wished more than anything she could give her mother a granddaughter or grandson to love during her remaining days on earth, but such a thing wasn’t possible. Kylie had suggested that she try looking into programs where elderly adults could volunteer to act as surrogate grandparents. Since her mother got around fairly well with minimum help on her good days, that was one idea worth checking out. Lena’s heart sank every time she thought of her mother being unhappy.

“May I help you, miss?”

The waiter’s question reined Lena’s thoughts back to the present. “Yes. I’m to meet Morgan Steele here.”

The waiter smiled. “Yes, please follow me. Mr. Steele is waiting.”

As she followed the waiter it wasn’t long before she was staring into the contours of Morgan’s handsome face when he stood for her approach. As usual he was dressed in a tailored suit and looked the epitome of a successful businessman. By the time she reached his table, her heart was jumping crazily in her chest. Although the eyes staring at her were intense, his facial expression was solid, unreadable. But that was all right, she tried assuring herself. If he were to look at her any other way, with even a hint of an open invitation right now, her Gemini twin would be tempted to come out, and heaven forbid if that happened. She had dreamed of Morgan last night, and those dreams were still vivid in her mind. Her body had been flooded with adrenaline of the most sensual kind. In her fantasy he was an expert lover, and she would bet that in reality he would be the same.

By the time she reached his table, her heart was just about ready to explode in her chest. She cleared her throat. “Morgan,” she said, automatically reaching her hand out to him.

He took it and for a moment she thought he held it a second longer than necessary. “Lena. Sorry about the change in plans but I’m glad you could meet me here. I appreciate your flexibility.”

“No problem,” she said, taking her seat with fluid ease. The place Morgan had chosen for lunch was elegant and the furnishings spoke the part. The chairs were soft leather with high-contoured backs for both comfort and style. There was a lit candle in the middle of the table, and it came to her attention for the first time that they were sitting in the back, almost in an alcove that provided a semblance of seclusion and a bit of intimacy—not at all in keeping which what should be a business meeting.

As if he read her thoughts he said, “I had a business meeting here earlier and decided that instead of going back to the office or changing location we could meet here. I hope you don’t mind.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t mind. It’s a nice place.”

“Yes, it is.”

Morgan knew he couldn’t tell her that this was the place he had intended to bring her for their first lunch date, which she never agreed to. And he’d had to do some underhanded maneuverings for her to be with him now. “So, I understand you have information for me,” he said.

“Yes. I might have an interested party for your home as well as a place you want to look at. It’s located not far in—”
“Well, aren’t we a cozy twosome.”

A sudden wave of irritation touched Morgan when he glanced up into the face of Cassandra Tisdale, a staunch member of Charlotte’s elite social group. She was one of the most self-absorbed women he knew, and to top it off, she was Bas’s former fiancée.

The only good thought about that was the word former. Bas had broken off the engagement the night of Chance and Kylie’s wedding and hadn’t given the family a reason why. But it hadn’t been that hard to figure things out. Cassandra and Bas were as different as day and night, and a marriage would have made them the odd couple, whereas Bas and Jocelyn were a perfect match.

He slowly came to his feet. “Cassandra, I didn’t know you were back.” Rumor had it that she left town for an extended trip to her parents’ vacation home in the Bahamas a couple of weeks before Bas’s wedding because she didn’t want to be anywhere near Charlotte when the event took place.

“Oh yes, I returned this week. I had a wonderful time.”

*Doing nothing,* he surmised. Cassandra saw her role in life as to not earn a living but to give parties, entertain and remain a social butterfly. She was wealthy and intended to marry wealthy. Rumor further had it that since her breakup with Bas she had set her sights on Donovan’s best friend, Bronson. Luckily Bronson was smart enough to not give Cassandra the time of day.

Everyone also knew she had only latched on to Bas in the first place after Dane Bradford had gotten back with his wife, Sienna. Cassandra had been Dane’s girlfriend in high school, but the two had broken up when they’d gone to separate colleges. When they returned to Charlotte she had figured Dane would come rushing back to her. Instead he met and married Vanessa’s best friend, Sienna Davis.

Almost two years ago Dane and Sienna began having bad times in their marriage and filed for a divorce. Both Cassandra’s family as well as Dane’s had hoped with Sienna out of the picture Cassandra could become part of Dane’s life again. That didn’t happen because Dane and Sienna eventually got back together. Not long after that Cassandra had set her sights on Bas. Eventually, she and Bas had become engaged, but Bas had called off the wedding before a date could be set.

“Glad to hear you had a wonderful time.” He glanced over at Lena. “I’m sure you know Lena.”

Cassandra’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Yes, I know, Lena,” she said, giving Lena only a cursory glance. “I’m really surprised to see the two of you here together in such a cozy setting. I’m disappointed in you, Morgan. I know you can do better.”

He heard Lena’s sharp intake of breath at the direct insult, and anger, to a degree he didn’t think possible, took over him. “Just like I knew Bas could do better, and I was right. I hope you get the chance to meet Jocelyn. She’s just what Bas needs, and the Steeles are proud to have her as a member of the family.”

When she picked up the water glass, no doubt to throw the contents in his face, he said, “Be careful, Cassandra. Your spiteful claws are showing, and I thought you were too socially cultivated for that.” He took his seat, not giving her the courtesy of remaining standing in her presence. “Now if you will excuse me I would like to get back to my lunch guest.”

He heard her place the glass back on the table and when he was sure she had walked away, he glanced over at Lena. “I apologize for that.”

Lena waved off his apology. “Don’t. I’ve known a long time that I’m not Cassandra’s favorite person, ever since I became friends with Sienna. I recommend her to decorate a lot of the houses I sell. So Cassandra’s insults don’t bother me. She assumed we’re here together for something else other than business and she was wrong…as usual.”

She leaned closer over the table. “Now, what I was saying before we were interrupted, Morgan, is that I think I’ve found an interested buyer for your home as well as a place you might like to purchase. I didn’t put a contract on your place because of what you told me about Donovan, but I can tell you they are willing to make you a good offer for it.”

He nodded, inwardly not caring what kind of offer they made. “Who are they?”

“The Edwardses. He’s an executive for Brook-shire Industries and his job is transferring him here. Matthew and his wife, Joan, are in their thirties and they have three kids. Meghan is ten, Matt Junior is eight. Then there’s Sarah. She’s five and is handicapped and confined to a wheelchair, but somehow she can swim with assistance. I think she’s the one who liked your pool the best. When she saw it she—”

“You showed them the house already?” he asked in surprise.

Lena raised a brow, wondering what kind of question that was. “Of course I showed them the house. You did give me permission to show your home while you weren’t there, didn’t you?”

He sighed deeply. “Of course.” And being the top-notch Realtor that she was, she wasn’t wasting any time doing what she thought he wanted her to do. “What about this place you want me to see?”
She smiled. “I think you’re going to like it. In fact I think you’re going to like it even better than what you have now, it’s just that beautiful.”

He lifted a brow. She had piqued his interest if she thought such a thing. “Just where is this place?”

He could see the excitement in her eyes when she said, “It’s just minutes from the airport, which will help with your travels, and in some areas it backs up against Lake Wylie, if you’re interested in waterfront property.”

He nodded. He hadn’t been before, but he could be if she was. “So, when can I take a look at it?”

“Whenever you’re free.”

“Okay, how about today, after lunch?”

Lena blinked. She hadn’t expected that. “Lunch?”

“Yes. Since you’re here you might as well join me for lunch, unless you’ve eaten already or have made other plans.”

“No, but didn’t you eat lunch during your earlier business meeting here?” she inquired curiously.

He lifted impeccably clad shoulders with a negative shake of his head. “No. Anthony and I shared drinks, not a meal. I haven’t eaten since breakfast and I need something. If you’d rather we not go check out this place today we can do it at another time. Just call my secretary and see when she’ll be able to work you into my calendar again later this week.”

Lena didn’t like the sound of that. She knew how busy Morgan was and decided she needed to show him the place as soon as she could. “No, it’s okay. If today is better for you, then it’s fine with me. No, I haven’t eaten anything and don’t have plans. I can stay and join you for lunch.”

He smiled. “Good.” He glanced around and called a waiter over to their table.

“Yes, Mr. Steele?”

“Ms. Spears will be joining me for lunch, Ricardo. May we have two menus?”

“Certainly, sir.”

When the waiter walked off, Lena said, “I take it that you come here often.”

“Yes, I usually hold my business meetings here.”

“Oh.”

Raising his glass he took a sip of his wine, knowing with those words he had effectively removed any thoughts from Lena’s mind that his invitation for her to join him for lunch was anything other than business.

Lena glanced over at Morgan as he expertly maneuvered his SUV toward their destination, which was a twenty-minute drive from the restaurant. He had suggested saving time by using one vehicle, preferably his. That way she was free to cover the amenities the place had to offer while he did the driving.

In some faraway recess of her mind, she knew it was time to begin going over those things with him, but for some reason she welcomed the quietness between them and wasn’t ready for conversation of any kind to intrude. Besides, he seemed to be in his own world, his gaze fixed on the stretch of road in front of him. Nothing played, not even his radio, and she felt a tinge of uneasiness at the thought he could possibly hear her breathing, an erratic sound of wanting and need that she was trying hard to hide. But around him it was nearly impossible.

Even now the scent of him, definitely male, infiltrated her nostrils, sent heat coursing through her blood. In the past she could control her urges and her desires just by turning her mind and thoughts off to them. But since meeting Morgan, she found such a thing difficult, almost impossible, especially when they were in close proximity to each other.

She’d been conscious of a slow, nagging ache in the lower part of her body ever since he had walked her out of the restaurant to his vehicle. By the time she had gotten seated in his truck she’d been almost breathless. And when he had casually bent over her to snap her seat belt in place, it took everything she had to force her Gemini twin back from taunting him by pushing her cleavage forward, showing him as much of her breasts as she could beneath the droopy neckline of her blouse, and go even further by grabbing his tie and pulling him in closer; to have her mouth and tongue ready, willing and wet to meet his and—

“Okay, what you got for me?”

His question snapped her out of her daytime fantasy and she glanced over at him and met his gaze. It was on the tip of her tongue to respond that what she had for him was anything he wanted and it didn’t have to be within reason. He had brought the car to a stop at a traffic light and was staring over at her beneath thick, long lashes. That ache in the lower part of her body intensified.

More than ever today she was aware of the absence of her panty hose. Usually, she wore a business suit, but because it was one of those rare warm days in March, she had decided to wear a knee-length melon-striped poplin skirt with a melon-colored pullover droopy-neck tunic sweater that flowed past her waist and a pair of flats.

She reached down by her leg to retrieve her leather portfolio to pull out the papers she needed and said,
“Ashton Oaks is one of the premier neighborhoods of the Palisades that contain a limited edition of custom homes within a beautiful gated enclave and is in close proximity to the Palisades Country Club.”

Morgan nodded. He was aware of the Palisades because of the magnificent golf course that bordered it.

“What’s the price range of the homes?” he asked.

“Between seven hundred and two million. The one I’m going to show you falls in between, and I think when you see it you will agree that it’s going to exceed your wildest dreams with its custom kitchens, fantasy bathrooms, glorious—”

“Fantasy bathrooms?” Morgan couldn’t resist interrupting to ask, while raising a brow.

Lena chuckled. “Yes. You’ll know what I mean when you see it. And because over three hundred acres of the land is set aside to preserve nature, there are plenty of hiking and equestrian trails.”

“Sounds like a real nice place.”

She smiled over at him after closing her folder. “I think you’re going to be pleased. It’s the ultimate in prestigious living. I really don’t think you’re going to find anything better.”

He brought his SUV to a halt at a stop sign and glanced over at her, appreciating how the fabric of her sweater clung to her full breasts and how the rich coloring of her honey-brown hair fell in lustrous curls past her shoulders. It was his opinion that she had a mouth that was begging to be kissed, and he decided right then and there that she was wrong. He would find something better than the place she was taking him, and that was the place he intended to one day be, which was in her arms, in her bed, inside her body.

“The turnoff is up ahead, Morgan.”

Morgan was convinced he wasn’t imagining things when he heard that breathless catch in her voice. “All right.” He tried putting all his concentration on his driving but found he couldn’t. Even now his every breath was filled with the succulent scent of her as it floated through the confines of his vehicle. He decided to get control back before he blew things by pulling the truck to the side of the road and kissing the living daylights out of her.

“You mentioned one of the Edwards children was handicapped. What happened?”

“I didn’t want to appear insensitive by asking. I think possibly a birth defect but I’m not sure. But Sarah is the cutest thing, simply adorable. She was ready to get into your pool that day.”

Morgan chuckled. “Was she? She sounds like Tiffany the first time she saw it,” he said of the niece he’d inherited after his brother’s marriage to Kylie. He knew Tiffany was also Lena’s godchild. His face formed in a thoughtful expression when he recalled how Chance’s son, Marcus, along with Tiffany, had managed to get their parents together. Too bad there was no one out there looking out for him and Lena.

“Turn right at the next corner, please, and stop. I’ll get us passage through the gates.”

Moments later Morgan brought his car to a stop at the gated entryway, and after Lena had talked to the guard to gain clearance, they were driving through. His breath actually caught at the impossibly beautiful homes he saw showcased, all custom designed and reflecting varying architectural styles. He immediately concluded that this was one extraordinary neighborhood from the lush landscaping to the pristine creeks that ran along the back properties of some.

“Pull into the next driveway on your left.”

He did and he had to stop the moment his vehicle pulled into the yard. Before him sat what had to be the most regal and provincial home he’d ever seen. Completely brick, the three-story structure was twice the size of his present home, definitely a lot for one man. But then, he didn’t intend to live in it alone. He would have a wife, a number of children and a mother-in-law whom he would gladly welcome with open arms.

“So what do you think?”

He turned to Lena when she asked the question. He smiled. “Umm, I’m curious to know what you think.”

He watched as her mouth pursed. “I think this place has your name on it.”

He chuckled, deciding not to tell her that if his name was on it, then her name was on it as well.
Chapter 4

So this was a fantasy bathroom, Morgan surmised as he studied the huge room that contained a Roman spa with trompe l’oeil walls, the Portuguese cork floors, the romantic recessed lightings, the cornice tile moldings that framed the wall mirror and the chrome fixtures. And then he couldn’t omit the stone fireplace, the first he’d ever seen placed in a bathroom where you could soak away a day’s worth of stress while enjoying the view of a blazing flame.

The house contained four other bathrooms and they were just as elegant. The walls behind the bathtubs displayed a convergence of ceramic-tile styles against a backdrop of decorative squares and mosaic insets that appeared hand-carved.

But the elegance didn’t stop there. The master suite connected to the main house by a glass breezeway with elevator access. There was also an in-law suite on the first floor that was the size of a small apartment. The massive great room with its thirty-foot ceilings and eight-foot-wide brick fireplace added an expressive intricate touch, and the huge kitchen with its granite-top island and ceramic tile floors did more than add a finishing touch. They provided enhancements not normally found in most custom homes, including the one he was living in now.

He turned and leaned against a kitchen counter. Although when he’d made the request he hadn’t thought it was possible, Lena had done just what he had asked her to do. She had found a home more perfect than the one he now owned. “I really like this house, Lena,” he said quite honestly. “Not only is it a home but it’s also a private retreat.”

He watched the smile that appeared on her face. “I like it, too, and hoped that you would. I have others to show you but I thought this one was yours.”

Morgan shook his head. It definitely was his…and hers. “So what’s next?” he asked.

“I prefer you not put a binder on it yet. I feel confident that I can work with the developer to get a few more amenities. I’m not saying he will give us any, but it’s worth a try, and I wouldn’t be doing my job as your Realtor if I didn’t get you the best bang for your buck.”

He swallowed and wished she hadn’t said the word bang. At the moment he would gladly take the best bang for his buck. Even now with her standing across the room he couldn’t help but notice her bare legs and would do anything to get up close and personal just to run his hands up her voluptuous thighs. After getting a glimpse of her yellow bra that day he wondered if she always matched her underthings with her outerwear. He would love to investigate, to check things out for himself by going up under her skirt to see just what was beneath it.

She glanced down at her watch. “Oops, I need to leave. I almost forgot I need to pick my mother up a little early today since they’re having a meeting at the center. I’ll barely have time to make it once you take me back to the restaurant to pick up my car.”

“Then I won’t. I’ll just take you straight to the place to get your mother.”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to do that, really.”

“I’m sure I don’t but I don’t mind. Besides, I’d like to meet your mother.”

She lifted a brow. “Why?”

“Because I’ve heard a lot about her.”

A bemused look touched Lena’s features. “You have?”

“Yes.”

“From who?”

“Kylie, Tiffany. She wasn’t able to make it to Kylie’s wedding. I understand she was under the weather.”

Lena nodded knowing it was a lot more than that. “It just so happened that Chance and Kylie got married on what would have been my parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary had my father lived. They’d already been married twenty years before I was born.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that. I’m sure losing your father was hard on her.”

Lena nodded. “Yes, it was. They had a rather close relationship, and although he’s been gone for six years now, she still has some rough times. The holidays are extremely hard, especially Christmas since it was the day they married. And of course his birthday, which happens to be on the Fourth of July. She goes into a state of depression every year around those days.”

Morgan nodded as he thought of his own parents. They would be celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary in a few years. They, too, had a close relationship and he knew if anything were to happen to either parent, the
remaining one would have a difficult time adjusting as well.

At that moment he felt an astounding respect and admiration for Lena. She had technically placed her social life on hold to take care of her mother. He and his brothers had unanimously decided when and if the time came not to place their parents in a nursing home if it was reasonably possible not to do so. Like Lena, they would become their parents’ primary caretakers.

When he saw her glance down at her watch again, he said, “Come on. I want to make sure you’re there to pick up your mother on time.”

It was on the tip of Lena’s tongue to tell him that she preferred that he not go. She could just imagine what her mother would think if a man accompanied her to pick her up as it had been over three years since she was actually out on a date. The last guy she’d dated had been Dr. Derek Peterson, who’d had the nerve to tell her that they could pick up their relationship once she put her mother in her own place and stop spending so much time with her. She was glad she hadn’t gotten any further with him than the first kiss. After saying what he’d said the man had really turned her stomach.

Once they were back in Morgan’s SUV her lips quivered slightly with nerves. Maybe she needed to prepare Morgan in case her mother did something crazy like bring up the subject of grandbabies, her favorite subject lately.

“Morgan?”

He glanced over at her as he backed the vehicle out of the driveway. “Yes?”

“My mother. I think I need to prepare you about something so you won’t be surprised, in case she brings it up.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“She wants grandkids.”

“Oh, I see.”

Even as he said the words, Lena doubted if he really saw at all and decided to explain. “She’s getting older and —”

“Lena, you don’t have to explain. I have parents, too, remember. And when it comes to wanting grandkids they’re just as bad.”

“They are?”

“Yes. For years Marcus was enough for them, but then they started throwing out hints to the four of us again. They felt Chance needed to remarry and Bas, Donovan and I needed to find wives. Now with Bas married and Chance with a new baby on the way, they’re satisfied for now, but I’m not counting on it lasting too long. They’ll be looking at me and Donovan again in a few years.”

A few moments later he asked, “What about you, Lena?”

She lifted a brow. “What about me?”

“I asked you before and you said you wanted kids…but. You never explained what that but meant.”

Lena recalled that day a couple of weeks ago. She met his gaze when he halted at a stop sign. “But means that I would love to have children of my own one day and I would love for my children to know my mother while she’s still here with me in good health and a good frame of mind. But since I’m not married and don’t see myself getting married in my near or distant future, then it doesn’t matter how much I love kids or want them, does it?”

Yes it did. Morgan’s jaw tightened and he wished to earth that he could tell her right then and there that it did matter because he was willing to give her as many babies as she wanted. He could provide their child a loving, stable environment that included two parents and grandparents. And he didn’t have a problem with Lena being her mother’s primary caretaker. They would do it together, share the responsibility. And he would be able to provide all the financial security she’d ever want.

But at the moment he was too deep into his plan of pursuit to tell her that. He would have to show her better than to tell her. In the past men had disappointed her in such a way that it would be hard for Lena to put her complete trust in one again. So he would take his time and continue with his plan to build her trust and belief that he was different. He had to prove that all the other men in her life had been Mr. Wrong but he was her Mr. Right.

When he brought the car to the gate to exit out of the subdivision he smiled and said, “Don’t worry. Your mother and I will get along great.”

Lena inwardly sighed. That was exactly what she was afraid of. And then when Morgan stopped coming around the way the others had once they realized that her mother was a permanent fixture in her life, she wondered just what her mother was going to think.

“Who are you, young man?”

Before Morgan could respond Lena quickly answered as she snapped her mother’s seat belt in place. “Mom, this is a client of mine, Morgan Steele. I was out showing him a house and time slipped away. He was kind enough to offer to bring me here to pick you up.”
“Oh.” Odessa, who was sitting in the front passenger seat, smiled over at Morgan, in the driver’s seat. “That was nice of you, Mr. Steele.” She then bunched her brows. “I know another Steele. Kylie’s husband.”

Morgan smiled. “That’s Chance, my brother.”

The woman’s face crinkled into an even wider smile. “So, you’re one of those Steele boys.”

Morgan chuckled. He hadn’t heard him and his brothers referred to that way in a long time. “Yes, ma’am, I am.”

“I heard there were four of you.”

“Yes, there are.”

“Another one got married recently, right?”

“Yes, that was my brother Sebastian.”

“You and your other brother are still single?”

“Mom! Please don’t make Morgan feel like he’s part of an inquisition,” Lena said from the backseat as Morgan drove away from the adult day care center.

Odessa glanced over at Morgan. “Sorry about that, son.”

He chuckled again. “No harm’s been done, Ms. Spears. And to answer your question, yes, my brother Donovan and I are still single.”

To avoid her mother asking Morgan any questions about his personal life, Lena quickly asked her how things had gone at the center today. Odessa then went into a lengthy explanation, filling everyone in on the happenings of that day. Lena sat in the backseat thinking most of it was an everyday occurrence, especially the information about Mr. Talbot trying to eat Ms. Meriwether’s lunch. But what was different today was that her mother had another set of ears, attentive ears. Lena knew Morgan was just being nice but he was hanging on to her mother’s every word; and the more he hung on, the more her mother had to say. She couldn’t recall the last time her mother was so chatty with a stranger.

From her position in the backseat Lena watched Morgan. Although he kept his eyes focused on the road, he was still attuned to what her mother was saying and would make occasional comments. Lena finally decided to tune out the conversation and focus on him.

The man had a very sexy mouth. That was one of the first things she had noticed about him the first night they met, which was probably the reason she kept having those fantasies of kissing it. Then there were his hands, the ones that were now gripping the steering wheel. She could just imagine him gripping her thighs in just the same way, while his fingers inched upward toward that heated place and—

“Isn’t that wonderful, Lena?”

She blinked, realizing her mother had spoken to her, had asked her a question. “Excuse me, Mom, what did you say? My thoughts were elsewhere.”

“I said, isn’t it wonderful that Morgan is coming to dinner on Sunday?”

“What?” Lena said, switching her gaze to Morgan and meeting his in the rearview mirror in wild confusion. What was her mother talking about? Morgan was not coming to dinner on Sunday.

“Did I miss something?” she asked, trying to ignore the intensity in the dark eyes staring back at her in the mirror.

“Your mother asked when the last time was that I had homemade chicken and dumplings, and I told her it’s been a while. She was kind enough to invite me over on Sunday since she’ll be cooking some then.”

Lena snatched her gaze from Morgan to stare at the back of her mother’s head. “When did you decide to cook?” She couldn’t recall the last time her mother had been motivated to go into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Usually Lena did the cooking.

“When Morgan said it’s been a while since he’d had chicken and dumplings. I think he should get a taste of mine at least once.”

“That’s kind of you, Mom, and I’m certain Morgan appreciates the invitation, but I’m sure he has other things to do on Sunday.”

“No, I don’t.”

A surprised brow lifted as Lena met Morgan’s gaze in the rearview mirror again. She’d been trying to help him out of what she thought was a situation he hadn’t really wanted to be in. “You don’t?”

He chuckled. “No, I don’t.”

“Then it’s all settled,” Odessa Spears was saying with a smile in her voice. “And I think I’m going to bake a peach cobbler as well. Do you like peach cobbler, Morgan?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.”
Kylie Steele smiled, seeing the look of grief on the face of the woman who’d been her best friend since high school. They were having their weekly lunch session at their favorite restaurant. “Come on, Lena. Morgan having dinner at your place can’t be that bad.”

Lena frowned. “That’s what you think. You know that he asked me out a few times and I turned him down, and I had worked so hard making sure he understood there could never be anything between us but friendship. And with him being a client, I’ve been trying to keep things strictly business between us, and now thanks to Mom he might get the wrong idea and I don’t want that.”

Kylie took a sip of her apple juice, her eyes meeting Lena’s over the rim of her glass. Once she set the glass down on the table she asked, “Okay, Lena. Tell me. What’s going on here? What is it that you really want?”

Lena shrugged. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“No, I think that you do. This is Kylie, remember, the one person who knows you like a book. Pregnancy didn’t destroy any of my brain cells. I know the reason you turned Morgan down all those times. You’re convinced he’s no different than the Derek Petersons of the world.”

Lena shook her head. “I never said he was anything like Derek. But then, I have to be fair and objective in dealing with men, Kylie. Taking care of an elderly parent is a huge undertaking, but I do it with pleasure and love because it’s my mom. I don’t see it just as a responsibility, I see it as a way to gladly give back all those things she’s given to me over the years.”

She took a sip of her wine before continuing. “But I can’t expect others to see it that way. Mom is seventy-one and not in the best of health. Morgan’s parents are in their late fifties, still alive, and are able to do things together. I’m all Mom has and that’s okay. I don’t have time to devote to a serious relationship. Being with her takes up most of my time.”

“But it doesn’t have to be that way, Lena. Your mom is in good health so it’s not like she needs a sitter around the clock and—”

“Where would a relationship lead, Kylie? I’ve never been one to get into casual affairs and maybe that’s my downfall. If I could indulge in one, then things would be just great and I wouldn’t hurt when the affair ended because I could just brush myself off and start on another. But I can’t do that. I get involved with all my emotions.”

“You really liked Derek, didn’t you?” Kylie asked softly, remembering the man who’d once had the nerve to try and hit on her right in front of Lena. What a jerk!

Emotions, thick and painful, lodged in Lena’s throat. “He was a real charmer, I have to admit. I’m just glad I never slept with him. Then him walking away like he did would really have been humiliating. But to answer your question, yes, I really liked him but I didn’t love him. I would have begun falling in love with him if I hadn’t started seeing his true side. He was just like a spoiled child. He wanted to make me choose between him and my mother and he was too stupid to see there wasn’t a choice. But to give me an ultimatum like that showed just what kind of person he was.”

“Yes, it did. But let’s get back to Morgan for a moment. You can’t tell me you don’t like him just a little.”

Lena couldn’t help but smile. “What’s there not to like? He’s good-looking, has good manners, he’s a successful businessman. When I quoted him the price of that house I showed him a couple of days ago, he didn’t bat an eye.”

“But?”

“But even if I didn’t have Mom I still wouldn’t get involved with him. I’m way out of my league with him. I can see him with a totally different woman by his side, and I can’t risk losing my heart to him. It’s as simple as that.”

She studied the contents of her glass for a moment, then said, “I didn’t tell you that Morgan and I ran into Cassandra Tisdale the day we had our business meeting at that restaurant in town.”

Kylie raised a brow. “Cassandra Tisdale? She’s back?”

“Yes, and her fangs are sharper than ever. She made a very rude comment about Morgan and me being together.”

Kylie frowned. “What kind of comment?”

“Something about how he could do better.”

Kylie leaned back in her chair with a look of incredulity on her face. “I can’t believe the nerve of that woman,” she said, remembering the first time she had come into contact with Cassandra. “For someone who’s supposed to be so refined, she can be downright tacky at times.”

“Yes, but Morgan put her in her place, but then he should not have. When people see us together they shouldn’t see us as a mismatched couple. When a couple walks into the room and heads turn it should be for all the right reasons and not the wrong ones.”

“And you see that happening?”
“Possibly. I have no problem with who I am, but I can’t honestly think that I’m someone he’d probably consider as his ideal woman.”

“Then why do you think he asked you out all those times?”

“Who knows? Maybe out of boredom.”

“I don’t think you’re being fair to Morgan or to yourself.” Kylie then leaned forward in her seat and sighed.

“Do something for me, Lena.”

“What?”

“Stop selling yourself short. When you get home take a look in the mirror. You’re a beautiful full-figured African American woman who could walk into any room and put the Cassandra Tisdales of this world to shame, mainly because not only do you have outside beauty, you have inside beauty as well. Don’t think a man like Morgan wouldn’t know that. And I think you need to think about something.”

“What?”

“What if you are Morgan’s ideal woman? And what if he’s that one man who doesn’t care that you’re your mother’s primary caretaker? Then what?”

A small smile touched the corners of Lena’s lips. “Then I’ll get the hell out of Dodge quick like and in a hurry.”

Kylie lifted a brow. “What does that mean?”

“It means that I would run like hell because I wouldn’t know the first thing about handling a man like Morgan…sexually, I mean. I bet his testosterone level is probably close to hitting the Richter scale. I get hot all over at the thought of sleeping with him.”

Kylie grinned as her eyes glittered teasingly. “So the thought has crossed your mind?”

A frisson of desire inched its way through Lena’s bloodstream at the same moment she knew a heated flush was probably showing in her cheeks. “Yes, more than a few times a week. How about every day?” she said honestly.

Kylie laughed. “Now you know what I was going through after meeting Chance.”

Yes, Lena thought. She knew. But she also knew that she and Kylie were different people. Kylie had started out being defiant and determined, but in the end she had given in to Chance’s charm. Lena didn’t intend to give in to any man’s charm again. What Derek and others before him had done had more than pricked her pride. It had made her see things quite clear. And the more she kept her dealings with Morgan on a business level, the better things would be.
Chapter 5

Lena tried to recall her immunity to any man’s charm as she gazed at the two beautiful bouquets of fresh flowers Morgan had just handed her. One for her and the other for her mother.

Finding herself unnerved, she glanced up at him. “Thanks for the flowers, Morgan. Please come in.”

She moved aside when he stepped inside. While she closed the door she noticed him glancing around, and when their gazes connected again he said, “You have a nice place.”

“Thanks. Please let me take your jacket.” The weather had changed and there was a brisk coolness in the air. The warm weather from earlier in the week was gone. In fact the forecaster’s had predicted the possibility of snow sometime next week.

“Mom’s in the kitchen,” she said, placing his leather jacket on the rack. “I told her you had arrived, so she should be coming out in a little bit. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Because his brother was married to her best friend, she and Morgan were invited to some of the same functions on occasion, so she had seen him in casual wear before. But there was something about seeing him now, standing tall and handsome in her living room wearing a pair of jeans, a blue pullover sweater and a pair of comfortable-looking sneakers that made her wonder, and not for the first time, why he didn’t have a steady girlfriend.

He was definitely one fine specimen of a man, a healthy-looking one at that, which meant he probably had a normal sex drive like most men. And not that she thought he went for the celibacy thing, but since being officially introduced to him at that charity ball over a year ago, she couldn’t recall his name linked to any female. Now, with his brother Donovan it was a different story. The fun-loving Donovan Steele had a reputation around town as being a ladies’ man.

“If you will excuse me I’m going to find a couple of vases for the flowers. Please make yourself at home.”

“All right.”

Although she was conscious of the tingly sensations that lit every cell in her body, Lena tried to ignore them as she quickly left the room. When she stepped into the kitchen she saw her mother, bending over the oven with an apron on. Lena had awakened that morning to the smell of fresh peaches cooking and had lain in bed for a while to make sure she was at the right house. Her mother hadn’t set foot in the kitchen since they moved in almost five years ago, other than to eat. But her invitation to Morgan had nearly done the impossible.

“Did you get Morgan settled comfortably, dear?” her mother asked as if she had a pair of eyes in the back of her head.

“Yes, and he brought these for us.”

Odessa straightened and turned around. Upon seeing the flowers she smiled. “Now, wasn’t that real sweet of him?”

Lena shrugged, knowing that it was but not wanting to give her mother any ideas where Morgan was concerned. “All the Steeles are nice, Mom.”

“Yes, and Kylie’s blessed to have met Chance. And just to think that Tiffany and Chance’s son Marcus got them together.”

Lena couldn’t help but smile at how the two teenagers had successfully played matchmakers. She glanced over at the stove. “It seems you’re serving more than just chicken and dumplings and peach cobbler,” she said upon seeing all the pots.

“I decided since that young man hasn’t had a good home-cooked meal in a while I would throw in a few more items. I really like him.”

To Lena that fact was obvious and she couldn’t help wondering why. Her mother had met Derek, Jon and Paul. They’d held conversations with her when they came to pick Lena up for dates, but neither of the three had won her mother over like Morgan to the point to bring her back into the kitchen.

“I’ll be back in a second.”

Lena watched as her mother left the kitchen to go to the living room and speak to Morgan. A few moments later she could actually hear Morgan’s deep voice and her mother laughing about something. She wondered what that was all about, knowing before she left the sanctuary of the kitchen to find out she needed to pull herself together. It seemed Morgan Steele had a way with women, both young and old.
Her mother laughed out again, and then the laughter was followed by the sound of Morgan’s voice. Lena paused as she put the flowers in the vase, as her mind, her thoughts and every sensation in her body focused on that voice. It was strong, husky, yet in some ways gentle. But then on the other hand, there was a sensuous quality about it that touched something deep inside her, in the most provocative places. There wasn’t a nook, corner or crevice of her body that hadn’t at one time or another been affected.

“Lena?”

She snapped out of her thoughts when she heard her mother call out her name. “Yes?” she called back.

“Morgan needs help setting the table.”

Lena lifted her brow. Morgan was setting the table? She picked up the vases and walked out of the kitchen. She placed one vase in the middle of the dining room table and the other on a table in the living room. She glanced up and saw the white linen tablecloth in Morgan’s hands.

“I guess Ms. Odessa is going to make me work for my supper,” he said, smiling.

“At least I’m letting Lena help you,” her mother replied, amused as she left them alone to go back into the kitchen.

“I like your mom, Lena. She’s fun to be around.”

Lena nodded, thinking it strange that none of the guys she’d brought home to meet her mother had ever made such an observation. “I don’t know why Mom felt I needed to help you with this,” she said, leading him into the dining room and removing the flowers off the table that she had put there mere minutes ago. “And you should feel honored you get dining room space. Usually our guests just cram with us in the kitchen.”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

Lena glanced up at him, saw the sincerity in his eyes and knew that he would not have minded. That was one thing she had discovered about Morgan. He was so unlike Derek in that he didn’t have a conceited bone in his body.

It didn’t take them long to spread the linen covering over the table and smooth the center and sides. They worked quietly, not saying anything, and then suddenly they came up short upon realizing they had moved into the same area when they accidentally bumped into each other. His hands reached out, gripped her around the waist to steady her, and her body automatically went into an immobile mode; she felt suspended in space. The hands at her waist felt warm, strong yet gentle.

Breathing deeply, she tilted her head up and looked into his face, met his gaze and nearly got scorched from the deep, hot intensity from his eyes. That look alone overwhelmed her, made her pulse race and her breathing come out forced.

“Sorry,” she muttered, quickly taking a step back. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“No harm done. Neither was I,” was Morgan’s easy response…which was a lie, he thought. He’d been drawn to her scent like a bee drawn to honey.

“Dinner’s ready. I need more hands to bring everything out,” Odessa called out from the kitchen.

Thinking it would be best not to bump into her twice since he wouldn’t be able to handle it, Morgan used his hand and gestured for her to go ahead of him and he followed her into the kitchen.

Morgan pushed away from the table with a huge smile on his face after finishing off a plate of Odessa’s peach cobbler. He licked his lips. “That was the best peach cobbler I’ve ever eaten,” he said. “My mom makes a banana pudding that’s to die for, and I can see someone killing for your cobbler as well, not to mention everything else you served today. Dinner was wonderful.”

Over the rim of her iced tea glass, Lena watched the smile of pleasure that appeared on her mother’s face, and shook her head. Morgan was a real charmer all right.

“I’ve eaten so much I’m going to have to trek around my neighborhood and walk it off,” he added.

“No need to wait until you get home since Lena walks every day after dinner anyway. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind the company.”

Lena quickly gazed over at her mother, studying the older woman’s innocent features. She couldn’t help but wonder if her mother had hatched some crazy idea about her and Morgan getting together. First dinner and now a walk—just the two of them. “I’m sure Morgan has had enough of our company for one day, Mom, and wants to call it a day.”

Morgan glanced over at her. “Quite the contrary. I enjoyed both of your company and I’d love going for a walk.”

_Think! Think!_ Lena tried unscrambling her mind to come up with a reason she couldn’t go walking with him. All through dinner her naughty twin had tried to surface by putting all kinds of thoughts into her head. “It’s kind of windy out. It will mess up my hair,” she said, saying the first thing that popped into her head, although it sounded rather lame.
“Of course it’s windy, Lena. It’s March,” her mother said, waving off her excuse with her hand.

“And there’s a cap in my jacket you can borrow,” Morgan tacked on.

Lena sighed. Both her mother and Morgan were looking at her expectantly, as if waiting for her to come up with another excuse. She smiled over at her mother but inwardly narrowed her eyes at Morgan. Why was he going along with Odessa on this? Just wait until they got outside. There was a lot she had to say to him.

“Fine,” she said, standing. “Let me change into something more appropriate for walking.”

Ten minutes later she returned to find Morgan had helped her mother clear the table. She found them in the kitchen, again sharing another joke. “I’m ready.” At the sound of her voice they both turned and smiled, and from the sparkle in her mother’s eyes Lena could tell she was in high spirits.

“Here’s the cap I was telling you about,” Morgan said, moving away from her mother to come stand in front of her. Instinctively, she reached out to take it from him, but instead of handing it to her he placed it on her head. He stepped back and then tipped his head to the side as if to admire his handiwork. “It will work. Looks good on you.”

Lena decided she needed to see for herself. She walked a couple of steps out of the kitchen to look into the huge mirror that hung on the dining room wall. He was right. It work would and it looked good…if blue, black and silver were your colors and you supported the Carolina Panthers.

She turned around and saw that Morgan had followed her out of the kitchen and was leaning against the door frame. His muscular shoulders came close to filling the doorway. “You do know I’m not a Carolina native and that I was born and raised in New York. Buffalo in fact,” she said, meeting his gaze, and a warm oozy feeling flowed through her bloodstream. That seemed to happen each and every time she looked into his eyes.

He smiled. “Is that a cute way of telling me that you prefer rooting for the Buffalo Bills?”

“Not necessarily. Lucky for you I quickly converted when the Panthers came to town.”

“We native Carolinians do appreciate that,” he said in a voice that was warm and engaging. He straightened his stance. “Are you ready for our walk?”

“Yes.” Ready but not looking forward to it,

she thought further.

Instead of jogging or fast walking, they eased into a nice leisurely walk. Neither said anything for a long while, but Morgan was prepared for Lena to have a lot to say. He knew she hadn’t liked the way her mother, with his help, had orchestrated this stroll.

Although it was windy, the sun was peeking through the clouds, making it a beautiful day the week before the first day of spring. Not that it mattered in Charlotte. Spring came when spring came. Last year it snowed on the first day of spring. Occasionally, they were visited by the snowstorm the locals called the Beast from the East. Last one had hit a couple of years ago, snowing everyone in the mountains, and surrounding areas, in for a few days.

Deciding they had walked long enough without conversation he decided to start one. “Nice day, isn’t it?”

He watched Lena snatch her head around as if she’d forgotten he was there. It was his opinion that she looked downright cute, dressed in a green jogging suit and well-worn sneakers and wearing his cap. “Yes.” She then resumed looking straight ahead, up the road, with her mouth shut.

His lips crinkled at the corners. If she thought he was going to let her get away with one-word responses, she had another thought coming. “Tell me in twenty-five words, but not less than ten, just what do you think is nice about it?”

She turned her head slightly, and he knew it was taking a lot of her willpower to keep her features expressionless. He could just imagine what she was thinking. When she didn’t say anything he decided to coax her on. “Come on, Lena, you can do it. You’re a Realtor so you have to be full of nice, descriptive words. Try it. I double-dare you.”

Lena couldn’t help the smile that spread across her features. For some strange reason she found Morgan’s antics endearing. “Okay, let me tell you what’s so nice about it…from a Realtor’s viewpoint.”

Smiling, he tilted his head downward to hers. “I’m listening.”

“Well, there’s the scent of spring in the air,” she said, dimpling, then breathing in deeply. “That’s always nice. Not to mention the brisk breeze that’s not too cold. One of the reasons I bought a home in this area was for that lake over there,” she said, pointing to the huge body of water that ran through the subdivision.

“I love walking around it, smelling all the dogwoods and seeing them bloom. But then, I need to be honest about something. Spring is nice but I like winter better mainly because I love snow.”

He arched a brow, and a smile touched the corners of his lips. “You like snow?”

She returned his smile. “Yes. I love watching the snowflakes fall to the ground and cover everything. I like drinking a mug full of hot chocolate while standing at the window looking at the snow fall and wishing I could just go out there and play in it. At least that wasn’t one of the things I had to give up moving from New York. Although I got to see snow more often while living in Buffalo, at least I still get to see it.”
She glanced up in the sky and blinked against the sun’s brightness and then back at him. “So, how did I do?”
“You went over your word count.”
She stopped, tipped her head back and laughed; really laughed. Moments later she stuck her hands in her pockets and continued walking, shaking her head. “I would hate working for you.”
He chuckled. “You already do.”
Her head shot up and she stared at him with all amusement gone, wondering if he was trying to remind her of their relationship. “Sorry, I forgot.”
This time it was Morgan who stopped walking. When she stopped as well, he reached out and lifted her chin with the tip of his finger. “I didn’t say that to make you remember.”
She shrugged. “That’s okay.”
Morgan felt the spell that had surrounded them for the past few moments trying to break, but a part of him refused to let it. She had started to relax around him and her mood had been light, almost carefree. He liked that.
“So what made you decide to leave New York to move to North Carolina?” he asked, wanting to get her talking again, as they resumed their walk. And he relaxed.
She didn’t say anything for a while, and for a moment he wondered if she was going to answer. Then she said, “My dad. In my senior year of high school his health began failing and the doctors thought a change in climate would help him. So we moved here right after my graduation and I began attending the University of North Carolina. Dad died a month after my graduation from college.”
“I’m sorry.”
A small smile touched her lips. “So was I. He was a wonderful man and I loved him deeply.”
She got quiet for a brief moment and then she continued by saying, “It was really hard for Mama. They had been together so long. There were too many memories in the house where we lived, so we eventually put it up for sale and bought this one. That helped some, but for a while I thought I was going to lose another parent when Mom went into a state of depression from all her grief.”
He nodded. “How long did it last?”
She titled her head to look up at him. “Who says it has stopped? She has good days and bad days, and trust me when I say today was one of her good days, and I have to thank you for it. This is the happiest I’ve seen her in a long time. She actually cooked all of the dinner herself. I can’t tell you the last time she went into a kitchen other than to eat or to get a drink of water.”
“I can’t accept your thanks because I don’t know what I did. Your mother is a nice person and like I told you earlier, I like her. I can’t imagine her getting depressed.”
“Well, she does. And then there’s her obsession with grandchildren. Did she mention anything about that to you?”
He smiled. “It just so happened that she did, briefly today while you were changing clothes and we were clearing the table. But that’s okay. Like I said the other day, I think all mothers believe it’s their duty to prod their children into parenthood.”
Lena stopped walking. “So you think it’s a phase that will pass?”
“Maybe. Maybe not. If not, then you might have to do some serious thinking as to what you want as well. And if you want a baby, too, then you’re going to have to find a man who’d be more than willing to get you pregnant.”
His voice was so low it could almost be defined as a whisper, and his words had sounded too serious. And the eyes staring down at her were more intense than ever.
Lena took a deep breath, inwardly forcing her naughty twin to behave when she felt her fingers itching to reach out and wrap her arms around his neck, bring his mouth down to hers and kiss him in all the ways she’d always dreamed about.
“Maybe we should head back now, Lena.”
Morgan’s words gave her the strength she needed to regain full control. But for one fleeting moment she felt something had changed, shifted, gotten altered. As they began walking back toward her house she tried not to put too much emphasis on her surprise when he took her hand in his, making her aware of his touch, making her feel a little squeeze in her chest.
Today she would take this, the casual versus professional rapport they were sharing. When they saw each other again it would be business as usual. But today was nice and she planned on making today’s pleasantries, as well as Morgan’s own special blend of kindness, a very special memory.
Chapter 6

“She’ll be able to finish up things once Morgan brings his attention back to the meeting.”

Morgan snapped his head up to look into his older brother’s intense dark eyes. He glanced around the room and saw that Bas, Donovan and Vanessa were staring at him as well. So okay. He’d been caught daydreaming. No big deal. But with the smirk he saw on Donovan’s face he knew that his younger brother would make it a big deal. And Morgan didn’t have long to wait.

“In defense of Morgan, he can’t help that he has a lot on his mind. The woman of his dreams, his perfect woman, still can’t seem to notice that he’s alive.”

“Go to hell, Donovan,” Morgan said, glaring over at his youngest brother.

“Okay, you two, knock it off. If you want to go at each other, save it for the next Saturday we’re on the court,” Chance said.

Morgan nodded. It was a family tradition that he and his three brothers got together every Saturday to play basketball, mainly to get rid of any competitive frustrations they might get from working together. Depending on the depth of their frustrations, the game could get downright mean and ugly. “My pleasure,” he said, giving Donovan a look that clearly said…next time we’re on the court, your ass is grass.

“Who’s his perfect woman?” Of course Vanessa had to ask. At twenty-six she was the oldest of the three girl cousins and headed the PR department. It had been challenging for the Steele Brothers to keep an eye out for their younger female cousins while growing up, especially when Vanessa and her best friend from high school, Sienna Davis Bradford, were always getting into trouble.

“Lena Spears is his perfect woman,” Donovan was more than happy to say.

A smile touched Vanessa’s lips. “Lena Spears? I know her and she’s a jewel. We’ve worked together on several community projects. Now, why doesn’t she notice that Morgan is alive?”

“Can we get back to the meeting?” Morgan asked, deciding he didn’t want his personal business discussed, especially if everyone had to hear Donovan’s take on things.

“You mean you want to get back to the meeting that wasn’t holding your attention anyway?” Bas said, rolling his eyes.

When Vanessa laughed, Morgan glared over at her. “Did I happen to mention that I was in Atlanta with Cameron a couple of weekends ago and he asked about you, Van?”

Morgan watched the amusement die on his cousin’s face, knowing he’d said something that would shut her up for a while. All it took was the mere mention of Cameron Cody’s name. Vanessa couldn’t stand the man.

“Okay, knock it off, all of you,” Chance said, taking the role as leader. “Let’s get back down to business. We have important things to discuss.”

An hour later when the meeting ended Morgan was the first to stand and head for the door. “Where’s the fire?”

Bas called after him.

Morgan smiled as he kept walking. Oddly enough, he felt there was a fire. Every time he thought about Lena a part of him would erupt into a smoldering blaze. It didn’t take much effort to recall their walk on Sunday. Even though there had been other people around walking and jogging, there had been something pleasingly intimate about strolling beside Lena, talking to her, listening to her talk. And on those occasions when their arms would occasionally brush, he’d felt a sharp sensation all the way to his toes.

He checked his watch as he stepped onto the elevator. His smile widened. Lena would be receiving a package from him in about an hour and he hoped that she liked her gift.

…If you want a baby, too, then you’re going to have to find a man who’d be more than willing to get you pregnant…

Morgan’s words from yesterday still weighed heavily in Lena’s thoughts as she walked into her office. She would even admit that at one time she’d had thoughts of visiting a sperm bank. From a recent article she’d read in a magazine, more and more professional women who were feeling the ticking of their biological clock were considering just that option. But of course being the ultra-traditional person she was, she had dissed the idea. She’d grown up in a home with both a loving father and mother and couldn’t see cheating a child out of a chance to have that as well. That reasoning always put her back at square one.
“Good afternoon, Lena.”
She smiled over at her secretary as she grabbed the mail off the table and began flipping through it. “And a
good afternoon to you, Wendy. Did I get any calls?”
The woman, who was only a few years older, smiled back and said, “Not since the last time you checked
earlier, but you did get a package. I put it on your desk.”
“Thanks, it’s probably those brochures I ordered last week,” Lena said, tossing the junk mail in a basket to get
shredded while keeping hold of anything she considered important. “I’ll be in the back if you need me.”
Entering her office, Lena removed her jacket and then took the time to hang it in the closet before taking a seat
behind her desk. She eyed the box sitting in the middle of it, immediately thinking it definitely wasn’t the brochures
she had ordered. It was a beautiful gift box, wrapped in red satin-looking paper with a huge white bow.
She immediately pushed the button for Wendy.
“Yes, Lena?”
“What did this box come from?”
“It was delivered to you today by a private courier.”
Lena lifted a brow as she studied the box. There wasn’t a card on the outside. “There’s not a card.”
“It’s probably inside the box. You know, one of those ploys to keep nosy secretaries from reading it. Not that I
would do such a thing,” Wendy said, chuckling.
“So, you have no idea who sent it?” Lena asked.
“Don’t you?” was Wendy’s quick response. “It’s your box.”
Lena shook her head. “I don’t have a clue, but there’s only one way to find out.”
“Wait! You want me to call for the bomb squad?”
“Real cute, Wendy.” Lena chuckled as she hung up the phone thinking that her secretary was forever the comic,
and Wendy’s comment made Lena see just how paranoid she was being about the box.
Deciding she had wasted enough time as it was, she reached out and began opening it, not surprised when
Wendy came into the room. “If there’s an explosion we blow up together,” her faithful secretary said. “But trust me,
it’s probably safe. The guy who delivered it was too cute to be on the wrong side of the law.”
It was on Lena’s tongue to say “whatever,” but when she removed the tissue paper her heart caught as she
pulled out a beautiful handcrafted snow globe. Inside was a miniature replica of Charlotte’s skyline, and with a push
of a small button, that skyline became covered as snowflakes seemed to drift from the sky over the city. Amazing.
A part of Lena’s heart suddenly felt tight in her chest. She knew who had sent the package. Morgan. He had
remembered her comments about the snow.
“Umm, it doesn’t look like one of those explosive devices, so I guess we’re safe,” Wendy said, reclaiming her
attention but only briefly.
“No, it doesn’t and yes, we’re safe.” A few moments later she said, “Isn’t it beautiful?” still in awe of her gift.
“Yes, if you like snow, and we all know that you’re one of the few strange ones who do.”
Lena chuckled as she looked back at the box and saw there was something else inside. She placed the snow
globe on her desk and pulled out another item wrapped in tissue paper. When she had it uncovered she couldn’t help
but laugh. It was her very own Carolina Panthers cap. She then pulled out the card and it said:
Lena,
I saw the snow globe in a store today and it made me think of you. Hope you like it. And about the cap. I
thought you looked so cute in mine that I wanted to get you one of your own. And I truly did enjoy our walk
together on Sunday. We must do it again sometime.
Morgan
Emotions Lena wasn’t ready for touched her at that moment. She couldn’t recall the last time someone saw
something in a store—other than an outfit Kylie might see that she would tell her about saying it would look good
on her. But this was different. This was special. And it had come from a man. Definitely no man had ever taken the
time to send her a gift such as this, one that reflected something she truly liked.
“Before I get back to work, is there something you want to share with me?”
Lena glanced up. She had forgotten Wendy was still in the room. She pulled herself together and cleared her
throat and said, “It’s from Morgan Steele.”
Her secretary and friend raised a curious brow. “And?”
“And I think it’s time you get back to work.”
A cute little frown, one that wasn’t at all convincing, appeared on Wendy’s face. “See if I share my next
romance novel with you. From now on you’re going to have to buy your own.” With her head held high, Wendy
then turned and walked out of the office, closing the door behind her.
Lena grinned as she turned her attention back to the snow globe and cap. She then read the note again. She
didn’t want to acknowledge the warmth she felt. She clenched her hands together trying to think logically and to fight both the tension and the excitement warring within her. A part of her, the woman in her, wanted to feel giddy at the thought that the very handsome Morgan Steele enjoyed the time he had spent with her walking on Sunday and wanted to do so again.

A part of her was too afraid to come out of her protective shell to believe such a thing. It had been that same part of her that had encouraged her to turn down his invitation to go out with him those other times. The way she saw it she had two strikes against her when it came to a man like Morgan. She wasn’t the type of woman someone would associate him with dating, and although it appeared he and her mother got along great on Sunday, and he had even gone so far as to say he liked Odessa, she had no reason to believe he would be willing to take on a twosome if things were to get serious between them.

But then, there was her Gemini twin who was right there in her mind taunting with the questions…But who wants serious? Even if there could never be a forever between you and Morgan, there could be a now. Why not just live each day at a time and take whatever you want?

Lena knew the answers. She couldn’t think that way because she was the sensible one. The one who thought things through before she acted.

Which was what she was driven to do now.

She needed to call and thank Morgan for the gifts. How should she approach that? Should she tell him how much receiving the gifts truly meant to her, or should she hide her true feelings and thank him, making no big deal of it, and move on?

She reached for the phone deciding to let her conscience be her guide. She took a deep breath to pull back in control, making sure it would be her conscience and not that of her naughty twin.

“Mr. Steele, Lena Spears is on the line for you.”

Morgan smiled as he tossed the papers he’d been reading aside. “Please put her through, Linda, and hold the rest of my calls."

As soon as his secretary clicked Lena on the line, in a businesslike tone he said, “Morgan Steele.”

“Morgan, this is Lena.”

The moment he heard her voice, potent desire slid through every part of his body despite his best efforts to stop it from doing so. He inhaled softly and leaned back in his leather chair. “Lena, how are you?”

“I’m fine. I was calling to thank you for my gifts.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I did. It was very thoughtful of you.”

He chuckled softly. “On occasion I try to be a thoughtful person.”

“Well, you are. And there’s also another reason I called. The developers of the Palisades and I are close to reaching an agreement about those additional amenities I’m pushing for. I’ve come up with a list and was wondering if you had the time for us to go over them.”

He raised a brow. “Now?”

“Yes, now, unless you’re busy at the moment.”

Morgan looked at his closed briefcase, and then across the room at the golf club resting against the wall where he’d been practicing his swing. He definitely wasn’t busy. Besides, it was time he made her an offer she couldn’t refuse. Using his skill in the area of research and development, for the past couple of weeks he had been researching just what Lena wanted in her life, and without her knowing it he’d put a plan in place not just to develop those wants but to bring them into the limelight.

For now he needed to continue to stick with his plan, although he was about to sharpen his strategy.

“Unfortunately, I’m rather busy at the moment. How about if we got together tomorrow?”

“Okay, when would be a good time for me to drop by your office?”

His office was the last place he intended for them to meet, especially when he presented his proposal to her.

“My secretary mentioned earlier that my calendar for tomorrow is full and I’m flying out of town on business Wednesday morning and won’t be returning until late Sunday. What about sometime later tomorrow, after my last appointment?”

“How late are we talking about?”

He knew she was asking because she had to pick up her mother from the adult day care center by six. “Let’s say around four. You should be able to cover everything in a short while, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good. And, Lena?”

“Yes?”
“My last appointment is out of the office on the other side of town. I prefer not driving back into this area if you don’t mind. Is there another place where we can meet? What about your office?”

He knew from something she’d said last week that her office officially closed at four, which meant her secretary would have left for the day. Originally, he’d thought of some pretense to get her to his home and speak with her there, but the more he’d thought about it, he’d concluded that although he wanted to be completely alone with her, he was willing to do so while on her turf if it would make her feel more comfortable and in control of the situation.

“My office?”
“Sure. Will that be a problem?”
She paused briefly, then said, “No. My office is fine. I’ll look for you at four.”
“All right. I’ll see you then.”
When Morgan hung up the phone he smiled broadly. Tomorrow couldn’t get there fast enough to suit him.
Chapter 7

The next day was the busiest Lena had had in a long time. She was excited over a new sale, but on the other hand, every time she glanced at her watch or clock, butterflies would take off in her stomach to the point where she was about ready to pull her hair out. Just the thought that within hours Morgan would be arriving, invading her space, had her unsettled.

She had tried talking Wendy into working late, but since it was Wednesday, prayer meeting night at church, her friend had refused to stay, saying she needed all the prayers she could get to be blessed with a good man.

As Lena settled back in her chair to go over a new contact she’d acquired, her thoughts drifted to last night. Unlike with the other nights, it hadn’t been her mother calling out for her dad that had awakened her. It had been an ache deep within her, gnawing away at her to the point it made her stomach tremble. She had wanted to blame it on nervous energy, but she knew it was more. The inner turmoil and fierce turbulence she’d felt had been a stark reminder of just how empty, unfulfilling and unsatisfying parts of her life were.

She was thirty-one, a relatively healthy young woman, single—a point her mother still reminded her of on occasion. She knew it downright bothered her mother that she didn’t have a man in her life.

Maybe her naughty twin was right about some things. If she accepted that her life would remain as it was, then why couldn’t she become involved in someone just for sanity’s sake? It would be someone who on occasion would take her to dinner or a movie, someone who could be her escort to the different social functions she attended during the year, and someone who would eventually become her exclusive lover.

She tried recalling the last time she’d shared a bed with a man. Had it been over six years ago? Not since the death of her father? Sheesh! No wonder she was having sleepless nights with feelings of emptiness that wouldn’t go away. She possessed a healthy sex drive like the next woman, and should she deny herself a relationship with a man just because she never intended to get serious about one?

She sighed deeply and rubbed the back of her neck, wondering if those were the thoughts of her naughty twin or thoughts of her own. For the first time in a long while she was convinced that she and her twin were on the same page. And she knew the reason.

Morgan Steele.

Morgan had a way of making her acutely aware that she was a woman, a living, breathing woman with real needs. Being around him at times unsettled her. All it took was one of his warm smiles, the sound of his deep husky voice or even one of those impersonal glances he could send her way to drum up heat deep inside her. He could look at you with an intensity that took your breath away, strip you of every wall you wanted to erect and pull you to him like metal to a magnet.

And those were the very reasons the thought of being alone with him today was so unnerving.

“I’m out of here, Lena.”

Lena glanced up at the doorway and saw her secretary standing there smiling. She then glanced at the clock on her wall. “It’s not four o’clock yet.”

Wendy chuckled. “I know but I didn’t take a lunch and decided to check out early to run by the cleaner’s. Do you need anything before I leave?”

Yes, for you to knock some sense into me. Instead she said, “No, I’m fine here. I don’t expect Morgan to stay long, so I should be leaving within a few minutes myself.”

Wendy nodded. “Okay, then, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Lena settled back in her chair and began making a list. She had placed Morgan’s file on her desk. First they needed to discuss the amenities for the home he was interested in buying, and then they would go over the potential sale of his home. He would need to make a decision and soon as to whether or not he wanted to sell his house to the Edwardses or his brother Donovan. Then there was the decision of whether he wanted to place a binder on the new house contingent on selling his present one.

When she heard someone in the doorway, assuming it was Wendy, she didn’t glance up when she asked, “Forget something?”

“No, I don’t think I’ve forgotten anything.”

Lena snatched her head up at the sound of the deep, masculine voice. She sucked in a deep breath at what now filled her vision. There standing in her doorway was Morgan with a sensuous air surrounding him. And he was
staring at her with a very opulent look in his eyes. Today he appeared more overpowering than ever, and she met his
stare with a leveled gaze while heat rushed through her body.

She released a shaky sigh and slowly stood to her feet. This was supposed to be a business meeting, but at that
moment discussing business was the furthest thing from her mind.

He wanted her.
That thought was most prevalent in Morgan’s mind as he tried to rein in his control, desires and temptation.
Just looking at her did all sorts of things to him. But the last thing he wanted to do was give the impression that the
only thing he was interested in was something physical.

He watched her come around her desk as if she were floating on air, moving with sophistication, style and
grace. Men who thought there wasn’t anything sexy about a full-figured woman needed to take a second look. Here
was a woman who was smart, confident and savvy. Combine all those things with a voluptuous figure and what you
got was all the woman any man could possibly want.

He took a deep breath thinking that his first rule of seduction was to take control of the situation with authority,
from beginning to end. In the past he’d made the mistake of letting Lena decide their future, but not anymore. By the
time he left her office today he would have placed his stamp on at least one part of her.

Deciding to take things slow at first, he approached her with an outstretched hand. “Once again I appreciate
your flexibility, Lena.” From the relieved expression on her face he could tell that his businesslike air relaxed her.

“Morgan, I was glad to accommodate you.”
One side of his mouth tilted into a deep smile. By the time it was over he would give new meaning to the word
accommodate. “Shall we get down to business? I’m sure you have other things to do. And how’s your mother?”
“She’s doing fine.”
“That’s good. Do you mind if I remove my jacket?”
“No, not at all.”
He took off his jacket and hung it on a rack before crossing the room and settling into the chair directly across
from Lena’s desk. He glanced around, liked the way her office was decorated and liked it even more that she had
found a home for the snow globe. It was sitting on top of a bookcase, in eye view.

He also liked the comfortable-looking leather sofa in her office. “Nice sofa.”
“Thanks.”
“You ever use it?”
She raised a brow. “Use it for what?”
He shrugged. “For anything. The one in my office is mainly there for decoration, but Bas uses the one in his. In
fact before he married he used to sleep on it a lot when he would work so late that he couldn’t make it home. Of
course all that changed after he got married.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “I would hope so. And to answer your question, my sofa is used a lot like yours,
for decoration. I rarely stay late at the office to use it for anything else.”
“I see.”
When she took the chair behind her desk he didn’t waste time asking, “So now, what about those amenities?”
For the next few minutes he listened as she talked, and he watched the movement of her mouth while she did
so. She had such luscious lips and the thought of kissing them made his stomach quiver. The woman was temptation
standing up, sitting down and he didn’t want to imagine how much temptation she would be lying down.

“So there you have it, Morgan. The developers have agreed to everything I asked for but that one thing. They
have also agreed to let the contract be contingent on you selling your house within a reasonable period of time.”

He nodded. “Sounds like you’ve been busy looking out for my welfare,” he said, leaning slightly forward,
pinning her with his gaze.

Lena shivered, feeling the heat of that gaze. As usual he was dressed in a business suit. When he had taken off
his jacket her gaze had been drawn to his broad shoulders. No matter what he wore, there was something masculine
and virile in every outfit, always relaying a degree of inner strength. “Yes,” she finally responded. “And I think the
contingency is a good thing.”
“Sounds like it is.”
“Are you interested?”

Morgan suddenly caught her gaze and held it, and when he did so she suddenly began experiencing a strange
sensation in the pit of her stomach. “Yes, I am very much interested,” he said, not taking his eyes off her.

It was something in the way he’d made that statement that made her feel that perhaps they weren’t talking
about the same thing. With all the poise she could muster, she then stood to her feet. “Well, that’s all I had to cover
with you, Morgan.”
He nodded. “There is this business proposition that I’d like to discuss with you, if you have the time.”

She smiled as she settled back comfortably in her chair. “You have another house you want me to sell?”

“No, but it is something very important to me, something I’ve been thinking about for quite some time but kept putting off because there wasn’t anyone I’d met that I felt comfortable about approaching to discuss a partnership.”

Lena leaned forward. “Not even Cameron Cody? I understand the two of you are good friends and have done business together on several projects.”

Morgan cleared his throat, cracked a smile and chuckled. “Trust me, Cameron wouldn’t work for this. I need a woman.”

He watched her eyes reflect a myriad of questions before she repeated the last part of what he’d said. “A woman?”

“Yes. In order to pull things off successfully, I need a very astute businesswoman, someone with an open mind, who could think outside the box, and who will appreciate a golden opportunity. And I believe that you are just that person.”

The charming smile on Morgan’s lips almost had Lena agreeing to anything, without knowing exactly what this “business venture” was about. His eyes were hooked on hers, and somehow she felt his keen sense of intelligence as well as his single-minded determination. He had piqued her curiosity and she definitely needed him to elaborate. “Just what type of business proposition are you talking about, Morgan?”

Morgan leaned forward a little, making sure he had her absolute attention. He also wanted to be right there, to gauge her reaction to his words. “I want you to marry me and have my baby.”

Dead silence.

Morgan studied her expression as she sat perfectly still. He saw her blink, then witnessed the fine arching of her brow; and mere seconds later he became an ardent observer of how her lips trembled slightly at the corner. His gaze then moved back to her eyes and saw how they slowly narrowed to sharp slits. Her expression left no doubt in his mind what he’d just told her wasn’t anything like what she’d expected. “Excuse me. I must have heard you wrong,” she finally said, not taking her eyes off his. “No, you heard me right, Lena.”

She stared, as if what he’d said didn’t make sense and she was imagining things. Then she spoke as she straightened up in her chair. “In that case, I need you to explain why you think I’d be interested in involving myself in something so preposterous.”

He smiled. “Is it really preposterous? Think about it for a second. It’s no different than a couple agreeing to a prenupt. Marriages of convenience, or more simply put, the one I’m interested in, a marriage of purpose, are not unheard of these days. People are marrying for a lot of reasons. Not everyone who marries is doing so for love.”

Lena heard what he was saying and a part of her was a little disappointed. She had been the product of a couple who loved each other dearly, and when she had met his parents at Kylie’s wedding, she had thought the same thing about them. And if she’d ever married, it was to have been for love. But then, she had given up the idea of ever marrying, so her feelings or lack of feelings were really a moot point. However, she couldn’t understand why Morgan of all people would settle for a loveless marriage when his two older brothers had married for love. Chance and Sebastian were so head over heels in love with their wives that it wasn’t funny. Was there a reason Morgan intended to fight the same fate?

“All of that may be true, Morgan, but why are you willing to settle for less than love? You’re good-looking, a successful businessman and you have a good personality. I think any woman would find you marriage material.”

He chuckled. “Thanks, but the question is, would I find them wife material? I have a lot going on in my life. The last thing I need is drama, or getting into a situation I’d be trying to get out of a few weeks after the wedding. And not to put your gender down because there are some in mine that are just as bad, possibly even worse, but there are some women who’re conniving, vicious, manipulative and looking to marriage as a way to secure their financial future. I don’t have a problem with the latter, but I want that individual to be one of my choosing and not the other way around.”

“And you actually see me as that person?”

“Yes. You bring a lot to the table. You’re mature in your thinking, you don’t have time for games or drama, but more importantly, I think you will make any child a wonderful mother.”

She tried not letting his words be the confidence booster that they were. “What makes you think that?”

He shrugged. “I just do. Maybe it’s a hidden insight I have, but just from talking to you I know you want a child, and I believe you will do right by one.”

Yes, she did want a child, and staring thirty-two in the face wasn’t a joke. But still, there was a lot to consider. “And,” he said, interrupting her thoughts. “I think you would make me a good wife.”

Now, that got her attention. “Really, Morgan, like I said, there are plenty of women who will—”
“I don’t want any of them.”
“And you want me to believe that you want me?”
“Yes.”

Lena’s heart began pounding. She shook her head. This was crazy. What Morgan was proposing was ludicrous.

He leaned forward with his forearms resting on her desk. “Before you turn me down flat, let me tell you what I’ll be offering you. First there’s financial security, which I know is something that’s important to you. Then there’s companionship. I like you and you can consider me as a live-in buddy and pal, which is a relationship some married couples don’t even have. I have no reason not to think we wouldn’t get along. Then there’s the baby, which is something I want and so do you. Last but not least is your mother.”

Lena’s spine stiffened. “What about my mother?”
“I have no problem with her becoming a part of our household. In fact, I more than welcome it. I think Odessa is special and want her to be my child’s grandmother as much as I want you as my child’s mother.”

Lena bit her lip. Of all the selling points he’d presented to her, this was the one that touched her the most and she couldn’t help the warm flood of emotions that suddenly flowed through her. No other male in her past had even as much as wanted her mother as part of their lives, let alone wanted to include her in their family fold.

“Lena?”
She met his gaze. “Yes?”

“I know what I’m asking might sound a bit unorthodox, but it’s the way I want to do things. I would want us to marry as soon as possible and start working on the baby right away.”

Lena’s heart lurched, as heat swirled around in her stomach. “Start on the baby right away?”

“Yes, after the wedding of course. And another thing, only the two of us can know our marriage is not the traditional one, which means I want us to share a bed.”

The startled look on her face let him know that she hadn’t thought about that part of the arrangement. He decided to press on. “Just so you’ll know, I’m thinking about going with that last home you showed me because it will be perfect for our family—which includes your mother. It will give her the privacy she needs while at the same time assuring her that she is wanted. It’s important to me that she feels that she is a part of our lives and not an outsider.”

Lena sighed. Morgan was hitting her at all angles and using every single argument she would come up with to his advantage. He was right. Financial security was something she craved, and more than anything she did want a child of her own. And her mother being part of her marriage rather than an outcast was more important than anything. But still…

“What if things don’t work out?” she asked softly.

Morgan smiled. Now was not the time to tell her that things would work out. Once he got her in his bed, made love to her the way he’d dreamt of doing for over a year and lavished her with all the attention and respect she deserved, then she wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

Instead he said, “We can draw up an agreement that we will stay together and make things work for at least twelve months. After that time if you or I feel that marrying was a mistake, we will end the marriage with joint custody of our child.”

He watched as Lena inhaled deeply before she said, “I need to think about this.”

“Of course. Do you think you can have an answer by the time I return on Sunday? That’s five days away.”

Lena’s chest tightened. She had a lot of thinking to do, and five days wasn’t a lot of time. But still, she would have an answer for him. “Yes, I should have a decision for you by then.”

“Good.” He stood. “I’m on my way to grab something to eat at the Racetrack Café. Would you care to join me?”

Lena shook her head. The last thing she needed was something to eat. What she needed was time alone to think.

“No, but thanks for asking.”

“You’re welcome.” He crossed the room to get his jacket, and she came from around her desk. She decided to ask him the question she’d been pondering since he had arrived. “How did you get in here?”

“Your secretary,” he said, slipping into his jacket. “I was walking in when she was leaving.”

“Oh.”

He smiled. “Was she supposed to hang around and announce me or something?”

“No, I was just surprised when you arrived,” she said, walking him to her office door.

He raised a dark brow quizically. “Had you forgotten about our appointment?”

_Hardly._ “No, I hadn’t forgotten.”

Now she stood in front of him at the door, and as usual he appeared overwhelming and his eyes were on her, as if he was studying her for some reason. The intensity of his gaze made her flush. “You’re going to St. Louis, right?”
she nervously asked.

He nodded. “Yes. You still have that business card I gave you with my cell phone number and e-mail address in case something comes up or if you need to ask me anything about my proposal?”

“Yes, and you still have mine, right?”

“Yes, I still have it.”

“Well, don’t hesitate to contact me if you want to withdraw your offer of the marriage thing.”

He chuckled. “I won’t be withdrawing it.”

Lena toyed with the button on her jacket thinking he sounded pretty sure of that. “I hope you have a safe flight, Morgan.”

“Thanks, and I promise to have an answer for you regarding the sale of my house when I return.”

“Okay. Although I’ve been showing the Edwardses other places, I think they like your house the best.”

The smile that tilted his lips widened. “That’s good to know. I’ll keep that in mind when I make my decision, and I hope you keep it in mind when you make yours.”

Lena sighed, trying to ignore the intense stare in Morgan’s eyes. She held out her hand. “Goodbye, Morgan. I’ll see you in a few days.”

He didn’t take her outstretched hand. Instead he continued to stare at her, hold her gaze, rattling her already shaken composure. “I want to do things different this time, Lena,” he said, his voice low, seductive.

Mesmerized, she dropped her hand to her side. Her palm suddenly felt warm and sweaty. And when he took a step closer to her, an aching need, that throbbing desire that had awakened her last night, was there, clawing at her, and she took a step forward as well.

“I think we can do better than that,” he said in a warm, husky tone, which was barely above a whisper, pulling her total concentration back in.

Before she could release her next breath, he lowered his mouth to hers with a quick, clean sweep of his tongue across her lips. He captivated her then and there, snapping her composure and destroying the last hold she had on her control.

She placed her hand on his chest when his mouth closed hungrily, greedily over hers, almost eating her alive and unleashing a degree of passion she didn’t know she had. Her naughty twin had passion, yes, but her, no. But this was not her twin who felt the smoldering eruption deep inside her as Morgan’s tongue sent her senses reeling from the mastery of his lips.

Nor was it her twin whose moans escaped her lips beneath Morgan’s demanding mouth while he grasped her around the waist in a tight hold of possession, bringing her closer to him and making her aware of how masculine and strong his body was.

A part of her was totally stunned at the depth of her need, her passion, her desire, but then another part wasn’t. The recesses of her mind taunted that this was Morgan, the man who had invaded her dreams for the past year. Morgan, who practically made her catch her breath every time she saw him. Morgan, the man who wanted to give her the baby she’d always wanted; and Morgan, the man her body was instinctively, unashamedly arching against.

She uttered a low moan of protest when he finally raised his head, and when he pressed her face against his chest she realized the impact the kiss had had on him as well. She heard his heart racing, felt the irregular beats beneath her head and heard the sound of his ragged breathing being forced from his throat. She buried her face deeper into his chest, feeling warm and contented. Moments later she sighed when she felt him rest his chin on the crown on her head.

They stood that way for a while, neither ready to separate, too mesmerized and filled with raw emotions to say anything. Then he reached down and lifted her chin with the tip of his finger, meeting her gaze, and then lowered his mouth to hers again. This kiss was gentler but was filled with a high degree of passion nonetheless.

When he finally released her mouth again, he let out a shaky breath and murmured softly, “I’d better go and please think about my proposal.”

Placing one quick kiss to her lips, he turned and then he was gone.
Chapter 8

“Morgan asked you what?” Kylie asked, staring at Lena disbelievingly.

Lena waited until the waitress had placed her order of French fries on the table and walked away before directing her attention back to Kylie. “I know it sounds crazy but he asked me to marry him and have his baby.”

Kylie continued to stare at her, saying nothing, and then she shook her head, smiling as she plucked a fry off Lena’s plate. “So you’re it.”

Lena lifted a confused brow. “I’m what?”

“Morgan’s perfect woman.”

Kylie frowned. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Lena scooted in her chair closer to the table so her voice wouldn’t carry. At least she scooted as close as her huge stomach would allow. “Everyone in the Steele family knows about Morgan’s obsession with finding the perfect woman. Evidently, you’ve made quite an impression on him.”

“Or he’s realized there’s no such thing as a perfect woman, like there’s no perfect man. But that doesn’t explain why he wants that person to be me.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “Aw, come on, Lena. Morgan has shown interest in you since that night the two of you met at that charity ball. He asked you out several times but you turned him down.”

Lena munched on her fry thinking that yes, he had asked her out, but she really hadn’t taken him seriously at first. But when he’d asked a few more times she thought it would be a smart move to break things down to him as to why she wouldn’t go out with him. Now he was asking her not only to marry him but also to have his baby.

“So, are you going to do it?”

Kylie’s question interrupted her thoughts. She knew of all people, she had to be totally honest with her best friend. “Would I sound like an awful person if I said I was really thinking about the idea? Gosh, Kylie, he’s the first man to take Mom into consideration. He actually said he would be proud to have her for his child’s grandmother.”

“Yes, that’s deep, isn’t it?”

“No. Hell, I don’t know.” Another thing that was deep was the kiss they’d shared. Even now if she were to touch her lips with her fingertips, she was convinced she would still be able to feel the warmth of Morgan’s lips there. “But there are other things to consider,” she finally said, sighing.

“Like what?”

“Although our union will be a marriage of purpose, as he put it, he still wants us to project a semblance of realness. In other words, he has no qualms about us sharing a bed.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. No. Hell, I don’t know.” The last couple of guys she’d dated—way back when—took that time to cross her mind. They hadn’t done anything to light a fire within her, at least not to the degree Morgan had with just a mere kiss. “Trust me, it wouldn’t bother me one bit to sleep with Morgan,” she finally said. “But what if we start something that neither of us can finish?”

“Meaning?”

“What if things don’t work out and he decides I’m not the woman he wants to live with or the right woman for the mother of his child?”

Kylie shrugged. “Knowing Morgan I’m sure he’s thought this thing through before approaching you with it. If I were you, the only thing I’d worry about is what decision I’ll be giving him in five days.”

She hadn’t dreamed today, Lena thought, slipping beneath the covers later that night. She lay on her back and stared up at the ceiling as memories flooded her. It was hard to believe Morgan had actually asked her to marry him and have his baby.

After Morgan had left her office she had hung back, unable to leave as she’d planned to do. Instead she had sat at her desk trying to rationalize what had happened moments earlier, replaying in her mind his every word, every stroke of his tongue in her mouth.

In the end when she’d realized she hadn’t been hallucinating, she had called Kylie and asked to meet her at the nearest Burger King after she closed her florist shop that day.

After their talk she had left to pick up her mother from day care, barely remembering what their conversation
had been about on the ride home. The only thing she remembered was the one single question that was still floating around in her head.

Why, of all the women he knew, he wanted to marry her?

From the day she had agreed to sell his house and help him locate another one, things had been strictly business between them. Even when he’d had dinner with her and her mother on Sunday he hadn’t shown any obvious signs that he was attracted to her.

Or had he?

She had noted the intense looks in his gazes, but he’d always looked at her that way. In the past she had chalked things up as a one-sided attraction that she could never act on…but today, following his lead, she had.

She doubted that she would ever be able to look him in the face and not be reminded of their kiss. Today she had been introduced to another facet of Morgan’s unique personality. His passionate side. It would be a side she would be constantly exposed to if they were to marry. Sheesh! For over a year he had been her nightly dream and she wasn’t sure she was ready for him to make the jump from being her Mr. Fantasy to taking on the role of her Mr. Reality.

But then, all she had to do was close her eyes to remember the exact moment he’d made his outlandish proposal. “I want you to marry me and have my baby.” The moment he had said the words, although she hadn’t been sure she’d heard him correctly, he had looked at her with that deep, dark gaze of his as a spark of desire had flooded her insides, overheating her senses. And the seductive scent of the cologne he’d been wearing hadn’t helped matters.

And later, right before he had left, he had taken the initiative to step closer to her, and she had boldly walked into his arms. And the exact moment their tongues had mingled, zapping her willpower with tenderness, she had known she was a goner. She knew even now that she would probably be whispering his name in her sleep. But that was okay. She didn’t know of any other man whose name she’d rather whisper.

And as she closed her eyes to peaceful slumber, it was Morgan’s face that occupied her dreams.

Morgan inhaled a steadying breath as he pushed himself out of bed and sat on the edge of it. The kiss he had shared earlier that day with Lena was still heavily on his mind, in his thoughts, embedded so deep in his memory that he couldn’t sleep and was so elemental it made his entire body ache.

The kiss had been everything he had known it would be and more, and she had felt just like he’d figured she would in his arms. Now his senses were incapable of any other thoughts but those of her. At this point if she were to turn down his proposal to marry him and have his baby he didn’t know what he would do.

He stood, deciding there wasn’t much hope of getting a lot of sleep tonight. His only hope was to try and get some shut-eye on the plane, which he would be catching in a few hours. Throwing on his robe, he made his way down the stairs to get a cup of coffee before going over some paperwork for his meeting with Cameron and Ben Malloy.

Malloy was an entrepreneur with multifaceted interests. A year ago Morgan had approached him and Cameron in regards to what he saw not only as a sound business opportunity but also as a way to give back to his hometown’s dying community. His latest venture was to open several shopping malls within urban areas of several handpicked communities around the country.

In recent years there had been an explosion of growth within the suburban areas of various cities, but there seemed to be a constant neglect within the downtown areas—where a number of African Americans lived. Most business owners—although they considered themselves rather astute—failed to recognize or acknowledge the potential growth in urban areas, and as a result, their narrow-mindedness had left the residents, those people living in the neglected areas, with limited access to shopping, adequate housing and entertainment.

Magic Johnson had brought attention to this issue when he opened several theaters within the urban communities across the country. And what Morgan, Cameron and Ben were posed to do was something similar with the development of a mall in St. Louis. Ben had asked their support and their aid in pouring a substantial amount of money into the project, and after doing a considerable amount of research they had determined it not only would be a worthwhile financial investment, but it would also be a way to help place development in those overlooked areas.

Morgan glanced at the clock when he entered his kitchen. It was three in the morning and he had a flight out at eight. After he’d left Lena he had come home to pack, prepare a quick dinner and savor the memories of his first kiss with the woman of his dreams.

Moments later as he sat at his desk, he absently stirred his coffee while trying to read the report Cameron’s secretary had faxed earlier. Instead of concentrating, his mind was stuck on other things, namely Lena. Would she agree to his offer of marriage? He smiled thinking once he had her in his bed there were no limitations to just what he could do and would do.
The die was cast and an indescribable warmth spread through him in knowing that if Lena agreed to become his wife and the mother of his child, he would have her right where he wanted her.
“How’s that Steele boy?”

Lena smiled as she shoved in her briefcase the documents she needed to go over with a potential buyer. Funny, although she knew her mother’s usage of the word boy was just a term, Lena couldn’t visualize Morgan as a boy. She saw the person who had kissed her almost senseless yesterday as being a man in every full sense of the word.

“If you’re asking about Morgan, I guess he’s fine,” she said, trying to keep her voice light, neutral and nonchalant.

“So when will he be coming back?”

Lena lifted her head and met her mother’s gaze with an arched brow. “How did you know he was going somewhere?”

“He told me when he called a few days ago,” Odessa said, as she sat at the kitchen table and took a sip of her coffee.

Lena, with an incredulous look on her face, shut her briefcase with a click. “Morgan called you?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“I told you it was a few days ago. Monday, I believe.”

Lena sighed. “And when did he call on Monday?”

“In the afternoon. Before you got home.”

Lena leaned against the kitchen counter. “He called to tell you he was leaving town?”

“Actually he called to thank me for dinner on Sunday, and then he mentioned he was leaving town.” Her mother took another sip of her coffee, then asked, “Why all the questions?”

“Because I thought that perhaps you had talked to him since then.”

“Yes, I saw him yesterday at my office. You know I’m selling his home and helping him find another.” Until she decided how she would handle his proposal she didn’t want her mother to get any ideas, so she added, “Our relationship is strictly professional.”

“If that’s true, then why did he come to dinner?”

Lena sighed. “Because you asked him, and like he told you, he hadn’t eaten a home-cooked meal in a long time. No man would have turned that down.”

“Maybe, but I think he came for another reason altogether,” Odessa said, matter-of-factly.

“And what reason is that?”

Her mother’s lips parted into the barest of smiles. “You. That Steele boy likes you. Any fool can see that.”

Later that day Lena’s mind was filled with Morgan’s proposition. He would see their marriage as a business venture. Could she do the same? What if she began developing feelings for him and he walked in one day and declared that he wanted out of the marriage? What would she do then?

She was jolted from her thoughts with the ringing of her telephone. She picked it up. “Yes, Wendy?”

“Vanessa Steele is on the line for you.”

Lena raised a brow. She and Vanessa had worked together on several community projects around town. Like her own father, Vanessa’s father had been the victim of cancer, so it wasn’t unusual for them to participate in fund-raising activities to benefit the American Cancer Society. The same thing applied to Chance, whose first wife had died from cancer.

Lena liked Vanessa. She thought she was a person who wasn’t just beautiful on the outside but on the inside as well. And unlike some people whose family had a lot of money—namely someone like Cassandra Tisdale—Vanessa Steele didn’t have a “better than thou” bone in her body.

“Thanks, Wendy, please put her through.”

Lena only had to wait a few moments before the sound of Vanessa’s exuberant voice came on the line. “Lena, how are you?”
“I’m fine, Vanessa, and how are you?”
“I’m doing great. I just got a call from the principal at the high school I graduated from requesting that I spearhead this project, and after hearing it, I immediately thought of soliciting your, Jocelyn’s and Sienna’s help.”
She chuckled, then added, “Kylie’s pregnancy saved her from me pulling her in as well, and we don’t have a lot of time to pull this thing together.”
Lena’s interest was piqued after hearing the excitement in Vanessa’s voice. “What sort of project is it?”
“A mini career fair. Only thing is that the head of the school’s business department wants it held in a few weeks. If we wait until next month we’ll be competing against prom time. Sorry for the late notice but it was something she thought of doing just last night, but I think it’s a wonderful idea to showcase local employment opportunities for those who might not be considering college as an option right now.”
“I agree, it’s a wonderful idea. How can I help?”
“I’m going to need your business to participate by having a booth. It would be nice for the students to see the wonderful opportunities in real estate.”
“Do you have a date picked out yet?”
“Yes, the thirtieth of this month. That’s a Friday. I’ve talked to Chance, and to kick things off the Steele Corporation will host a sit-down dinner for all the businesses that will be participating.”
“Well, consider me in,” Lena said, smiling.
“And consider it done. I’d like to have a meeting this weekend, something informal. How about my place on Saturday evening? Are you available?”
Lena didn’t like to commit herself to being somewhere until she made sure her mother would be fine staying alone. So far her mother’s condition had improved over the past month or so, and she was taking her medication when she was supposed to, making it easier for her to get around. “Let me get back with you about that meeting on Saturday.”
“That’s fine. Do you still have my number?”
Lena quickly checked the Rolodex on her desk. “Yes, I still have it.”
“Good. I hope to see you if you can make it. If you can’t I’ll understand and I will call you the early part of next week and go over what was discussed.”
“Thanks.”
After hanging up the phone, Lena couldn’t help but feel good that Vanessa had included her on the committee.

Morgan entered his hotel room after having dinner with Cameron and Ben. Moments later he had set up his laptop on the desk in the room and called home to speak with Chance before going into the bathroom to take a shower.

According to Chance, things were running smoothly back at the office, and Chance was glad to hear that Morgan would be returning home late Friday night instead of Sunday. That meant he would be home for the brothers’ weekly basketball game Saturday morning.

After his shower, Morgan sat down at the desk and booted up his computer, immediately checking his e-mail to see if his secretary had sent him the documents he had requested of her earlier. She had, and after downloading all the attachments and reading through most of them, which took almost a full hour, he clicked on his Instant Messages, mainly to see if Donovan was online. His younger brother had a tendency to pick up dates online as well off.

It appeared Donovan wasn’t, but someone else was, he thought, when Lena’s screen name popped up. He glanced at the clock radio near the bed. It was almost two in the morning. What was she still doing up?

He remembered her once mentioning that because of her mom, she typically got into bed early. He hoped that whatever reason she was still awake and on her laptop he wouldn’t interrupt, because he intended to drop in.

Lena smiled as she continued to read the messages her goddaughter, Tiffany, had sent her earlier that day over the computer. Tiffany was excited about the prospect of becoming a big sister to a baby girl or boy, and before going to bed each night she would send Lena information on all the things she planned to do in her new role.

Tiffany had also written to tell her about this guy from school that she simply adored. Although Kylie had lightened up some on Tiffany now that she was sixteen, her best friend was still trying to make sure Tiffany didn’t make the same mistakes she had made as a teen, which was understandable. These days Kylie was handling the situation in a different way, one that would not alienate her daughter. Chance and Kylie, along with Tiffany and Chase’s son, Marcus, were one big happy family.

Lena leaned back against the headboard and balanced her laptop on raised knees, remembering what had awakened her at two in the morning. She had had a dream of her and Morgan together, in bed. A shiver ran down
her spine at the memory.

In her dream Morgan’s kisses had been just as heated as the one in her office. And when he had placed her on
the bed, she had watched as his eyes changed from a dark brown to a hot brown as she succumbed to his magnetic
pull and sexual appeal. Her breath had become shallow as he slowly removed her clothes, and desire consumed her,
sending blood gushing through her veins like water through a fire hose. The eyes that had stared at her while he’d
gotten undressed had had her pulse escalating, had made a certain part of her beg for him to take her over the edge.
Her tension had mounted when he placed his body over hers, the scent of him sending her senses into overdrive. Her
thighs had parted, and mere seconds before he was to enter her she had heard her mother cry out for her father, thus
shattering the moment.

Lena sighed, thinking maybe that had been a good thing. She couldn’t imagine how things would have been if
Morgan had completed the task and made love to her. She was about to log off the computer when an Instant
Message popped up on her screen, almost startling her. The message asked *What are you doing up so late?*

She frowned, lifting a brow, pondering the identity of the individual who wanted to know. She was not a person
who indulged in Internet chats or instant messages unless it was Kylie or Tiffany, and she knew both of them were
in bed asleep now. Her gaze was drawn to the screen name, and her heart almost stopped—MDSteele. She
immediately sucked in a huge breath upon recognizing the screen name belonged to Morgan Darien Steele.

Ignoring the sensations that shivered up her spine, she nervously typed a response, wanting to make sure it was
him.

*Morgan?*

*Yes, it’s me.*

Satisfied, she then clicked further to answer his question. *Mom woke me. Bad dream. And I couldn’t go back to
sleep. She decided not to tell him about his part in her sleepless night. What about you? Why are you still up?*

*Late business meeting and not ready to go to bed, was his typed response. And then Is your Mom okay?*

*Yes, she’s fine. And how are things going with your meeting?*

*All right.*

Moments later she typed. *Can I ask you something?*

*You can ask me anything.*

*Why me, Morgan?*

He knew what she was asking him and moments later he typed *Why not you, Lena? You’re a very beautiful and
desirable woman and I want you.*

She swallowed hard, trying to keep her heart from pounding at his words. She refused to put too much stock
into them. She was glad he couldn’t hear her low laugh as she typed *Come on, Morgan, be for real. I’m not your
type.*

*And what do you see as my type?*

Lena frowned. If he wanted the truth she would give it to him. *Worldly, highly sophisticated, pencil thin…*

*Wrong on all accounts. Is that why you never wanted to go out with me?*

She quickly typed a response. *No. I told you the reason. Once burned you learn not to play with fire.*

*And you saw me as fire?*

*Maybe not fire, but definitely someone too hot to handle.*

She could tell by the timing that he had paused before sending her his next typed response. *What if I told you
that I saw you as someone too hot to handle as well?*

Lena smiled. *Then my response would be that you probably had me mixed up with my twin.*

*You have a twin?*

*I’m a Gemini.*

*Interesting. What’s the difference in the two of you?*

*I’m not a risk taker. My twin is. She lives for the moment without thinking about her actions. I do just the
opposite. She decided to leave off anything about her twin having a tendency to be naughty and wild.*

*How often does she come out?*

Lena rolled her eyes and grinned. Of course as a man Morgan would be interested in knowing that. *She’s never
actually come out. I’ve managed to keep her in line.*

*What a shame.*

*Yes, well, that’s how it is. And with that said, I’m going to turn in now. I’m finally feeling sleepy.*

*All right. Pleasant dreams. Good night, Lena.*

*Good night, Morgan.*

Morgan smiled when Lena clicked off-line, and moments later he logged off his computer as well. He found it
interesting what she’d told him about her so-called twin. Hmm, so there was another side of her, a side she was suppressing, a side where she could become another person, one who wouldn’t hesitate to let her hair down.

He would love to meet that Lena Spears.

Now she had him curious and his pulse began racing. Just the thought of a loose Lena had him reaching for one of the chilled bottled waters the housekeeping staff had left in the ice bucket on the desk. He quickly opened it and took a sip, cooling his insides.

He shook his head, remembering when she’d mentioned she hadn’t thought she was his type. He definitely had to prove her wrong on that, and while doing so he wanted to prove to her that whether she was the ultraconservative Lena or the not so conservative one, she was the woman he wanted.

Over breakfast the next morning Lena thought about her tête-à-tête with Morgan via her laptop. She hated to admit it but she’d actually enjoyed herself. There had been something downright fun about exchanging words with him online rather than by phone or in person. While online he couldn’t hear her responses or see her facial expressions. She couldn’t believe that she’d actually mentioned her mischievous twin to him. Well, he’d certainly seemed interested in that.

“I’m sorry I woke you last night, Lena.”

Lena glanced up when her mother came to the table and sat down. Of all the times her mother had awakened her during the night, this was the first time she had apologized for doing so, and Lena wanted to assure her that there was no need for the apology. “Mom, you don’t have to apologize, I understand.”

Her mother looked at her with sad eyes. “And what do you understand?”

Lena shrugged. “I understand that you and Dad had a close relationship and that losing him was hard on you, and it still is. I know he was your very best friend and confidant. What the two of you shared was really awesome when you think about it.”

Odessa nodded slowly and Lena saw the lone tear that clung to one of her eyelids. “I know you probably think at some point I should let go and move on with my life, Lena, but it’s hard. Your father was my life. I feel lonesome without him. I know you’re here but it’s not the same.”

Lena didn’t know what to say. One of the main reasons she took her mother to the adult day care center twice a week was so she could be around other senior adults. Deciding to change the subject to a cheerier note, she asked, “So, how’s Ms. Emily doing?” She watched a smile appear on her mother’s lips.

“Emily is doing fine. I think this is the weekend her grandkids and great-grands are coming over.”

Lena swallowed. Now she wished she hadn’t brought Ms. Emily up. “Is it?”

“Yes. And I hope some nice young man comes into your life. I want you to share with a man that special love me and your father had. And then more than anything, I wish I could have a little one to cuddle on my knee before the good Lord calls me home.”

An ache appeared in Lena’s chest as she heard the sadness in her mother’s voice. Considering everything, Lena knew that if she was to say yes to Morgan’s proposal she would be able to give her mother the one thing she wanted the most.

Later that night after making sure her mother was settled in for the night, Lena took a shower and then slipped into a pair of silky pajamas Kylie had given her on her last birthday.

She settled in bed with her laptop, deciding to see if Tiffany had sent her a message that day. Today had been hectic, and to keep Morgan off her mind she had thrown herself into her work. She had shown another couple Morgan’s house, and the moment she had walked through the door sensations had curled in the pit of her stomach, as if she expected to look up and see him walk down his stairs at any moment.

Unfortunately the couple she’d shown the house to had a three-year-old son who had just finished eating a chocolate bar. Needless to say, a chocolate handprint had gotten on a few of Morgan’s doors. The boy’s mother had apologized and wiped off those areas, but sometime tomorrow, Lena intended to go to Morgan’s place and make sure the woman hadn’t missed any spots.

Moments later she chuckled after reading Tiffany’s note. The boy she had thought she was interested in a few days ago was no longer the hunk of the week. A new guy at school had caught her eye. Lena shook her head. Her goddaughter was a lot different from Kylie when she’d been that age. At sixteen, Kylie had thought Tiffany’s father, Sam Miller, was her entire world. At least she’d thought that until he’d left her alone and pregnant. A part of Lena was glad that Tiffany was not getting serious about any one guy.

Lena tried not to notice that Morgan was also online. Chances were he was aware she was on the computer as well and she couldn’t help wondering if he would do as he’d done the night before and engage in online conversation with her. She didn’t have long to wonder when Morgan’s screen name popped up. But his typed
request surprised her.

Lena. I want to chat with your twin tonight.

Do you now? was Lena’s typed response as she managed a wry smile, after regaining her composure.

Yes.

Why?

I’d like to get to know her.

Don’t think that’s a good idea.

Let me be the judge of that. Trust me.

Lena leaned back against her headboard trying to remember the last time she had put her complete trust in a man. When she remembered, her chin firmed as she thought stubbornly, why should she trust Morgan? But then, another part of her wanted to trust him. “I’m a big girl,” she murmured softly to herself. “Maybe it’s time I act like it.”

Smiling, a naughty and wicked shiver sliding down her spine, she began typing. Okay, I trust you and for the rest of the time you’re online, you’ll be chatting with my twin.

Okay. Thanks for trusting me.

Lena nodded. She hadn’t expected him to thank her for that.

So, Lena’s twin. How are you?

Lena wasn’t sure what came over her at that moment. Maybe it was the idea that now she could, even if only for a short while, finally unleash her unruly inner self with a man she’d admitting to trusting. This was her chance to shed her inhibitions, stop being the good girl for a little while and walk on the wild side.

Taking a deep breath and before she could change her mind she began typing and felt an intense shiver when she sent Morgan her response.

I’m fine, Morgan, but I wish I was there with you.

Morgan was sitting at a large oak desk in his suite when he received Lena’s response, and immediately he felt his body transform into hard steel, and inner fire began creeping through his bloodstream. The Lena Spears he knew, even the one he’d kissed the other day, would not have admitted such a thing.

Inhaling deeply he began typing. And what would you do if you were?

It didn’t take long for her typed response. I’d try things on you that I’ve never tried on a man before.

Feeling hot, he undid the top button of his shirt before typing. Such as?

Depends on where you are now. You’re in your suite, right?

No, I’m sitting at the desk.

That’s a good spot. I’d clear off that desk and spread my naked self on top of it.

Mercy! Morgan thought and immediately grabbed a sixteen-ounce bottle of chilled water and practically drained the entire thing just to cool off his heated body. The thought of Lena spread naked across this desk aroused such strong feelings within him that he had to lean back in his chair to place space between him and the desk. Imagining those voluptuous thighs exposed to his view sent a warm flood of anticipated and delicious pleasure racing through him.

Morgan? she typed. You’re still there?

Barely. But instead of typing that single response, he stroked the keys to ask And then what you would do?

Whatever you want. I would become your every woman.

His every woman…Just the thought sent more heat escalating through him. He leaned forward, feeling a heated rush. He tried to remain calm, keep his composure, but it was hard, just like the rest of him.

Before he could type in a response she sent him a question. And what’s your fantasy, Morgan Steele?

He smiled, not the least ashamed to admit what that was. He typed in his response. Making love to you all day long and feel you climax beneath me several times. More times than either of us can count. Then he smiled with a predatory satisfaction when she didn’t respond for a while.

You sure about that? was the response she finally sent.

Positive. Now what’s your fantasy?

To have you on top of me, making love to you, and I’d be grateful for a half day and at least one climax.

That powerful chemistry that she had failed to acknowledge the first night they’d met was back with a vengeance, stirring every volatile emotion within him. This was the Lena he wanted in his bed, and once he got her there he was going to prove they were one and the same. There weren’t two sides of Lena Spears, and he planned to make sure she realized that.

Don’t settle for one climax. Get ready for several, he typed and then added Your wish will be my every
command, Lena Spears. Whatever you want done, I will do…with pleasure.

There was a pause and then she responded. *I think it's time we ended this conversation before the screens burn out.*

*If we must.*

*We must, and remember, Morgan, tonight you chatted with the twin.*

He lifted a challenging brow. The sexual excitement she had aroused in him had gotten to an intense level, had become a momentous force. There was no way he would let her cunningly fall back to being her old self. Even over cyberspace he sensed her emotional withdrawal.

*Good night, Morgan.*

*Good night, Lena.*

He waited for her to log off before he did likewise. Then he sagged back against the chair thinking he couldn’t return to Charlotte quick enough to suit him.
The following day Morgan discovered that he had a hard time focusing his attention on anything, even this meeting with Cameron and Ben. By the end of the day business negotiations were behind them, everything had been finalized and it was agreed that they would enter into a partnership for the development of urban real estate, with the objective of fostering economic opportunities in the underserved urban areas around the country.

Ben had caught a flight back to Los Angeles as soon as the meeting was over, and if it hadn’t been for the promise Morgan had made to Cameron a few days ago to stick around and play a few rounds of golf, he would have been on the next plane bound for Charlotte. Now with the golfing behind them they both had plans to fly home on Thursday instead of Friday.

After enjoying a scrumptious meal at a very popular soul food restaurant in St. Louis, they decided to have a couple of beers while a jazz band performed.

“So how’s Vanessa?”

Morgan lifted his gaze from studying the contents of his glass of beer and glanced across the table at Cameron. He smiled over at his friend. “She’s no different than she was the last time you asked me about her. What can I say? Vanessa is Vanessa.”

Cameron took a sip of his own beer, straight from the bottle. “Maybe it’s time for me to pay you a visit in Charlotte.”

Morgan chuckled. “Yeah, maybe it is. That should really shake things up a bit.”

Cameron grinned. “I imagine it would. So how is the sale of your house coming?”

Cameron’s questions made Morgan think of Lena, not that he hadn’t been thinking about her anyway. “Lena has found several interested buyers, and I actually like the new place she found for me.”

Cameron lifted a brow. “But I thought you hiring her as a real estate agent was a cunning ploy to spend time with her.”

Morgan smiled. “It started out that way, but this might be one of those situations where I got caught in my own trap.”

Cameron chuckled. “That doesn’t bother you?”

“No, whatever works I’m for it.” Moments later Morgan asked, “Why are we drawn to difficult women?”

Morgan shrugged massive shoulders as he glanced at his watch. “Because we’re strong men. Any weaker man would have given up by now. Rejection is something a lot of men don’t take very well. But you know that saying about only the strong surviving. I think it has become our slogan. Besides,” he said, after another sip of his beer, “it’s more than our nature, Morgan. It’s our destiny.”

Morgan’s mouth formed into a determined smile. Cameron had spoken of strength, but Morgan hadn’t felt strong after talking with Lena last night. In fact for a long while after their conversation he had sat in the chair behind the desk, too weak in the knees to even move. Never had he gotten so turned on from exchanging words with a woman through cyberspace. And every time he moved around in his hotel room and glanced over at his desk, he could picture a naked Lena spread on it.

He glanced over at Cameron. “So can I expect a visit from you sometime later this month?”

Cameron smiled. “Yes, that’s something you can pretty much bank on.”

Lena found that her emotional side was the pits. She had asked herself a million times upon wakening that morning, how had she done what she did last night? Sheesh! She could blame it on her fictional twin all she wanted, but it was her fingers that had typed in those outlandish words.

What did Morgan think of her? From his typed responses it didn’t appear that he’d been put off by her behavior. In fact he seemed to have enjoyed chatting with her naughty twin. She sighed thinking that he was due back in town on Sunday and she was supposed to give him an answer to his proposal. She was no closer to making a decision than she had been the day he’d made it.

She had planned to go by his house that day to clean up any more chocolate handprints left by that little boy, but hadn’t had the desire to do so. The last place she needed to go today was the place where Morgan slept, ate, bathed, dressed…

She tossed a file on her desk wondering at what point she would stop fantasizing about the man. Hadn’t doing
so got her in enough trouble already?

She almost jumped when her intercom sounded. Leaning forward she pushed the button. “Yes, Wendy?”

“Cassandra Tisdale is here to see you.”

Lena lifted a brow. Cassandra Tisdale? What would the woman want with her? There was only one way to find out. “Send her in, Wendy.”

Lena stood just moments before her office door opened and Cassandra breezed in, bringing all her air of phoniness with her. She decided not to waste any time in asking, “Cassandra, what can I do for you?”

Cassandra smiled brightly. “I think I owe you an apology.”

Lena crossed her arms over her chest and eyed the woman skeptically. “Do you?”

“Yes, silly me. When I saw you and Morgan together a couple of weeks ago I jumped to the wrong conclusions when I should have known better. I just heard at lunch that you’re selling his home for him. I should have known it was something to do with business and not anything personal.”

Lena silently heard what Cassandra was not saying. “And why should you have known that?”

Cassandra smiled affectionately. Lena surmised that it was the same way she would have smiled at a puppy before kicking it. “Because you aren’t Morgan’s type. In fact I know the perfect woman for him.”

Lena leaned her hips against her desk. “Do you?”

“Yes, my cousin Jamie. You probably remember her from the ball that night.”

Now it was Lena who smiled. “Oh yes. Isn’t that the same cousin you tried pushing off on Chance?”

Cassandra frowned. “Chance disappointed me. I always thought he appreciated the finer things in life.”

“He does. That’s why he married Kylie. In fact I think he’s a man who recognizes top quality when he sees it.”

Cassandra’s frown deepened. “Well, I wish them the best. But getting back to Morgan.”

“And your cousin?”

“Yes. Did you know she was his date at the governor’s inaugural ball last year?”

Lena smiled. She had heard it a different way from Kylie. It seemed the young woman was in attendance and had asked Morgan to take her home when she began not feeling well. “And?”

“And I thought he was rather taken with her.”

“Really?”

Cassandra smiled. “Yes. Money marries money. What can I say?”

Nothing, Lena thought. The woman had basically said it all. Now it was her time to speak, and what she had to say would definitely burst the woman’s bubble. Maybe it was the fact that she was sick and tired of the Cassandras and Jamies of the world who thought good things should happen only to them because they were born with silver spoons in their mouths, or perhaps it was because Cassandra, as usual, had rubbed her the wrong way.

Whatever the reason, Lena had had enough. “I hate to disappoint you and your cousin, but when Morgan returns to town we’ll be announcing our engagement.”

Cassandra blinked and then burst out laughing. “If you think Morgan is going to marry you, then you are a fool. Everyone knows he wants the perfect woman, and trust me you’re far from perfect. Your lack of pedigree, your appearance, your profession. You are definitely not what Morgan Steele needs in a wife, so if he asked you to marry him it had to be during a weak moment when he wasn’t thinking rationally. Men marry women they will be proud to be seen with. Although I really don’t care for Kylie or that woman Bas married, I have to admit they look decent enough. I can’t say the same for you.”

Anger tore through Lena and she came close to slapping that smile off Cassandra Tisdale’s face, but she wouldn’t let the woman know how much her words bothered her. Instead she said, “Thanks for dropping by, Cassandra, and unless you have a house you want me to sell or you’re looking to buy one, I really have work to do, so please leave.”

“Less than a month.”

Lena raised a brow. “Excuse me?”

Cassandra tilted her head back and gave Lena a haughty look. “Jamie has moved here, and like I said, she and Morgan have dated before and if I recall they got rather cozy. I bet that, engaged or not, in less than a month she’ll have Morgan and you won’t.”

And then she turned and breezed out of the office with the same air of phoniness that she’d breezed in with.

“What a witch,” Jocelyn Steele said, putting down her cup of tea. “I can’t believe Bas could have been engaged to marry such a creature.”

Jocelyn had joined Kylie and Lena for lunch and Lena told them about Cassandra Tisdale’s visit.

“Honestly,” Kylie said, sipping her tea. “I think the brothers knew Bas would come to his senses before the wedding. Chance even told me such. And he was right. When we got back from our honeymoon we found out that
Bas had broken the engagement.”

“Well, I’m glad I’m the woman he chose,” Jocelyn said, smiling. She then turned her attention to Lena and smiled. “So, are you and Morgan really getting married?”

Lena wanted to hold her head down in frustration. She hadn’t told Morgan of her decision, but she hadn’t wasted any time throwing it in Cassandra’s face in anger. “I never gave Morgan an answer. I’m supposed to tell him what I’ve decided when he returns.”

“Well, you might as well have told the entire town,” Kylie said, grinning. “I bet it will be spread all over Charlotte by morning. And I hope you don’t believe that garbage Cassandra said about her cousin being able to turn Morgan’s head in less than a month.”

Lena sighed. She had seen Cassandra’s cousin and had to admit the woman was a beauty. How would Morgan react if the woman did turn her attention his way?

“Don’t think it, Lena.”

Lena lifted her head and met Kylie’s gaze. “Don’t think what?”

“That anything Cassandra said is true. Morgan is not the type of man who would be interested in a woman like Jamie Hollis. I told you what really happened that night at the governor’s ball. She claimed a headache and asked Morgan to take her home.”

“They’ve dated before,” Jocelyn said.

“But still,” Lena said softly, “Jamie Hollis is pretty, she’s a socialite, her father is a senator, she comes from money…”

“Evidently none of those things matter to Morgan, Lena. He’s made his choice,” Kylie interjected. “And as far as I’m concerned you’ll be bringing far more to the table, something that Morgan admires. Genuineness. You’re not superficial. What people see is what they get. I personally think that’s the best quality of all.”

Later that night before getting into bed Lena decided she needed to call Morgan. She preferred that he hear about her conversation with Cassandra from her than from someone else. She braced herself when she began dialing his cell phone.

“Hello.”

The greeting was whispered huskily and sent sensuous chills through her body. “Morgan, this is Lena.”

“I know.”

She raised a brow. “You do? How?”

“Caller ID.”

“Oh.” She rolled her eyes, calling herself a ninny for not figuring that out.

“How are you doing, Lena?”

She cleared her throat. “I’m fine. What about you?”

“I’m doing okay. How’s your mom?”

“She’s doing fine. Thanks for asking.” Then without missing a beat she said, “Morgan, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Yes?”

“About your proposal?”

“What about it?”

“Something happened today that I think you should know about.”

“All right, what happened?”

Lena decided to lie back on the bed. “Cassandra Tisdale dropped by my office today and…”

“And what?”

Lena sighed. “She said some things that really rubbed me the wrong way, and before I could catch myself I told her that you and I would be announcing our engagement when you returned to town.”

She heard Morgan’s chuckle. “I’m sure that shut her up.”

Lena shook her head. “Not quite.” But Lena had no intention of telling him what else Cassandra had said, especially the part about her cousin Jamie. Instead she added, “I have a feeling it did just the opposite. I bet she’s spreading it all around town now and I thought you should know.”

“Okay, thanks for telling me.”

“You don’t sound bothered by it.”

“By what?”

Lena stared up at the ceiling. “By what I told her.”

“I’m not. I asked you to marry me. You just hadn’t given me your answer. Does this mean you’ll be accepting the terms of my proposal, Lena?”
She ran a hand over her face. “What do you want, Morgan?”

“You know what I want. I want you. I want you to have my baby. I want us to get married and be best friends. I want your mother to be an integrated part of our lives. I guess you can say I want it all.”

Everything but love, she thought, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. In all their conversations he never had mentioned love. She forced that thought from her mind. There were times in life when you couldn’t get everything you wanted.

“Well, I’ll let you go now. I just wanted you to know,” she said softly.

“Okay, we’ll talk more about it when I return to Charlotte.”

“All right. Good night, Morgan.”

“Good night, Lena.”

Morgan didn’t release the phone until he heard the click of Lena’s disconnecting the line. Although he was overjoyed that she had decided to accept his proposal, he was curious as to what had driven her to make that decision. He couldn’t help wondering exactly what Cassandra had said to her.

Morgan was astute enough to know that there was more to the story than Lena had told him. He knew of only two people who could possibly know. Kylie was one, but when it came to Lena she had a tendency to be tight-lipped. The other person was Donovan. Donovan usually hung around in the right circles, and if there was something amiss he would be the one to know it.

He quickly keyed in Donovan’s number, and his brother picked up on the first ring. “Yes?”

“Okay, Donovan, what’s going on?”

He heard his brother’s chuckle before he said, “You tell me. Rumor has it that you’re about to become an engaged man.”

Morgan smiled. So word was out already. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Congratulations. It seemed you got the woman you wanted. I’m not going to ask how you managed and maybe it’s best if I don’t know. But I better tell you the masses are taking bets.”

Morgan frowned. “Bets?”

Donovan chuckled again. “Yes. It seems a certain part of Charlotte’s elite society group can’t imagine you and Lena as a couple. In fact they’re taking bets that before it’s over you’ll come to your senses and marry a woman they feel is more suitable to your breeding.”

Morgan’s frown deepened. “And who’s that supposed to be?”

“Jamie Hollis. It’s my understanding Cassandra is certain her cousin can replace Lena. I understand she’s even bold enough to tell Lena that.”

“Oh, I see.”

Now he really did.

So that’s what had pushed Lena into action. He shook his head. He would take Lena over Jamie any day. And he intended to do that very thing.

“It appears that all those times you’ve stated you were looking for the perfect woman, everyone was forming their own opinions as to what you wanted.”

Morgan sighed. “Evidently. Seems like I have a lot to straighten out when I return to Charlotte tomorrow.”

“I would have to agree. You know Cassandra and her better-than-thou group.”

Yes, he did know Cassandra and her group. He would have thought her broken engagement with Bas would keep her quiet for a while. Evidently now that she had returned to town she was trying to take the spotlight off her and place it on someone else.

“And before you come back to town to roll any heads, I need to remind you of something,” Donovan said, breaking into his thoughts.

“What?”

“If you’re still thinking about running for public office I wouldn’t have my name linked to any negative publicity by stirring up trouble. You know the woman you intend to marry. I wouldn’t worry about what is being said.”

Morgan frowned. “I will worry about it if it involves Lena,” he said roughly. “I won’t have people assuming she’s competing against Jamie for my attention, because she’s not.”

“Then show it in other ways. You know what they say about action speaking louder than words. Besides, once it’s officially announced that you’re engaged to Lena, if Jamie has any class she will bow out of the picture and put an end to this foolishness that Cassandra has started.”

Moments later Morgan hung up the phone. All he had to do was show back up in Charlotte and put this foolishness to rest by announcing his engagement. He knew what woman he wanted and it wasn’t Jamie Hollis.
Chapter 11

It occurred to Lena during lunchtime the following day that she hadn’t made a pit stop by Morgan’s house to clean up those chocolate smudges. After talking to him on the phone last night and telling him what to expect when he returned she had immediately felt a sense of relief. But upon waking this morning a lot of doubt now filled her mind. Had she really made the right decision? Had she allowed Cassandra’s words to push her into a situation she shouldn’t really be in?

Morgan made it seem like a “marriage of purpose” was nothing new, and maybe it wasn’t to celebrities, high profilers and those Hollywood types. But she was someone who dealt with reality and she didn’t know of any woman in her inner circle who would agree to marry a man and have his baby as part of a business deal. The media would have a field day with that bit of news if they ever got wind of it. And what would his brothers think? His parents? His own friends?

Not knowing what to think herself, Lena brought her car to a stop after pulling into Morgan’s driveway. Unsnapping her seat belt she got out and proceeded to check his mailbox before getting the door key from the lockbox. The least she could do was bring in any mail since it seemed the box was overflowing.

Moments later she was walking inside his foyer and closing the door behind her. She smiled as she glanced around, distinctly remembering the first time he’d brought her here for that tour. And each time she had returned to his home she couldn’t help but think how massive it was for one person. But then, the one he was thinking of buying was just as huge. And now that she’d decided to accept the terms of his proposal, that meant she and her mother would be sharing with him whatever house he purchased.

There were a number of framed portraits that hung on the walls, detailing the vast extent of his valuable art collection. She thought, and not for the first time, that his house smelled like him, a robust scent of man.

Walking into the living room she placed Morgan’s mail on the table in a spot where he would be able to see it when he returned on Sunday. After taking off her jacket and slipping out of her shoes, she noticed a chocolate smudge on the door handle of the French door leading out to the pool and so she walked into the kitchen to get a wet cloth. She hoped and prayed there weren’t too many others.

Standing at the kitchen sink she bit back a smile. One of Ms. Emily’s daughters had called a couple of nights ago saying she planned to take their mother out to dinner and a movie for her birthday and had invited Odessa along. At first Lena had had mixed emotions about her mother going, but after talking to Cora Jessup and seeing how excited Odessa had gotten with the invitation, she had agreed. Hopefully, this would be the start of some sort of social life for her mother.

“You certainly have a way of brightening up my kitchen.”

Lena spun around, holding a hand to her chest, as her gaze connected to Morgan’s. And speaking of chest…his was broad, hairy, well defined and at the moment, naked. In fact it was obvious he had just stepped out of the shower. The only thing covering the bottom half of his body was a velour towel and it wasn’t all that thick. From the look and shape of things, it was obvious he worked out regularly, which was something she herself had begun doing but not with as much zeal and dedication as some people. But she was determined to get there.

She cleared her throat after her racing heart slowed down a bit. “When did you get back?” she asked, after she was finally able to speak. The fact that he was standing in the middle of the room looking sexy as hell was making her skin feel heated.

He cracked a gorgeous smile. “About an hour ago.”

“B-but I talked to you last night. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming back today?”

Striding toward her with a smile so hot it could melt butter, he said, “I wanted to surprise you.”

Well, he had certainly succeeded in doing that. She tried averting her gaze from that smile only to have it fall on his chest, and she quickly decided that wasn’t good. And if she moved it lower it would hit another spot. Although that area was covered, staring at it wasn’t a smart idea, either. Definitely not a decent thing to do, but who could think of decency in the presence of a half-naked man?

When he came to a stop directly in front of her, pinning her between his body and the counter, she forced a smile to her lips and cleared her throat yet again before saying, “So, how was your trip?”

His smile became even sexier when he said, “Mmm, let’s talk about my trip later. Right now I’d like the perfect homecoming.”
And before she could blink, he leaned forward and captured her lips with his.

The moment Morgan’s tongue took control of hers Lena’s world turned topsy-turvy and blazing hot all at the same time. This was what spontaneous combustion was all about, she quickly decided. He hadn’t given her time to react, to resist, or to think. When he had coaxed her lips apart and seized her tongue, he had been the one to take control. He was a master at what he was doing, and the sensations his skilled lips, tongue and mouth were causing shot straight to areas of her body that hadn’t been touched in a long time or ever. He made the last kiss they’d shared in her office seem tame compared to this. Their tongues were mingling, tangling, mating in a private, sensual and heat-blasting dance.

She wanted to wrench her mind back from all the erratic emotions he was making her feel, all the heated lust invading her body. Instead she was being overtaken by some primal elemental force that sent vibrations of deep need all through her.

The air they were breathing seemed to change and she felt her entire body attune to that change. She heard herself moan. She felt herself surrender, and she felt herself being pulled more and more under the mastery of a Morgan Steele kiss.

Then as if that wasn’t enough, his hands moved to her waist, then upward to slip beneath her blouse, unclip her bra and trace hot fingertips to caress her breasts—kneading their softness and then playing, torturing and tantalizing their taut tips. She heard herself whimper when she became entrenched in desire so strong, potent and deliberate she couldn’t breathe.

It was then that he broke off the kiss. While trying to force air through their lungs their gazes held, locked, with a need that almost bordered on obsession, and she knew what he wanted. She knew what she wanted as well. Here and now.

She didn’t care that they were standing in his kitchen during midday. All that mattered, the only thing that was important, was to finish what they started. Any regrets would come later but not now. Something had taken over, held them in a sensual grip. It was something they couldn’t explain, nor did they want to or feel the need to. It was enough that they both felt it. They both wanted it. And they both intended to have it.

Now.

Without uttering a word he reached out and tugged the blouse over her head, then freed the bra completely from her breasts. As he tossed both aside, his hands then moved to her hips and on bended knee he unceremoniously yanked down her skirt, leaving her standing in the middle of his kitchen wearing nothing but a thong.

“Mercy.”

Lena heard his growl.

Heat drummed through her when she felt his fingers move slowly up her legs, kneading her flesh while making her body burst into flames. But it seemed it didn’t intend to let her burn without him. The next thing she knew was that he was sensually stroking the back of her knee with one hand while tracing his fingertips up her inner thigh with the other. When he reached her thong, his hand slipped beneath the satin barely-there covering and touched her.

She fought the fiery sensations that single touch caused by closing her eyes, throwing her head back and pressing her knees together. She had never felt such intensity, such vulnerability, so possessed with need.

“Lena?”

Deep in the recess of her mind she heard her name. She slowly opened her eyes and looked down and met his gaze, recognizing the look in their dark depths. That look stole her breath, sent even more indescribable sensations shooting through her and made liquid heat, which she could actually feel, pool right smack between her legs where his finger still was located.

“I want you, Lena,” he whispered in a husky voice, still holding her gaze. “I want you on the table.”

She stared down at him. He was leaning back on his haunches staring back at her. There was a high degree of heat in his eyes, and then suddenly she felt hot all over again. He stood, laced his fingers with hers, positioned her body close to his and turned her slightly and begin inching her backward toward the table. It was then that she noticed his towel had dropped and he was as stark naked as she was.

“I’ve been fantasizing about you spread out on my desk, but I’m going to make this table work,” he whispered huskily into her ear.

They came to a stop when the table was at her back. Morgan remembered how his brothers had joked about him having such a huge table in his kitchen. Now he knew why it was there. It was perfect. His need, his desire and his want for her had built up over a long period. She had become an obsession that nearly bordered on madness.

He wanted to marry her. He wanted her to have his baby. He wanted her to be a part of his life forever.

He loved her.

That stark realization ratcheted through him, nearly knocking him off balance. That was the reason why he had come up with those crazy plans, and why, even when Donovan had teased him mercilessly about Lena not giving
him the time of day, he hadn’t let her rejection deter him one bit from making her his priority.

He knew at that very moment that he had probably fallen in love with her the moment he set eyes on her that
tight, and he had dreamed about her every night since then. She had fascinated him in a way no other woman had
ever done before. He saw a beauty on the outside that he knew radiated from the inside. Her dedication to her
mother and those she considered friends was monumental. He admired such a high degree of loyalty and devotion.
Her interest in the various community projects around town that were geared to benefit others was a testimony
that she was a person who cared. This was the type of woman he needed in his life, to walk by his side, to be there
with him when the going got tough. She didn’t know it yet but he had high plans for their future, and they would
have a rewarding future together—she might as well bank on it.

He reached down and lifted her bottom and sat her on the edge of the table, then gently scooted her back on it.
He stepped back. She was lying flat on her back with her gorgeous legs dangling off the sides, naked and opened for
him. Just like he’d imagined in his fantasy.

Morgan inwardly groaned. All that naked flesh only heightened his desire. “You’re beautiful, Lena,” he
whispered and felt the truth of his words all the way to his toes.

He watched as she slid a glance at him, smiled and said, “You have a way of making me feel sexy, Morgan
Steele.”

“You have a way of making me feel sexy. And your sexiness has a way of driving me wild. Pushing me over the edge and making
me want to do things I normally don’t do,” he said truthfully.

He came back to the table, leaned over her and kissed her. Thoroughly. Deeply. And then he was between her
spread knees, easing them apart even farther.

The scent of her drove him crazy, made him lose control, made his body even more aroused. He stepped closer,
rubbed his hardened shaft against her wet core, teasing it, tantalizing it, provoking it in an enticing way.

“I think this is where I ask if I need to put on a condom,” he whispered huskily, as he continued to rub himself
against her. “As much as I want to give you my baby, now isn’t the time to do it. There are too many number
crunchers around here to suit me.”

She smiled and slowly shook her head. “I take the pill to regulate my periods, so I’m safe, but if you prefer to
—”

“No, I don’t prefer. I want to be skin to skin, flesh to flesh with you. I want to know the exact moment I let go
and fill you with me, Lena.”

He leaned in closer to her ear, letting his warm breath touch her skin underneath when he whispered, “In other
words, I want to soak your insides to the point that even next week you’ll still know that I came for a visit.”

And then he kissed her in a long, drugging kiss that automatically had her eyes closing while the desire within
her crested, seeking fulfillment.

“Look at me, Lena,” he said in a soft command after pulling back.

She opened her eyes and smiled at him. It was then that she saw that he was on the table with his body
straddled over hers. The light shining through his kitchen blinds made him appear as the man he had been—her
nighttime fantasy—and into the man he now was, her daytime reality. At that moment she was aware of everything.
The way he was staring down at her, the way their breathing was being released in the quiet stillness of the room,
the way his shaft was resting between her open legs and the sexual, hot sense they radiated.

He leaned down and placed a light kiss on the tip of her nose and smiled. “I think I’m going to keep this table
forever,” he said, chuckling softly. And then his expression turned serious and he leaned down and whispered, “Got
to have you. Now.”

He seemed to rise even higher above her before he sank back down in one fluid motion inside her.

“Oh,” she gasped, her sensation one of total fulfillment and extreme gratification, knowing their bodies were
connected this way. He moved deeper, going inside her to the hilt, inside her while reaching under her and bracing
her voluptuous bottom, holding it tight to the fit of him.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, whispering softly against the thick luxuriance of her hair.

“No, you feel good,” she said, smiling up at him. “Okay, big guy. Show me what you can do.” And with the
agility of an acrobat, she lifted her legs to lock her ankles in the center of his back.

He grinned down at her. “Remember, you asked for it.”

And then he began moving slow at first, easing in and out as if savoring each stroke, liking the feel of his shaft
work its way inside her. And then the tempo suddenly changed, and he began pumping fast. Then faster. Relentless
with need. Unbelievably detailed with each and every intimate and intense caress.


It was on the tip of Morgan’s tongue to tell her that at this point he couldn’t stop even if he wanted to. So he
continued to pump into her, ignoring the hard feel of her heels in the center of his back with each thrusting motion.
He felt her climbing the same ladder of passion that he was climbing, knowing what awaited them at the top was one hell of an orgasm. And when she arched her back, he didn’t know how it was possible but he drove deeper into her, hit something and whatever it was had her screaming her release. He felt it, the tensing of her muscles, the pull, the clenching, and at that moment she became the epitome of everything sensual to him. She was one hell of a woman. His woman.

And then he reached the top with her, clung to everything, felt sensually trapped tight within her inner thighs, wishing he could stay a captive forever. He felt his body explode, shatter, flood her. And he bucked once, twice, a third time, appreciating the sturdiness of the table, grateful it was genuine wood and not glass. He was shattering enough. He didn’t need the table to shatter as well.

He threw his head back and growled incoherently. He felt like the wolf claiming his mate and all the innate rights that came with that possession. And as his body began to slow down, he started feeling an inner peace, one he’d never felt before. He could only think of one word for what had just taken place on his kitchen table. Perfect.

He sucked in a deep breath, trying to reclaim a semblance of strength. He gazed down at her and he wanted her again. Just like that. Just like this. But the next time he wanted it in the bedroom, in the bed. This table was of good quality, but it could only take so much.

He leaned down and pressed his mouth gently to hers, not ready to separate from her. Her saw the aftermath of a sexual glaze in her eyes, watched a satisfied smile touch the corners of her lips. Grinning proudly he wanted to beat his fists against his chest. Instead he reached down and cupped her face in his hands. “Tell me,” he whispered throatily. “What are you thinking?”

She grinned back at him, still trying to catch her breath. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Mmm, I was just thinking that you have one hell of an organ, Morgan.”

He laughed. He actually laughed and the ripples from his body went straight through to hers, making them aware they were still joined.

“Besides being a sexy lady, you’re also a poet, I see.”

She chuckled. “Sometimes. How about this one? Why waste it when you can taste it?” And then she was pulling his head down for a kiss that sent an aching need through him. When she released his mouth she smiled up at him, pleased with what she’d done.

“Arrogant woman,” he teased gruffly. “You know what I think?” he asked, leaning down and brushing a kiss across her lips.

“No, what?”

“I think we should carry this discussion to the bedroom.”

“Think you’ll get poetic justice in there?”

“Among other things.”

Lena wrapped her arms around him. “I’m curious to find out about those other things.”
Chapter 12

And just to think she had convinced herself for six years that she didn’t need sex, Lena thought, feeling the heated warmth of Morgan’s naked body snuggled so close to hers. His even breathing was an indication that he had drifted off to sleep, but to make sure she didn’t go anywhere, his arms were wrapped securely around her waist and one of his legs was thrown over hers.

They were cuddled, spoon position, in his bed after just having another round of mind-blowing lovemaking. Yes, she preferred thinking about what they’d spent doing the better part of the last two hours as making love rather than just having sex. Today he had shown her there was a difference in the two. He had been painstakingly thorough with every detail, passionate with every sensual move and personal and intimate with every word he’d whispered in her ear each and every time he entered her body.

She inhaled deeply, picking up his masculine scent while at the same time feeling an inner peace, one she hadn’t felt in a long time—at least not since her father’s death. Willie Spears hadn’t been just a man. He had been a good father, husband and provider for “his girls,” as he had often referred to her and her mother. He had been kindhearted to those he met, strong in his belief in God and a person who was always willing to lend a hand to help others. That was one of the reasons his sickness and subsequent death had taken a toll on both her and her mother.

He had requested only one promise of her, a promise she was living each day to fulfill. “Take care of my Odessa,” he’d said in what had been his final hours. “Promise that no matter what, you will take care of her, Lena. She’s my most precious gift that I’m leaving to you.”

His most precious gift.

How many men thought of the woman they loved, when they had dedicated their lives to for so many years, as their most precious gift? And she’d always wanted to find a man just like that, someone who would think of her that way. A man whose personality, ideals and beliefs so closely mirrored her father’s. She’d known that finding such a man wouldn’t be easy, and for a time, while in college, she’d thought she would have to settle for less.

She wasn’t exactly the type of woman that men eagerly sought out. A pleasing personality always managed to take a backseat to looks and body size. Unfortunately, Cassandra Tisdale had been right that day when she’d said that Lena wasn’t Morgan’s type. That only made her wonder even more why she was here, in the middle of the day in bed with him after having spent what would go down in her mind as the most memorable two hours she’d ever spent with a man. And an even more demanding question that refused to go away was why, when he could probably have any woman he wanted, he was intent on having her.

There was yet another question lurking deep in her mind. Now that he’d had her did he actually still want her? Did he still want to marry her and give her his baby? Or had she been nothing more than a puzzle he’d wanted to figure out and now that he had…

“What time do you have to pick your mom up today?”

Lena’s body tensed and her fingers gripped the bedcovers when she felt Morgan’s hot body edge even closer and the leg thrown across hers tighten. She’d thought he was still asleep. It had been so long, she wasn’t sure how one behaved afterward. Even now she felt it, that sensual ache between her thighs that begged for more of what he had given her earlier. She felt like a downright greedy hussy, and the sad thing about it was that she could no longer blame her wanton actions on her twin.

“Lena?”

The sound of his voice, a deep, husky, sexy tone, was close to her ear, and her body instantly responded when he licked her earlobe with a hot sweep of his tongue.

“Umm?” That was the only word she could manage between flushed lips and a throat that suddenly felt tight. She felt hot and breathless.

“What time do you have to leave to pick up Odessa?” he repeated in a husky whisper that made an even deeper throb in the area between her legs.

“I don’t,” she managed to get out. “One of the ladies at the center who Mom became friends with is having a birthday dinner this evening and she was invited. One of the lady’s daughters will be bringing Mom home later tonight. I was told not to expect her before eight.”

“And do you have any more appointments scheduled for today?” was his next question.

“No.”
“Good.”

Before she had an indication of what he was about to do, he quickly eased himself up on his elbows and turned her toward him to stare down at her. And then he did something else she didn’t expect, he tossed back the bedspread covering them, exposing their nakedness. But it wasn’t his own nudity that held his attention and interest, it was hers.

His gaze left her face and slowly moved down her body, and she could actually feel the heated desire that was emanating from his eyes. She also felt his erection as it got harder and harder, pressed against the backside of her thigh. He didn’t say anything, just got his fill looking.

And while he was looking at her, she was looking at him. First she began on his face, zeroing in on his lips and remembering that first kiss in her office, and the one that had started things off today in the kitchen. She still had the taste of him on her tongue.

She then moved her gaze to his throat; saw the beating of the pulse at the center before moving lower to his shoulders, then his chest. She would have arched her neck to see farther down, but then she felt his hand on her thigh and then he used those same hands to spread her knees apart.

She sighed deeply. She had discovered during the course of the last couple of hours that she had a weakness, which was turning to a raw, primal addiction, whenever Morgan’s hands or fingers got close to any areas between her legs.

Like now.

There was this ache that would start right there in the center and move slowly, shivering through all parts of her body. He leaned down toward her mouth and began trailing kisses around her lips and then he pulled back, stared at her lips for a moment and then stuck out his tongue and began nibbling on her as if she was the sweetest chocolate he’d ever tasted.

Simultaneously, his fingers began going to work at her center, and she fought the tide of desire that began overtaking her. He was making her already hot body hotter. He was filling her, making the intense need within her that much greater; and he wasn’t far from making her cry out in pleasure. She tried fighting it, and the more she fought it, the more she felt it. His touch was deliberate. It was precise. It was almost too much for her to handle.

“Morgan!”

He had her panting, barely breathing, and when he took his thumb and flicked it over her achy part, right in the juncture of her thighs, she felt her body teeter, right on the edge of an orgasm.

“I want to be inside you again,” he whispered, easing his body in place over hers, while at the same time gently scraping his teeth against the dark skin of her shoulder.

“I want to get in and lock down,” he said, lifting her hips and cupping her backside.

The only thing she could do was to release a sigh of “Oh.” And the moment she did so, he swept his tongue into her mouth at the same time he eased into her body.

She gripped his shoulders. She wrapped her legs around him—not that she thought he was going anywhere. He was working it. Working her. Establishing his own rhythm, thrusting in and out. Then he flung his head back and she felt his thighs tighten, locking down on hers; felt how he clenched her hips higher to the fit of him, to go deeper inside her. She moved with him, followed his beat, his tempo, and closed her eyes thinking that this might be madness but at the moment it was madness at its finest.

It was he who screamed her name, and at that exact moment she felt his body jolt, buck, thrust continuously, almost frantically, into hers. She felt the heat of him, thick and hot, flood her insides. And then she understood what he’d meant when he’d said lock down. He was holding her immobile when he continued to slide in and out of her, giving her his own brand of both torture and gratification.

“Morgan!”

Then it happened to her for the umpteenth time that day. Hearing his name he cupped the back of her neck and she opened her eyes and looked at him, stared into his dark eyes, like heated chocolate chips, gazing back at her. And then without saying a word, he lowered his head and covered her mouth with his.

Lena knew at that moment she would go without a man for another six years if she thought the result would be this. Morgan Steele had definitely ended her sexual drought, and he had been well worth the wait.

And that was the last thought that crossed her mind when another orgasm hit and her body began exploding all over again.

A short while later, Morgan switched their positions to make things more comfortable for a sleeping Lena. He smiled. His perfect woman had actually fallen asleep, but that was fine. He was inside her, locked down, locked in tight and he didn’t intend to go anywhere. Their legs were tangled, making them fixed in place, their bodies bolted, almost making true the words “joined at the hips.” But they weren’t joined at the hip. They were joined at the
organs, sexual organs.

He smiled, remembering her compliment of that particular organ of his. This woman was so amazing that he
couldn’t think straight. All he had to do was close his eyes to remember the past several hours. He’d wanted a
special homecoming but had gotten a whole lot more.

The moment he had kissed her in his kitchen he had felt it. Her response had been spontaneous, hot. And the
way she had yielded to him sparked every desire within his body that could be named, arousing passions he had kept
well under control for years and stirring such volatile emotions within him, he couldn’t do anything but succumb to
the powerful chemistry that had gripped him.

Just the thought that once they were married he would have a right to this, a chance to share a bed with her
every night, had him getting hard all over again. But he had to admit what he felt was something a lot more than just
physical.

He loved her.

Lena slowly opened her eyes and glanced around the room. When she saw it was almost dark outside she
jerked up in bed and glanced over at the clock. It wasn’t quite six yet.

She eased back down, released a long, ragged breath. She was alone, and for a moment that was a good thing.
She needed to get her thoughts together. She closed her eyes again, and it didn’t take much to remember what she
and Morgan had been doing for the majority of the afternoon. She felt sore between her legs like you wouldn’t
believe. But that wasn’t all. Her mouth felt sore as well and she couldn’t help wondering if it was swollen. But each
time she thought about Morgan’s kisses, deep, intense, and the way he would explore her mouth, plundering it,
stealing her breath away and mating almost nonstop with her tongue, she wondered just what kind of vitamins he
was on.

Her nipples felt taut with her just thinking about how she responded to him, greedily taking what he was
offering and then falling into peaceful sleep afterward. And when she would wake after her catnap he would be
there, wide awake, with dark eyes staring down at her, focused, intent, hungry. His breathing would get shallow and
she would automatically melt in a pool of succulent desire.

She heard a sound downstairs and knew that now was the perfect time to get up, get dressed and get out. The
last thing she needed was for him to walk into the room while she was still in bed. If nothing else, she had
discovered that when it came to Morgan Steele, she had little, if no, resistance left.

Slipping out of bed she began putting on her clothes. When she had awakened that morning she’d been a little
confused, and now she was more confused than ever about just what was happening between her and Morgan.

Morgan pulled himself out of the pool after taking one last lap around it. Never in his life had he felt so
rejuvenated, so bursting with energy…and so filled with love.

Now he fully understood how Chance and Bas felt. He clearly comprehended those possessive stares they
would give their wives, and realized why on those days they would rush home from the office or show up late from
lunch with twisted ties around their necks and silly grins on their faces.

He now had a firm handle on what emotions his two older brothers were dealing with. Hell, the only reason he
had finally left Lena asleep to come downstairs for a swim was that, had he been in bed when she’d awakened, he
would have been tempted to make love to her again.

Tempted, hell! He would have made love to her just as sure as there was a Charlotte sky overhead.

He began drying off with the huge towel, knowing that he and Lena needed to talk. They needed to announce
their intentions to marry to their families and to anyone else who wanted to listen. He was ready to go to the tallest
building and begin shouting.

“I’m leaving now, Morgan.”

He turned and saw her standing in the doorway that separated his family room from his patio. Seeing her
standing there, looking as sexy as sexy could get, and remembering what they had shared most of the afternoon sent
a shiver of deep desire combined with hot excitement through him.

He tossed aside the towel and began walking toward her. When he got within three feet of her he noticed the
apprehension in her eyes, the uncertainty, and he wondered, how could she not know, not sense how he felt at that
moment? But then he had to admit they hadn’t had a normal relationship. He had been a man with a plan, first using
business and then ultimate pleasure to seduce her, win her over. But he had a feeling he hadn’t completely won her
over. She was having doubts, and from the look in her eyes, lots of them.

He could get on bended knee and tell her to hell with that business proposal. He wanted to marry her because
he loved her. But would she believe him? He doubted it. Lena was a woman who would need more action than
words, and that’s just what he would give her. By the time she walked down the aisle to him, there would be no
doubt in her mind just how deep his emotions were for her.

Instead of saying anything when he reached her, he took hold of her hand and gently pulled her closer to him. Then he leaned down and gently touched his lips to hers. He pulled back, cupped her jaw and intently studied her lips. She definitely looked like a woman who’d been well kissed all afternoon.

“What are you going to tell Odessa if she asks what happened to your lips?”

Lena’s shoulders shrugged, but he saw the mocking challenge in her gaze and immediately sensed some sort of withdrawal taking place. It was a withdrawal he refused to have.

“I don’t know. Got any suggestions?”

He returned that look by cocking a challenging eyebrow. “You can always tell her the truth, Lena. That we got carried away today and—”

“I don’t think so.”

He smiled. “I figured as much. I guess you can claim you got swollen lips from sipping too long on a soda bottle.”

She lifted her own brow. “Can that happen?”

He chuckled. “It happened to Donovan once, or so he claims.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, if she asks I guess that’s one excuse I could try.” She then glanced at her watch. “I need to go, Morgan.”

“Oh, and we need to talk. Will Odessa be at the day care again tomorrow?”

“No, she’ll be at home all day watching her soaps.”

He nodded. “Will you have dinner with me tomorrow? We can make it early. You and I need to talk.”

She inhaled deeply. Yes, they did. “Okay, what time?”

“How about four? Is that time good for you?”

“Yes, that time is fine.” She turned to leave and remembered he was still holding her hand.

“Hey, not so fast,” he said, looking into her eyes. Then slowly he lowered his head and kissed her, gently and deeply.

Before releasing her he whispered into her ear, “And get on your computer tonight. Around ten. I want to talk to your twin.”

Sensations rushed through Lena’s body as she remembered their last conversation and how they had come close to playing out that fantasy in his kitchen. But still, she wasn’t certain exchanging sexual banter in cyberspace again was a good idea. “I might be busy.”

“If you’re not, then pop into my space.”

She nodded and quickly turned and left.
Chapter 13

Odessa had been so chatty about how her day and evening had gone that if she’d noticed anything odd about Lena’s lips she hadn’t said anything. Despite her initial concern, by the time she had gotten home, taken a shower and eaten a salad for dinner, Lena was too keyed up to worry about how her mouth looked. Her main concern was her future.

Morgan had left her with the impression that the business deal between them was still in place, but she needed to know for certain, which is why she had readily accepted his invitation to dinner.

After getting her mother settled for the night she had slipped into a nightgown and gone into her room to read some real estate literature she’d received in the mail. She tried ignoring her laptop that was sitting on the desk in her room. And she tried not to notice the time. It was after nine. Close to nine-thirty.

Moments later she glanced at the clock again. It was ten. She sighed and glanced over at her laptop. Should she or shouldn’t she? Hadn’t she gotten into enough trouble with Morgan today? Okay, she would admit that after the type of afternoon she’d had it would only be natural to want to spend time talking to him again. But why not by phone instead of cyberspace?

She quickly knew the answer to that one. She and Morgan had crossed the lines of professionalism on their laptops in a way that they could never retract. And although she had claimed it was her twin being naughty and not her, her behavior this afternoon had proven differently. And on top of that, there was something relaxing and comforting, as well as daring, in having a private, intimate and provocative conversation with someone you knew, yet didn’t really know at the same time.

Deciding to stop fighting the impulse, she tossed the magazine aside and got out of bed and reached for her laptop. Taking a deep breath she quickly logged on. It was almost ten minutes after the hour. Had he checked to see if she’d logged on and when he found out she hadn’t had already logged off? She inhaled deeply again, knowing there was only one way to find out.

She signed on with her Internet server and sighed in relief when his name was still there. Leaning back against the headboard she settled into a comfortable position and waited. She didn’t have long for action when Morgan clicked on, invading her space.

Lena?
She clicked a response. Yes, I’m here.
Thanks for dropping by.
And then their fun time began.
Morgan asked the first question. What’s your favorite sport?
Lena chuckled. That would be a quick response and she typed it in. I really don’t have one.
Umm, have you ever played Sex by Design?
She lifted a brow and her fingers went to work. No. How is it played?
Easy. All you need is one woman and one man.
She shook her head, grinning as she clicked a response. Good. I don’t go for that kinky stuff.
Neither do I.
Good to know. So, how do you play it?
You think of a word, the first one that comes to your mind, and the other person has to come up with some sort of sexual story about it.
Lena frowned. That’s a lot of typing.
Abbreviations are accepted.
Okay.
I’ll let you go first and you give me a word.
She paused a moment to think hard. She glanced around the room and smiled when she saw something on her dresser and decided not to make things easy for him. Cotton balls.
Cotton balls?
Yes.
There was a long pause and then he began typing. Picture this. You and me together, naked in bed. Like we were this afternoon.
Heat shivered through her bloodstream. Okay I got the picture.

And I take a bunch of those little cotton balls and strategically place them to cover your front. You know, that particular area between your legs. They will fit you like a perfect triangle. Then I use my mouth to remove them, one by one. The object is not to let one fall. Each time I remove one I get to lick the area where it had been.

Lena swallowed. Her mouth suddenly felt dry, tight, and her nipples felt hard against her nightgown. She couldn’t help but type and ask. What happens when they’re all gone?

Then I get to taste the entire area; nibble and lick as much as I want. Then I get to use my mouth and place them back and start the game all over again. So what do you think?

When visions of him doing that engulfed her mind, what Lena really thought was that they had to be nuts to be having this sort of conversation, especially when the most prolific and exquisite sensations flowed through her body.

I think we’ve said enough for tonight.

Chicken. Where’s your twin?

Some place safe. Good night, Morgan.

Good night, Lena.

Morgan was standing at the window the next day thinking about his and Lena’s cyberspace chat of the night before when his secretary’s voice on the intercom intruded into this thoughts.

“Yes, Linda, what is it?”

“Edward Dunlap is here to see you.”

Morgan raised a brow before saying, “Please send him in.”

A few minutes later Edward walked in. He was in his late fifties, the same age as Morgan’s father. In fact, his father and the man had been business associates for years before Edward had chosen a life of politics. He had been elected as Charlotte’s first African American councilman and remained in that office for years. From there he had become a state representative and was now eying a position in Congress. In recent years he had appointed himself as Morgan’s mentor, determined to see him enter the political arena.

“Edward, this is a surprise,” Morgan said, crossing the room to shake the older man’s hand.

“Yes, and I hate to come unannounced but this meeting is important. Word has it that Roger Chadwick will be holding a press conference in a few hours to announce his candidacy. So you know what this means?”

Morgan leaned back against his desk. Yes, he knew what that meant. If he was going to announce his own intentions to run for that same seat, now was the time to finally make up his mind. “Yes, I know what it means, Edward, but there is someone I need to discuss this with.”

Edward nodded. “And that brings me to another reason I’m here. There’s a rumor floating around about you.”

Morgan lifted a brow. “What rumor?”

“That you’re thinking of getting married.”

Morgan couldn’t help the smile that touched his lips. “That’s no rumor. I am getting married.”

“I think we need to discuss that, Morgan.”

“Discuss what?”

“Your choice of a wife.”

Morgan cast him a glance that nearly bordered on anger. “Excuse me?”

“I said your choice of a wife. I understand you’re thinking about marrying Lena Spears, which comes as a surprise because I wasn’t aware you were serious about anyone.”

Morgan frowned, wondering if the man assumed he had to know everything about his business, personal or otherwise. “Yes, I’ve asked Lena to marry me.”

“I’m sure you know family name, style and connections are everything.”

“To some people.”

Edward shook his head. “Don’t kid yourself. You’re a Steele about to run for office. You don’t need to consider marrying any woman who won’t be an asset to your career. Lena Spears is a nice woman, but she won’t do as a wife for you. Now, take Senator Hollis’s daughter. I understand she’s—”

“No, you take Senator Hollis’s daughter,” Morgan said, after having heard enough. “For God’s sake, Edward, this is the twenty-first century. Lena won’t be the one running for office, I will. And who I decide to marry is really no one’s business.”

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking it’s not, Morgan. I met with a few people earlier today and the rumor of your possible engagement came up. They asked that I come and meet with you to discuss it.”

Morgan straightened his stance, getting angrier by the minute. “In that case, tell them you have met with me and discussed it. And that my response is that in my opinion Lena Spears has more style and beauty in her little finger than most women have in their entire body. I’m marrying her and if the masses don’t like it, then I’ll run
without their support.”

“You won’t win.”

Morgan chuckled. “I might not get their vote, but if they feel the way they do about the woman I intend to marry, then I don’t want their vote. They only represent a small population of Charlotte’s society. I refuse to believe that the majority of the people in this town is that narrowed-minded and shallow. Good day, Edward.”

Edward stared at him and shook his head for a moment before turning and walking out the door.

“For Pete’s sake, calm down, Morgan.”

Chance, Bas and Donovan watched as an angry Morgan paced back and forth around his office. As soon as Edward had left, Morgan had summoned his brothers. After he’d told them about Edward’s visit and what had been said, they had gotten just as angry as Morgan. But not quite.

“I can’t believe Dunlap actually said that to you,” Donovan said, shaking his head as he sat in one of the chairs in the room. “I can see him saying that to me since he never liked me anyway.”

Bas rolled his eyes. “Might be from that time he caught you almost making out with his youngest daughter in a parked car right in front of his house.”

“Hey, she asked for it,” Donovan said in defense. “What was I supposed to do?”

Chance shook his head. “Turning her down might have been the decent thing to do,” he said sarcastically. “But let’s get back to the issue of Morgan and Lena.”

Morgan stopped his pacing and met Chance’s gaze. “There’s no issue. Who the hell do they think they are, deciding what woman is appropriate for me?” he asked angrily. “It’s nobody’s business who I marry.”

“Damn right it’s not, now let’s go kick some asses,” was Bas’s quick reply.

Now it was Chance who rolled his eyes. Everyone in Charlotte knew that of all the Steeles, Bas had always been the hothead, the one ready to not only start trouble but put an end to it as well. He’d always been known as the not-so-sterling Steele, a reputation he’d garnered proudly until he turned twenty-one, dropped out of college and had to face the real world…and a man by the name of Jim Mason—Jocelyn’s father.

“Just think how that sounds, Bas. Fighting never solves anything. What we need to do is to put our heads together. Whether you want to admit it or not, Morgan, you’re going to need Edward and his group’s support.”

“Then I don’t want it, and in that case I won’t run.”

Chance shook his head. “Think hard on that before making a decision. Have you discussed any of this with Lena?”

“No.”

“Don’t you think you should? Especially if the two of you are getting married, which is a mystery within itself. Two weeks ago she wasn’t giving you the time of day,” Chance said, eying his brother curiously. “What happened?”

Morgan stared at his brothers, and since he wanted to make sure they understood the depth of his feelings for Lena he said, “Love happened. I fell for her that night of the charity ball. I just thought I wanted her. But it’s more. I love her.”

Chance and Bas slowly nodded, indicating they understood. They had been there, done that and were still doing it. However, it was Donovan who was looking at him with what amounted to pity in his eyes.

“Okay, then,” Chance said, smiling, as if satisfied with what he’d been told. “I suggest you talk things over with Lena. I probably won’t go so far as to tell her about Edward’s visit, but I think she at least deserves to know you’re thinking about running for a political office.”

Morgan nodded, knowing Chance was right. He and Lena had a dinner date later that day. He would tell her of his decision then.

Lena glanced around. She was lucky that although she’d arrived at the restaurant early, there had been a table reserved for her.

McIntosh Steak House and Seafood was a popular restaurant in town. Simple and elegant it catered to businesspeople with money, the power brokers of Charlotte. The interior spoke of old money with its plush carpeting, the rich-looking furnishing and the expensive art collections of oil paintings on the walls. Service was always magnificent, the food always tasty. Sometimes people traveled for miles just to dine here.

The waiter had already brought her one glass of wine and had come to see if she wanted another when she glanced up and saw Cassandra Tisdale and a couple of women she recognized as being in the woman’s inner circle, including her cousin Jamie. She immediately got cold chills.

She hoped they would pass by the table and not see her as they were leaving the restaurant, but it seemed that was one layer of hope that wouldn’t be granted.

“Well, if it isn’t the woman who thinks she’s going to be the future Mrs. Morgan Steele.”
Lena glanced up, smiling. She refused to let Cassandra’s snide comment rattle her. “Hi, Cassandra, Debra, Karen and Jamie. I see the four of you are leaving.”

“Yes, we are,” Debra Kendall said, almost apologetically. And not for the umpteenth time Lena had to inwardly question why someone as nice as Debra would hang around with someone like Cassandra. Maybe she believed that sooner or later her kindness would rub off on Cassandra.

“So, what do you think of Morgan running for office?” Karen Smith asked, after looking at Cassandra and getting her cue.

“Excuse me?” Lena asked.

Cassandra smiled. “Oh, didn’t you know? Now that Chadwick has announced he’s running for office, speculation is high that Morgan will, too. He’s very well thought of in this town.”

Lena didn’t say anything. She was still recovering from Karen’s comment about the possibility of Morgan being a political candidate.

“Of course it’s not definite whether Morgan is even interested,” Debra said, as if to smooth things over.

“But if he does,” Cassandra said, grinning, “he’s going to need a woman who will complement him. Someone well groomed with a good name, a sense of fashion, style and grace, and a pedigree. Wouldn’t you agree, Lena?”

Before Lena could say anything, it was Jamie who spoke, smiling sweetly. “And I’m sure if you care anything for Morgan as well as recognize what an asset he would be in this community in politics, then you’d agree that all of us need to give him all the support he needs and the chance to win. I understand entering politics has been his lifelong dream. If you really care for him, you wouldn’t take that dream away. In fact you would work hard to make it become a reality."

Then three of the women walked off. Debra, however, remained behind long enough to at least say goodbye.

The cold chills Lena had gotten earlier were there in full force. Why hadn’t Morgan mentioned he was thinking about entering politics? Did he just assume she would want to be a politician’s wife? Well, she didn’t. She was a person who liked her life the way it was. She and her mother lived a quiet and peaceful existence, and she had no intention of being thrust out into the limelight.

Besides, how much did Morgan know about her? Oh, he’d learned a lot about her this afternoon and probably from the two chats they’d had, but that had all been sexual. What did Morgan really know about her? Nothing. If he did, he would know that she and politics didn’t mix because she was too opinionated when it came to certain issues and she didn’t know how to remain quiet when it involved a subject she was passionate about.

She thought about what Cassandra and her group said as well as what they didn’t say. The people she hung out with, as well as those her parents hung out with, had a lot of influence and power. They would back Morgan fully if he had what they perceived as the right kind of wife by his side. But she knew they wouldn’t use any of that to help get him elected if he was intent on marrying her.

Her father had once told her there was more to be an elected official than working on balancing the budget, attending meetings and making speeches. There was a matter of respect and Morgan had it, from a lot of people; but it seemed he ran the risk of losing it because of her, mainly because she was not a fit.

She paused and sat quietly for a moment, and when she felt a tear slide from her eye to wet her cheek, she knew why. At some point during their business relationship, those sexy chats and their romp between the sheets yesterday, she had fallen in love with Morgan. And she had fallen hard. So hard that she knew what she had to do. She could only think of one other time she’d actually felt noble in her life. The first had been at thirteen when she’d actually saved Paula Brewster’s baby sister from drowning in the community pool, and the other time was now.

To help Morgan retain his regal public image and give him all the support he needed to pursue what evidently was his lifelong dream, she knew what she had to do. Summoning the waiter over to the table she said, “Please bring me my check, and when Mr. Steele arrives let him know something came up and I had to leave.”
Chapter 14

Not ready to go home yet, Lena returned to her office. She had placed a quick call to her mother to make sure she was okay and had eaten dinner. After Odessa had assured her that she was fine and not to worry about her, Lena decided to stay and work late at the office.

Wendy had already left for the day and the office was quiet. Although Lena tried concentrating on the listing of new homes she had in front of her, she found her focus wasn’t what it should be. One part of her was absorbed with anger for a certain group of people—those who thought they were influential enough to dictate how people should live their lives and with whom. Then another part of her knew that bowing out was the best thing. It had nothing to do with pride, confidence or self-esteem but everything to do with making a sacrifice for the man she loved. Under any other circumstances, she and Morgan might have had a chance to make their “marriage of purpose” work, but now entering into such an agreement with him would serve no purpose. He needed a different type of woman to be by his side and have his baby, and that woman wasn’t her.

She glanced up when the phone on her desk began to ring. She picked it up. “Yes?”
“It’s Morgan.”
Lena’s throat suddenly felt tight. She swallowed past the lump before saying, “Yes, Morgan?”
“I’m outside at your office door. Let me in.”
When she heard the click she pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it a few moments before hanging it up. The last person she wanted to see right now was Morgan. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and slumped back in her chair. If he had given her time, she would have told him to go away because she couldn’t see him now.

Not bothering to slip back into her shoes she stood and headed down the hallway toward the door. She could clearly see Morgan through the glass front. As usual, he was dressed immaculately like the businessman he was. He was wearing a navy blue suit, a light blue shirt and a printed tie that coordinated perfectly.

She turned off the alarm and unlocked the door and then stepped back as he entered and watched as he raised a brow and searched her face. “Are you okay?”
She wondered if he’d found out about her conversation with Cassandra and her nasty-girl squad but then figured that he couldn’t have. “Yes, I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”
He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her. “You tell me. We had a dinner date and when I arrived one of the waiters said you had been there but left, and that you’d left a message that something had come up and you had to leave. Of course the first thought that crossed my mind was that something had happened to Odessa. I tried calling you at home and she picked up. When I asked for you she said you were at the office working late. So what was the big emergency, Lena?”
If only he knew. But at the moment she didn’t plan on telling him anything. “There was no big emergency, Morgan. I figured there were some things I could be doing here and figured our talk could wait. No biggie.”
He continued to stare at her and then gestured to the hallway leading to her office. “Do what you were doing before I got here while I bring everything in.”
She arched a brow. “Everything like what?”
“Dinner.”
“Dinner?”
“Yes, dinner,” he replied. “Have you eaten?”
“No, but I didn’t expect you to bring me anything.”
“No, what I expected was to have dinner with you at McIntosh’s. So I got takeouts.”
Her brows arched a little higher. “McIntosh doesn’t do takeouts.”
“They do if you know the right people.”
At the moment that wasn’t what she needed to hear. She threw up her hands. “Yes, you’re right,” she all but snapped. “It’s all about connections, isn’t it?”
He frowned. “What do you mean by that?”
“Nothing,” she said and quickly turned away from him. After taking a deep breath she turned back toward him. “I’m just not in a good mood at the moment.”
He nodded as if he understood when he honestly didn’t have a clue, she thought. “Look, I have a tray table
around here somewhere. I’ll go dig it out.” And then she walked off, leaving him standing there.

By the time Lena had located the tray table, Morgan had brought in all the bags of food, and a delicious scent filled her office. If she wasn’t hungry before, she was certainly hungry now. She also noticed that Morgan had brought in his briefcase.

“Need help with anything?” he asked.

She glanced over in his direction. He had removed his jacket and looked rather comfortable in her office. “No, I don’t need help. Thanks for asking.”

“No problem.”

She continued what she was doing as she drew in a deep breath. She and Morgan were virtually acting like strangers and not like the two people who had mated like rabbits yesterday. A part of her wished she could remove what happened yesterday from her mind. And then there was the chat they’d had online last night. How can you move from a high level of intimacy to a lower one that was basically nonintimate?

“Now that does it. I set you up over here,” she said, after placing a tray table near the sofa. “And I’ll just use my desk.”

She met his gaze, and the smile that touched his lips let her know he’d caught on to what she’d done. She had deliberately placed him away to the other side of the room. “Any reason I can’t share your desk with you?” he asked, with eyes that glinted with mischief.

She shrugged as she moved toward her desk. “I thought you’d want more room.”

“What I really want, Lena, is more of you.”

She quickly turned back toward him and paused to take a deep, calming breath. His words hadn’t been what she’d expected. And the impact they had on her was unnerving. The sexual excitement, desire and longing that she’d tried not to think about were now hitting her in the face. She felt her heart as it began to race and her stomach began fluttering.

Before she could say anything he said, “But I’ll behave and stay on this side of the room…for now.”

She glared at him and started to say something, but then changed her mind and crossed the room to her desk.

Once Lena had settled in at her desk and begun eating, the mischief that had been in Morgan’s eyes a few moments ago was replaced with concern. Something was going on with Lena and he couldn’t help wondering what. Had she heard anything about the possibility of him going into politics? Even if she had, why would that have driven her to cancel their dinner date and leave the restaurant before he had arrived?

And from the moment he had walked into her office, he had sensed her withdrawal. She was definitely not acting like the woman who had shared his bed for almost four hours yesterday. He didn’t know what was bothering her, but he was determined to find out, and whatever it was, he intended to remove it from between them.

He settled on the sofa and placed the tray table in front of him and unloaded the bag with his food. He glanced over at her. She was eating, not saying anything, so he decided to break the silence. “I dropped by your house and left your mom something to eat as well.”

He watched as she quickly lifted her head and a surprised look was on her face. “You did?”

“Yes. She said she’d already eaten but would save it as leftovers for tomorrow.”

Lena nodded. “Thanks. That was thoughtful of you, Morgan.”

“You’re welcome.” He watched as she took another sip of the iced tea that had been included with her dinner. When her lips touched the edge of the cup his stomach clenched, as he remembered how his lips had devoured hers yesterday, which then reminded him of something else.

“Did your mom ask why your lips were bruised when she saw you last night?”

Lena lifted her head and their gazes connected. “No, she didn’t ask,” she responded softly. “Why?”

“Just curious.” And what he didn’t add was that asking her about it would make her remember, just in case she had forgotten.

“Everything tastes good, Morgan. Thanks again for thinking of me.”

“I always think of you, Lena.”

Heat. Awesome heat, vibrant heat flowed all through Lena. It wasn’t what he’d said but rather how he’d said it. And she wondered if this was a game he was playing with her. And had yesterday been a game as well? She inhaled deeply. No matter what, she refused to let Morgan get next to her until he was totally up front with her. Then she would be up front with him and let him know their deal was off. She was not the woman he needed to move his career forward.

For the next few moments they continued to eat in silence, sharing little or no conversation. But each time she would glance over at him, he would be watching her with an intensity that made it almost impossible to chew her
food. He could generate so much heat within her from just a look, and she could feel even more heat radiating from the depths of his eyes each time he looked at her.

So she tried not to look over at him, but she still felt it. The chemistry, the attraction and the desire that wouldn’t go away no matter how hard she was fighting it.

“Would you like some dessert?”

She raised her head and met his gaze. “What?”


“No, thanks. I’m full. I’ll just save it for tomorrow.”

He nodded and then stood. “Okay. I’ll start discarding the trash. Do you have a Dumpster nearby?”

“Yes. It’s out back.”

She watched as he began putting everything back in the bags. He had rolled his sleeves up and she couldn’t help but notice all the hair on his arms. But then, she’d noticed yesterday just what a hairy man he was. He had hair all over—his chest, his thighs and even that thick thatch where his manhood rested.

“You’re through?”

She looked at him. He was standing in front of her desk. “Excuse me?”

He chuckled. “I asked if you were through. All the food is gone off your plate, but you’re still sitting there, holding your fork like you’re going to take another bite where there’s nothing left.”

“Oh,” she said and immediately dropped the fork down on her plate. “Sorry, I was just thinking about something.”

“No problem. I’ve been sitting over there thinking about some things as well.”

She lifted a brow. “You have?”

“Yes. It seems my mind has been busy a lot lately.”

She nodded. His mind wasn’t the only thing that had been busy a lot. He had used his mouth and hands yesterday with a skill that was absolutely astounding.

“I’m taking the trash out. I’ll be back in a second.”

“All right.” It was only when he left the room that she finally let out a deep sigh. She couldn’t help wondering what was next. Would he be leaving when he returned or would he be staying? And if he stayed what did he intend to do?

He didn’t leave, nor did it seem he intended to. When he returned she had deliberately placed work on her desk to look busy. He had merely crossed the room, folded up the tray table and then sat down with his briefcase. She started to ask what he was doing but it had been obvious. He’d evidently brought work with him to do and intended doing his while she did hers.

For the next half hour or so, the only sounds that could be heard in the room was their breathing and papers shuffling. But there was something comforting, relaxing and intimate about them sharing space that wasn’t cyberspace.

He finished working on whatever papers he had long before she did and stood, stretching his muscles before walking over to the window. Her office was located in one of those minimalls that faced a busy street. When Morgan opened one of the blinds, she saw that the parking area was pretty well lit and already the floodlights had come on and it wasn’t even six o’clock yet.

She knew Morgan was standing there, studying the casual surroundings out the window. She, however, was studying him. Her gaze flowed across the contours of his back that was covered with his dress shirt, remembering how she had placed love bites on that back yesterday. At the time she’d thought they were merely nibbles, but now, considering how she felt about him, she knew they’d been love bites.

And then there were his slacks, the way they fit his thighs and hips, and the way he had his hands shoved into his pockets showed just what a fine tush he had. She decided she had read enough and placed her papers aside. More memories of yesterday filled her mind, and suddenly that ache between her thighs returned. On top of that, her body began humming with awareness, and it became charged as if certain parts of her had lives of their own.

She tried fighting the feelings. What she and Morgan needed to do was to talk. He needed to tell her about his decision to get into politics, and she needed to explain to him why it wouldn’t work between them. The last thing she should be doing was sitting there ogling him and inhaling his scent, remembering his taste and the very feel of him buried deep within her.

Hard Steele.

She blinked when he suddenly turned and caught her staring. The depths of the dark eyes gazing back at her caused a hot flame to burst to life within her. If nothing else they had proven yesterday that when it came to the sexual chemistry between them they had a tendency to act on it, regardless of the time or the place.
And she had a feeling tonight would be one of those times.
She could feel it. It was there in the air again, transmitting between them like hot lava. It was like a heated mist, surrounding them in a sexual haze. Instinctively she pushed back her chair and stood. No matter if they were on the verge of going separate ways, there was no way she could let tonight end without feeling the hardness of him embedded within her one last time.

Through eyes filled with desire she watched as he closed the blinds and pulled his shirt from within his pants and began unbuttoning it. When he had completely removed it and tossed it aside, her body responded. This was the naked chest that had rubbed against her bare breasts yesterday. The chest she had covered with more kisses than she could count.

She walked from around her desk but stayed a good distance from him. “I feel hot,” she said, her voice breathy and husky in a way it could get only around him.

“Then let me cool you off,” was his reply.

“Cool me off or make me hotter?”

He only shook his head and smiled before saying, “I’ll let you be the judge.”

Emboldened by the same force that had overtaken her yesterday, she began removing her blouse while he watched her. His gaze was intense, intimate and hot. After tossing her blouse aside she unsnapped her bra. Her breasts poured out before she could get the bra off completely and she felt a sheen of perspiration forming between the twin globes.

She shimmied out of her skirt and when she stood in front of him wearing a thong, this one black lace and covering less of her femininity than the one she’d worn yesterday, he suddenly made a sound. She heard the low growl that radiated from deep within his throat. It was then that he moved away from the window to return to the sofa and sat down and continued to hold her gaze. And then in a deep, husky, desire-laden voice, he said, “Come here, Lena.”

On legs that could barely hold her, she slowly crossed the room to him, locked with a gaze that was so intense it nearly took her breath away. When she came to a stop between his widened thighs, he leaned forward, almost bringing him face-to-face with her womanly core.

His face was so close she could feel his breath through the thin wispy material. And then she felt something else, the wetness of his tongue as he snaked it out and began licking the lace. She remembered their chat the night before, and suddenly she felt so weak she had to reach out and grab hold of his shoulders to keep from falling.

Then he was pushing her a few steps back so that he could ease down on his knees in front of her.

“I need to taste you, Lena,” he whispered in a husky voice, still holding her gaze.

His words torched the flame within her, suddenly made her crazy with desire. She watched his breathing quicken, his eyes darken just mere seconds before he lowered his head and began kissing and licking his way upward, toward her inner thigh.

“Open your legs for me, baby,” he requested softly and it was then she realized she still had them pressed together. The moment she opened them he slowly peeled the thong down her legs, leaving her completely bare for his view.

His finger that was lodged between her legs moved and she inhaled a sharp breath. “You’re awfully wet, baby,” he whispered huskily. “And I can’t imagine letting all that deliciousness go to waste.”

And before she could draw her next breath he was kissing and licking his way up her inner thigh again. The moment she felt his hot breath within inches of her womanly core, she dug her hands in his shoulders, bracing for the onslaught, and when it happened, when his tongue invaded her, both torturing and satisfying the ache between her legs, she almost lost consciousness. But he wouldn’t let her. The sensations that tore into her were too sharp and keen. Too electrifying to do anything other than to enjoy the moment.

So she held on as he relentlessly devoured her, tonguing and sucking, as sensations shot all the way through her bloodstream. She felt the explosion and tried pushing him away before it happened, but his hand was firm, possessively cupping her hips steady, locked to his mouth as his tongue continued to pound into her over and over.

“Morgan!”

She heard herself making moaning sounds at the same exact time she felt her stomach constrict. And she began experiencing sensations that swept through her that were so strong, so totally out of her control that they had her screaming. It was like nothing she’d ever felt before. Her body began vibrating between her thighs and she found herself pushing hard against his hot mouth instead of pulling away from it.

It took some doing but the sensations began ebbing and her body was slowly being pulled back into dimension. There was a heartbeat of silence and then she heard Morgan say huskily, “Get ready, baby. We’ve barely got started yet.”
Chapter 15

Lena glanced across the room at the man who was putting back on his clothes while she put back on hers. “We never got around to talking,” she said, forcing herself to speak calmly.

There hadn’t been anything remotely calm about what she and Morgan had shared for the past hour. Even now she knew they weren’t through with each other. It was bad enough they couldn’t get dressed without looking at each other, but there was this surge of nonstop desire that kept flowing through her.

“I know. Do you need to call your mother and check on her?”

She knew why he was asking. She should have been gone hours ago. It was almost eight. She couldn’t recall the last time she stayed away from home that late in the evening. “That’s not a bad idea.” She then tossed aside the blouse she was about to put on and walked over to her desk to call home, not missing the glint of heated desire she saw in the depths of his dark eyes.

Moments later she hung up the phone, shaking her head and chuckling. “What’s so funny?” Morgan asked.

“Yes. Sounds like she’s found a good friend.”

He smiled. “And you feel about that?”

“Of course a part of me is happy, Morgan, but then, I’ve gotten used to being there for her, taking care of her, and having her to need me.”

As if he knew she needed a hug he pulled her into his arms and rested his chin on the top of her head. “But I know how you feel. I felt that way when Chance got married again.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were thinking of running for public office?”

For a few moments he didn’t say anything, and then he released her and took a step back as if he needed full
control of his mind and body to respond to her question. “I hadn’t really made a decision. Before I had merely thought about it.”

She nodded. “And now?”

“And now I have made a decision and will officially announce my candidacy next week.”

She inhaled deeply. “When were you planning to tell me?”

“This afternoon at dinner. And then tonight, which is why I came over here. But I kind of got distracted.”

They both had. She moved across the room to stand at the window. Opening the blinds she looked out. Like him she needed full control of her mind and body. After several moments she turned toward him. “I hope you know this changes everything and I can no longer agree to your business proposal.”

Immediately, she felt his inner tension. “One has nothing to do with the other, Lena.”

She shook her head. “Yes, it does. I’m not cut out to be a political wife.”

“I think you are.”

“You need someone else by your side, Morgan. Someone who would complement you and—”

He crossed the room. “What the hell are you saying?” he asked angrily. “Don’t you think I’m old enough to know what I want and need?”

They both had. She moved across the room to stand at the window. Opening the blinds she looked out. Like him she needed full control of her mind and body. After several moments she turned toward him. “I hope you know this changes everything and I can no longer agree to your business proposal.”

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“I think you are.”

“You need someone else by your side, Morgan. Someone who would complement you and—”

He crossed the room. “What the hell are you saying?” he asked angrily. “Don’t you think I’m old enough to know what I want and need?”

“Yes, but when you had made that decision things were different. Then all you needed was a woman who would have your baby. Now you need a…”

“Trophy wife?” he asked in a voice filled with even more anger.

She sighed deeply. “Yes, if you want to refer to it as such.”

“So me wanting you as the mother of my child means nothing?”

“It did before but not now.” Lena felt a tightening around her heart when she added, “Don’t you see what I’m trying to do?”

“Honestly, no, I don’t. Mainly because I know what I want and who I want, and let me tell you something else, Lena. I refuse for you or anyone else to decide my future for me.” He crossed the room to the coatrack and got his jacket and slipped it on. “Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

Lena knew he was angry but she didn’t know what else she could say or do to make him see reason. Why couldn’t he understand that things needed to be back on a professional level between them?

When they reached her car, he asked before opening the door, “So what was tonight about, Lena?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do. Why did you make love to you tonight if you knew things would be over between us?”

When she didn’t say anything he shook his head, understanding completely. “So it was one of those kinds of nights.”

She raised her head and met his gaze. “What kind of nights?”

“Nothing but sex, pure sex and nothing but sex.”

She cringed. His words had made it sound so dirty. “Why are you giving me a hard time about my decision, Morgan? I would think you would be overjoyed.”

He stared at her before moving aside and opening the car door for her. “Yes, you would think that and you know what, Lena? I’m going to announce my candidacy without you or anyone else beside me.”

When she got inside the car, she watched as he walked over to his own, and instead of getting in he stood there, staring at her. She held back the tears that threatened to fall. Why couldn’t he see that everything she was doing was because she loved him?

“Let me get this straight,” Kylie said, glaring at her best friend. “You actually told Morgan you couldn’t marry him because he’s decided to run for public office?”

Lena was glad they were the only two in the house. They were in the kitchen. She was sitting at the kitchen table when Kylie stood at the counter folding laundry.

Chance was out playing the usual Saturday morning basketball game with his brothers; Marcus and his latest girlfriend had left earlier for the mall, and Tiffany had gone to spend the weekend with her grandparents.

“Calm down, Kylie. I wouldn’t want Chance to blame me if you went into labor early. And yes, I told him I couldn’t marry him. It would not have been a real marriage anyway.”

Kylie tossed the items she was about to fold back in the laundry basket and came and sat across the table from Lena. “And just what do you mean it would not have been a real marriage?”

Lena sighed. She knew that Kylie would be upset because she had held all the facts of her pending engagement to Morgan from her. “First promise that you won’t get mad.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “I won’t promise you anything because I’m already mad. I can’t believe you let Cassandra Tisdale and her band of Merry Hussies get to you.”
"They didn’t get to me."
"Sounds to me like they did. So let’s get back on track. What do you mean that your marriage to Morgan would not have been real?"

Lena didn’t say anything for a long time. Then she said, “Morgan and I entered into a business agreement.”

Kylie lifted an arched brow. “What kind of business agreement?”

“I was to marry him and have his baby.”

“What!”

“You heard me. He asked me to marry him just to have his baby.”

Kylie stared at her for a long moment. And then she did the one thing Lena hadn’t expected. She burst out laughing.

And she continued laughing to the point where Lena began getting slightly irritated. Personally, she didn’t see anything funny, she thought, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest and glaring across the table at Kylie. “Excuse me, I hate to interrupt, especially when I’ve evidently brought so much amusement into your life this morning, but can you please explain to me what the hell is so funny?”

Kylie stopped laughing, slightly. She then got up and went to the kitchen counter and grabbed a paper towel to dab at her eyes and said, “I’m so sorry, Lena, but Morgan pulled one over on you.”

Lena’s glare deepened. “Meaning?”

Kylie dabbed at her eyes some more and chuckled a few times before saying, “Meaning, he would have told you anything to get you married to him.”

Lena inhaled deeply, still not knowing just what Kylie meant. “Kylie, I’m going to count to ten, and if you don’t get that rump of yours back in this chair and tell me what you’re talking about, then you will be going into labor early.”

Kylie saw the threatening look in her eyes and knew her best friend meant business. “All right, all right,” she said, coming back to sit down at the table.

“Now talk.”

Kylie raised her eyes to the ceiling. “You’re so smart I’m surprised you hadn’t figured things out, Lena. Think,” she said, reaching across the table and tapping a finger against what at the moment she considered her best friend’s thick skull. “For months Morgan has been after you. He asked you out several times.”

She glared at Kylie. “So? I’m sure he’s asked several women out. Big deal.”

“No, Lena. For Morgan it wasn’t just a big deal. I think it almost became an obsession.”

Lena frowned. “An obsession?”

“Yes. Not to the point that he would have resorted to stalking you or anything like that,” Kylie said, grinning. “But he was determined to get you.”

Lena considered Kylie’s words for a moment, then asked softly, “In bed?”

Kylie immediately knew where Lena’s thoughts were going and reached out and captured her hand. “No, Lena. I think it was more serious than that.”

Lena’s frown deepened. “What’s more serious than a man going after a woman for the sole intent of getting her in his bed? And you knew about this and didn’t tell me?”

Kylie shrugged. “I knew what Chance was telling me, which wasn’t much, but enough to figure out what was going on. The reason I didn’t tell you is that my husband asked me not to. He felt sooner or later sexual chemistry would do the both of you in. The brothers knew how bad Morgan wanted you, so they figured out why he’d hired you to sell his house and buy another.”

Lena’s eyes widened in startled shock. “Are you saying the reason Morgan hired me as a Realtor was that he wanted to sleep with me?”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “No, that’s not what I’m saying, and will you please be quiet for a moment so I can give you my take on things?”

When Lena reluctantly nodded, she said, “My take on things is this. For Morgan it was more than having you in his bed. I honestly think he was quite taken with you, Lena, and he concocted this plan to get you right where he wanted you, as a permanent part of his life. Remember that day at lunch I told you about his belief about his perfect woman? In his mind you’re it and he would have done anything for you to become a part of his life like he wanted to become a part of yours. But first he had to prove himself to you, let you see that he’s not like those guys you dated before.”

Lena bit her bottom lip. A part of her couldn’t buy what Kylie was saying. Mainly because she couldn’t see herself as any man’s perfect anything. “I think you’re wrong, Kylie.”

“And I think I’m right, Lena. If all Morgan wanted was to sleep with you, once he’d done that he wouldn’t have come back, and I know the two of you have slept together.”
Lena leaned forward. “And how do you know that?”

Kylie smiled. “The same way you knew that Chance and I had slept together without me having said one word. I was celibate for over fifteen years and I know you haven’t been with anyone since your dad died. Although I hadn’t seen you in the past couple of days when I talked to you a couple of days ago you sounded funny.”

Lena leaned back in the chair and lifted a brow. “Funny how?”

“Like you were tired, exhausted, sexually fulfilled. And when I talked to your mom yesterday and she happened to mentioned the fact that you had swollen lips, I thought that—”

Lena straightened in her chair. “Mom told you that?”

Kylie couldn’t help but giggle. “Yes, you know mothers don’t miss anything. They see everything. Trust me, although she might not have said anything, she noticed.”

Lena nodded. “So what did you tell her?”

Kylie smiled. “I told her it must have been a soda bottle. I heard Donovan give that excuse to Chance once.”

Lena inhaled deeply. “Okay, Morgan and I did sleep together, once.”

Kylie lifted a brow, then reached out and touched a mark on Lena’s upper arm. “Once? This sure looks like a recent passion mark to me.”

Lena rolled her eyes. “Okay, more than once. So he got what he wanted.”

Kylie shook her head. “I’m sorry you think that way. You know what your problem is, Lena?”

“No, what do you think my problem is, Kylie?” she asked sarcastically.

“I’ve known you all my life and you’ve always felt you’ve had to compete against skinny females. Why can’t you believe and accept that there are some men who don’t give a damn about a woman’s weight? They see beyond all that and see what’s in her heart. Why can’t you believe Morgan is one of those men? To him, you are his perfect woman. You and not Jamie Hollis or any other slim woman who wants to catch his eye. But until you believe in your own beauty, both inside and outside, what he sees doesn’t really matter.”

Donovan glared at his two oldest brothers. “I refuse to play another game until the two of you calm Morgan down. What the hell is his problem?”

Bas smiled as he grabbed the ball from Chance. Morgan had called time-out for a bathroom break and they were using the time while he was gone to discuss him. “If I recall, you pissed him off that day when he was daydreaming in the meeting. “If I recall, you pissed him off that day when he was daydreaming in the meeting. You should have figured then there would be hell to pay. Stop whining and take it like a man.”

“No, it’s more than just that particular day,” Chance said, concerned. “He’s been playing pretty rough with all of us. I wonder what’s going on.”

“Whatever it is, I bet it has something to do with Lena,” Donovan said.

Bas rolled his eyes. “What else is new?”

“Hey, look at who just walked in,” Chance said.

Both Bas and Donovan squinted their eyes against the gym’s bright lights. “Isn’t that Jamie Hollis and your ex, Bas?” Donovan asked.

Bas frowned. “You make her sound like she used to be my wife,” he said of the woman with Jamie, Cassandra Tisdale. “I wonder what the hell the two of them are doing here.”

Donovan grinned. “Oh, I know the answer to that one. Jamie is after Morgan. In fact there are bets going around that she’s going to be the one he eventually marries instead of Lena.”

Chance shook his head. “Does Morgan know that?”

“Yes, I told him. I also told him that I’d heard that Cassandra had even boasted about it to Lena,” Donovan said.

“No wonder Lena dumped him,” Bas said, frowning.

“Lena didn’t dump me,” Morgan said angrily, approaching his brothers from behind. “Ready to play another game?” He then glanced up into the bleachers, recognized the two women and frowned. “What the hell are they doing here?”

Bas turned to his brother and grinned. “Evidently, they came to see you get your ass kicked all over the basketball court today.”

A few hours later Morgan was back at his place soaking in a hot tub of water. He and his brothers had played some pretty rough games today, but then he’d need the brutal workout to work out his frustrations. Now he could settle down and think.

He shook his head at the audacity of Cassandra and Jamie. They had tried their best to get him to agree to meet them some place for drinks and to play a game of tennis. He leaned back in the water thinking he wasn’t stupid. He
had seen that same look in Jamie Hollis’s eyes that he’d seen in other women on a manhunt. She was a woman with a plan just like he had been a man with a plan. A plan that had backfired on him.

He wondered if Lena had figured things out yet and if she had, did she even care? Well, hell, he cared and if she thought he had given up on her she had another thought coming.

He got out of the tub and began drying off. Something Bas had said earlier piqued his interest. Evidently Lena was a part of Vanessa’s latest community project, and there would be a meeting at her house sometime this evening. There was no reason for him not to stop by and give his regards to the ladies.

Vanessa Steele rolled her eyes at the man standing on her doorstep. “What are you doing here, Morgan?”

He smiled. “Do I need a reason to visit one of my favorite cousins?”

She frowned. “No, but it does seem odd since you haven’t been over here since Christmas.”

He chuckled. “Only because the last time I dropped by you told me not to come back.”

Her frown deepened. “I told you not to come back if you had to bring Cameron Cody with you. That man is not welcome in my home.”

Morgan shook his head. “Wasn’t it just last Sunday that Pastor Givens spoke about forgiveness?”

She lifted an arched brow. “I’m surprised you remembered the sermon since you, Donovan and Bas usually fall asleep during service. It’s a sin and a shame.”

“No need to get ugly about it.” He shoved away from the wall. “So, are you going to invite me in or not?”

Vanessa stared at him as if she was considering his question, and then she moved aside. “Only because Dane’s going to drop Sienna off and he might hang around if you’re here.”

Morgan entered the house and glanced around, heard feminine voices coming from the back and smiled when he heard one in particular. He then turned to Vanessa and asked, “Why does Dane have to drive Sienna over here?”

Vanessa couldn’t stop the smile that spread across her lips. “Because they’re driving to Memphis right after the meeting to spend the weekend.” She leaned closer and whispered, “Sienna has some special news for Dane.”

Morgan nodded. From the way Vanessa had said it, he had an idea just what that news was. He then thought of Lena and the day she would tell him some special news. But first he knew he had to win her over. First he had to get the wife, and then the baby.

“Well, ladies, look who just showed up,” Vanessa said to the three women in her kitchen.

Everyone turned and stared at Morgan, but it was Lena who held his gaze the longest. “Hello, everyone. I just decided to pay Vanessa a visit, so don’t mind me,” he said.

Jocelyn, who was still trying to get to know her husband’s family, smiled over at him and said, “It’s good seeing you, Morgan.”

“Same here, Jocelyn.” He then glanced over at Kylie. “And how are you, Kylie, besides pregnant?”

She made a face at him before saying, “Fine and counting. One more month to go and I’m free.”

He nodded. He then crossed the room to Lena. She was standing alone near the sink. Remembering their last conversation he wasn’t sure how her attitude would be toward him. “Hello, Lena.”

“Morgan.”

“How’s your mother?”

“She’s doing fine. Thanks for asking.”

He nodded. “I told Vanessa I would make myself useful while I’m here. I’ll be outside trimming her hedges if you need me for anything.”

She lifted a brow. “If I need you for anything?”

He smiled. “Yes.”

Lena stared at him, remembering what Kylie had told her just that morning. The only reason Morgan had hired her to sell his house was that he had wanted her, although she and Kylie had a difference of opinion of just what the word want actually meant.

“I’m glad you came here today since I was going to seek you out tomorrow.”

She watched the smile spread to his eyes. “You were?”

“Yes. There’s something I needed to tell you, and if you have time, since the meeting hasn’t started yet, maybe I can do it now.”

His smile widened. “Sure. Let’s go into Vanessa’s study for privacy.”

Lena nodded and then glanced around the room at the other ladies, not surprised to find them staring at her and Morgan. Evidently there weren’t too many secrets in the Steele family. Had all of them known of his obsession to have her in his bed? “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I need to speak with Morgan about something.”

She followed Morgan to Vanessa’s study, and the moment the door was closed, she inhaled deeply, feeling
angry and frustrated.

He leaned back on Vanessa’s desk and smiled at her. “So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

She crossed the room, trying to hold back her anger and the hurt she felt. “It has come to my attention that you hired me as your real estate agent for an indecent reason and I just want you to know that effective today, I quit.”

Then without saying anything else, she turned and walked out of the room.
Chapter 16

On Monday morning Morgan was standing at the window in his office thinking about what Lena had told him on Saturday. Since the meeting had started he hadn’t gotten a chance to talk to her after that because as soon as the meeting was over she’d left.

But then, what exactly could he have said? He couldn’t deny that he’d had ulterior motives for hiring her as a Realtor. But she was wrong about any of it being indecent.

He was in love with her, but he knew he would have a hard time convincing her of that now. He had talked to Kylie yesterday and she had convinced him that the best thing to do was to just give Lena time to come around. Well, he didn’t want to give her time. He wanted and needed her like he needed his next breath.

His secretary’s voice on the intercom intruded into his thoughts.

“Yes, Linda?”

“There’s a Ms. Jamie Hollis here to see you. She doesn’t have an appointment but indicated she’s Senator Hollis’s daughter.”

Morgan rolled his eyes. Like he gave a flip, and he was ready to tell Linda to advise the senator’s daughter he was too busy to see her. But then he decided what the hell? He needed to set Jamie straight once and for all. “All right, Linda, please send her in.”

A few minutes later Jamie walked in with her expensive perfume almost choking him. She was dressed in an outfit that probably cost a pretty penny, and she looked the epitome of a wealthy, sophisticated, aristocratic lady. He had to admit she was an attractive woman, but he was able to see beyond that beauty to someone he wouldn’t be attached to even for a billion dollars. “Jamie,” he said, with a forced smile, crossing the room to give her a formal handshake. “What can I do for you?”

She smiled up at him as she took the seat he offered. “The question, Morgan, is what I can do for you. I’d like to make you an offer I don’t think you’ll be able to refuse.”

He lifted a brow and leaned back on his desk. “Really, and what is it?”

“A partnership between us.”

He inwardly shuddered, wondering if that’s how he’d sounded that day he had offered Lena a business deal between them. If so, then he regretted every word he’d spoken. “What kind of a partnership?”

“Marriage. I’ll be thirty this time next year, and Daddy thinks it’s time I do something.”

Morgan crossed his arms over his chest. “Does he?”

“Yes. And I was bred and groomed to be a politician’s wife, someone who’s going places. And I want to become a mother one day, with a nanny of course.”

She shifted in the chair, and her smile widened and excitement shone in her eyes as she continued. “Everyone sees you as a top contender for Charlotte’s first black mayor in a few years, and who knows where that will lead? I could see you as the governor, even president one day. And I intend to be your First Lady all the way.”

Like hell you will.

He cleared his throat. Evidently she had erroneously thought things through. “I appreciate your offer, Jamie, but I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“I’ve asked someone else to marry me. In fact we’ll be announcing our engagement sometime this week.”

The spark in her eyes was replaced with a furious dart. “Really? Who?”

“Lena Spears.”

She blinked and then he watched a smile touch her lips before she waved her well-manicured, neatly polished hand in the air like his words had held no significant meaning. “Really? Morgan, Lena is not the woman you need, I am. In fact after our little talk last week with Lena, Cassandra and I were sure we had convinced her that if she cared anything for you she would get out of the picture.”

He straightened. “Excuse me?”

“I said we had a talk with Lena last week. We happened to run into her at McIntosh’s. She’s a very sensible woman who I believes loves you, but we made it quite clear that she wasn’t the woman for you. For a man of your caliber, you need a woman who possesses style, grace, pedigree, wealth and connections.”

Morgan shook his head. “Let me get this straight. You actually said those things to Lena?”

She smiled. “Of course. Someone needed to be honest and up front with her. And since the two of you hadn’t
announced an engagement this weekend, I assumed she took our advice.”

Morgan nodded. *She had.* No wonder she had given him that garbage that night in her office about not being the appropriate woman for him. He walked over to the chair Jamie was sitting in and leaned over, placing his hands on the arms and pinning her in. Anger, the likes he’d never known before, flowed through him.

“Listen, Jamie, and listen well,” he said through gritted teeth. “There will never be a business partnership of any kind between us. When I marry, I will marry for love, and the woman I marry will be Lena Spears. And I will be marrying her for all the right reasons, and if I ever hear of you or anyone else spouting anything to her about not being good enough for me and my political future, you will have to deal with me. Do you understand?”

“No, I’m telling it like it is, and if you ever come back I will get on television and tell everyone about why it was necessary for you to take that trip to London for six months last year.”

She blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“You figure it out. But like you, I do have connections and mine talk and have all the proof we need. It would be an embarrassment not only for your father but also for the Tisdale family, who think so highly of their family name.”

He’d said enough. Cameron, who made it a point to keep tabs on people who could either be a menace or someone useful to him in the future, had picked up wind of the senator’s daughter’s pregnancy and how she’d gone to London to give the child up for adoption. He had found it interesting and had passed the information on to Morgan earlier that year.

He stepped back, more than certain she was ready to leave his office and wouldn’t be coming back any time soon. Before she walked out the door he said, “And if I were you I would try and find a way to convince Cassandra to keep her mouth shut, too. There’s a lot she doesn’t want taken out of her closet as well.”

He walked back to the window and didn’t even look around when he heard the door slam shut.

After lunch Morgan placed a call to a friend from college who happened to be the top anchorwoman at the city’s leading television station. When Gail Winston came on the line he said, “All right, Gail, I promised you first dibs when I decided to run for office.”

He laughed and placed the phone away from his ear when he heard her scream. “Yes, I’d like to announce it on your show Friday morning, but there’s a catch.”

Gail Winston smiled into the camera. It was Friday morning and in a few seconds another segment of her local morning talk show would begin. When the producer gave her cue, she began.

“First, I want to thank our next guests who have joined forces with our local high schools to present a career fair that will be held next week. We have with us today Vanessa Steele, PR representative for the Steele Corporation. Lena Spears, a local Realtor from our area. And Jocelyn Steele, who will be the general manager of Cody Construction here in town. And it’s my understanding Cody Construction will be establishing apprenticeship training in the areas of bricklaying, air-conditioning and plumbing this fall for individuals who are interested in those occupations.”

Putting an even bigger smile on her face, Gail said, “Good morning, ladies.”

“Good morning,” the three women said simultaneously.

And for the next ten minutes, under the direction of Gail’s intense questions, they talked to the television audience about the importance of the students in the area coming out and taking part in such a worthwhile event. After a commercial break, Gail came back on the air with the three ladies still sitting with her onstage in guest seats. “The reason I asked these ladies to remain is that two of them are members of the Steele family. And it just so happens that we have a surprise guest for everyone today. For years it’s been speculated that sooner or later one of this city’s favorite sons would enter politics, and today history is in the making. I have as our special guest someone most of you know because of his involvement in so many community affairs. Let’s give a warm welcome to Morgan Steele, director of research and development for the Steele Corporation.”

The audience applauded when Morgan walked out onstage and took the extra guest seat, which just happened to be beside Lena. Lena’s heart almost stopped when he walked out. Impeccably dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and red tie, he looked like a movie celebrity rather than a businessman and easily took the breath away of any female seeing him.

She tried to focus her gaze on the monitor and not on him, for fear of another heartbreak. She loved him, and wooing her had been nothing more than a game to him.

Morgan settled into his seat. He hoped like hell this plan worked and had felt confident that it would, but now
he wasn’t all that sure, especially with the tension he could feel radiating from Lena.

Gail took control and pulled in his attention.

“Morgan has been a guest on my show before to promote numerous community causes, but this time he’s here for another reason, right, Morgan?”

He smiled into the camera. “Right, Gail. Today I want to officially announce my candidacy for the council-at-large seat here in Charlotte. However, there is one condition.”

Gail leaned forward and smiled. “And what condition is that?” she dutifully asked.

“I am a single man and there are a group of people who believe it’s important that I have a good woman by my side, and I agree. What I don’t agree with is the theory that I should choose a woman because the public thinks she and I will do well together politically as a team.”

The camera angled in on him, and the intensity in his features couldn’t be missed as he continued. “The woman I will marry is a woman I trust, a woman I know will have my back no matter what, and a woman I know is capable of being everything I could ever want in a wife. She is also a woman I love. I don’t care if some people out there think she’s not what they want for me. She is the woman I want for myself.”

He paused for a second, then said, “So many times when people are involved in politics, they marry for all the wrong reasons. They form a partnership instead of a real marriage, and that’s not what I want for myself. I could not understand the importance of the family and marriage dynamics if I didn’t have a real marriage of my own. I want to marry for love and nothing else.”

Anyone listening to what Morgan had said, whether a romantic or not, had to have felt the deep emotions he’d just conveyed in his words. Even Gail dabbed at her eyes.

“So, have you asked this young lady to marry you yet?” Gail couldn’t help asking since she knew her audience would want to know.

“Yes, but at the time I asked her for the wrong reason. Now I want to ask her for the right one. I want her to know how much I truly do love her and that more than anything I want her to be my wife and the mother of my children. And whether I win this election bid doesn’t matter as long as I have her by my side and in my life.”

Gail dabbed at her eyes again. “Do you think she’s out there watching the show and knows what you’re saying?”

“It’s even better than that,” he said, smiling. “The woman I love just happens to be here onstage with us.” Then before anyone could blink, Morgan got out of his chair and on his knees in front of Lena, while pulling a small white velvet box out of his pants pocket.

The cameras moved in closer, determined to capture the entire thing on film. Morgan took Lena’s hand in his and gazed up into her eyes and took a deep breath. “Lena, if there is anything such as love at first sight, then it happened to me the night of the American Cancer Society’s annual ball, when you walked into that ballroom. I can remember in full detail the dress you were wearing that night because you were such a vision of beauty in it that it took my breath away. And I knew from that night on I had to make you mine.

“And I’m here before you, on bended knee, wanting to do that. I love you and I believe you love me, too. Otherwise you would not have cared what became of my future. But what you don’t know is that I truly don’t have a future without you. You are the essence of my very being. You are the woman I want to see when I wake up in the morning, and the last face I want to see before going to sleep at night. You are the only woman I want and need in my life. You are my perfect woman. You are my everything.”

His smile wavered just a little when he saw all her tears. He hoped they weren’t tears of sadness but tears of joy. He opened the ring box and held the ring in his hand. “And will you make me the happiest man on earth, sweetheart, by agreeing to marry me? Will you marry me, Lena, and have my babies, to stick beside me for better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness and in health, until death do us part?”

Tears continued to stream down Lena’s face. The man she loved more than anything was proclaiming his love for her for all to hear. It was only when everything in the studio got quiet, except for the sounds of more than a few sniffles, that she realized that everyone, especially Morgan, was waiting on her answer.

She leaned forward and cupped his face in her hand. Meeting his gaze she said, loud and clear, “And I love you, too, Morgan, and yes, I will marry you and have your babies. And you will make me an extremely happy woman as well.”

Morgan slid the ring on Lena’s hand, and of course the cameraman had to slide his camera over for the ultimate shot for the television audience.

“Can you believe the size of that rock?” Gail exclaimed to everyone as the monitor continued to zero in on Lena’s hand.

“Well, folks, this is certainly a first. I don’t know of any other morning show where someone can officially announce their candidacy and do a marriage proposal in the same ten-minute segment.”
Everyone heard her words, but most people were staring at Morgan when he stood to his feet and pulled Lena into his arms for one whopper of a kiss.

Gail smiled brightly, knowing her ratings would soar. “Well, there you have it, folks. A man who puts love before any political career he might be seeking certainly will definitely get my vote. And remember you saw it live right here.”

Lena smiled tremendously as she glanced around the room. “Are you sure this is the house you want, Morgan? Your other home was—”

“My other home. I want to start somewhere new with you and Odessa. I knew when you showed this house to me that day that it would be perfect for us and our family.”

She nodded happily as she walked into his outstretched arms. “What about your other home? Does Donovan still want it?”

Morgan threw his head back and chuckled. “Honey, Donovan never wanted my house. I talked him into buying it as part of my plan to get you.”

“Okay, if you were that desperate?”

“Yes, for you I was that desperate. Plan A failed badly, but I was determined to make plan B a success. I hit a few bumps along the way but in the end I got you just where I want you, in my arms.”

She cocked her head back and looked at him. “And not your bed.”

He grinned. “Yes, there, too.”

Lena moved closer and placed her head on her fiancé’s chest. Today had to be the happiest day of her life.

“Thanks for making sure Mom and everyone at the adult day care center was able to see this morning’s show. She was so proud.”

Morgan smiled. “And I’m glad. She’s a part of our family and I never want her to forget it.”

“Okay, if you were that desperate.”

“I know it, sweetheart. And because it means a lot to you it means a lot to me as well. And you know the question everyone will be asking. When is our wedding date?”

Lena sighed. “I always wanted a June wedding, but so did Kylie and Jocelyn and they never got one.”

Morgan smiled. “Only because my impatient brothers couldn’t wait. Luckily for you, June is only three months away. It might kill me but I’ll wait.”

She leaned back and kissed his chin. “Thanks, Morgan. You are a wonderful man.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, and don’t you ever forget it. And I have a wonderful idea.”

“What?”

“Let’s christen our new home right now.”

Lena grinned. She had an idea just how he wanted that particular ceremony done. “But it doesn’t have any furniture.”

“You think not? Then come with me.”

Morgan took Lena’s hand and led her up the stairs and toward the master suite that connected to the main house by a glass breezeway and elevator access. “Now close your eyes,” he said.

Lena did as he demanded and felt him tug her along. Moments later he said, “You can open them now.”

She gasped after opening her eyes. The master suite was completely furnished. She glanced around, not believing the beauty and the workmanship of the furniture. “But who gave you permission to put furniture in here? You haven’t purchased this place yet.”

Morgan shook his head, grinning. “Technically I have. When my Realtor quit on me last weekend,” he said with a teasing glint in his eyes, “I decided I had to do what I needed to do. I used the company’s attorney to close the deal, but with the understanding that my Realtor would still get the commission.”

Lena shook her head. Morgan had basically thought of everything. “And I guess it was your idea for Mom to be invited over to Chance and Kylie’s place for the night, right?”

He laughed. “Right.”
Lena looked up at the ceiling. “What am I going to do with you, Morgan Steele?”

“Love me. Marry me and have my babies?” He leaned forward and captured her lips with his. The moment his tongue touched hers she felt fire light up inside her. And then the seduction began.

Lena had discovered that Morgan was skilled at whatever he did. And when it came to multitasking, he was at the top of the list. He began stroking her back, grinding the lower part of his body against her spread thighs, rubbing his chest against the taut tips of her breasts, while kissing her senseless. She closed her eyes and moaned like a woman in dire need of her man.

All she could think about and all she wanted to focus on were being in that bed with him, him making love to her, and having him inside her. He pulled back and whispered in her ear, “Undress for me, baby.”

She smiled, liking the idea of stripping for him. She took a step back to slide the blouse over her head and skimmed the skirt she was wearing down her hips, leaving her clad only in a royal-blue thong. She placed her hands on her hips and smiled at him. “So, what do you think?”

He returned her smile. “I’d rather show you than tell you.”

Quickly, he begin removing all of his clothes with a wicked grin plastered to his face. In no time at all he was standing in front of her, completely naked, but he saw she had one remaining piece left on. Her thong.

His smile widened as he got down on his knees in front of her. “I see you save the best for last.”

She balanced her hands on his shoulders while he slowly slid the thin wispy material down her legs. And just like she’d known he would do, once it was removed he leaned forward and attached his mouth to her womanly core, giving her one hell of a tongue-lashing kiss there. She had to grip his shoulders to keep her balance, and when an orgasm hit her she screamed his name.

 Moments later he stood, smiled and took her hand in his. “That was just an appetizer. Come on, sweetheart, let’s christen our bed.”

Morgan’s groin tightened as he watched Lena ease her naked body into the huge bed. Perfect, he thought, easing onto the bed behind her, like a lion stalking his prey. And then he had her in his arms, kissing her deeply, with all the love in his heart.

Lena gazed up at him when he positioned his body over hers, and she knew this would be a moment she would remember for the rest of her life. Today on television he had asked her to marry him, and now in the beautiful home he had purchased for her he was about to make her his in the most elemental way.

“I love you, Morgan,” she whispered.

He smiled down at her. “And I love you, too. For always.”

And then he eased his body into hers, closed his eyes and locked in place for a moment to absorb the intensity of the moment and to thank God for sending such a beautiful woman into his life. He then opened his eyes at the same time his body began to move. Sexual need combined with every deep emotion he possessed took over, and he established a rhythm that immediately sent all kinds of shudders racing through him.

“Lena!”

He was hit by the strongest force that could ever take down a man and literally bring him to his knees. The force of love. And he lifted her hips as another orgasm hit, and when he felt her body shattering as well he screamed out her name yet again.

And he knew what the two of them were sharing went beyond temptation. It went beyond anything he knew. And it would set the stage for the wonderful love they would always share. Together.
Epilogue

A beautiful day in June

“You may kiss your bride, Morgan.”

Those were the very words Morgan had been waiting for, although he felt it had taken Reverend Givens long enough to say them. As far as he was concerned this had to have been the longest wedding ceremony on record. But as he glanced down at the beautiful woman in front of him, he knew it had been well worth it and more.

He pulled her into his arms and captured her lips in his, making another promise; one only the two of them understood. Today would begin the rest of their lives together and tonight they intended to start work on their dynasty. She had gone off the Pill months ago and tonight he would start another mission.

He pulled back when he felt a jab to his ribs and knew it had to have been Bas. Evidently the kiss had lasted longer than some people felt it should have. He smiled down into Lena’s beautiful smiling face. “I love you, Mrs. Steele.”

She smiled back up at him with tears shining in her eyes. “And I love you, Mr. Steele.”

They turned to their audience, all five hundred of their guests, and smiled as the pastor announced proudly, “I now present to everyone, Morgan and Lena Steele.”

Morgan shot a glance over at Cameron, who had served as one of his groomsmen. He then looked at his cousin Vanessa, who didn’t look like a happy camper. He chuckled. He would give Cameron at least until the end of the summer to finally win his stubborn cousin over.

But Morgan knew he himself had other things to worry about. Making his wife happy, making a baby, and starting his campaign at full force. He had a lot to accomplish.

But of course like always, he was a man with a plan.
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“Take it from someone who almost found out the hard way, Van. Running away never solves anything.”

Vanessa Steele shifted her gaze from the open suitcase to the woman standing in her doorway. Sienna Bradford had been her best friend since grade school, but it bothered Vanessa that at times Sienna thought she knew her better than she knew herself. Unfortunately, some times Sienna actually did.

“I am not running away.” But not even Vanessa’s short, gruff tone could convince anyone that she wasn’t getting the hell out of Dodge because a certain man by the name of Cameron Cody was on his way to Charlotte, supposedly to spend some time visiting with her cousins.

“Then please explain what you’re doing if you’re not running away.”

Vanessa sighed and tossed aside the blouse she was about to pack. “I’m leaving for Jamaica because Cheyenne called and asked if I would house-sit while the builders are putting in her pool. She hadn’t planned on having to go to Italy for an unscheduled photo shoot,” Vanessa said of her sister, an international model. “There’s not a lot happening at work and a vacation in Jamaica is just what I need.”

Sienna arched a brow. “And your leaving has nothing to do with Cameron coming to town?”

Vanessa nervously averted her gaze. “I wish I can say one has nothing to do with the other but that wouldn’t be true and you and I both know it. Cheyenne’s phone call gave me the out I need, and I’m taking it.”

Sienna came farther into the room, forcing Vanessa to look at her. “What are you afraid of, Van? Why do you feel so much dislike and anger toward one man?”

“You of all people know why, Sienna. You know what Cameron tried to do to my family’s business.”

“Yes, but that was three years ago. And if your cousins have gotten over it and consider him a friend, why can’t you?”

“I’ll never consider that man a friend,” Vanessa snapped.

“Then maybe you need to wonder why,” Sienna replied smoothly. “There has to be a reason for your intense dislike of him.”

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “There is, and I’ve told you what it is.”

“I only know what you’ve convinced yourself it is.”

Vanessa lifted a brow. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Only that I have eyes. I’ve been watching you and Cameron for a while now, especially at Morgan and Lena’s wedding last month. What I saw between you wasn’t animosity, but a buildup of sexual chemistry of the most potent and compelling kind. And I think the reason you don’t like being around him is because, if given the chance, you’d want to have your way with him.” Sienna grinned. “You’d probably jump his bones in a heartbeat.”

“What!” Vanessa exclaimed, folding her arms over her chest and giving her pregnant best friend an incredulous look. “How can you even think of anything so ridiculous?”

“Is it really so ridiculous, Vanessa? Think about it. He’s the only man I know who has pushed your buttons since that guy you met in London.”

“Well, yeah, that might be true, but he’s pushing them the wrong way.”

“And what if he starts pushing them the right way? What if one day you discover that Cameron isn’t as bad as you think and that an affair with him is just what you need to take the edge off?”

Vanessa laughed. “I don’t have an edge on.”

“Yes, you do, and we both know it.”

Vanessa walked over to her bedroom window and looked out. Yes, she had an edge on, all right. Not that she was counting, but it had been almost four years since that summer she’d spent in London with Harlan, a man she had fancied herself in love with. But Harlan couldn’t hold a candle to Cameron Cody. As far as she was concerned, Cameron was the sexiest, most handsome man alive—which wasn’t helping matters. It would be a lie to say she hadn’t thought about doing him, because she had. A part of her saw it as the perfect way to get him out of her system. Right?

Wrong.

Another part of her saw it as dominance on his part, a sure victory for him. Eventually he’d take her over just as he’d enjoyed taking over corporations that suited his fancy. He had a reputation that made Genghis Khan look like a choirboy.
“Van?”

She turned back around to Sienna. “Are you suggesting that I engage in an affair with Cameron? Especially after what Harlan said?”

Sienna frowned and rubbed her stomach as she felt her baby kick. “Forget about what Harlan Shaw said. As far as I’m concerned, an affair with Cameron sounds like a good plan to me. You’re twenty-six, old enough to know the score, and you and Cameron are spontaneous combustion just waiting to happen. I’ve never been around two more volatile individuals. And I’m not the only one who can feel the intensity, the passion, when the two of you are in the same room. Do us all a favor and finally do something about it.”

Vanessa fought back the fear that ran through her at the mere thought of what would happen if she followed Sienna’s suggestion. She would find herself at Cameron’s mercy, become beholden to him—as she had to Harlan—and the thought of that filled her with disgust. On the other hand, the thought of sharing a bed with Cameron and finally letting go, putting aside her dislike of him to appease her overworked hormones, suddenly replaced the fear with red-hot pleasure. Wanton pleasure. It would be risky pleasure of the most intense type, the kind that would finally take the edge off. Her insides quivered at the very idea of Cameron giving her the best sex of her life. It was too much to think about. Downright scary.

She never wanted to be that vulnerable to a man. Especially not that man. There was so much about him she disliked. His chauvinistic, egoistical attitude was one a modern, liberated woman like herself couldn’t stand or tolerate. Besides, there was her concern about just what kind of bed partner she would be. According to Harlan, she needed vast improvement in that area.

“Will it help matters if I promise to give it some thought while I’m relaxing on the beach in Jamaica?” Vanessa finally asked.

“You can’t run forever. At some point you’re going to have to stop running and do something about Cameron. It’s obvious that he wants you, Van, and he comes across as a man who gets whatever he wants.”

That was exactly what had her worried, Vanessa admitted silently. For some reason she had a feeling that Cameron’s upcoming visit had a purpose, one that involved her. Maybe it was the way he had looked at her at the wedding, as if her time for avoiding him was up and that he was about to make his move. Unfortunately, it would be a wasted trip. When he arrived in Charlotte, she’d be long gone.
Chapter 1

This is paradise, Vanessa thought as she stood on the shore of the white-sand beach that overlooked the deep blue waters of the Caribbean Sea. Cheyenne’s two-story home was located on a secluded cove in Montero Bay, on a private street with one other house.

Other than the pool workers, who arrived at nine and left by five, Vanessa was alone, except for the two days a week that the housekeeper showed up.

Cheyenne had already left for Italy by the time Vanessa had arrived so her first days were spent unpacking and shopping.

This was day three and she had decided just to do nothing. Since weather reports had predicted it would be another scorcher of a late-July day, she stayed inside working crossword puzzles and sipping lemonade while reading a book she had picked up yesterday. Later that day, after the workers had left, she gathered up her large straw hat, her beach bag, which was stuffed with a bottle of wine and a glass, and a huge towel to head down to the beach.

When she reached what she considered a good spot, she casually glanced around. This stretch of private beach was shared only by whoever was living in the house next door and so far the place appeared empty. According to Helen, Cheyenne’s housekeeper, the house had changed ownership several times, and rumor had it someone had recently purchased it.

Helen had gone on to say that a few years ago, the house had been owned by some gorgeous Italian jet-setting playboy by the name of Chardon Argentina. And if you went along with what everyone believed, a number of seductions had taken place in that house. It was even rumored that many of Hollywood’s leading ladies had been overnight guests.

Vanessa shrugged as she spread the huge towel on the sand and sat down. She was glad she didn’t believe everything she heard. Besides, what had happened in that house was not her business. After placing the huge straw hat on her head and situating the brim in such a way as to block what was left of the sun, she glanced toward the ocean, thinking she could definitely get used to this. She’d never had an entire beach to herself. She was glad that Cheyenne had invited her to stay.

She, Taylor and Cheyenne had always been close, but it was Vanessa who had decided to stick with the family business instead of pursuing other careers as her sisters had. She had returned home to Charlotte and the Steele Corporation after getting a grad degree from Tennessee State.

Taylor, who was twenty-four, had graduated from Georgetown with a degree in business and a grad degree in finance. After college, she’d moved to New York to work at a major bank as a wealth asset manager and was doing quite well for herself.

After obtaining a degree in communications from Boston University, Cheyenne, who was twenty-two, had taken a reporter position at a television station in Philly and in less than a year, her looks, personality and keen intelligence had gotten her a promotion to the position of anchorwoman on the morning news. That job was short-lived as she had suddenly realized she wanted to do something different and had become a model. Modeling meant a lot of traveling and living in some of the most beautiful and exotic places in the world. A year ago, Cheyenne had been doing a photo shoot in Jamaica when she’d stumbled across this particular house, fallen in love with it and purchased it.

Vanessa leaned back on her arms with her legs stretched out in front of her. She tilted her head back to enjoy the feel of the evening sun on her face, as well as the salty spray from the ocean on her cheeks and lips. She couldn’t help wondering what was happening back in Charlotte. Had Cameron arrived yet? Had he discovered her gone? Was he upset about it? Why did she even care?

She was deep into her thoughts when a movement caught her eye, and she turned her head. In the distance, in front of the property next door, she could see a man standing close to shore. With the palm trees partially blocking her view, she couldn’t make out his features, but she could tell he wore only a pair of swimming trunks. And he was overpoweringly male.

She sat up as her heart began pumping wildly in her chest, and she wondered what on earth was wrong with her. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t seen good-looking men before. So what was there about this tall, broad-shouldered, long-legged, fine-as-they-come brother whose aura was seeping out to her over stretches of sand? And
what was there about him that seemed so oddly familiar?

Biting down on her lip, she fought against one particular ultra-sexy male image that tried forcing its way into her mind. She simply refused to go there. She would not let Cameron creep into her thoughts. Tilting her head, she refocused her attention as she continued to gaze at the man, not seeing as much as she would like due to the shade cast by the palm trees, the fading evening sun and the emergence of dusk.

Since this was a private beach she quickly assumed he was the owner of the house next door and wondered who he was. A celebrity perhaps? Was he married, single or in between lovers like she was?

A lump caught in her throat when the man eased down his swimming trunks. It suddenly occurred to her that he was about to go swimming in the nude. Although their properties were separated only by a few palm trees, she wondered if he hadn’t noticed her sitting here—if he had, evidently he didn’t care.

She knew the decent thing to do was to ignore him, but she couldn’t pull her gaze away. When he had completely removed the trunks, she held her breath and wished like hell that she had a pair of binoculars.

Reaching into her beach bag, she pulled out the bottle of wine and wineglass she had packed. By the time the man had dived into the ocean water she had not only poured a glassful but had quickly tossed back the contents, liking how the soothing liquid had flowed down her throat.

She decided to pour another glass, taking her eyes off the man for just a second. When she looked back, pausing with the wineglass halfway to her lips, he was gone. She sighed, wondering if she’d really seen him or if he’d been a mirage, a cruel trick of her imagination.

As she took a sip of her wine to calm her racing heart, a part of her knew that what she’d seen earlier had been the real thing.

Cameron Cody stood at the window and watched as the woman he intended to marry gathered up her belongings to walk back to the house where she would be staying for two weeks.

He didn’t want to think what her reaction would be once she discovered he was her neighbor and that her flight from Charlotte had been for nothing. As soon as he had gotten word—thanks to her cousin and his loyal friend Morgan Steele—that she intended to leave the country for a few weeks to house-sit her sister’s home in Jamaica, he had changed his plans. No big deal. Where she went, he intended to follow. Her time for avoiding him had run out. At thirty-five, he was no longer interested in playing games. He was ready to make his move.

When he was sure Vanessa was safely inside the house, he moved away from the window toward the wet bar to pour himself a drink. He glanced around the home he had recently purchased, wanting to believe that luck was still on his side. It had been easy enough to buy this house within a matter of hours, his first move to gain what he considered the most valuable asset of his life.

As he sipped his brandy, he recalled the exact moment a little over three years ago when he had first laid eyes on Vanessa Steele. He had arrived at a very important Steele Corporation board meeting, one he’d assumed would give him total control of the Charlotte-based manufacturing company.

He had walked into the conference room, confident in his abilities and pretty damn positive that one of the Steeles would defect and throw their voting shares his way. After all, past experience had shown him that if offered the right price, family members had a tendency to prove that blood might be thicker than water but not thicker than the mighty dollar.

The Steeles had proved him wrong that day.

In less than an hour he had walked away after encountering the first defeat of his career as a corporate raider. But that afternoon hadn’t been a complete waste, since he had sat across the table from the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He could admit now that he had focused his attention more on Vanessa Steele than on taking over her family’s company.

The memory of that day would forever be etched in his mind. Something about Vanessa had immediately captured his attention. The moment he had gazed into her eyes he had suffered an instant jolt in his gut. He’d been mesmerized, awestruck and captivated all at the same time. The other two Steele women had been just as good-looking, but it had been Vanessa who had caused his body and mind to react in all sorts of ways. Everything about her had turned him on, even when she had glared at him, which she’d spent most of her time doing.

During the years that followed, he and members of the Steele family had put the takeover attempt behind them. He was close friends with Vanessa’s four older male cousins, especially Morgan, whom he considered one of his best friends. He even got along with her two sisters whenever their paths crossed. But Vanessa hung back, refusing to accept friendship or anything else from him.

She was different from the women he usually dated, since his taste ran to the tall, willowy, talk-only-if-you’re-asked-to-speak kind. At five foot eight, she came up to his nose. He’d discovered that fact the one and only time he’d caught her unawares and had gotten up close. And instead of a willowy figure she had a feminine one, with a
small waist and seductive curves to her hips. Whenever she passed, every male took notice. And then there was her face. It seemed the hairstyle she wore, short and flippy, was created just for her; it emphasized her ethereal facial features. Dark eyes, a voluptuously formed mouth, a chin imbued with intense stubbornness, and high cheekbones, compliments of her Cheyenne ancestry from her mother’s side.

That day in the conference room he knew she had felt the intensity of his attention and hadn’t liked it. That hadn’t diminished his feelings for her, even though he’d known he should walk away and leave her alone. Ten years ago, at the age of twenty-five, he had learned one hard lesson when it came to matters of the heart. Stay clear of them. A woman who got too deep under a man’s skin could ultimately become his downfall. Besides, he needed to use his time working deals and not pursuing resistant women.

But he had ignored the warning bells and now after three years of playing a no-win game, he was ready to pursue a relationship and come out a winner. Some would even go so far as to say that he’d taken drastic measures. All he said was that there came a time when a man had to do what a man had to do. Now he was finally going to do something about this chronic tug of desire that claimed his body each and every time he saw her or thought about her—which was all the time.

Today on the beach she had been wearing a wrap over her bathing suit, but she’d still looked good. He remembered the way the straps of the wrap had hung off her shoulders and how those graceful legs of hers moved when she walked. And when she had sat down and leaned back on her arms and stretched out her legs, he had gotten a nice view of her thigh, and even from a distance he had become so aroused that he’d had to jump into the ocean waters to cool off.

Cameron couldn’t retract the smile that touched his lips. Experience had taught him a valuable lesson—if there was something you wanted, then you put all your efforts into getting it. You didn’t wait for it to come to you or you’d never have it. And he was a man with a reputation for going after whatever it was he wanted. Hence, here he was, on this beautiful tropical island, going after Vanessa.

By this time tomorrow she would know that he was her neighbor. She would also know that for the remainder of her time on the island, he intended to seduce the hell out of her.

The last time he’d come up against the Steeles, he had failed. This time he would only be dealing with one. Vanessa. He wanted her and no matter what it took, he wouldn’t fail at having her.

The ringing of his cell phone crashed its way into his thoughts. Annoyed at the interruption, he picked it up and flipped it open. “Yes, what is it?” he said gruffly.

“McMurray is trying to fight back.”

Cameron recognized the caller’s voice immediately. Xavier Kane was not only his right-hand man but also a good friend. The two had met at Harvard when Cameron was in business school and Xavier in law school. Though both had been loners, somehow they’d forged a bond that was still intact today. For years Cameron had tried to convince Xavier to come work for him, knowing it would only be a matter of time before his friend got tired of defending men who were guilty of white-collar crimes. Cameron had needed someone to have his back, someone he trusted implicitly, and X was that man. Now Xavier handled all the legal aspects of Cody Enterprises.

A faint smile touched Cameron’s lips. “He can fight back, although it’s rather late since Global Petroleum is now legally mine.”

“Well, I just thought you should know that he held a press conference today, and I don’t have to tell you that he painted you as someone who won’t have any sympathy or loyalty with the present workers when you clean house.”

Cameron shook his head. “I bet while he was in front of the camera he didn’t happen to mention how he messed up his employees’ pension plan or how they were about to lose their jobs anyway at the rate he was going.”

“Of course he didn’t. His intent was to make you look bad. And when I called him to let him know we wouldn’t hesitate to take him to court for slander, he made a threat.”

Cameron raised a dark brow. “What kind of threat?”

“That you’re going to regret the day you were ever born for taking his company away.”

Cameron shook his head. “He brought that on himself.”

“You and I both know he doesn’t see things that way. And there’s no telling what will happen when he finds out your connection to his company. After all this time he’s evidently put behind him his bad deeds of yesteryear.”

Cameron’s face hardened. “He might have, but I haven’t.”

“Just be prepared, Cam. All hell’s going to break loose when he discovers why you took his company away.”

“How he handles things doesn’t matter to me, X, and as far as I’m concerned, John McMurray is serving no purpose by causing problems now.”

“Yes, but I’ve always told you that there’s something about him that bothers me. It’s like he’s not working with a full deck most of the time. As a safety precaution I’m going to let Kurt know what’s going on. I want to make sure his men know that McMurray is not allowed back on the premises. If he hasn’t cleaned out his desk by now, we’ll
ship his things to him.”

“I agree we should tell Kurt.” Kurt Grainger, another college friend, headed up security for Cody Enterprises. A few moments later, after hanging up the phone, Cameron banished John McMurray from his mind. The only thing he wanted occupying his mind were thoughts of a woman by the name of Vanessa Steele.
Chapter 2

“What neighbor?”

Vanessa tapped her foot impatiently on the ceramic tile floor. “I’m talking about the man who lives next door, Cheyenne,” she said trying to hide her frustration. She had a harder time squashing the irritation she felt with herself for being so curious about the man’s identity.

It was morning and the pool workers were ten minutes late already. She couldn’t wait to gather her stuff and go back down to the beach in hopes that she would see the stranger again. For some reason he had played on her thoughts all night.

“I truly don’t know anything about a man living next door,” Cheyenne said convincingly. “That house has been up for sale for a while, but I hadn’t heard anything of a new owner. It must have been rather recent.”

After a brief pause, Cheyenne then asked, “Why are you interested in my new neighbor, Van?”

Vanessa frowned and searched her mind for a reason her sister would believe and decided to be honest. “I saw him yesterday. At least I caught a glimpse of him,” she said, deciding not to tell Cheyenne about the man swimming in the nude. “And I liked what I saw.”

“Umm, your hormones acting up, are they?” her sister asked in a teasing voice.

“You sound like Sienna, and no, my hormones are not acting up. It was the usual reaction a woman would have to a good-looking man.”

“Then do something about it. Be neighborly and go over there, introduce yourself and welcome him to the neighborhood.”

Vanessa’s mouth quirked. Of the three of them Cheyenne had always been the most daring. “I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can. You’re a liberated woman. You don’t have to wait for the man to make the first move. What are you afraid of?”

That was the same question Sienna had asked her about Cameron. “I’m not afraid of anything,” she came back to say. She was wrong, though. She was afraid of something. Rejection. Thanks to Harlan Shaw.

“Well, my advice is, if you’re interested, act on it.”

“Goodbye, Cheyenne.”

“Why do you always do that, Van? When someone tells you something you don’t want to hear, you bow out in a hurry.”

“You just answered your own question, Cheyenne,” she said with a weak smile in her voice. “You’re telling me something I really don’t want to hear. Love you. Goodbye.”

Vanessa hung up the phone.

A couple of hours later, Vanessa stood in her sister’s kitchen with her back against the counter looking at the picnic basket she had placed on the table. It was her idea of a welcome-to-the-neighborhood gift and contained a bottle of spring water, a block of cheese she had picked up from the market two days ago, as well as a pack of crackers. Then there was the fruit she had added and for dessert, oatmeal raisin cookies she had baked.

Vanessa knew if either Taylor or Cheyenne was putting the basket together they would probably include a tablecloth, the proper eating utensils and enough food for two with the intent of joining him in a picnic instead of giving him everything he needed to enjoy on his own. To say both of her sisters were bold when it came to dating was an understatement. But then neither had encountered the likes of Harlan, the man responsible for rattling her self-confidence.

In fact, neither of her sisters nor her cousins had ever heard of him. The only person who’d known about him was Sienna. Vanessa had immediately been taken with Harlan’s handsome features and smooth talk while vacationing for two weeks in London four years ago. He’d been a college professor from Los Angeles on a year’s sabbatical doing research for a book he was writing.

She’d thought he was special, an intellectual genius. She’d also assumed that he had fallen in love with her, as she had with him, and that he would want to continue what they’d started once she returned to the States. Instead, on the last night they spent together, the one and only time they’d been intimate, he’d told her they were through. She hadn’t been everything that he fully desired from a woman in bed. After the pain of his cruel words, she had made a decision not to let any man close enough to break her heart again. That was the main reason she kept a comfortable
distance between herself and Cameron Cody. She would admit—but only to herself and only when she was in a
good mood—that she was attracted to him, but her mother hadn’t raised her to be a fool twice over.

So instead of being as bold as she wanted to be and inviting the man next door to picnic with her on the beach,
she would do the neighborly thing and present him with a welcome basket and leave. She wouldn’t even enter his
home if he invited her inside. He was a stranger and she knew nothing about him. He could be married or some
woman’s fiancé. She had enough to keep her mind occupied over the next two weeks. She certainly didn’t need a
man around causing problems. All she had to do when she felt weak was to remember Harlan, although she had to
admit Harlan’s memory had a tendency to fade to black when Cameron was around.

She walked over to the basket, opened the lid and did a quick check to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything.
She wondered what Mr. Neighbor would think when she appeared on his doorstep. She intended to meet the man
then put him out of her thoughts once and for all.

Little Red Riding Hood.

That was the first thought that came to Cameron’s mind when he glanced out his library window and saw the
feminine figure coming up his walkway dressed in a red shorts set, a red straw hat and carrying a picnic basket. He
pasted a smile on his lips. It seemed that Vanessa would be finding out his identity sooner than he had anticipated,
but that was just as well.

He stood and pressed the intercom button on his desk and within minutes an elderly lady appeared. It seemed
that Martha Pritchett came with the house, having been housekeeper to the previous four owners, over a period of
fifteen years. She had been born and raised on the island and arrived early on Monday, Wednesday and Friday
mornings. He really didn’t need her that often and with little to do, she usually left by noon. But during the time she
was there, he’d found her to be very efficient.

“Yes, Mr. Cody?”

“I’m about to get a visitor.”

“And you want me to send them away,” she said quickly, assuming what would be his position on unwelcome
guests.

In most circumstances she wasn’t far off the mark, but in this case, the last thing he wanted was Vanessa sent
away. “No. I want you to do whatever it takes to encourage her to stay. I’m going upstairs to change and will be
back down in a minute.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And in case it comes up in conversation, I prefer that you not give her my name.”

If Martha found his request strange, her expression didn’t show it. “All right.”

With adrenaline of the strongest kind rushing through his veins, Cameron turned and left the room.

Vanessa stood, stretched and for the third time dismissed the idea of leaving before officially meeting her
neighbor. She’d only rung his bell once when the door had been opened by an elderly lady with a huge smile who’d
introduced herself as Martha.

Vanessa had given her the spiel of wanting to welcome her sister’s new neighbor, and then, without batting an
eye, the older woman had ushered her inside. That had been a little over five minutes ago. Explaining that the master
of the house would be down shortly, she led Vanessa to the massive living room. A few moments later she had
returned with a tray of hot tea and the most delicious teacakes Vanessa had ever eaten. Then she had excused
herself.

Vanessa glanced around the room, admiring everything she saw and wondering if the decorating was the taste
of the present owner or if, as in the case of Cheyenne’s home, the furnishings had come with the house. Whichever
the case, Vanessa was in awe of the furnishing’s rich design, as well as the cost of the paintings that hung on the
walls. Being best friend to Sienna, who was an interior designer, had acquainted her with the different designs and
style of furniture and it was plain to see everything in the house spoke of wealth.

And then there was this breathtaking view of the ocean through the large floor-to-ceiling window. She could
stand there looking out at that view for hours, but she didn’t have that much time to spare, she thought, glancing at
her watch. The five-minute wait time had stretched to seven, and a part of her refused to be kept waiting any longer.
Besides, each and every time she was reminded of what she had seen of her neighbor yesterday made goose bumps
form on her arms. What if he walked into the room wearing something as skimpy as the swimming trunks he’d had
on yesterday? Or, worse yet, what if he was bold enough to walk into the room wearing nothing at all?

Vanessa felt her face flush at the thought and immediately decided maybe coming here hadn’t been a good idea
after all. She should have waited until their paths crossed on the beach or something. Sighing, she was about to turn
around when she heard a deep husky voice behind her.
“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Vanessa went still. She knew that voice. She knew that sensual texture, that smooth timbre, that silky reverberation. Her throat immediately tightened around the gasp that formed in it. She felt heat flow up her arms as a tingling sensation swept through her at the same time that realization streamed all through her. It was highly unlikely that two men could produce that same sexy sound. It was a voice she’d always thought was meant to seduce, and it could only belong to one man.

She quickly turned around and her gaze clashed with dark eyes, the same dark eyes she often fantasized about at night in the privacy of her bedroom. Before she could utter his name in shock and disbelief, she watched as a small smile touched the corners of his lips right before he spoke.

“Hello, Vanessa. Welcome to my home.”

“Your home?” Vanessa snapped the words as she fought the intense anger that was coursing through her, consuming every part of her body. If this was somebody’s idea of a joke, she wasn’t at all amused. She closed her eyes, hoping this was a bad dream. There was no way Cameron Cody could be here when he was supposed to be in Charlotte. But seconds later, when she reopened her eyes, he still stood across the room, staring at her. She could feel her blood pressure rise.

Her gaze swept over him. His head was clean-shaven, his eyes deep and dark. An angular jaw with a cleft in the chin completed an outrageously handsome face. This was the first time she’d seen him wearing anything other than a business suit or tux, but the jeans and pullover shirt looked good on him. He appeared tall, solid, rugged and impenetrable. And just as yesterday, when she had seen him from a distance, his mere presence denoted some sort of masculine power.

“Yes, my home,” he said, breaking into her thoughts and stepping into the room.

She narrowed her eyes and placed her hands on her hips. “And just when did you buy it?”

“A few days ago,” he replied in a low, controlled voice, a sharp contrast to hers. She was livid and her voice reflected her emotion.

“Please don’t tell me that you bought this house when you found out I was coming here.”

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and met her narrowed gaze. Instead of showing any sign of wilting under her angry stare, he simply said, “Okay, then I won’t tell you.”

Vanessa heard her own teeth gnashing and wondered if he heard it, as well. Angrily, she strode to the center of the room to stand in front of him. “Just who the hell do you think you are?”

She tried not to notice the sexy drawl in his voice when he’d said her name, or the intense look in his eyes. She threw her head back and tilted it at an angle. “I think you are the most ruthless, uncaring, callous, hard-nosed and unfeeling man that I know.”

He nodded slowly and then said, “If you believe that, then it means you really don’t know me very well, because I’m considerate, compassionate, loyal and passionate. I can prove it.”

Of the four qualities he’d named the only one she could believe he had in his favor was passion. “I don’t want you to prove anything. You being here and buying this house only show how far you’ll go to get something you want, something you intend to possess. What is it about me that has become an obsession to you, Cameron? Is it because the Steele Corporation was the one company you couldn’t get your cold, callous hands on and now you’ve decided to go after me for revenge?”

“My wanting you has nothing to do with revenge, Vanessa. It has everything to do with the intensity of my desire for you.”

A part of Vanessa wished he hadn’t said that one word, a word she’d been battling since meeting him. Desire. Cameron Cody wasn’t a man a woman could ignore—at least not a woman with any degree of passion in her bones. There was something about him that grabbed you, snatched your attention the moment he walked into a room. It was something that went beyond just a handsome face and a well-built body. There was something perilous about him, something downright lethal. She was convinced that beneath his civilized side there was a part of him that could be downright ruthless, unrefined and plain old raw. Some women were drawn to such men, but she wasn’t.

“I care nothing about the intensity of your desire for me,” she finally said. “I just want to be left alone.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said I’ve left you alone long enough,” he drawled smoothly and in a way that had those same goose bumps reappearing on her arms. “I’ve given you more time than I’ve given anything I’ve ever wanted.”

Fire flared in Vanessa’s eyes. She couldn’t believe the audacity of the man. “And should I feel grateful about that?”
Cameron moved a step closer. “It’s not gratitude I want you to feel. Right now I want you to feel something else altogether.”

Before she could blink, he stepped closer and pulled her into his arms. His mouth descended upon hers, snatching her next breath. For some reason that she didn’t understand, instinctively her lips parted at the same time she felt strong hands wrap around her. Before she could register anything else, before she could regain total control of what was happening and stop it from going further, Cameron inserted his tongue into her mouth.

The moment she sampled his taste, just as bold and daring as the rest of him, she gasped. Then she moaned deep in her throat when her pulse rate escalated. Suddenly, she felt a spine-tingling sensation race through her body, along with an intense need to put all she had into this kiss.

The kiss was everything she’d hoped it would not be, the kind of kiss that drew her to him like a magnet. It was the kind of kiss that did more than give her a sampling of his taste. It was feeding her in a way she had never been fed before. His invasive tongue was doing things a male tongue had never done in her mouth before, making it an art. With other men, she had considered kissing a chore, something that was expected of you.

But Cameron was taking the art of French-kissing to a whole other level. It was downright scandalous, all the things he was doing. But a part of her didn’t want him to stop. And he was getting her to join in the erotic byplay, something she had never done before.

She felt herself drowning in his sensuality, getting smothered in the passion. And she knew if she didn’t put a stop to this madness now, he would claim a victory; the same way he did with anything else he went after. And she refused to become another one of his claimed possessions.

With more strength than she’d thought she had, she pushed herself out of his arms and inhaled deeply to regain control of her senses. She felt flustered and knew she probably looked it, as well. But to her way of thinking, he maintained a calm demeanor, looking totally in control, programmed and completely at ease. His coolness made her even angrier. It also proved what she’d said earlier. The man had no feelings.

“That should not have happened,” she snapped.

“But it did, and it will again,” he said with strong conviction in his voice. “We are two passionate individuals, Vanessa. The reason you didn’t fight me off just now is because you’ve been aching to taste me just as long as I’ve been aching to taste you. And things won’t stop there, sweetheart. They can only go further.”

“No!”

“Yes. You can’t fight me on this. Becoming mine is inevitable.”

“Like hell!”

A small smile curved his wide mouth. “Actually it’ll be more like heaven. That I promise you.”

She took another step back. “Don’t promise me anything, Cameron. Just stay away from me.”

“Sorry, I can’t do that.”

Her mind registered his words but she refused to accept them. “I will fight you with every breath in my body.”

“You do that. And at the same time I plan on claiming you with every breath in mine.”

“You know nothing about me!”

“But I will. I intend to get to know everything about you, Vanessa. Count on it.”

Knowing that continuing to exchange words with him was a complete waste of her time, she angrily moved around him to leave his home, pausing only to snatch her red straw hat off the table.
“Mr. Cody, what do you want me to do with the basket that Ms. Steele brought?”

Cameron forced his gaze from the window where he watched an angry Vanessa make her way down his palm-tree-lined driveway toward the path that would lead her back to her place. To say she was highly upset with him would be an understatement.

He turned slowly, took a deep breath and let it out before asking, “Where is it?”

“I placed it on the kitchen table.”

“Leave it there. I’ll take care of it.”

“Yes, sir.” She turned to leave.

“And, Martha?”

She turned back to him. “Yes, sir?”

“If Vanessa Steele ever returns, whether I’m here or not, she is welcome.”

He was certain that after overhearing his and Vanessa’s conversation, his housekeeper probably thought that this would be the last place Vanessa would show her face again. However, if those were her thoughts, Martha was keeping them to herself. “Yes, sir,” she said instead. “I’ll make a point of remembering that.” Then she left the room.

Moments later, curiosity drew Cameron to the kitchen to see exactly what Vanessa had put in his gift basket. Like a kid in a candy store he started pulling things out, smiling when he saw the oatmeal raisin cookies she was famous for, the ones he’d heard Morgan rave about so many times.

As he began putting everything back in the basket he saw that her intent was for him to have a picnic without her, since there was just enough of everything for one person to enjoy. That was thoughtful of her. But then, from what he’d learned of Vanessa, she was a rather thoughtful person, which was why she was involved in so many community projects. But, as he’d told her, there was a lot about her he didn’t know, and since he intended to marry her relatively soon, he needed to continue his quest to get to know her.

Ten years ago he had vowed never to become involved in a relationship with even the remotest chance of becoming serious. He had made it a point to be totally honest with women he dated, to let them know up front that there were zero odds that the affair would go anywhere. He was very selective, preferring those women within his social circle. And there were certain things he just didn’t do. He didn’t invite them to functions that included his closest friends. And he never gave one free rein in his home. His home—and he had several—was his sanctuary, his private and personal domain. No woman had permission to invade his place. Until now. As he’d told Martha, Vanessa was welcome to his home at any time. If he was busy, he was to be interrupted; if he was asleep, he wanted to be awakened. It was important that he got his point across to Vanessa that she had become the most important thing in his life.

He leaned back against the counter, thinking about how she’d looked standing in the middle of his living room, as angry as any woman had a right to be. While she was standing there giving him what she saw as a much-deserved dressing down, he was giving her a dressing down of another type. He’d been wondering just what she had on beneath that cute pair of red linen shorts with the matching top. Some of the thoughts that had run through his mind had been outright scandalous. She hadn’t been wearing a bra, he could tell that. But then her breasts were just the right size and shape not to need one. And when he had pulled her into his arms and kissed her, he had known the exact moment her nipples had hardened because he’d felt them press firmly against his chest.

After their kiss, when he’d finally released her lips, he couldn’t help but recall how he’d left them moist and thoroughly kissed. And then there had been that deep, dark, desire-filled look in her eyes, just seconds before they turned fiery red and she began spouting off about him staying away from her. But, as he’d told her, that wouldn’t happen.

He would admit her finding out he had bought this house just to be close to her threw a monkey wrench in things for a while, but he was determined not to give up. Eventually, she would get over it, especially when she saw he wasn’t going away. He intended to use whatever means he found necessary to break down her defenses.

With that in mind he walked out of the kitchen and went to the nearest intercom to summon Martha.

“Yes, Mr. Cody?”

“I want a dozen red roses sent to Ms. Steele. And I want a bottle of wine delivered with the flowers. Have the
card say, ‘Thanks for the basket. I’d love to share its contents, as well as this wine, with you later today on the beach.’”

“Yes, sir.”

Confident the older woman was capable of carrying out his wishes, he headed toward the study.

“Calm down, Vanessa, and stop yelling. I don’t understand a word you’re saying.”

Vanessa inhaled deeply. Sienna was right. She had been yelling. Pausing, she rubbed her cell phone against her cheek to calm nerves that were already shot to hell. She couldn’t believe it. She just couldn’t believe it.

“Now do you want to start over and tell me what has you so upset?”

Sienna’s voice—calm as you please—reminded her why she was so upset. “Cameron is here, Sienna.”

“Here, where?”

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “Here in Jamaica. On this island. Living right next door. He had the audacity, the gall, to purchase the house next door. I am as pissed as any woman can get.”

“I can tell. You’re raising your voice again. Calm down. So, you’re saying he found out you were skipping town and decided to follow you?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying. Just what am I supposed to do about that?”

“Make the most of it.”

“Sienna!”

“Okay, considering how you feel about the man, I guess that wasn’t a good answer.”

“No it wasn’t,” Vanessa said, walking over to the refrigerator and grabbing one of Cheyenne’s beers. “So come up with something else.”

It was only after popping the top off the bottle that she remembered she didn’t like beer. But what the hell, her day was a total waste now anyway. She took a swallow, straight from the bottle, and decided this particular brand wasn’t so bad.

“Okay, but first I want to know how you found out he was there.”

For the next fifteen minutes Vanessa filled Sienna in. It would have taken less time had Sienna not asked so many questions, especially when Vanessa told her about seeing Cameron go skinny-dipping.

“Well,” Sienna said, sighing deeply. “You’ve warned him to stay away from you and if he doesn’t adhere to your request you can have him arrested as a stalker.”

“Sienna!”

“Hey, I’m serious.”

Vanessa rolled her eyes upward. “Cameron doesn’t pose that kind of threat and you know it. He’s merely being a pain in the ass.”

“All right, then, let’s cover one more time why he is such a pain in your rear end. The man is simply gorgeous, any woman can see that. Even I can and you know that I only have eyes for Dane. Cameron has money, plenty of it. And he has manners. He’s refined, sophisticated, intelligent—”

“He’s also in the business of taking people’s companies away from them.”

“Come on, Van. Are you going to hold what he tried doing to the Steele Corporation over his head forever? Business is business. You can’t hate all the corporate raiders out there. Look at Ted Turner, another self-made millionaire who created more jobs than he took away. Corporate takeovers have become a way of life. Besides, look at the number of people who are benefiting from all those foundations Cameron has set up. He’s on the cover of Ebony this month, by the way. You should pick up a copy and read the article. I did. I was impressed.”

“Stay impressed. There’s nothing that man can do that will impress me.”

“It’ll be your loss, and unfortunately another sister’s gain. I bet there are a number of women out there who would love getting a piece of Cameron Cody right now.”

“They’re welcome to him!”

“At some point I believe I’m going to have to remind you that you said that.”

Vanessa rubbed the bridge of her nose, wondering why she’d bothered calling Sienna anyway. For some reason her best friend could actually envision her and Cameron as a couple. How that was possible she didn’t know. Vanessa couldn’t blame Sienna’s pregnancy for destroying her brain cells since Sienna had reached that conclusion long before she’d gotten pregnant.

She took another swallow of beer before saying, “Look, Sienna, talking to you is getting me nowhere. I called you for advice, not for you to take sides with the enemy.”

“I’m not taking sides with the enemy. You are my very best friend and I love you. But I also think you’re so full of dislike for Cameron that you aren’t thinking straight. If you would put your dislike aside and sit down and analyze the situation, I think you would reach the conclusion that what he’s doing is rather cute, as well as bold. I
visited Cheyenne’s place with you last summer so I know what that house next door looks like. Just think about it, Van. He went through all that trouble to buy that place just to be close to you. Why do you think he did that?”

“I already know why he did it. He told me. He wants me.”

“And is that so bad?”

“Yes, it’s bad because I refuse to become just another possession to him, one that he goes about obtaining just like his corporations. I refuse to let any man take me over that way.”

“And what way would you want a man to take you over?”

Vanessa tipped the beer bottle up to her mouth and drank a large swallow again. It was only when her eyes started feeling heavy that she recalled another reason she had never liked beer. It had a tendency to make her feel sleepy. “I don’t want to be taken over, Sienna.”

“Okay, then, how about changing the strategy. You take over Cameron.”

“What?”

“Think about it. Evidently he has this well-thought-out plan to win you over. What if you put yourself in position to be the one in charge?”

“In what way?”

“Any way you want. I have an idea what Cameron wants out of this pursuit. I see it in his eyes every time he looks at you. He definitely has thehots for you. And don’t bother denying that you have the hots for him, as well. So, my question to you is this: What’s wrong with an island fling? However, you’ll be in charge, and you’ll make the rules. Men like Cameron don’t like following rules, especially if they’re someone else’s. But with you calling the shots, you’ll be the one to decide what you want to do with him in the end, instead of the other way around.”

Sienna’s words reminded Vanessa of Harlan, and she was aware that her best friend knew they would. “Harlan Shaw screwed up your mind, Vanessa, but it’s going to take a man like Cameron to screw it back on right. You can’t see it so I won’t waste my time saying it again. But I’m your best friend and I know what’s going on in that head of yours. I also know what’s going on in that body of yours. It’s been almost four years since you’ve been with anyone. Cameron is available, he turns you on, so why not make the most of it?”

Vanessa glanced at the bottle and thought it must be the beer, because for one brief moment she was actually considering what Sienna had said. She shook her head, refusing to consider the suggestion.

“Look, Sienna, I’m feeling sleepy. I need to go lie down.”

“Sleepy? Isn’t it the middle of the day there?”

“Yes, but I just overindulged in a bottle of beer,” she said, placing the empty bottle on the counter beside her.

“Okay, go to bed. But just think of how much more fun it would be if Cameron could join you there. Aren’t you tired of sleeping alone? Aren’t your inner muscles aching for a little hanky-panky?”

“Goodbye, Sienna,” Vanessa said, not bothering to answer the questions.

“Goodbye, Van. Love you.”

“Love you, too. But there are days I wished you weren’t my best friend.”

Even after Vanessa clicked off the line, she could still hear Sienna laughing.
Chapter 4

Hours later when Vanessa opened her eyes she glanced around her bedroom. The first thing she noticed was that the sun had gone down. Then as she pulled herself up in bed she felt those inner muscles Sienna had teased her about earlier. They were actually aching.

She quickly blamed it on the beer she’d drunk, which would also be the reason she’d conjured up that hot and heavy dream she’d had. In her dream she and Cameron had made love on the beach, under a beautiful blue sky. She had felt the soft sand beneath her back while he loomed over her, touching and tasting her everywhere before finally taking his place between her legs.

She quickly sucked in a deep breath, forcing the memory of the dream to the back of her mind. Getting out of bed, she walked over to the window and looked out toward the beach, watching how the waves hit the shore, how the seagulls flew overhead and how—

Her breath caught when she saw a lone figure jog by, invading her line of vision. Her achy inner muscles clenched when she recognized Cameron, wearing the skimpiest pair of jogging shorts she’d ever seen on a man. Her gaze followed him. Although she was still upset over what he’d pulled, she couldn’t discount the fact that Cameron Cody had a great body to go along with his handsome face. She might be mad but she definitely wasn’t blind. She could appreciate a nice piece of male flesh no matter what her anger level was.

Keeping her gaze focused on him as he ran at an even pace, she couldn’t help but admire his muscular shoulders, broad chest, firm stomach, healthy thighs and strong legs. Those were the same legs that in her dream had wrapped around her thighs to hold her down when he entered her body over and over again.

And, as if her dream wasn’t bad enough, there was the memory of the kiss they had shared earlier, so intense and more passionate than any kiss she’d ever experienced. He was a master kisser to whom every nerve and cell in her body had greedily responded.

Even now she could feel heat seeping through all parts of her body just thinking about it. His tongue had known just what it was supposed to do and had done it well. He had tumbled her resistance the same way the Berlin Wall had met its downfall. Whenever she thought of his mouth locked to hers, and the wicked and sensuous things he could do with that tongue, all those achy parts of her body acted up.

Vanessa forced herself to take a deep breath and then let it out. She felt so hot, her brow damp, that she wondered if the air conditioner was working. When the view of Cameron was lost among the thicket of palm trees, she moved away from the window, deciding to take a shower before going downstairs to meet with Helen before she left. Today was market day and there were a couple of items she wanted Helen to pick up. Beer being one of them.

As long as Cameron was her neighbor, Vanessa refused to share the private beach with him. If she had to remain inside for the rest of her stay in Jamaica, that would suit her just fine, because she would not give him the time of day…although certain parts of her body relentlessly pushed for her to do that and more.

Vanessa picked up the scent of the flowers the moment she walked down the stairs. She glanced across the room to see the huge vase of red roses on the living-room table.

“Where did those come from?” she asked Helen upon reaching the last stair.

Busy dusting, the housekeeper didn’t pause or look up when she said, “They arrived a few hours ago. Aren’t they pretty?”

Vanessa had to agree, although she really didn’t want to, especially when she had an idea who sent them.

“They came with a bottle of wine.”

Vanessa lifted a brow. “Wine?”

“Yes. I placed it on the kitchen table.”

Vanessa walked over to the roses. They were simply gorgeous. The blooms were full, and the petals looked healthy and silky. Seeing the flowers reminded her of her father. His garden was full of flowers of all types, but especially roses.

She knew his death as a result of lung cancer was the reason she had been so gullible that summer she’d met Harlan. She had needed affection and unfortunately had looked for love in the wrong places and with the wrong man. She would not be making that same mistake again.

She pulled off the card and read it, confirming her suspicions. After everything she’d said, Cameron still had
the nerve to invite her to a rendezvous on the beach later.

“I’m leaving in a few minutes, Ms. Steele. Is there anything you want me to pick up for you from the market?”

Vanessa glanced up at Helen. “Yes, there are a few things I need.”

A few minutes later she had given Helen her list. Before the older woman could walk out the door she called out to her. “And, Helen?”

She turned. “Yes?”

“If you happen to see a copy of Ebony magazine on the rack, grab one for me, please.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll do that.”

Once Helen had left, closing the door behind her, Vanessa shrugged her shoulders. Okay, so she was curious about the article on Cameron. But curiosity meant nothing. It would be a cold day in hell before another man got the best of her again.

Especially him.

“So, how are things going, Cameron?”

Cameron glanced around at what were fast becoming familiar surroundings as he talked on the phone to his friend Morgan Steele. “Vanessa knows I’m here,” he said slowly after taking a sip of his wine.

“Umm, and how did she take it?”

“Like we both knew she would. Let’s just say I’m not her favorite person right now.”

Morgan’s chuckle vibrated over the mobile phone. “I hate to tell you but you’ve never been her favorite person. You’ve always been her least-liked person.”

Cameron couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, Morgan, for being so brutally honest.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

After a brief pause and another sip of wine, Cameron said, “I want you to help me understand something, Morgan.”

“Okay, I’ll try.”

“Why does Vanessa take my actions three years ago as a personal affront? You and your brothers, as well as her sisters, were able to get over it. What’s holding her back from doing the same? Is there something I’m missing here? Something you can share with me?”

“No, there’s nothing I know about. The only reason I can come up with is the fact that the Steele Corporation was founded by my father and my uncle, Vanessa’s father. And, as you know, her father died a few years ago. They were very close.”

“You think she feels I was trying to take away his legacy?”

For a moment Morgan didn’t respond and then he said, “At one time that thought did occur to me, but now I’m inclined to think there might be another reason altogether.”

“And what reason is that?”

“Vanessa hasn’t had a man she’s ever gotten serious about, although I do recall her having a couple of boyfriends while she was in college. But there’s never been anyone special, no one she’s brought home for the family to meet. Now that I think of it, I believe her coldness toward you and men in general might be linked to what might have happened to her one summer.”

Cameron paused with his wineglass halfway to his lips. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

“What happened?”

“I don’t really know. None of us do, although I’d bet my money that her best friend Sienna Bradford knows. Right after my uncle died, Vanessa took some time off from her job and went to Europe for a few weeks to get away. We were worried about her and thought the trip would be a good idea. Vanessa, Taylor and Cheyenne were close to their father and took his death hard, but Vanessa took it the hardest. Like her mom, she felt there was something they could have done to make him stop smoking years ago.”

“A smoker will only quit when he’s ready.”

“I know that, but still, it was hard on her. The couple of times she called home from London she seemed to be doing okay, and I’d heard through the grapevine that she’d met someone, some guy who was also vacationing over there. I’d even heard from Cheyenne—or should I say overheard when she and Taylor were deep in conversation one day—that Vanessa fancied herself in love with him. But we all figured she only assumed it was love because she was going through a vulnerable period in her life, and she would come to her senses before doing anything stupid like bringing home a husband. Anyway, the next thing we know, she returns home and to this day she hasn’t mentioned him. None of us even knows his name. The only thing I can figure is that she discovered the guy was playing her, and she cared more for him than he did for her. Most likely that’s why she’s keeping you at arm’s length, to protect her heart. She’s not sure she can trust you and probably feels that you’re trying to take over her
In a way he was, Cameron silently agreed. That was definitely his intent. He wanted her life to become ingrained in his, but he didn’t see that as a negative. He could only see positives, so why couldn’t she?

“I suggest you use another approach,” Morgan continued. “All of us discovered real early that strong-arm tactics don’t work well for Vanessa. I’ve told you that before.”

Morgan had told him that before, but Cameron was used to doing things his way. Now it seemed that his way wasn’t working. “So what do you suggest?” he asked.

“You’re going to have to revamp and do a sneak attack.”

That comment had Cameron laughing. “Like the one you used with Lena?”

“Yeah, like the one I used with Lena. Laugh all you want but I got my woman, didn’t I?”

“Need I remind you that it wasn’t exactly smooth sailing for you, Morgan?”

“No, you don’t have to remind me, but I was still able to make it work.”

Cameron had to agree, since Morgan and Lena had been married a little over a month now. Morgan had also kicked off his campaign for a seat on the city council in Charlotte. “A sneak attack, huh?” he asked.

“Yes. A sneak attack. Let her think that whatever will happen between you two is only for the moment, nothing permanent. If you go into it promising tomorrows, she won’t believe you. Women expect us to have commitment phobia, so let her think what you’re proposing isn’t for the long haul, although you know it really is. Vanessa won’t consider a long-term relationship with a man, but she might be interested in a short-term affair if she was in control and calling the shots.”

Cameron shook his head. Most of the women he knew would jump at the chance of having a permanent relationship with him, given the size of his bank account. “So you think if I use that approach it will work?”

“Yes. Try it and see. Let her assume it’s nothing more than a fling and when it’s over, you’ll go your way and she’ll go hers. Your job is to pull out the Cody charm and get her so taken with you that she won’t want to go anywhere.”

Cameron rubbed his chin as he pondered Morgan’s advice. Then he said, “You do know this is your cousin’s fate you’re plotting, don’t you?”

Morgan chuckled. “Yes, but my brothers and I trust you to do the right thing by her.”

Cameron grinned. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You’re welcome. But if I’m wrong, Cameron, you’ll have us to deal with. Understood?”

“Yes, Morgan. I understand completely.”

Sitting down at the kitchen table, Vanessa resigned herself to the inevitable, taking the time to read the article on Cameron. Helen had put away the items she’d picked up at the market and had placed Ebony on the table in full view.

It didn’t help matters that Cameron’s picture—in living, vibrant color—was on the cover. Nor that the photographer’s close-up sent a fluttery feeling all through her insides and had blood rushing through her veins. Cameron had been caught in a rare moment with a smile curving the corners of his lips. She would rather not admit that he looked so sexy that she had stared at the cover for too long before turning it facedown.

Vanessa sighed as she turned it faceup, and once again his picture sent tingly sensations all over her skin. One thing she’d discovered since that day three years ago was that Cameron was what fantasies were made of. She of all people should know, since he was a nightly invader into her dreams.

Deciding to get it over with, she opened the magazine and immediately flipped to page thirty-nine. Ignoring another picture of him—this one showing him entering the doors of one of the many corporations he’d taken away from someone—she began reading.

A short while later Vanessa pushed away from the table as she closed the magazine. Okay, she would be the first to admit it was a well-written article. As head of the public relations department at the Steele Corporation, she understood the importance of projecting a positive image, as well as a beneficial relationship with the public, and the article had definitely done that.

It showed a side of Cameron few probably got to see—his compassionate side. His philanthropic actions included establishing numerous foundations to help those less fortunate. Most of them Vanessa hadn’t known about, but some, such as the Katrina Relief Fund, she was aware of; he had solicited her cousins’ involvement in that particular project. Under Cameron’s leadership and direction, several construction companies had rebuilt homes in New Orleans so the evacuees could return and reestablish their lives. According to the article, Cameron, acting as pilot, had gotten his private jet into the stricken city of New Orleans to provide aid and relief long before the federal government had arrived.
One thing the article hadn’t focused on was how many companies Cody Enterprises had taken over in the past years, and how many people had lost their jobs because of those takeovers. There was no doubt in her mind that he was a man who liked being in total control, and he would handle any of his personal relationships the same way he handled his business.

Even when kissing her earlier today, he hadn’t taken anything slowly. He had seen an opportunity and seized it. He had seen what he wanted and gone after it. With him there would be no compromise. It would be all or nothing, and only on his terms.

She walked around the house, pulling down the blinds. When she walked into the living room she couldn’t help but stare at the roses. No doubt there was a purpose behind Cameron sending them. He probably assumed that this was the first step in breaking down her defenses, and that the next time he saw her she would be easier to bend his way. If that’s what he thought, he definitely had another think coming.

She glanced out the window, realizing how much she’d missed spending any time on the beach today. Suddenly, the stubborn streak within her decided not to let Cameron’s presence keep her from enjoying her time here. Tomorrow she would get up, pack a lunch and spend the day on the beach. She’d meant what she’d said when she’d told Cameron she wanted to be left alone.

Now she would see how good he was at following orders.
Chapter 5

The man wasn’t good at following orders, Vanessa concluded the very next morning when she opened the front door to find Cameron standing there. Evidently he hadn’t taken her seriously.

“What do you want, Cameron? I thought I told you to stay away from me,” she said glaring at him.

“You did and I recall telling you that I wouldn’t.”

He leaned against the bamboo post, seemingly completely at ease. She watched him slip his hands into the pockets of his shorts and wished he hadn’t done that. It drew her attention to what he was wearing—a muscle shirt and a pair of denim shorts that emphasized his masculine physique. She touched her stomach when her inner muscles became achy, and released a moan.

“Are you okay?”

Her glare deepened. “No, I’m not okay. I don’t like being harassed.”

“And you think that’s what I’m doing? Harassing you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I need to use another approach.”

“What you need to do is turn around, go back to your place and leave me alone.”

He shook his head. “I can’t do that. We need to talk.”

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “We have nothing to talk about since I have nothing to say to you.”

“But I have something to say to you. I’d like to offer you a business proposition.”

Her eyes widened slightly before returning to angry slits. “A business proposition?”

“Yes. One where you’ll be in full control and calling all the shots.”

Before Vanessa’s mind could take in what he had said and dissect what he meant, he added, “I think I need to clear something up right now, Vanessa, something you might have assumed. I’m not interested in a committed relationship…with anyone.”

Now, that really threw her. Not that she was surprised he wasn’t interested in a committed relationship, since most single men weren’t. But it did leave her curious as to why he had been hot on her tail for the last three years. Or was it just as she’d thought? To him it had been a challenge, nothing more than a game he’d had every intention of winning.

Evidently he read the question in her eyes because he responded by saying, “The reason I’ve been pursuing you with such single-minded determination is that I think you’re a very desirable woman and I want you. It’s as simple as that.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. Nothing with Cameron was ever simple. “So you bought a house just to be near me for a couple of weeks because you want me?”

“Yeah, and in a bad way. Three years’ worth of wanting to be exact. I’ve dreamed of having you in my bed every night, and I figured it was time to turn my dreams into reality.”

Although she wished it was otherwise, his words were having a naughty effect on her. Sensations, warm and tingly, began flowing all through her veins, and the salty air from the nearby ocean was getting replaced with his scent, a pungent fragrance that was all man.

“It won’t happen,” she said with conviction.

“What won’t happen?”

“Me, you, together that way.”

“I think it will, because you’re a very passionate woman, although it appears you keep all that passion hidden. I would love to tap into it.”

Hidden passion that he wanted to tap into? She wondered what kind of alcohol he’d been drinking this morning. “Look, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She decided not to tell him that she’d been told by one man just how passionless she was.

“Then let me break everything down for you. Let me make my offer. One that you can accept or reject.”

“And if I reject it?”

“Then I promise to leave you alone for the remainder of your stay here as you’ve requested. In fact, I’ll make arrangements to fly back to the States. But I’m hoping that you will accept it.”

“And if I do?”
“If you do, I will take you on the sexual adventure of your life. Entertain old fantasies and create new ones. I plan to take us both over the edge, and when it’s over, you’ll go your way and I’ll go mine, and I promise not to bother you again.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes, just like that. My offer is that for the remainder of your days here, I will become your sex mate while we indulge in all sorts of wild and wicked play time.”

Vanessa felt her stomach fluttering again. Now she wished she’d had a taste of whatever alcohol he had consumed that morning. She needed it. What he was proposing—although similar in nature to what Sienna had suggested—was crazy, absolutely ludicrous, outright insane. Still, his words refused to stop swimming around in her mind, and, as he stood there on her front porch in the sunlight, looking more handsome than any man had a right to look, she was tempted. Boy, was she tempted.

Pulling on her last bit of control, she said, “And what makes you think I want a sex mate?”

He took a step closer. “Your kiss. A man can tell a lot from a woman’s kiss. Hunger, wariness, pain. I tasted all three. You want me as much as I want you. Being honest with yourself and admitting it is the first step. I can see it even now in your eyes, the heat, the yearning, the need.”

He reached out and took her hand in his. Before she could pull it back, he rubbed his thumb across the underside of her wrist “Feel it here,” he said of her pulse. “Your passion points. They’re beating like crazy and drumming out a message you’ve ignored too long.”

She pulled her hand back. “It’s all in your mind,” she said, then moistened her lips when they suddenly felt dry.

“I don’t think so and I’m willing to prove you wrong.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t want you proving anything.”

“Don’t you? Let’s move on to your wariness. I tasted that, too. You want me, but you don’t fully trust me. You’re confused about where I’m coming from and, more importantly, where I’m going when it’s over. I think I’ve made it clear what I want out of a relationship with you. And it’s not wedding bells. But then I’m sure you feel the same way.”

Before she could respond he continued, “And last but not least, I tasted pain, which is why you probably find it hard to trust me or any other man. But that’s okay. I plan to take the pain away and replace it with pleasure of the most intense kind. After me you won’t even remember your last fling.”

Vanessa studied Cameron carefully. She gazed back into the intense eyes staring at her and felt another tug of her inner muscles. They were getting achier by the minute. Four years was a long time and her body was letting her know it. What Cameron had said wasn’t helping matters. He wanted her for a sex mate. He wanted to tap into what he claimed was her hidden passion.

“Think about my proposition, Vanessa, and if you’re interested in what I’m proposing, meet me on the beach at noon. Like I said, I’ll let you set the parameters and call the shots. Turning over total control to anyone isn’t easy for me, but I’ll do it because I want you that bad. I’ll take you on any terms.”

She swallowed the tightness in her throat. “And what happens after you’ve had me? What if you get tired of me after the first time?” She couldn’t forget that Harlan had done exactly that.

Cameron’s soft chuckle caressed her skin. “Trust me, that’s not possible. I doubt I’ll be tired of you after the first thousand years. But how long the affair lasts will be up to you, and I promise to adhere to your time frame.”

He took a step back. “Think about everything I’ve said and if you’re interested, I’ll see you on the beach at noon.”

As Vanessa watched him walk away she knew she had to get a grip. Over the past three years the man had tilted her world, and now he was proposing to rock it in a way it had never been rocked before. She inhaled deeply, then let the breath out slowly. No, she told herself, the thought of a meaningless fling with Cameron was too much. She wouldn’t even think about it.

She thought about it all morning. Pacing the confines of her sister’s living room, she went through the pros and cons of Cameron’s proposal, and it seemed the pros were tilting the scale.

If he had suggested such a thing five years ago, she would have told him just where he could go. But that would have been her pre-Harlan days, a time when she wanted to believe in romance and a forever kind of love.

She had grown up believing that two people could meet, fall in love and stay together for the rest of their lives, until death did them part. Her parents had done it, and so had her aunt and uncle. And when she had been looking at things through rose-colored glasses, she had wanted that same special love for herself.

But Harlan had taught her one vital lesson in life, something she wouldn’t ever forget: All that glittered wasn’t gold. She was older and smarter now and didn’t look through those rose-colored glasses anymore. After she’d thoroughly analyzed that summer in Europe, the one thing that stood out was how each day Harlan wanted to change
her, mold her into the person he wanted by suggesting certain outfits for her to wear, foods that he preferred she eat and activities he’d rather they did. It was always what he wanted, without any consideration for what she wanted. It had always been about Harlan. He had controlled everything.

Even their lovemaking.

That night he hadn’t asked for any suggestions or ideas. He’d done things his way, mainly for his own satisfaction. And if he thought she had failed in pleasing him, well, if the truth were known, he hadn’t pleased her, either. But at the time she had fancied herself too much in love to care.

Now she did care.

After not having been intimate with a man since Harlan, the thought of a relationship with one just for sex should be a turnoff. But knowing the man involved was Cameron was quite the opposite. He turned her on. Besides, the dynamics of a man-woman relationship weren’t what they used to be. Men, she told herself, no longer courted you. They seduced you.

So what was wrong with seducing them back?

There would be no misunderstandings in their relationship. There would be a beginning and an end. And most importantly, it would be a way finally to get Cameron to leave her alone and a way finally to get the one thing her body needed. A man.

But not just any man.

It needed the man who’d so ruthlessly invaded her dreams, the man who could stare at her from across a room and make heat swell within her. The man who could start her pulse—her pleasure points—to beating in a way that sent blood racing through her veins.

And she would be the one in control.

That was the one thing that appealed to her. How would Cameron react once stripped of control? Once unable to call the shots? He would have a hard time of it, no doubt, but she would enjoy every single minute.

Every single inch of him.

She sighed deeply. Was she crazy to consider such a thing? Or was she crazy not to? She would be going into the affair with both eyes open, with no unrealistic expectations. There would be no future in the brief relationship they shared but at least her celibate days would come to an end. For the rest of her stay on this island, she would put out of her mind that Cameron Cody had to be the most insufferably irritating man she’d ever met and instead concentrate on how he was also the handsomest and sexiest. Being around him, looking into the darkness of his eyes, studying those intriguing lips and knowing what it would feel like being touched by those big, strong hands, being made love to with an intensity that took her breath away, was worth the risk.

For a short while she wouldn’t feel guilty about being so incredibly attracted to him. She would take Sienna’s advice and finally take her “edge off.” And what better person to do it with than a man who was so utterly male? She and Cameron were spontaneous combustion just waiting to explode, just as Sienna claimed.

Besides, it was about time someone taught Cameron a lesson in humility. Not everything in life got played by his terms, his wants and his desires. People weren’t like corporations; he couldn’t just come in and take over their lives because they caught his eye for the moment.

A smile touched the corners of her lips. For the second time in his life Cameron Cody was about to get outdone by a Steele. The first time her family had effectively shown him that family devotion was worth a lot more than his money. Now, with single-minded determination, she intended to show him that there were some things you just couldn’t control. He was about to discover that all his management theories couldn’t be applied to a personal relationship, not even a short-term one.

Whether Cameron realized it, he had met his match.
It was high noon.

For Vanessa, the path leading from Cheyenne’s home down to the beach had never seemed so long. She had changed from the sundress she’d been wearing earlier to a pair of shorts and matching top that were meant to capture Cameron’s full attention, not that she didn’t think she’d had it earlier when he had been standing on her doorstep.

She had seen the way his eyes had roamed over her. She had felt the heat in the gaze that had touched different parts of her body. At the time she’d been so taken aback by his proposal she had dismissed the intensity of his look.

In the future, when it came to him she wouldn’t dismiss anything. She would keep her eyes and ears open, and, more than anything, she would keep her heart intact. She would not make the same mistake with him that she had with Harlan.

As soon as her bare feet touched the heated sand, another kind of heat quickly spread through her. Cameron had laid out a towel on the beach a safe distance from the water, and he had brought the basket she’d given him yesterday. But what caught her eye was the man himself.

He was shirtless, wearing only a pair of khaki shorts. Probably he had on his swimming trunks under the shorts, just like she was wearing her two-piece bathing suit under her outfit.

Regardless of the smell of the ocean water, she discovered the closer she got to him that his scent enveloped her. He was standing, looking out over the ocean with his back to her, but not for one minute did she think he wasn’t aware of her approach. Her gaze traveled over him, appreciating the corded muscles of his back.

When she got within five feet of him, he slowly turned and her gaze automatically latched on to the bare, muscular contours of his chest and the sparse dark hairs covering it. Bringing her gaze back to his face, she watched the corners of his lips tilt in a slow, devastatingly handsome smile, the impact of which she could feel all the way to her womb. It was an intense tug that made her inner muscles clench.

“Thanks for coming,” he said in a low, sexy voice that made her heart begin thumping and made goose bumps rise on her arm. “I’m going to make sure you don’t regret your decision.”

She came to a stop beside him. “We’ll see, Cameron, but first we need to talk, to get a few things straight upfront. I want to make sure we understand each other completely.”

He nodded. “All right. And after we talk I suggest we eat since it’s lunchtime. Do you want to sit here to talk or do you want to walk along the beach?”

The thought of the two of them strolling along the beach together set up a romantic picture in her mind, and she didn’t want to think romance. “We can sit and talk right here.”

The thought of the two of them strolling along the beach together set up a romantic picture in her mind, and she didn’t want to think romance. “We can sit and talk right here.”

He nodded before taking her hand to assist her down on the huge towel. The moment their hands touched, she felt an electric current charge through her body and knew he felt it, as well. He sat down beside her. When one of his bare legs brushed against hers, her heartbeat quickened. The sexual chemistry between them was overpowering. Even if she had had on layers and layers of clothing, she still would have felt his touch. Every fiber of her body was attuned to him, but she was determined to dispel some of that high-voltage sexual tension that gripped them, made her forget about talking and want only to lie on this towel with him, naked, instead.

“What are your rules?”

His words interrupted her thoughts and she glanced over at him. Even sitting there as casual as he wanted to be, he still looked dominating, far more powerful and commanding than she liked.

The sooner she told him just how things would be between them, the better. Then he could take her proposal or leave it. She was inclined to think he would leave it, because a part of her refused to believe he could put total control in her hands.

The next few minutes would tell.

“I want to share an affair with you, Cameron, for the remainder of the time I have left on the island. Twelve days to be exact. During that time I will forget my dislike of you, and I want you to forget your dislike of me.”

“I don’t dislike you. In fact I like you. A lot.”

His words gave her pause, and it took a few moments to regroup her thoughts. “Okay, maybe your feelings for me are not as intense as my feelings for you, but even you would admit we really don’t get along.”

“That was your choice. You turned me down each and every time I asked you out. You refused to get within
ten feet of me.”

Glancing down, Vanessa rubbed the bridge of her nose, wondering how they had strayed off the subject. She decided to use the opportunity to make him see that, unlike in the past, she wouldn’t be putting distance between them now—not as long as she was in control.

“Forget about the past, Cameron, because I’m within ten feet of you now, aren’t I? I’m sitting so close to you, I’m practically in your lap.”

A naughty smile touched his lips when he said in a low voice, “If you want to ease over into my lap, I won’t have a problem with it.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure you won’t, but I need us to finish our discussion.”

“All right.”

“Like I said, we will put the past and our feelings behind us and start on that adventure you alluded to. But at the end of the twelve days, whatever we’ve shared will come to an end. No future. No promises. You will go your way and I will go mine, and if our paths cross again, which I’m sure they eventually will, given your close relationship with other members of my family, we will act as though nothing ever happened between us. There won’t be any repeat or any suggestion of such a thing. When this affair ends, it’s over. Totally and completely. Understood?”

He stared at her for a long moment but she refused to back down or wither under his gaze. She remained quiet and still while he considered her proposal.

Finally he spoke. “Yes, I understand but what happens if—”

When he stopped in midsentence she arched a brow and asked, “If what?”

“If we become addicted to each other. What if the intimacy is so good and we get so embodied into each other’s systems that we don’t want things to end? What if—”

Not wanting to hear any more, Vanessa reached out and pressed her fingers to his lips to silence his next words. She wished she hadn’t when the tip of his tongue lightly flicked across her fingers.

The action made her gasp, nearly took her breath away. But for some reason she couldn’t pull her hand back. She stared at him, felt those same inner muscles clench again at the heated lust forming in his eyes. Then she wondered if such a thing was possible. Could she possibly become sexually addicted to him? Or was he thinking too much of himself? There was no doubt in her mind that he probably could whip up some delicious sexual fantasies, but...an addiction? She shook her head. That couldn’t and wouldn’t happen.

She moistened her lips as she pulled her fingers away from his mouth, but not before his tongue flicked out for one more quick taste. She watched as he took that same tongue and licked his lips as if he had enjoyed the taste of her.

“It won’t happen,” she finally said, barely getting the words out. “I’ve never gotten addicted to anything in my life.”

“Maybe the reason you’ve never gotten addicted is because you’ve never overindulged. For the next twelve days, with me, you will.”

She saw something flicker in his eyes and for some reason she suddenly felt on her guard. “It doesn’t matter. I won’t get addicted.”

She watched as his gaze dropped to her mouth and he said, “But if, when our affair is over you find you still want me, just let me know and I will make myself available. Anytime, anyplace and any position.”

A wave of heated desire, larger than one of the waves forming out in the ocean, shot through her. Any position? Just what kind of fantasies had he conjured up for the next twelve days?

Vanessa had to struggle against the excitement that tried grabbing her in its clutches. He had painted one hell of a picture; the imagery was too sensual even for a graphic artist to try his hand at it. Someday, when this affair was over, she would wonder just how she got through it with all her senses intact.

Had she perhaps bitten off more than she could chew? But then she remembered that she would be the one in control. He couldn’t do any more than she let him. She had the last word.

Struggling to regain power of her senses, she said, “Thanks for the offer but I don’t intend to use it.”

“That will be your choice, Vanessa, but it’s out there if you change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

He gave her a look that said, “we’ll see.” “And another thing, Vanessa, just so you don’t accuse me of having an ulterior motive later, I might as well tell you that I’ve decided to make Charlotte my primary home.”

His words shocked the hell out of her and she was grateful she was sitting down. It had been bad enough to endure his occasional trips to the city, but the thought of him setting up permanent residence in her hometown was too much.

“Why?” she snapped. “Why are you moving to Charlotte?”
“I happen to like the town. I own several homes, most of them in the areas where I have extensive business interests—Atlanta, Austin and Los Angeles—and of course, now this place here. But the home I recently purchased in Charlotte is where I intend to stay most of the time.”

“Exactly where in Charlotte? What side of town?” she asked, clearly annoyed.

“The same subdivision where Morgan lives. I like the area and the homes there.”

She nodded. So did she. It was a very beautiful area and the homes, all in the million-dollar range, were simply breathtaking. At least he would be living on the opposite side of town, quite a distance from her, so the chances of their paths crossing too many times were low enough not to worry about now.

“Well, I’m trusting you to stay on your side of town and I’ll stay on mine,” she said.

He smiled. “Don’t worry. Charlotte is big enough for both of us,” he said, standing.

She gazed up at him, hoping that it was.

“Now that we’ve come to an understanding about a number of things, do you want to go for a walk before we have lunch? Of course, the decision is yours,” he said smoothly.

Walk? Vanessa thought, smiling humorlessly. He wants to go for a walk? She would have thought that a man like Cameron would immediately initiate his role as her sex mate by suggesting that they go to one of the houses and get it on. Was he trying to throw her off by using a different strategy?

She regarded him for a moment and was about to pull herself to her feet when he reached out his hand to her. His fingertips grazed her knuckles before his hand tightened around hers, effortlessly tugging her up. Trying to downplay the stirrings she felt between her thighs, she said in a tight voice, “A walk sounds like a good idea. It’s a nice day out.”

“Yes, it is.”

He surprised her even more when he kept her hand tucked in his as they began strolling along the shoreline. She glanced up at him, and he looked at her and slanted a crooked smile before asking, “Is anything wrong?”

Nothing other than that I can actually feel my heart leaping in my chest, she thought. But instead she said, “No, nothing’s wrong. But I would like to know something.”

“What?”

“Who told you that I was coming here? Although I have an idea.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Umm, how would you like to go to dinner?”

She shook her head, knowing what he was trying to do. “You’re trying to avoid my question.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

He glanced sideways at her and gave her an easy grin. She had seen more smiles from him in the past few hours than she’d thought possible. “You’re right. I am avoiding your question. But I won’t reveal my sources.”

“I think I know who it was.”

He chuckled. “But you’re not sure so leave it alone.”

“I can’t. I want to know who told you I was coming here.”

“Why?”

“So I can deal with him.”

Cameron chuckled. “Are you sure it’s a he?”

She glanced over at him. “Pretty much.”

“You’re only guessing, Vanessa, and I’m not telling you. Now back to my earlier question of how you want to spend dinner?”

She wondered why he was asking. Did he have an idea? She decided to play her hunch. “I don’t know. Any suggestions?”

“Yes. There’s a concert tonight on the beach of the Half Moon Royal Villas. I think you might like it since I understand you enjoy reggae music.”

Irritation stiffened her spine. Someone had again given him information about her. He evidently felt her displeasure and glanced down at her. “Why does it bother you that someone mentioned that to me?”

She stopped walking and turned to him. “Because that meant I was the topic of your conversation, and I’m not sure I like that.”

Cameron stared at Vanessa, resisting the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her. He wanted to indulge in the taste he’d sampled. Instead he said, “I think we need to clear the air about something. I’ve wanted you from the first moment I saw you, but I’m sure you know that already. And because I wanted you, I became fixated on knowing all there was about you, so I asked questions. Trust me, if my sources thought I was asking for the wrong reasons, they
would not have told me anything.”

“And you think wanting to know everything about me for the mere reason of sleeping with me is the right
reason?”

Cameron smiled blandly. He had decided after talking to Morgan on the phone yesterday that he would modify
his sneak-attack plan. When possible, he intended to be as honest as he could with her. Because of that, it would
only be fair that she knew how much he’d wanted her initially.

“Yes, I think so. I’m a private person. I don’t bring a lot of people into my life and I have established a certain
standard for the women I date.”

He saw the frown that appeared on Vanessa’s face. Evidently she didn’t like the thought of being grouped with
the other women he dated. In the past he had always enjoyed a pretty healthy sex life, making sure no woman got
close. But with Vanessa he had wanted more than a toss between the sheets. He had wanted a whole hell of a lot
more and he still did.

“I saw my relationship with you as different,” he said honestly. “With someone else it might not have mattered
what was her favorite food, her taste in music or her favorite sports, but when it came to you, it mattered.”

“So?”

“Because, like I said earlier, and I’ve been saying now, I wanted you, and the depth of that want went beyond
anything I’ve ever known. I’ve never been attracted to a woman this much before.”

Vanessa shrugged. “It was probably the challenge. You didn’t get the Steele Corporation so you decided to go
after a Steele.”

Cameron shook his head. “First you accuse me of seeking revenge. Now it’s the thrill of a challenge. It’s
neither of the two. You’re a very desirable woman, Vanessa. Why is it so hard for you to believe that?”

Morgan had mentioned something about the possibility of a man screwing up her life one summer a few years
ago and since that time she hadn’t dated much. Had the man done or said something to make her question her
appeal, her femininity? If that was the case, he would make sure in the coming days that he did the opposite. The last
thing Vanessa Steele needed to worry about was whether a man actually found her desirable.

“It’s hard for me to believe because I know how men are. I have four older male cousins, remember.”

“Yes, but three of them are happily married, so what’s your point?”

She evidently took offense at his question. Her frown deepened. “My point is that while they’re happy now,
there was a time they dated frequently with no thought of settling down.”

“And are you saying that women don’t date frequently? I know some women who are just as bad as men when
it comes to getting what they want, using whatever means possible.”

She glared at him. “We aren’t talking about women. We’re talking about men.”

Cameron raised a brow. “Are we? And why is that?”

Vanessa inclined her head to get a better look into Cameron’s face and to keep the glare of the sun out of her
eyes. “I don’t know why that is and I would appreciate it if you didn’t confuse me.”

In that instant Cameron knew only one thing for sure: He had to kiss her. The way she had tilted her head back
made her lips too accessible and he had a deep, compelling need to ravish them, kiss her crazy. Every nerve in his
body was pushing him to do just that, so he leaned closer.

Evidently she picked up on his intent but didn’t take a step back. Instead their gazes held, locked. She tried
clearing her throat lightly and said, “You never finished telling me about the plans for dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes. I think that’s what we should be concentrating on.”

His gaze moved from her eyes back onto her mouth. If she thought she could get him thinking about anything
other than kissing her, she was wrong. Leaning closer, he said huskily, “The only thing I want to concentrate on,
Vanessa, is your mouth.”

“Cameron…” When his lips touched hers, his name became a shuddering breath from her mouth.

The last time they kissed he had tried zapping her of her senses, but this time he wanted to take things slow and
tender. She parted her mouth beneath his and the moment she did so, he drank of her greedily but in a leisurely and
unhurried way. He wanted every dip, swipe and lick of his tongue to solicit a reaction from her, a sensuous response.
And if for one minute she thought she wouldn’t get addicted to this, then he intended to prove otherwise. He had
gotten addicted to her even before their first kiss. Her scent had been his downfall, but he could admit that her taste
was doing a close second.

The kiss was incredible. It was heated and it made a tortured groan escape his throat when she began returning
it, tangling her tongue with his, making an already heated situation even hotter.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer to fit into him. He felt her bare legs rub against his, felt the
hardened tips of her breasts press against his bare chest, and he felt the hardness of his erection settle between her
thighs. And when he heard her moan, blood rushed through his veins.

Cameron knew that if they didn’t stop soon he would be tempted to lay her down on the beach, right here, and make love to her, to claim her as he wanted. He wanted to say to hell with a sneak attack. He wanted to operate on the got-to-have-you-now strategy but knew that he couldn’t. Contrary to what she thought, he was fighting for long-term here and he intended to get it.

With that thought in mind, he drew back and heard her soft, breathless protest when he did so. He gazed down at her swollen lips, and the eyes that met his looked drugged in the most passionate way.

He knew he should say something, anything, or else he would be devouring her mouth once again. “I think the Tapas restaurant would be nice.”

It took a second for her to comprehend that he had spoken. “For what?” she asked softly.

He smiled and wondered if she realized her arms were still wrapped around his neck and she was inching her lips closer to his.

“For dinner,” he said throatily, deciding to inch his lips closer to hers, as well. “We can do dinner there and then do the concert. What do you think?”

Instead of answering him, she released a whimper the moment her lips touched his, reconnecting with his mouth again. As far as he was concerned, if they kept this up they could forgo dinner and just feast on each other; especially when he felt her taking the lead by wrapping her tongue around his.

He might work hard at making her addicted to this, but for him, things were even worse. For the past three years, Vanessa had been a fascination to him. Now she was fast becoming an obsession.
Chapter 7

It was a beautiful evening, Vanessa thought, as she leaned back against the headrest, feeling the wind off the ocean gently caress her face. She was in Cameron’s convertible sports car as they made their way down the narrow beach road toward the restaurant where they would be having dinner.

She had to admit that her noontime meeting on the beach with him had gone well. After their walk they had returned to the towel and shared lunch. Their conversation had mostly been about the new addition to the Steele family, a beautiful little boy named Alden who had been born to Chance and Kylie, who had joined his teenage son and her teenage daughter together into an amazing blended family. They also talked about Morgan’s bid for political office and how Cameron intended to be a part of Morgan’s campaign staff. After they had finished eating, Cameron had walked her back to her place and, with nothing more than a peck on the cheek, he’d left.

“I never did thank you for the roses. They’re beautiful,” she said, finally breaking the silence surrounding them in the two-seater vehicle. “And the wine was a nice touch.”

He gave a quick glance over at her. “You’re more than welcome for both.”

When silence settled between them again she decided to ask, “Is this car yours or is it a rental?”

“It’s mine. I purchased it the first day I arrived, and I plan to keep it here on the island to use whenever I’m here. Do you like it?”

She smiled. “Yes, actually I do. Morgan bought a sports car for Lena as a wedding gift, but I’m sure you know that.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I know. It’s a nice set of wheels.”

Vanessa nodded in agreement. “Lena said she’d always wanted one, but had always stuck to purchasing something practical. Morgan decided to indulge her and she loves it.”

“And he loves her.”

Vanessa glanced over at Cameron. He sounded so sure of that, but then everyone was aware of how Morgan felt about his wife. He wasn’t ashamed to wear his heart on his sleeve. Neither were Chance and Sebastian. They had been fortunate enough to meet women who were worth every ounce of their love, and since getting to know them and seeing what beautiful people Kylie, Lena and Jocelyn were, both inside and out, Vanessa understood why.

Deciding to keep the focus of the conversation on anyone but them, she said, “At what point do you think he fell in love with her?”

She had heard the story of how Morgan had been swept off his feet the moment Lena had walked into the ballroom at some charity function, but since Cameron and Morgan were close friends she wanted to hear his thoughts.

“According to Morgan, he fell for her the first time he saw her. Instant love. I understand it can happen that way sometimes.”

“Do you really believe that?”

They had arrived at the restaurant and Cameron noticed he was behind a few other cars waiting for valet parking. He turned to Vanessa, thinking that she had asked a good question and he wanted her to see the similarities between their situation and Morgan and Lena’s.

“Yes. I believe a man can meet a woman and fall in love the moment he sets eyes on her.” He could tell by the gentle lift of her brow that she was surprised by his response.

“That’s interesting to hear you say that. Please elaborate.”

He smiled. He’d figured she would want him to. “There’s really nothing to elaborate on, Vanessa. Contrary to what some women think, all men aren’t horrid.”

“Women don’t think all men are horrid.”

“Maybe not all of you, but enough of you do to give some of us a bad rap. All it takes is for one man to mess up, and the masses of your gender assume the next one will do the same.”

She straightened in her seat, her body going on the defensive as she frowned at him. “Are you saying if the roles were reversed that a man wouldn’t be just as cautious? That a man wouldn’t protect his heart from further pain?”

Cameron smiled weakly, remembering that he was currently at that stage in his own life. Stacy McCann had definitely done a job on him when she’d claimed that although she loved him, she had to obey her father and marry a
man who’d been born into wealth instead of considering marriage to Cameron—a man her father referred to as a “young punk with pipe dreams.”

“No,” he said. “All I’m saying is that at some point you have to move on and take another chance, risk all.” At least to a certain degree.

He didn’t utter those last words but he definitely believed them. He was certain he could not totally and completely give his heart to another woman ever again. But what he could do for Vanessa was to pledge her his undying devotion. While he hadn’t felt love the moment he’d seen her, he’d felt an instant attraction, the kind he’d never before experienced. Vanessa might not have his love but she would have the next best thing.

“Dinner was wonderful, Cameron,” Vanessa said as they sat in what she thought had to be one of the most exquisite restaurants on the island. In addition to the exceptional food and service, they’d been seated at a table with a breathtaking view of the ocean.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Cameron said, taking a sip of his wine. “It came highly recommended.”

She didn’t have to ask by whom since Chance and Kylie had come here on their honeymoon, and had raved about what a fantastic time they’d had. They had stayed at the Half Moon Royal Villas, where she and Cameron would be going later for the concert on the beach.

Feeling Cameron’s eyes on her, she glanced across the table. The moment their gazes connected, a shimmering heat flowed all through her, pooling in the lower part of her body. Earlier, while they were eating and exchanging polite conversation, she had allowed herself to relax a little and let her guard down. Now, seeing the intense look in his eyes, she quickly pulled her guard back up.

His look was more than just intense, it was purposeful. The lighting of the restaurant played along his features, highlighting his angular jaw, cleft chin and sexy lower lip. Then there was something about the slickness of his bald head that gave him such a manly appeal. He looked so good in the tailored trousers and a white shirt that when she’d opened the door to him earlier, he had momentarily taken her breath away.

She continued to study his lower lip while she gently traced the stem of her wineglass, thinking just what she would like to do with those lips. She’d never been a woman who felt comfortable making the first move, but she felt like doing so now. Besides, he was her sex mate and she was in full control and calling the shots. The big question was whether she was going to use that control. Could she ask him to make love to her as if it was nothing more than asking him to pass the butter?

She swallowed tightly, feeling the intense heat and awareness of the unbroken eye contact they were sharing. Why was she just now noticing things about him, things she hadn’t taken time to notice before? Like the long lashes that covered his dark eyes, the pearly white teeth that seemed so perfect and straight, or the way he could never keep his fingers still for long. They were either holding something or drumming restlessly on the table.

“Ready to go?” he asked, his voice seemingly gentle.

“To the concert?”

“Yes. But if you prefer to call it an early night—”

“No,” she said quickly, calling herself a coward. “I’m looking forward to the concert.”

“All right.”

She took another sip of her wine. Why couldn’t she have told the truth? Yes, I prefer calling it an early night, so we can go back to my place or yours and tumble between the sheets. But she hadn’t, and it wasn’t a good idea for her to even think it.

Moments later, while they waited for their check, she decided to ask, “Have you moved into your place in Charlotte yet?”

The corners of his lips tipped into a smile. “No. That’s the reason I was coming to Charlotte, to spend a few days getting settled.”

“And you changed your plans to follow me here?”

“Yes.”

Vanessa shook her head, still not sure what to make of that. “You’ll have a lot to do when you get back.”

“I’ll manage.”

Probably with hired help, she thought. Before she could think of another topic to keep the conversation going, the waiter returned with their check. She watched as Cameron signed off on the bill while thinking just how little she knew about him other than what she’d read in the newspaper or, more recently, in that magazine.

He was a high-school dropout who had gotten himself together to end up graduating cum laude from Harvard Business School. A self-made millionaire, he was one of the most successful men in the country.

She hadn’t noticed that the waiter had gone, and she was still sitting there staring at Cameron. When she did realize it, she saw that he was staring back at her. For a moment she couldn’t breathe and it felt as if her heart was
pounding in her chest.

“Are you ready to leave now, Vanessa?”

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and she saw it move, but for the life of her she had no idea what he’d said. Her mind, her thoughts, her entire body were centered on him and on how, just by looking at her, he could make a compelling need thicken inside of her.

“Vanessa?”

“Yes?”

A smile touched those full, irresistible lips. “I asked if you were ready to leave for the concert.”

Sighing deeply, she nodded. She would go to the concert, but all she’d do was think about what would happen between them later.

Some women, Cameron thought, were meant to be made love to, day and night, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Vanessa Steele was that kind of woman.

He was standing in line at the bar to get a refill on their drinks and couldn’t help but stare at her. She was standing, leaning against a palm tree, listening to the music, her body swaying to the reggae beat.

He had been on edge all night, ever since picking her up. She had come to the door wearing a peasant blouse that hung off her shoulders and a matching skirt whose hem came to her ankles. And she had the cutest-looking sandals on her feet. He had been tempted to kiss her then and there and suggest they forgo dinner and the concert and go somewhere and make love.

But he hadn’t made such a suggestion. Instead he had taken her hand and led her to his car, all the while knowing this would be one hot night for him in more ways than one.

The need for her was sharp and compelling. He wanted to touch her all over, kiss her all over, make love to her inside and out. Each thought intensified his need, his desire. Raw, primitive passion clawed at him. He could no longer hold it beneath the surface. It was there, forcing its way free, gripping him, slicing through him.

As if she felt the heat of his eyes on her, she glanced in his direction and their gazes connected and then locked—something they’d done a lot tonight. At that moment a deep, intense sensation sent flames flaring through him and he knew he had to leave with her. Now.

“What would you like to have, sir?”

He blinked when he realized the bartender had asked him a question. He broke eye contact with Vanessa to glance at the man long enough to say, “Nothing.”

The only thing he wanted to have was Vanessa. He turned to stride back to her, hoping that she would take his suggestion that they leave now.

Vanessa watched as Cameron began walking toward her, his eyes locked with hers. Even across the distance she felt his heat and read the intense look in his gaze. His shoulders looked massive and he appeared larger than life with every step he took. There was a profound sexiness about him. The way his pants fit his body had her mesmerized because she could tell when she glanced below his waist that he was aroused. From what? Just looking at her? Hidden fantasies in his mind?

She was glad that everyone else around them was caught up in the concert and didn’t notice that she and Cameron were caught up only in each other. The closer he got the more she could feel her heart thundering, beating wildly in her chest. She no longer wondered how their night would end. He was painting a very clear picture.

“Our drinks?” she asked, when he finally reached her empty-handed.

“I think we need more than alcohol to cool off,” he said huskily, reaching out and gently drawing her to him.

She met his heated gaze. “Do we?”

“Yes.”

She then surprised Cameron by placing her arms around his neck, bringing her body up close to his. He knew there was no way she couldn’t feel his erection, the intensity of his desire for her. Hell, she probably had noticed it when he was walking back toward her.

“And what do you think we need, Cameron Cody?” she asked, breaking into his thoughts.

The corners of his lips turned up slightly as he stared down at her. Then he leaned close to her ear and whispered, “I think we need to go someplace where we can be alone.”

She gazed into his eyes for several long moments before saying softly, “I think you’re right.”
Chapter 8

“Would you like to see the progress that’s been made on Cheyenne’s pool, Cameron?”

No. Not really, Cameron thought as he leaned against the closed door. He dug his hands into the pockets of his trousers and watched as Vanessa crossed the room, her skirt twirling in fluid motion around her legs when she walked.

The ride from the concert had been the hardest drive he’d ever made. More than once he’d been tempted to pull to the side of the road, tug her into his arms and start something that he could handle a lot better in a bedroom. Right now the last thing he was interested in seeing was a swimming pool under construction.

“Cameron?”

When he hadn’t answered, she turned and was looking at him with one beautifully arched eyebrow raised. He could tell she was nervous and that it would be to his advantage to do whatever it took to make her comfortable. And if that meant seeing her sister’s pool then so be it.

Pulling his hands out of his pockets, he stepped a little farther into the room. “Yes, I’d like to see it.” He then tilted his head in the general direction where he figured the pool to be and said, “Isn’t it dark out back?”

“With the flip of a switch the area will become well lit.”

Great.

“All right, then, show me.”

He followed as she led him through the living room where she opened a set of French doors. The scent of the ocean immediately filled their nostrils, but it was her scent that was driving him wild, and it had done so all evening.

When he followed her onto the patio, she flipped a switch and, true to her word the area lit up and he saw it—a huge cemented hole in the ground. “When I first arrived they were just digging it out,” she was saying. “Now it’s begun to take shape. Already I can tell it’s going to be beautiful.”

He shook his head and his mouth curled into a smile. “Pools aren’t beautiful, Vanessa. People are beautiful.”

Thinking they had wasted enough time already, he crossed the patio to where she was standing staring out at the pool. When he reached her he took her hand in his and turned her to him. His gaze took in the features of her face, moving from her dark eyes, her high cheekbones, her delicious-looking mouth and back to her eyes again.

“You are beautiful,” he said in a deep, husky voice.

She shook her head. “You’re either seeing things or have bad eyesight.”

“It’s neither,” he said, reaching out and gently looping his arms around her shoulders and taking a step closer, bringing their bodies right smack against each other. “I know beauty when I see it, Vanessa, and you are beautiful.”

She sighed, and he knew she’d figured it would be a waste of time to argue with him, so she said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

At that moment a million scenarios began filling Cameron’s mind, all of them fantasies or dreams in which she was a willing participant. His dreams were what had kept him going even when it seemed Vanessa’s icy attitude toward him would never melt. Now he was ready to turn one of those dreams—didn’t matter which one since there were many—into reality.

He decided to take things slow and dipped his head to brush a kiss across her lips. “I like tasting you,” he said, watching her eyes darken.

“Do you?”

“Yes.” He then dipped his head to kiss her again, this time gliding the tip of his tongue across the fullness of her mouth. “I do. You taste good. You smell good. And...you can do this to me,” he said, slowly sliding his hands from her shoulders to her backside and pressing her against him so she would know exactly what he was talking about.

She arched into his erection, and his breath caught at such a bold move. “Are you sure I did this?” she asked in a whisper close to his ear.

A chuckle rumbled deep within his throat. “Baby, I’m positive you did it. I haven’t thought of anything but making love to you all evening,” he said, trailing kisses down her throat.

“Is that a fact?”

“Yes, definitely nonfiction.” While one hand remained on her backside, the other gently caressed her back while he continued to taste her slowly, letting the tip of his tongue move to the underside of her ear.

“Cameron.” Her voice was barely a whisper, but he could hear the deep desire in it.
“Yes?”
“Stop torturing me.” She arched into him some more.
“You’re the one in control, Vanessa. Just say the word.”
“Take me.”

She didn’t have to say a single thing more. As far as he was concerned those two words said it all. He swept her into his arms and headed back into the house, pausing only long enough to adjust his hold on her so she could reach out and pull shut the French doors.

“Where to?” he asked, glancing down at her when he stood in the middle of the living room. Adrenaline was pouring through his veins at an alarming speed. He wanted her. Now. But he refused to allow their first time to be anywhere other than a bed. Later, all the others could be anytime, anyplace, any position, just as he’d said.

“The guest room is upstairs. First door on your right.”

Before she had finished what she was saying, he was already moving in that direction. When he reached the room he gave the furnishings nothing more than a quick glance. His attention, however, was definitely drawn to the huge sleigh bed. It looked sturdy and that was good. He crossed the room and leaned down to place her on it and was surprised when she pulled him down on the bed with her, hungrily latching on to his mouth. He groaned deep in his chest when she slipped her tongue between his parted lips and knew her degree of need was just as high as his.

“Now, Cameron. I couldn’t stand it if you waited.” Her voice was filled with tension and desire and her words reflected a desperation that hit him below the gut.

In a tangle of ardent open-mouthed kisses and eager, frantic hands, he began removing her clothes, pulling the blouse over her head and sliding the skirt down her hips. He tossed her sandals aside and then she lay there, in full view, wearing nothing more than a white lace bra and a matching thong that barely covered her feminine mound.

Although the lingerie was fairly revealing, he wanted to see the real thing and reached out and unclasped her bra. His attention was drawn to her breasts, in all their fine glory, and he reached out to touch them, caressing them, then leaned over and took a hardened tip into his mouth, sucking relentlessly.

“Cameron…”

He pulled back to lower the thong down her thighs. She lifted her hips as he slowly slid the flimsy material down her legs. Tossing her thong aside, he reached out and touched her center. Finding it wet, he began stroking it, stirring up the scent of her in the room.

“Cameron…” she murmured his name again in a tortured groan. “Don’t play with me. Just do it.”

“If you’re absolutely, positively sure that’s what you want.”

“I’m absolutely, positively sure,” she moaned.

He stood back as his gaze moved all over her naked body, over her breasts, down to the core of her femininity then down the length of her gorgeous long legs, before inching back toward her center, the part of her that drew him. That’s where he would get the ultimate, succulent taste he craved.

Unable to resist any longer, he quickly began removing his clothes while she watched him, feeling the heat of her eyes over him as he bared all. Her sexy scent now permeated the room, driving him crazy with the need to make love to her after three years of wanting her. He took the time to ease the condom he had taken from his wallet over his shaft before moving back toward the bed.

“I told you earlier that I liked your taste. Remember?”

She gazed at him through heavy-lidded eyes filled with desire. “Yes.”

“Now I intend to show you just how much.”

Vanessa gasped when his mouth took hers with heated possession, at the same time he moved his hand lower, past her stomach to settle right between her legs. He stroked her there again, ardently fondling the swollen bud of her womanhood.

“You’re playing with me again,” she accused in a breathless moan.

“Then let me try something else,” he whispered in her ear.

Before she realized what he was about to do, he eased her back onto the fluffy bed coverings and began kissing a trail down her stomach. Every place his mouth touched made her skin feel sensitized. When he reached the spot between her inner thighs, he began placing heated kisses there.

Vanessa lifted her hips, barely able to tolerate the intense sensations overtaking her. Her need for modesty vanished, and she instinctively opened her legs when his mouth moved to the center of her.

Vanessa lifted her hips, barely able to tolerate the intense sensations overtaking her. Her need for modesty vanished, and she instinctively opened her legs when his mouth moved to the center of her. She screamed his name at the first stroke of his tongue on her and her body quivered from the inside out when he began feasting on her hungrily, as if he’d been waiting a long time to do what he was doing. A strangled moan got caught in her throat and her hips rose off the bed when he stopped nibbling on her and began a tormenting lick.

“Cameron!”

She screamed his name again when her body exploded in one mind-bending, earth-shattering climax. By the
time the sound echoed off the walls, he had leaned up to position his body over hers. The moment her trembling subsided, she looked up and gazed into his eyes.

“I’ve wanted you for so long,” he whispered, his erection homing in on the heat of her like iron toward a magnet.

Still recovering from the effects of one hell of an orgasm, Vanessa somehow found the strength to lift her hips, and the moment his hardened tip grazed her womanly core, he threw his head back and slid into her body. She wrapped her legs around him when he began moving back and forth inside her. With each thrust, her body was being navigated to a place it had never been before.

She might be the one in control, but he was the one plotting a course that was pushing her toward another skyrocketing experience. She had never known pleasure this intense, this extreme and forceful. It was as if his body knew just what position, what angle to take to hit that precise spot—her ultimate erogenous zone.

Each mind-blowing plunge was made to send her over the edge, and she felt her thighs quaking and her muscles spasming. When he bucked his body with an intensity that tested the endurance of the mattress springs, she felt her body explode at the same time his did.

“Vanessa!”

He hollered out her name, giving one last long, hard thrust into her body. She seemed to break into a million tiny pieces upon impact, never realizing something like this could be so powerful and earth-shattering. And then he was back at her mouth, kissing her with a hunger that was sending her body into an erotic spin all over again.

At that moment, the only thing she was totally aware of was that whether she wanted him to or not, Cameron Cody was rocking her world.

Neither wanted to move so they lay there, wrapped in each others’ arms, their bodies connected, their limbs entwined for the longest time while their breathing returned to normal and their pounding heartbeats abated.

Sometime later, Cameron eased off Vanessa to look down at her. He was mesmerized, slightly shaken at what had taken place. He’d wanted her for so long, he wasn’t surprised at the magnitude of his need, his craving, his desire. But what he hadn’t counted on or expected was the intense degree of satisfaction and fulfillment he’d received.

Never before had any woman made him feel what he’d felt with her. If he had to describe it, he couldn’t. No words could. Sensations he’d never before encountered had rammed through his body, overtaking his mind, as well. It was totally bizarre, impossible to comprehend and even a tad bit alarming that one single woman could make him feel that way.

But she had.

Somehow, Vanessa Steele had tunneled her way under his hardest covering, his most tightly sealed wrap, and was embedded under his skin. No woman had ever done this.

His gaze studied her face. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing evenly, but he knew she wasn’t asleep. Like him, she was probably trying to get her mind and body in sync, which wasn’t easy after what they had shared.

“You’re one amazing woman,” he said softly, truthfully, breaking into the quiet silence surrounding them. He watched a smile touch her lips as she slowly opened her eyes to him. “Thank you. That was a wonderful thing to say.”

He considered the look in her eyes. It was as if she was both surprised and relieved by his words. Why? Had someone once told her differently? An old lover perhaps? He pushed the thought aside, thinking if that was the case, the person evidently hadn’t recognized true passion when he saw it. Besides, he didn’t want to think of anyone else having shared something so special with her. That was all in the past. Whether she knew it or would accept it, she belonged to him now and that was all that mattered. He would always tell her how remarkable she was.

“It’s true,” he said, staring down into her face. From that first day he’d known she was a beautiful woman, but he hadn’t known just how beautiful until now. She had that afterglow look, that aroused look in her eyes that said she could and would take him on again. Even now, after what they’d just shared, he still wanted to devour her, and he was certain she knew it because his erection had grown hard against her belly.

He leaned down, deciding that he wanted to play with her lips again, and began licking them from corner to corner. He liked the purr of pleasure that eased from her throat. He liked it even more when he felt her hand travel down his stomach to close over his shaft. He sucked in a deep breath and groaned when she began stroking him.

“Two can play your game, Mr. Cody,” she whispered. Her hands were steady, her fingers confident, and he felt a rush of blood surge through his veins, especially the ones located where she had touched.

“You’re playing with dynamite,” he whispered, barely getting the words out when pleasure as raw as it could get shot all through him.

“Umm, I can believe that,” she said softly, in a sultry voice. “I’m still recovering from the aftershocks of the
last explosion.”

“Vanessa…”

Cameron said her name, whispered it from deep within his gut. He leaned down and kissed her, at the same
time positioning his body over hers again. He slid into her, slowly, easily, and felt as if he was getting a piece of
heaven. He groaned in pleasure as he continued to kiss her hungrily while slowly moving in and out of her body.

He felt on fire, scorched, and when her body began quivering beneath his, he literally went up in smoke. She
called out his name, clenched his shaft with her inner muscles, pulling him deeper inside her, and he threw his head
back and growled as he experienced yet another mind-blowing, body-ramming orgasm.

He had only one conscious thought: Just who was getting sexually addicted to whom?
Chapter 9

With her eyes still closed, barely released from sleep, Vanessa reached for the ringing telephone next to her bed. “Hello.”

“So, who’s my neighbor? Have you checked him out yet?”

Cheyenne’s question jerked Vanessa out of her slumberous state and she immediately opened her eyes. Sunlight was pouring into the room and she could hear the shower running. Memories of last night came flooding back and a quick glance at the spot beside her in bed indicated tumbled sheets and an indentation where a man’s body had been.

Cameron’s body.

“Vanessa, hey, are you awake? I asked about my neighbor and if you’d had a chance to check him out yet.”

Vanessa sighed, knowing there was no way she was going to tell her sister that not only had she checked him out, but she’d gone a step further and had slept with him, as well. “Yes, I’m awake, Cheyenne, and yes, I’ve checked him out.”

“And?”

Vanessa rubbed a hand across her face. “And it’s Cameron.”

There was a pause. Then Cheyenne said, “Cameron? As in Cameron Cody?”

“Yes, as in Cameron Cody.”

She could hear Cheyenne’s soft chuckle and frowned. It always annoyed Vanessa that her two sisters had found Cameron’s hot pursuit of her rather amusing. “So, I assume buying the house next door was a calculated move on his part after finding out you would be house-sitting for me for two weeks.”

Vanessa sighed. If only her sister knew the whole story. “Yes, it was.”

“Wow, that’s really something for a man to want you that bad to go to those extremes. Why don’t you put him out of his misery and go ahead and have an affair with him, Van?”

Vanessa couldn’t help the smile that touched her lips. She doubted Cameron was in much misery this morning since they were having an affair. But it even went deeper than that. They were officially sex mates for the next eleven days. “I’ll think about it.”

“He’s not going away. Determined men are like pimples. They keep reappearing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I don’t understand why you don’t like the guy. He’s good-looking, sexy, wealthy and—”

“Goodbye, Cheyenne.”

“Hey, don’t you want my opinion?”

“Not really. Call Taylor and harass her.” She then hung up the phone.

“It’s not good to hang up on people.”

Vanessa flicked her gaze in the direction of the deep male voice. Cameron was leaning against the bathroom door wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist. His body was glistening, still wet from his shower, and just as Cheyenne had said, he was good-looking, sexy...

She wondered how much he’d heard. “Cheyenne is used to me hanging up on her. We have that kind of relationship.”

He took a few steps into the room and she had to struggle with the breath that was forcing its way through her lungs. The only thing worse than a good-looking Cameron was a half-naked good-looking Cameron. Although there was the towel, it didn’t take much for her to visualize him wearing nothing at all, as he’d done most of last night. She had seen enough of him in the buff. Or had she? She then decided it hadn’t been enough and that she would love seeing even more.

“And what kind of relationship is that?” he asked coming to sit on the edge of the bed beside her. He had a just-showered scent. His smell was fresh, manly.

“It’s the kind where she expects me to hang up on her when she starts getting bossy, which she has a tendency to do. I’m the oldest and she’s the youngest but sometimes I think she believes it’s vice versa.”

His sexy chuckle seemed to rumble off the walls in the room. “And what about your other sister? Taylor. The one living in New York.”

Vanessa sat up in bed and braced her back against the headboard. “Taylor likes keeping everyone out of her
business, so she makes sure she doesn’t get into anyone else’s. She’s the one we call the Quiet Storm.”

He lifted a brow. “And why is that?”

“Because she doesn’t have a lot to say. She’s usually mild-mannered and easygoing. But if you piss her off, there’s plenty of hell to pay.”

“Oh, I see.”

Cameron stared at her for a long moment and Vanessa began getting uncomfortable under his fixed gaze. “What?” she asked.

He smiled. “It just occurred to me that I hadn’t kissed you good morning.”

“Oh, were you supposed to?”

“Definitely.”

And then he was inching his face closer to hers for a kiss. It was soft and gentle, but it didn’t take long for it to turn into something desperate and hungry. When he finally lifted his mouth from hers, she kept her eyes on his lips and asked, “So what would you like to do today?”

The look and smile he gave her told her she hadn’t needed to ask. “I’ll let you think of something,” he said.

A part of her felt that maybe she should send him away, put distance between them to lessen the impact his mere presence was having on her. An idea formed in her mind; perhaps they should each do their own thing during the day and just come together at night. But she immediately squashed it. The thought of planning only their nights together seemed too calculated, nonspontaneous and such a waste of valuable time. There was that part of her that wanted him around both day and night, and they only had eleven days left. “Would you like to go shopping?” she asked.

He lifted a dark brow. “Shopping?”

“Yes. There’re some wonderful shops in town.”

He nodded. “All right, shopping it is. I need to go home and change but I’ll be back within the hour. Unless you want to go back to sleep for a while to get some rest. We were up pretty late.”

That was an understatement, she thought. They had been awake practically all night. She had used muscles she hadn’t used in years, if ever. Those same achy muscles from yesterday were now aching for another reason.

“No, I’m fine. I don’t need any more sleep.”

“Oh,” he said, standing slowly. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

Vanessa watched as he dropped the towel and began dressing. Although seemingly unbothered by his nakedness, she was getting bothered by it. Her skin was beginning to feel tingly, and the memories of last night were beckoning for a repeat performance.

He was about to slip into his pants when she got up enough courage to act. “Cameron?”

He glanced over at her. “Yes.”

“I don’t need any more sleep, but there is something else I can use right now.” She was certain the look in her eyes and the low pitch of her voice were a dead giveaway.

“And what’s that?” he asked.

She sighed. He was deliberately making her spell things out for him. No problem. She could do that. “Come here and I’ll show you,” she said.

He slowly walked back over to the bed, and she leaned over toward him and kissed his bare stomach before reaching out and gliding her hands over his thick erection. “This,” she said looking up at him, “is what I can use right now.”

The smile that touched the corners of his lips sent all kinds of sensations throbbing through her, and when he stepped back and removed his shirt she knew that being a sex mate to this man was better than she had ever imagined. And the thought that he’d found her amazing in bed had boosted her confidence level sky-high.

The moment his knee touched the mattress she was reaching out to him, rubbing her naked body against his. And when he wrapped his arms around her and eased her down into the thickness of the bed coverings, she knew it would be late when they got to town to do any shopping. But then, some things just couldn’t be hurried.

“So what do you think of this one?”

A surge of desire raced through Cameron as he sat in the chair at the dress shop surveying yet another outfit on Vanessa. It was hard to believe women did this sort of thing every time they purchased clothes. First, it took them forever to find exactly what they wanted on the rack, then they had to go into the dressing room to try it on and then come out wearing it to get someone’s opinion. So far this was her sixth outfit. He had liked them all except for the one that had barely covered her thighs, definitely showing too much leg. He’d told her he hadn’t liked the little black skirt, but she had smiled and placed it in her “to-buy” stack anyway.

He smiled when he thought of those legs of hers, the same ones that had wrapped around him tightly, locking
him inside her body, clenching her muscles to draw everything out of him while they had—

“Cameron, I asked what you thought.”

Her words reclaimed his attention. He tapped his fingers on his knee. This would be another one he didn’t like. It showed too much breast. Hell, her twin globes were pouring out of it and the swath of light overhead was making it nearly impossible not to notice the hardened tips of her nipples pressing against the fabric. This dress would make a lot of women jealous. But it was the men he was worried about. Men would see her in this dress and immediately want to take her out of it.

“I don’t like it,” he finally said.

“Why?”

Last time, with the skirt, he hadn’t given her a reason and she’d decided to purchase it anyway. Maybe if he told her why he didn’t particularly care for this dress, she wouldn’t buy it. “It shows too much cleavage. Your breasts are all but pouring out of it.”

He then dragged his gaze over the rest of her and said, “The outfit leaves very little to the imagination. It’s clinging to you like a second layer of skin. A man will look at you in that dress and immediately think of sex.”

She glanced down at herself in the outfit. “You think so?”

“Hell, yeah.”

She glanced back up, met his gaze and smiled. “In that case I think I’ll take it.”

Cameron immediately saw red and wondered if steam was coming out of his ears. Before he had a chance to say anything, she had darted back into the dressing room. She was lucky they were in a public place or he would be striding into that dressing room to teach her a lesson about tempting him.

He was about to settle back in his chair to wait for her to come out wearing yet another outfit when his cell phone rang. The caller ID indicated it was Xavier. “Yes, X, what’s going on?”

“The main office at Global Petroleum was broken into last night. Security has been tight there for the past few days so we figure it might have been an inside job. A McMurray loyalist. We’re discovering he had quite a few.”

Cameron tightened his grip on the cell phone. “Was anything taken?”

“No, just a mess made with papers scattered all about. But a message was left for you, smeared on the wall.”

Cameron rubbed the bridge of his nose. “What did it say?”

“Told you to give the company back to McMurray or you’ll be sorry. Kurt told me to let you know that he’s determined to find the person responsible.”

Cameron nodded. There was no doubt in his mind that Kurt would find the person or die trying. “Okay, keep me posted.”

“Do you want me to advise Kurt to let the local police know what’s going on?”

“No, not yet. If we go to the authorities it will eventually get leaked to the papers. If the person is a McMurray loyalist then that’s what they’re counting on. Free publicity. I don’t intend to oblige them.”

“All right. I’ll get back to you if anything else comes up.”

Cameron clicked off the phone at the exact moment a rustling sound caught his attention. Glancing up, he saw the outfit Vanessa was now wearing. It had to be made of the flimsiest material ever created. He immediately came to his feet. “No. Hell no,” he said, almost growling. “I don’t like it.”

He couldn’t believe someone would design such a thing for public wear. It was so thin he could even see she wasn’t wearing any underwear. The dark area between her legs clearly showed that.

An innocent smile touched her lips. “What do you mean you don’t like it?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Just what I said, Vanessa. I don’t like it.”

She placed her hands on her hips and he saw that the top part of the dress was just as transparent as the bottom. She might as well have been standing there naked. “In that case it’s a good thing you don’t have to wear it because I happen to like it,” she said. “And I’m getting it.”

She turned around to leave and he called out to her, annoyed. “I thought you wanted my opinions.”

She turned back around. “I do.”

Cameron frowned, puzzled. “Then please explain why the outfits that I don’t like, you’re buying anyway.”

She smiled sweetly. “I want your opinion, Cameron, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I’ll take it. Those are all the outfits I intend to purchase today and I’ll be back in a second.” She slipped back into the dressing room.

Cameron couldn’t stop the smile that curved his lips. It seemed some women were just born to be stubborn, and the one he intended to spend the rest of his life with was doubly obstinate.

He shook his head in despair. How could he have been so lucky?

Vanessa smiled at Cameron from across the table. They were sitting in one of those café-style restaurants that overlooked the bay while enjoying an early dinner. “I think we got a lot accomplished today.”
He lifted a dark brow. “We?”

She dabbed her mouth with the corner of her napkin. “Yes. With your help I was able to pick out eight outfits that I think will enhance my wardrobe.”

He rolled his eyes. “I didn’t like half of them.”

“Yes, but I liked them.” And you will too once you see me in them, she thought. He had no idea she had bought the outfits with him in mind.

She placed her elbows on the table and supported her chin with her knuckles. “You’re an only child, right?”

“Yes.”

“It’s unfortunate that you didn’t have a sister, then you would understand how a woman’s mind works.”

“I don’t need a sister to understand the workings of a woman’s mind.”

She gave him a quick smile. “It would have helped. Then you would have realized you were approaching the situation all wrong in going after me. You’re not a forever kind of guy, Cameron. And on top of that, you have controlling tendencies. You aren’t the type of man a woman would consider getting involved with for the rest of her life. But you are fling material, which is why I decided to have an affair with you.”

Cameron didn’t like what he was hearing but decided not to contradict anything she said. She would find out how wrong she was when he had her just where he wanted her—when he had her good and addicted. “So, what’s on the agenda for tonight?” he asked, placing his napkin down and leaning back in his chair. Anticipation of what was yet to come was already flowing through his bloodstream.

“Umm, let’s not plan anything. Let’s go with spontaneous during our time together.”

Cameron sighed. If he went with spontaneous she would be on this table, flat on her back with him on top of her, making out like there was no tomorrow. Sitting across from her and watching her eat and drink had been torturous. Each time she had taken a sip from her glass and he had seen how her perfectly shaped mouth had fit on the rim, he’d wished it was fitting that way on a certain part of him instead. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, there had been the way her throat had moved when the liquid had flowed down it, making him wonder just how deep her throat was. Just the thought had given him an erection as hard as a nail.

“So, will spontaneous be all right with you, Cameron?”

He really didn’t think she knew what she was asking, and he had no intention of telling her. “Spontaneous is fine with me.”

“Good. You won’t be sorry.”

He lifted a brow. He knew he wouldn’t be sorry and hoped like hell that she wouldn’t be, either. But what she’d said did give him pause. “Why would you think I’d be sorry?”

Her face broke into a smile. “Because you come across as a man who prefers structure. I take it you like to think things through thoroughly before taking action.”

She had him there. Rash decisions didn’t sit well with him. But spontaneous with her was a no-brainer. He knew he wanted her and if given the opportunity to have her whenever and wherever, he would be a fool not to take it and run...to the nearest bedroom.

“Typically, I am that kind of guy, but I’m here to enjoy myself, and for the next eleven days there aren’t any limitations.”

Not wanting to give her too much time to ponder what he’d said, he tilted his head toward the bar. “Would you like another drink?”

She glanced at her almost-empty glass. “No, I think I’ve had enough. But I would like to walk on the beach later tonight. Would you?”

He regarded her for a minute, thinking of the unlimited spontaneous possibilities. Then he nodded his head slowly and said, “Yes, I’d love to do that.”

A smile curved her mouth and she murmured, “Great. I’m looking forward to later.”
Later could have come sooner, Cameron thought, as he walked barefoot along the beach. After their dinner date he had dropped Vanessa at home with the understanding they would meet on the beach after dark. When he’d asked if he needed to bring anything, she had simply smiled and said, “Just yourself.”

So here he was with no specific plan in mind since spontaneous was the order of the evening. He looked past the palm trees toward her place and saw how well lit it was. Light spilled out, illuminating certain areas of the private beach.

“Cameron.”

He turned toward the sound of his name and saw her standing next to a palm tree in a semi-lighted area. She was wearing the last outfit she had modeled for him. The one he had liked least. But seeing her in it now, the material as transparent as could be, had blood gushing through his veins.

As if mesmerized, he drifted toward her, his eyes never leaving her. With each step he took, his heart pounded out a heated rhythm and his teeth were clenched to stop the flood of sensations overtaking him.

Her outfit might have been provocative as hell, but it was her stance that was his undoing. She leaned against the tree, her legs braced apart in such a way that the flimsy material flowed all over her lush softness, her magnificent curves. Tantalizing. Sexy. Seductive.

The latter had him entranced. Standing there in that outfit she was the epitome of sensual femininity. He could clearly see everything, the puckered tips of her shapely breasts, the flat stomach and small waist and the dark triangle between her legs. His mouth watered, his erection hardened and his breathing became a forced act.

The closer he got, the longer he looked into her passion-filled eyes, the more he wanted her.

The more he wanted spontaneous.

Every muscle in his body clenched with desire the moment he came to a stop in front of her. He reached out and, with a flick of his wrist, he unclasped the hooks on both her shoulders, and the dress slithered down her body and lay in a pool at her feet.

He whisked his eyes over her naked body and when, as if in a moment of nervousness, she lowered one of her hands to cover her center, he caught her wrist and moved her hand aside. She was his. And as far as he was concerned, what she was trying to hide was his. And he intended to have it. Now.

He took a step back and whipped his shirt over his head and with trembling, hot fingers he fumbled at his belt before jerking it free and tossing it aside. Then came his shorts. Anticipating what would happen tonight, he hadn’t bothered with underwear.

Vanessa just stood looking at him, letting her gaze move from his face slowly down his body, stopping at his shaft.

It actually twitched under her direct perusal and he felt it harden even more right before her eyes. When she licked her lips, he released a tortured moan.

Instantly, she sank to her knees on the sand in front of him, and before he could draw his next breath, her hands closed over his erection just seconds before she took him into her mouth.

The impact of that sensual contact made his entire body shudder. She began stroking him all over with her tongue, then raking that same tongue across the sensitized tip, nibbling gently with her teeth before sucking deeply. He tangled his fingers in her hair, trying to tug her away one minute and then trying to hold her mouth hostage on him the next.

When he felt an explosion starting right there at the tip, he jerked back, and in one quick move he eased her down and positioned his body over hers. The moment she lifted her hips to him, he entered her in one smooth thrust, driving deep into her wetness.

She screamed his name at the same exact time he screamed hers, and it seemed every cell in his body fragmented as he was thrown into mind-boggling pleasure. Too late he realized that he hadn’t used a condom just as he felt his body explode, releasing everything he had deep into her womb.

He held her there, her body locked to his, and somehow, moments later, he found the strength to thrust deep into her again, and in no time felt himself succumbing, exploding once more.

This was rapture so pure, so unadulterated and perfect.

He knew it could only be this way with Vanessa.
“Would you like to watch a movie?” Cameron asked. “The previous owner left his DVD collection behind.”

Vanessa glanced over at Cameron from across the kitchen and wondered if he was serious. After the rendezvous on the beach that had left them both naked and covered in sand, he had carried her to his place where they had used his outside shower. He had shampooed her hair and she had washed his back, then they had made love all over again, right there in the shower. Afterwards, he made her promise never to wear the outfit again and had given her one of his T-shirts to put on. They had decided they were hungry and now were in the kitchen.

“I’m going to have to pass on the movie, but I would like you to tell me who taught you how to cook.”

He leaned back against the counter, holding a cup of coffee in his hand. He had thrown together an omelet and biscuits. “My grandfather. After my grandmother died it was just the two of us.”

She nodded. “Is he still living?”

He shook his head and she could see the sadness reflected in his deep-set eyes. “No, he died when I turned eighteen. Right before I entered college.”

“The two of you were close. I can tell,” she said softly. She could hear the special love in his voice.

She watched his smile touch his lips. “Yes, we were very close. He was the best.”

She didn’t say anything for the longest time until finally she admitted, “My dad was the best, too. He never had sons but it didn’t matter to him. My mom, Taylor, Cheyenne and I were the apples of his eye and he always let us know it. I only wish…”

“What?”

“That I could have convinced him to stop smoking. He died of lung cancer, and a part of me wished I could have done something, hidden his cigarettes, anything.”

“That wouldn’t have helped, Vanessa. The person smoking is the one who has to want to stop. Your father would have continued to smoke until it was his decision to quit.”

What Cameron was telling her was no different from what her family and Sienna had told her. But when she remembered her father in his last days, how the cancer had left a robust man barely recognizable, a part of her still believed there was something she could have done.

Not wanting to discuss her father any longer, she decided to ask Cameron more about his childhood. In all the media releases she’d read on him, very little had been mentioned about it, except that he’d dropped out of school at sixteen.

“Was your grandfather your mom’s father or your dad’s?”

She watched him take a sip of his coffee before glancing over at her. “He was my father’s father. My parents were killed in a fire at our apartment complex when I was six. My dad was able to get me out but when he went back in for my mother, the building collapsed.”

Vanessa gasped and she immediately felt a tug on her heart. “Oh, how awful that must have been for you.”

Cameron stared down into his coffee cup a long moment before finally lifting his head and meeting her gaze. “It was. And for the longest time, like you, I was on a guilt trip. I would often ask myself, What if Dad had gotten Mom out first? What if I had awakened and smelled the smoke first? What if I had convinced them to have a fire-escape plan like they had taught us in school? There were so many what-ifs, but I soon realized that none of them would bring my parents back.”

Vanessa’s heartstrings tugged tighter. She could just imagine the guilt that had consumed his young mind. “Is that when you went to live with your grandparents?” she asked.

“Yes, and they were great. It was as if they knew exactly what I needed.” He chuckled. “My grandparents were pretty big on hugs. The warm and cuddly kind.”

Vanessa smiled. She wondered how a man with such a warm and cuddly childhood with his grandparents could grow up to be the hard and controlled man that he was.

She opened her mouth to ask him another question when his cell phone rang. “Excuse me.” He picked it up off the counter. “Yes, X.”

Vanessa could tell from the expression on Cameron’s face and the tenseness of his body that he didn’t like whatever the person was telling him.

“Tell Kurt that I want this person found before he does any more damage.” He snapped the phone shut.

“Trouble?”

Cameron jerked his head up and looked at her. “No, everything’s fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

She doubted he would tell her if things weren’t fine and decided not to get upset by it. He really had no reason to share his business matters with her, since she certainly wouldn’t be sharing any of the Steele business with him.
“I’ve changed my mind.”
   The gaze holding hers was steady. “About what?”
   “The movie. I’m not sleepy and I would love watching one if you still want to.”
   A small smile touched the corners of his lips. “Yes, I want to and I’ll even let you choose something sappy.”
   Vanessa stood. “That’s mighty generous of you, Mr. Cody.”
   He grinned. “Haven’t you figured out by now that I’m a very generous person?”

   “Need more tissue?”
   Vanessa looked over at him with tear-filled eyes. “Sorry. I always cry whenever I watch this movie.”
   “Then why do you watch it?”
   “Because it’s a good movie.”
   “It’s a tear-jerker.”
   She eased off the sofa to stand in front of him. “It’s still a good movie. In fact, it’s my favorite and has been since the first time I saw it when I was eight. I’m surprised you don’t like it.”
   He shrugged. “It took Dorothy too long to find her way back to Kansas. As far as I’m concerned she wasn’t too bright. She should have figured out a lot sooner there was no yellow brick road that would get her there.”
   Vanessa placed her hand on her hips, not liking his critique. “Do you have a favorite movie?”
   “No.”
   “Not a one?”
   “No, not a one. I like creating my own action,” he said. With her standing right in front of him, her luscious scent was filling his lungs, and his T-shirt, which barely hit her at midthigh, was looking sexy as hell on her.
   Not able to resist temptation any longer, he reached out and pulled her down into his lap. A naughty grin touched his lips. “In addition to creating my own action, I especially like taking part in my own love scenes.”
   And then he leaned over and kissed her.
   Vanessa returned the kiss, doubting she would ever tire of kissing him. She wrapped her arms around Cameron’s neck and tasted him with the same hunger with which he was tasting her. Beneath her, his erection nudged her hip and his hand began tracing a path up her inner thigh.
   Suddenly Cameron pulled both his mouth and hand away. “We need to talk,” he said, resting his forehead against hers. “We need to discuss something I should have brought up earlier.”
   She kept her arms wrapped around his neck and met his gaze. “What?”
   “I didn’t use any protection when we made love on the beach tonight.”
   His words were like ice water thrown on her. No protection. How had she not realized? She’d never had sex with a man without using some type of protection. She’d been taking the Pill since her college days but when it came to sex these days, women had more to worry about than an unwanted pregnancy. There were serious health issues to consider.
   “I’m safe, Vanessa. Don’t worry about that,” Cameron said as if reading her thoughts. “I get a physical every year.”
   “So do I,” she quickly said, needing to reassure him, as well. “I’m safe, too.”
   He smiled and tightened his arms around her waist. “I know you are.”
   She was tempted to ask why he was so certain, but just the thought that he was sent a warm feeling through her.
   “Now that we’ve covered that part, we need to discuss the other.”
   She lifted a brow. “What other?”
   “The possibility of a pregnancy.”
   She shook her head. “That’s not possible. I’m on the Pill.”
   He nodded slowly. “Anything is possible. The Pill isn’t 100 percent guaranteed and if a child has been created, Vanessa, the agreement is off.”
   “What do you mean?”
   “We agreed that once this affair ended we wouldn’t be in contact with each other. But if you’re pregnant that changes everything since I’d want to know about my child. Understood?”
   She frowned, not liking the tone of voice he’d taken, and definitely not liking the way he was trying to take control of things. “I told you I’m on the Pill, so relax, Cameron. There won’t be a baby.”
   “If there is—”
   “Then I would let you know. But you’re worrying for nothing.”
   He met her gaze for a long moment before standing with her in his arms. “Are you ready for bed?”
   After that last conversation a part of her wanted to leave, to go back to Cheyenne’s place and sleep in her own bed tonight. He had made her mad. But another part of her wanted to stay, to sleep cuddled under him and wake up
with him in the morning. That was the part telling her to get over it.

She quickly made a decision and tightened her arms around his neck. “Yes, I’m ready.”
Four days later, Cameron leaned against the rail on his patio watching the sun rising over the ocean. Vanessa was upstairs, still asleep in his bed. He had slipped away momentarily to come downstairs to wait for a call he expected from Kurt…and also to think.

Although he had no intention of doing so, if he were to adhere to their agreement, he had only one week left to spend with Vanessa. And if he were to analyze their days together since becoming sex mates, he would be the first to admit that they had been some of the best days of his life. He smiled, thinking that a lot could be said for spontaneity.

There hadn’t been too much they hadn’t tried in the bedroom. But then the bedroom hadn’t been the only place they’d made love. In fact, come to think of it, the only times they had actually made it to the bed was when it was time for them to retire for the night. Otherwise, spontaneous meant spontaneous.

Vanessa had seduction down to an art form, and he’d discovered the hard way—literally—that she was a woman of incredible talents. She had to be the most passionate human being on the face of the earth. Already his body was whirring with thoughts of what today would bring.

Although the sex was great, Cameron knew it wasn’t the only reason he was enjoying every moment that he spent with Vanessa. Whether it was playing tennis, looking for seashells on the beach, swimming together, cooking, even shopping, everything with her was turning into an adventure.

They never talked about work but had shared their thoughts about the many charitable organizations they were both involved with. He had also discovered that she was a very compassionate person who gave her time to others generously. When he’d told her about his involvement in Angel Flight, an organization in which CEOs volunteered their private jets to transport needy patients, she promised to propose it at the next Steele board meeting, now that the company was purchasing a private jet.

The ring of his cell phone interrupted his thoughts. He answered it. “Yeah, Kurt, what do you have for me?”

“An arrest has been made, Cameron.”

He nodded, relieved. At first he’d tried not to get the authorities involved, but when there had been a third incident, he’d been left with no choice. For the next ten to fifteen minutes he listened while Kurt detailed how they had discovered the identity of the person responsible for vandalizing the offices of Global Petroleum on three separate occasions.

“At least he won’t admit McMurray put him up to anything,” Kurt was saying. “But that’s okay since the man was caught in full color on video. I’m going to make sure he does jail time for what he did, which will give him a chance to think about it.”

Cameron nodded. “Good job, Kurt. The charges being brought against him will send a clear message to others that I mean business and I won’t tolerate such behavior from any employee.”

After ending the call with Kurt, Cameron leaned back against the rail and stared across the ocean. For some reason he had a gut feeling that this thing with McMurray was far from over. Bitter, John McMurray would continue to make problems or would hire others to do his dirty work for him.

Not wanting to think about McMurray anymore, Cameron switched his thoughts back to Vanessa. They had gone shopping again yesterday, this time for baby items. She was excited about the new addition to the Steele family, Chance’s son, Alden. Cameron was grateful she hadn’t asked for his opinion on anything since he couldn’t recall the last time he’d been around a baby.

“A baby.”

He remembered his conversation of a few nights ago with Vanessa when they’d discussed the possibility of her being pregnant. Yesterday, while shopping for Chance and Kylie’s baby, a part of him had wished that he and Vanessa had been shopping for their own child. He had never entertained any thoughts of sharing a child with a woman until now, but the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea…with Vanessa.

He shook his head. First he needed to secure a strong relationship with the mother before he could even contemplate bringing a baby into the mix.

But he definitely was thinking about it.

“Oh, I’m stumped,” Vanessa said, tossing aside the crossword puzzle she’d been working on for the past half
hour. A few hours ago she and Cameron had made love upstairs in his bed and now they were stretched out beside each other by his pool in a double chaise lounge.

“Maybe I can help,” Cameron said, glancing from the book he was reading. “What’s the clue?”

Vanessa picked up the book. “It’s a five-letter word for ‘a fruit-loving bug.’ The second letter is a P.”

Cameron turned on his side and stretched his arm around her. “Aphid.” He proceeded to spell it for her.

She stared at him, amazed. “And you knew the answer…just like that,” she said, snapping her fingers for emphasis.

He shrugged. “No great mystery. I love science, always have.”

Vanessa shook her head. He evidently loved math, as well, if the last two shopping trips were anything to go by. By the time they’d reached the cash register, he had totaled the purchases in his head, almost to the penny. She wondered...

She flipped on her side to face him. “Cameron?”

“Yes?”

Her heart began to race. It happened every time his sexy smile was directed at her. “It’s plain to see that you’re a very smart and intelligent man, and I don’t believe you acquired those traits since reaching adulthood. So why did you drop out of high school?”

She watched what amounted to pain form in his eyes and he shifted on the lounger, seeming uncomfortable with her question. He lowered his arm from her shoulders. For the first time ever, Vanessa could feel him withdrawing from her. Though he seldom discussed his childhood, he had told her about his parents and how they’d died and about the grandparents who’d raised him. Why did this particular question bother him?

“I’m sorry if I asked you about something that’s too personal, Cameron.”

He glanced back at her and then, as if he had reached a decision about something, he pulled her back into his arms. “No, it’s not too personal, at least not for you. I dropped out of school at sixteen because my grandfather lost his job. The company he had been employed with for over forty years deliberately laid him off less than a year before he was to retire so he couldn’t receive any retirement benefits.”

“Oh, how awful.”

“Yes, it was. He was sixty-four and because of his age, there was no other place for him to go or anything else that he knew how to do. My grandfather wasn’t the only person that particular company ruined that way. There were a number of others.”

Vanessa sat up. She was angry. “But couldn’t something be done about that company? Surely the government could have stepped in and—”

“The government did nothing,” Cameron said, just as angry and very bitter. “There were no laws in place to protect workers against such tactics. And with no money coming in, I had to do something. I couldn’t let my grandfather worry himself to death. His health hadn’t been at its best as it was, and he was trying to make that final year.”

“So you dropped out of school to help.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“Yes. Gramps didn’t want me to do it, neither did my teachers, but there was nothing else to do. There was still a mortgage on the house and Gramps was still paying the medical bills my grandmother had left behind.”

For a moment he didn’t say anything then he added, “I’m just thankful for Mrs. Turner.”

Vanessa raised a brow. “Mrs. Turner?”

“Yes. She was one of my teachers who thought I had a bright future ahead of me, so she volunteered to tutor me. When I turned eighteen I passed the GED and got my high-school diploma that way.”

Vanessa nodded. She was thankful for someone like Mrs. Turner in Cameron’s life, as well. “And what type of work did you do for those two years?”

“I worked at Myers Feed Store for a while, driving his truck, making deliveries, and then I went to work for Handover Construction Company. With the money I made I was able to keep food on the table for me and Gramps and buy his medication each month.”

Vanessa knew from what he’d told her last week that his grandfather had died right before Cameron had entered college. That must have been a lonely time for him. “Thanks for sharing that with me, Cameron.”

Instead of saying anything, he pulled her into his arms and just held her close.

“I can’t believe you’re taking time to call me,” Sienna teased. “I thought Cameron was occupying most of your time these days. Don’t tell me you’ve had enough of each other already.”

Vanessa dropped down on her bed and glanced out the window. Down below she could see Cameron driving off, going to town to pick up the items they needed for dinner. Tonight they would get into the kitchen together.

“No, we haven’t had enough.”
She thought about what she’d said then decided she couldn’t really speak for Cameron and modified her reply. “At least I haven’t had enough.”

Sienna was the only person to whom Vanessa had admitted that she and Cameron were having an affair. To Cheyenne, who called periodically, she hadn’t said anything, deciding to let her sister keep guessing, although Vanessa was pretty sure Cheyenne knew the score.

“How many more days?” Sienna asked her.

“Seven.”

“What happens?”

“Then Cameron returns to Charlotte. I’ll be leaving a day or two afterward when Cheyenne returns.”

“And what if you fall in love with him?”

Vanessa shook her head stubbornly. “Won’t happen. You of all people know that I’ve learned—the hard way, I might add—how to keep my emotions in check.”

“But why would you want to if the right person came along? You know that I wasn’t ready for Dane when we first met. Talk about night and day. He was the rich kid and I was the one whose parents had more issues than The New York Times had newspapers. I tried to fight his interest, tried convincing him of all the reasons we were wrong for each other. Then I finally talked him into letting me be his bedmate for a night, thinking that would definitely get us out of each other’s systems. You of all people know that didn’t work.”

“Yes, but you and Dane were meant to be together, I’ve always told you that. I never knew why you were fighting it and fighting him.”

“The same way I don’t understand why you’re fighting Cameron. Okay, he can be a control freak at times, he likes being in charge, the master of his game. But even you said he’s been letting you call the shots, allowing you to take control, so that means at least he’s flexible. And can you honestly say that after spending a week with him, he’s still the monster you always thought him to be?”

Vanessa remained quiet for a moment as she pondered Sienna’s question. She thought about the time she and Cameron had spent together, all the fun they’d had. Then she said, “No, I don’t think he’s a monster.”

Sienna must have heard the tiny catch in her voice because her friend didn’t say anything for a while, until she asked, “Are you okay, Vanessa?”

“No, I’m not okay,” she confirmed with a bit of gloom in her tone. “But I will be. It’s just that…”

“What?”

“Nothing. I knew what I was getting into.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Despite all the misgivings she was suddenly feeling, Vanessa refused to give in to the racing of her heart and summoned every ounce of her common sense. No, she told herself, what she was feeling was nothing other than good old-fashioned lust. “Yes, Sienna, I’m sure.”

Vanessa held out her hand to Cameron. “The sharp knife.”

He carefully placed the item she had requested into her hand and then watched as she expertly removed the bone and skin from the four chicken breast halves before tossing the meat into the slow cooker.

“Bell pepper.”

He scooped up the bell pepper strips that he’d cut and tossed them in the pot to join the chicken.

“Now the can of pepper-jack cheese soup and the chunky salsa mixture.”

Before handing those items to her, he eased closer to her while she stood at the kitchen counter. “My mouth is watering already.”

His closeness and the low chuckle that rumbled close to her ear actually made her shiver. Even after a week her body still reacted whenever he was near. “Then I expect you to have a clean plate later,” she said, placing the lid on the cooker and setting it to cook on low for six hours. “This is what I call easy and tasty.”

“I can certainly see that.”

Considering her mind had been elsewhere all day, ever since talking to Sienna, Vanessa had wanted to prepare something that didn’t take a lot of thought, and this was the first thing that had come to mind. It was one of the first dishes she had prepared in her home economics class in high school and she had served it to her family, or anyone else who wanted to eat it, for three nights in a row.

“So it’s going to take six hours?” Cameron asked, easing still closer to her.

She smiled, already knowing where his mind was going. “Yes, just about.”
“Would you like to go swimming while we wait?”
“Sure. Why not? But I didn’t bring a bathing suit over here with me.”
Cameron’s smile nearly sizzled her insides. “Who said anything about you needing a bathing suit? Let’s be daring.”
Vanessa chuckled. “If I recall, you’ve already been daring. I was sitting on the beach that day you decided to bare all before diving into the ocean.”
He leaned over and touched her lips with his. “I saw you and even from a distance, I got turned on and needed to take a quick dip to cool off.”
“You expect me to believe that?”
He took her hand in his. “Yes, because it’s true. Haven’t these past days we’ve spent together proved it?”
To Vanessa’s way of thinking, these past days they’d spent together proved how quickly she had succumbed to his charm. What bothered her most was knowing that sooner or later she would have to start withdrawing. Their time together was now a clock slowly ticking away, and every second, minute or hour counted…until the end.

The end.
She inhaled deeply and instinctively snuggled closer to him, and he wrapped his arms completely around her. They’d had a lot of these types of moments, usually after making love when there were no words left to say and he would just hold her. Making the decision to have an island fling with him had been hard, but now what would be even harder was walking away knowing there would not be a repeat. This was all they would have.
“Yes, I’ll go skinny-dipping with you, Cameron,” she finally said, turning in his arms and looking up to meet his gaze. “But I won’t walk out of this house down to the beach naked,” she added. “I’m going to need something to wear.”
A smooth grin curled the corners of Cameron’s mouth. “Will one of my T-shirts do?”
She couldn’t help but laugh, recalling how many times she had walked around in his T-shirts and how very little they covered. She remembered one night in particular when, in one of her seductive moods, she had seduced him while wearing his L.A. Lakers T-shirt. He had practically ripped the thing off before taking her right here on the kitchen table.
“If that’s the best you can do, then yes, one of your T-shirts will do,” she decided to say, trying to block the memories of that particular night from her mind.
“You know where they are.”
A grin tugged at her lips. “Yes, I do, don’t I?” She pulled herself out of his arms. “I’ll be back in a second.”
Vanessa was halfway up the stairs when she glanced back over her shoulder. Cameron was standing in the doorway separating the kitchen from the living room. His hands were braced on either side of the arch and his stance was as sexy as sexy could get. At that moment she wished she had a camera to capture that pose on film so she could take out the photo on those lonely nights after she returned to Charlotte.
She quickly turned back around and made it up the rest of the stairs. Damn, she didn’t need this now, especially not when she was trying hard to keep what they were sharing in perspective. And she definitely hadn’t counted on it.
Cameron Cody was truly beginning to grow on her. Even worse, he was slowly but surely getting under her skin in a way she hadn’t thought possible.
Chapter 12

Cameron heard Vanessa return even before her bare feet touched the last step. He glanced up and tried not to stare. But he couldn’t help himself. The woman did wonders for his T-shirts.

It was his opinion that her body was outright and unreservedly perfect, and as she walked toward him, putting those long gorgeous legs out in front of her, his blood raced, literally pounding through every part of him. His gaze traveled all over her. This particular shirt—the one promoting his construction company—seemed shorter than the rest. The cotton fabric clung to her full breasts and curvy hips.

When she finally reached the bottom step she slowly twirled around with her hands on her hips. “So, what do you think?” she asked as a smile twitched her lips.

He groaned inwardly. What he really thought was that now was a good time to kiss that lush mouth of hers, or better yet, to whisk her into his arms and take her back upstairs. Everything about her, every sensuous detail, was wreaking havoc on his control, his ability to think straight, his ability to resist emotions he’d never encountered before.

“I think,” he said, taking a step forward, “that you are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met, whether you’re wearing an outfit I personally don’t like, my T-shirt or nothing at all. You are simply stunning.”

A warm tingle started in Vanessa’s breasts and moved lower, toward her midsection. The dark, tense eyes staring down at her seemed both serious and deeply enthralled. She bit her lower lip, trying not to let his words affect her so, and found it difficult. They had affected her.

She took a deep breath and glanced down at him. The only thing covering his body was a pair of outlandishly sexy swim trunks that left nothing to her imagination. They seemed like a second layer of skin and clearly emphasized the fact that he wanted her. Her heartbeat sped up at the thought of what would happen once they got down to the beach.

“I’m taking a large blanket and a bottle of body cream.”

Vanessa hitched a brow. “Body cream?”

He smiled. “Yes, I want to rub it all over you after we take a swim.”

A tremble ran through her body. She had a feeling that wasn’t all he intended to do.

Vanessa lay on her stomach on the thick blanket with the sand as a cushion. She closed her eyes at the feel of Cameron’s hands moving slowly, lightly over her shoulder, gently massaging the slope of her back and the curve of her neck. The cream he was rubbing into her skin smelled of tropical fruits, and his calloused fingers were working magic as he caressed her skin.

She released a long sigh when he rubbed more of the cream onto her back, tenderly kneading her muscles, working out her aches and pains at the same time he caused a different type of throbbing in her body.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked in an almost-whisper, leaning down close to her ear. He was on his knees straddling her butt. She could feel his nearness, his heat, and the way his hands were touching her, moving down her back, the rear of her thighs and then her behind was sending all kinds of sensations through her body.

“Umm, I’m thinking about how good your hands feel on me,” she said, almost in a purr. “I’ve never gotten this much attention from a man before.”

“And is that good or bad?”

She paused, thinking about his question, before she answered. “Before this trip, I would have thought it was bad. But now I can’t help but think it’s all good. I can’t imagine another man touching me this way, making me feel this way, and—”

She never finished what she was about to say. Cameron had gently turned her over and rubbed some of the cream onto her chest. He began rubbing it into her skin, caressing her breasts in a circular motion around the nipples while they hardened at his touch.

After smearing more cream onto her body, his fingers moved lower to her stomach and with the tip of his finger he drew rings around her navel, sending a rush of sexual pleasure through every pore on her body. A part of her wanted to reach out and cover her feminine mound from his gaze, but she couldn’t. Besides, it would be a waste of time. She might be the one in control, but Cameron had a way of using anything she did to his advantage. She was beginning to see that he was smart in more ways than one.
“I didn’t tell you everything there was to know about this particular cream, Vanessa,” he said, his voice a low, sensuous timbre.

She let go of a shaky breath at the mere sound. “What didn’t you tell me?” She looked up into his face. He was above her, straddling her body. Then he began lowering his head closer to hers. When he was just inches from her face he said, “The cream I’ve rubbed all over you is edible. Do you know what that means?”

Her gaze was locked with his and was filled with hunger, heat, and a hefty dose of arousal. Of course she knew what he meant, what he was alluding to, but she decided to play dumb. “No, what does that mean?” she asked innocently.

Bracing his hands on both sides of her head, he leaned down to within inches of her lips. “It means, Vanessa Steele, that tonight, under the beauty of this Jamaican moon, you will become my treat.”

“Your treat?” she asked, her voice barely audible against the waves rushing toward the shore.

“Yes, but first this…”

And then he leaned closer, captured her lips and kissed her as though she was everything he had ever wanted, everything he had ever needed, and that kissing her was his lifeline for the next minute, hour, day. His mouth was feeding on hers with a hunger that made her whimper.

He slowly pulled his mouth away, and she immediately felt the loss of his lips on hers.

“Did I tell you that mango is my favorite fruit and this cream has plenty of mango in it?”

“Mango?”

“Yes. There’s also a pinch of pineapple and avocado. Real tasty fruits. Exotic fruits. Fruits with mouthwatering flavor.”

He picked up the bottle of cream and with his hands he smeared a trail of it from the tips of her breasts down to her stomach. When he came to her feminine mound with its smooth bikini wax, he stared at it for a moment before taking his hand and fully coating it with the fruity cream. It was like piling whipped cream on top of a hot fudge sundae.

“Cameron?”

“Yes?”

“What are you doing?”

“Fulfilling one of my fantasies. And I might as well confess right now that there’s nothing spontaneous about this. This is something I’ve been thinking about for quite some time. And when we do part, Vanessa, I plan to take the taste of you with me. I want it embedded so deeply in my tongue that it becomes a permanent part of my taste buds. I want the scent of you to inflame my nostrils for all eternity.”

“But we agreed—”

“I know what we agreed, Vanessa. This is an island fling and I will keep my word. But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t remember what I consider to be some of the most special days I’ve ever had with a woman who has more passion in her little finger than some women have in their entire body. I won’t do anything intentionally to look you up when we return to Charlotte, but as I told you in the beginning, I want to make love so good that you’ll want to look me up.”

“I won’t,” she said stubbornly, frowning.

“Then I really have my work cut out for me over the next six days, don’t I?” he said softly, with a confidence she heard. His nostrils flared slightly when he continued. “You are in my system, and all these days of loving you only implanted you deeper. And before we separate, I’m going to make sure that I’m as entrenched within you as you are within me.”

Vanessa glanced away, breaking eye contact as she looked out at the ocean. It was dark, and somewhere in the distance she could see the lights from a huge ship, probably a cruise liner. She was grateful they couldn’t be seen from that far out at sea.

She breathed in deeply, wondering if she could become addicted to Cameron. Could he become an itch she would need to have scratched at some point? She shook her head, refusing to believe it. People engaged in affairs all the time and walked away. But the big question was this: Could she really and truly walk away from his loving? Endless passion, earth-shattering orgasms, an easy camaraderie with a man who made her feel desirable? Yes, she could do it, because, although she had gotten to know Cameron a lot better than before, there were still some things about him that she wouldn’t be able to tolerate. Such as his need to control and to be in control.

She turned back to look at him when she heard him removing his shorts. She watched almost spellbound as he slowly slid the garment down his legs, then she blinked, thinking that tonight his erection looked larger than usual. Was that possible?

A warm, hot tingle began in her midsection and quickly spread to the area between her legs when he slowly eased back to her, settling on his knees in the middle of her opened thighs.
“I’m going to lick you all over, starting here.” He lifted her hips and placed her legs on his shoulders, bringing her feminine mound level to his. “Enjoy, sweetheart, because I certainly intend to.”

Vanessa gasped at the first touch of Cameron’s tongue on her sensitive flesh. Each stroke of his tongue was methodical, focused, greedy. He was giving her his undivided attention and it took everything she had not to scream out.

The intimate kiss might have started out as a late-night treat for him, but it was an entirely different thing to her. Each sensuous nibble was taking her to a place she had never been before, a place where only the two of them belonged. She didn’t want to question the rightness of her thoughts, she just knew they were so.

The more he loved her in this most cherished way, the more sensations consumed her, taking over her mind and body. Her heart beat faster and her breathing became difficult. When the rumble of a scream was close to pouring forth from her throat, she bit down on her lips to hold it back. Her fingers dug into Cameron’s shoulders, holding his mouth in place.

But the sensations became too much to bear. She tightened her grip on his shoulders even more and drew in a deep breath before letting it out by screaming his name when an orgasm hit.

“Cameron!”

The moment she called out his name he pulled his mouth from her and moved his body in place over hers. Then in one smooth and swift thrust, he entered her, going deep. “Wrap your legs around my waist,” he whispered in her ear, and as soon as she did so, locking their bodies, he began thrusting in and out of her with the speed of a whip.

Her entire body clenched tightly, pulling everything she could out of him. She could tell he was fighting against an orgasm, trying to make it last, but she wanted more and she wanted it now.

Using her teeth she bit gently into his shoulder, then soothed the mark with her tongue. She felt him shudder, felt his body get harder inside hers and heard him moan close to her ear.

And then she felt it happen as he thrust into her hard. For the second time that night she didn’t want to question the feeling of oneness with this man, the feeling that he could become her entire world, and that she was haphazardly tumbling into his.

She didn’t want to think about anything, especially not the fact they had only six days left after tonight. The only thing she wanted to think about was how he was making her feel. This instant. This moment.

Vanessa knew that no matter what, after this time with Cameron, her life would never be the same.
Chapter 13

Cameron’s eyes opened slowly during the predawn hours. Something had awakened him. He reached out to pull Vanessa closer into his arms and came up empty-handed. All that was there, other than the slight indentation on the pillow where her head had lain, was her scent, an arousing fragrance that had become such an innate part of his life.

He gazed around the room and saw the open patio door. Evidently she hadn’t been able to sleep. For a long while, neither had he. It was hard as hell to accept that their twelve days were over and that today at noon he would be flying out, returning to the States.

He tightened his fists at his sides, damning their agreement. There was no way she could deny that their time together had been special, especially the last six days. They had taken early-morning walks on the beach, picnics on the bay, and had made love under the moonlight in a number of places. He would miss her like hell when he left and he hoped and prayed each day that she would realize they were meant to be together.

A shiver passed through him at the thought of the separation they faced. What if, when she returned to Charlotte, she had no problem in keeping her end of the agreement and would not want to see him again? What if their time together meant more to him than it did to her? What if his entire plan backfired and he wasn’t any closer to having her as a part of his life than he had been before taking Morgan’s advice?

He pulled himself up in bed, suddenly thinking about all the things he’d never wanted from a woman before, but now had to have from Vanessa. He’d thought he wanted possession, wanted to make her a part of his life without any deep emotional attachment or binding commitment. After all, he was a man who didn’t do emotional attachments. But now he wanted it all. He wanted her.

He loved her.

He sucked in a deep, shaky breath with that admission. It was one he had thought he would never make again after Stacy. But Vanessa had proven him wrong. She had brought out in him something no woman had done in over ten years—his desire to love unconditionally. She had broken down his defenses and made the twisted reason he’d wanted her in his life into something he hadn’t counted on. Love.

He had always wanted Vanessa but hadn’t realized or accepted that he also loved her.

Now he did, and what the hell was he supposed to do about it? He slowly slid back down in the bed. One thing he would not do was let her have her way and turn her back on what they could have together. His heart was at stake, and he was determined that, in the end, she would love him as much as he loved her.

He heard the sliding of the patio door and lowered his eyelids, pretending sleep. He wasn’t ready to admit his feelings to Vanessa just yet. Not until he had another workable plan.

Through half-closed eyes he watched as she dropped her robe and eased her naked body into bed beside him. She cuddled close, skin to skin, and lowered her head to his chest. Then, moments later she glanced up, placed a kiss on his lips and whispered, “I’m going to miss you when you leave, Cameron Cody. A hell of a lot more than I should.”

He didn’t say anything since he knew she assumed he was asleep and her words hadn’t been meant for him to hear. But those words sent every cell in his body vibrating. If she was fighting any feelings for him and was pretty close to the edge, he intended to push her over. He would try and be patient, but he wouldn’t let her send him out of sight and out of mind.

When she cuddled back in his arms to reclaim sleep, a smile curved his lips. There were some risks worth taking, and no matter what it took, he intended to convince Vanessa of that.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the airstrip with me?”

Vanessa shook her head as she watched Cameron get dressed. They had awakened that morning and made love. Then they had gone downstairs and, as they’d done on a number of other mornings, they had prepared breakfast together. Afterwards, they had come back upstairs to make love again. Now she was sitting up in bed half-naked and he was putting on his shirt and pants. A limo would be arriving in less than an hour to take him to the airport where his private jet would return him to the States.

“No, I think it’s best if we say our goodbyes here,” she said.

He glanced up and looked at her and then he slowly walked over to the bed and pulled her into his arms. “What
we shared was special, Vanessa. I’m going to miss it and I’m going to miss you. Why can’t we—"

She quickly reached out and placed her fingers to his lips. “Don’t, Cameron. You promised. All this was supposed to be was an island fling. We both agreed. Flings aren’t meant to last.”

Taking a deep breath, Cameron fought back the words he wanted to say. He would let her have things her way for now, but once she set her feet back on American soil he would intensify his plan.

“Regardless, I meant what I said. If your days or nights become lonely and you find you still want me, just let me know and I will make myself available to you. Anytime, anyplace and any position.”

A small tremble rippled down Vanessa’s spine at Cameron’s offer. A part of her was tempted, but she held on to her resolve. Cameron had been wonderful these past few weeks only because he had allowed himself to put his guard down. He had been stripped of his control. Back in the States it would be business as usual, and he would go back to being the kind of man she did not want in her life. The kind of person who got what he wanted regardless of how he went about getting it. Ruthless, powerful, demanding. Those were three things she could not accept in any man.

But still…she would miss him. She would miss everything they had shared. For a little while he had stripped away her inhibitions, robbed her of her common sense and had filled her days and nights with more pleasure than any one woman had a right to receive.

“Vanessa.”

She met his gaze, saw the deep longing there and knew what he wanted. She shook her head. “You’ll miss your plane.”

He smiled. The smile where the corners of his lips tilted so sexily, the one that sent tingly sensations all through her. “I can’t miss the plane since I own it,” he said huskily. “And I can’t leave here without being with you again.”

He kissed her then, a hot, open-mouthed kiss that was filled with more passion than Vanessa thought she could handle. She would never get tired of savoring the taste of him. It was the kind of kiss that stirred everything inside her to life once again, that activated a dull, throbbing ache right between her legs.

“Cameron.”

He gently eased her down on the bed, while running his hands up her legs, her thighs and finding that very spot that ached for him. Instead of clamping her legs together to stop him, she parted them and he slipped his finger inside her. Her response to his intimate touch was immediate, and she released a moan of need from deep within her throat.

How could she still crave this when she had made love in two weeks more times than in her entire life? How could his touch alone make an insufferable longing erupt deep within her? Those questions were obliterated from her mind, squashed by the sensations that began taking over.

Intense pleasure suffused her entire body as his fingers worked their magic on her, and then shock wave after delicious shock wave consumed her. She literally gasped at the magnitude. Her body trembled and she clutched him, held tightly to his shoulder as an orgasm rammed into her.

He held her for long moments, waiting for the aftershocks to cease, to ease from her body. Then he slowly released her and stepped back, and she watched as he began removing his clothes. He took a condom from his nightstand and put it on.

Vanessa could tell from the intense look in Cameron’s eyes that even with the time restraints this wouldn’t be a quickie. He intended to leave her with something she would remember for a long time. He was determined to get her addicted to him.

A rainbow of emotions arced through her. Resentment. Inflexibility. Stubbornness. But all three were overshadowed by desire, a need that was deeply intense within her, even after what she’d just shared with him.

When he came back to the bed, gloriously naked, she pushed all those unwanted emotions aside. Instead she wanted to concentrate on this one last time. Rising up, she eagerly went into his arms, kissing him with the same hunger and intensity with which he had kissed her earlier.

Later, after he left, she would question her sanity, drum up all that common sense that he had blown to pieces. She would go back to being her own person, a confident woman who didn’t want or need a man in her life.

The tiny hot flames licking her body made any more coherent thoughts impossible. And when Cameron broke their kiss and eased her down in bed, she wrapped her arms around his neck, needing to hold on to him for just a little while longer.

The look in his eyes made her breathless, and when he positioned his body over hers and continued to look at her she could feel her body surrendering to him. To his wants and his desires.

When he entered her, she moaned at the impact and wrapped her legs around his waist. The way he made love to her, thrusting in and out, was making her delirious and she held on, needing as much as he was giving. She felt the muscles in his back straining with each powerful thrust.
And just when she felt the earth move, he leaned toward her and dipped the tip of his tongue into the corners of her mouth, licking her as though she was a taste he had to have.

At that moment the earth didn’t just move, it exploded, and she felt herself being blasted to a place Cameron had never taken her before. She screamed his name until her throat seemed raw and still the sensations kept ramming her, nonstop. She was slightly taken aback by the intensity of her passion, the force of her need, and when he followed her over, when that same explosion tore into him, she tightened her hold on him, lifted her hips and locked him in place.

And then she felt it, that affinity she had never felt before with a man, a special oneness. And no matter how much she tried fighting the feeling, it wouldn’t go away.

She was forced to admit that if she hadn’t gotten addicted, she was pretty close to it.

Vanessa kept running down the beach, along the shore. Cameron was probably back in the States now, back on Charlotte’s soil, and she needed to run.

She kept jogging, mindless of the exhaustion that had seeped into her bones. She wanted to be tired so she could sleep tonight, so the dreams wouldn’t come. It would be bad enough when she reached out and found the place beside her empty.

She had stood at his upstairs bedroom window and looked down below to watch him leave. Right before he got into the car, he glanced up, knowing she would be there. He had stared at her for a long moment before lifting his hand. She had expected a wave but instead he had blown her a kiss.

That single action had gotten under her skin, and for the rest of the day all rational thoughts had been reduced to a mess of emotions.

So, for now, she kept running to release that wild, reckless streak that Cameron had encouraged. She was determined to be all right and to put her island fling behind her. Cheyenne had called. The photo shoot had ended and she was on her way home. That meant in a day or so Vanessa would be free to leave this island that would always hold so many special memories.

She kept running, feeling her muscles ache, feeling the heaviness of her heart, but she refused to acknowledge the pain, the anxiety, the deep, intense need Cameron had so effortlessly fulfilled. She had begun missing him the moment he had gotten into the car that had taken him away. He had left his door key with her and also his car key, both generously offered for her use.

Vanessa inhaled deeply as she continued to jog. She had taken a chance. She had trodden on dangerous grounds. She had indulged in a very special kind of risky pleasure. But she didn’t have any regrets. What she and Cameron had shared was priceless and the memories would be endless.

When she returned to work on Monday it would be business as usual. That’s the way she wanted it and that’s the way she intended it to be.
“Welcome back, Vanessa.”
Vanessa glanced up to find her four cousins standing in the doorway to her office. She smiled. “Thanks, guys. It’s good to be back.”

“And you really want us to believe that you prefer being here over Jamaica?” Donovan, the youngest of the Steele brothers, asked.
She chuckled. “Hey, I didn’t admit that but you know what they say. There’s no place like home.”
Referring to that quote from *The Wizard of Oz* made her think of Cameron and the night they had watched that particular movie together.
“Vanessa?”
She was jerked from her thoughts. She glanced over at Chance. “Yes?”
“I asked if you wanted to come to dinner on Sunday. We’re having a small dinner party to celebrate the baby’s arrival.”
She smiled. “I’d love to come.” She wondered if Cameron had been invited, as well, but decided not to ask.
“And mark your calendar for Friday night, two weeks from now,” Morgan said.
She raised a brow while grabbing the calendar on her desk. “What’s going on that night?”
“I’m hosting a party to officially kick off my campaign. The election is in three months.”
Vanessa nodded. She didn’t have to wonder if Cameron would be attending that event. He was committed to Morgan’s campaign. She sighed deeply and after penciling in the date on her calendar she smiled up at Morgan.
“Consider it done. Do you need me to do anything?”
“Ask my campaign manager,” he said, nodding over at Donovan. “Or I could send you to Cameron since he’s the second in command.”
Vanessa frowned at Morgan. “No, that’s okay. I’m sure Donovan can tell me anything I need to know.”
She saw the quirking of Morgan’s lips and knew it was business as usual between them. He was still trying to shove Cameron down her throat. Well, little did he know, Cameron had already been there. She flushed at the memory.
“Vanessa, are you okay?”
She drew a deep breath and glanced over at Sebastian. “Yes, Bas, why do you ask?”
“You seem preoccupied about something.”
*If only you knew.* “I’m not preoccupied, just a little overwhelmed with the amount of work piled high on my desk.”
“Well, bring your thoughts off Jamaica. We have a lot of work to do this week. We need to call a press conference later today.”
Vanessa raised a brow. “Why?”
With irritation in his voice, Chance informed her, “An article appeared in this morning’s paper that we would be laying off over two hundred employees due to outsourcing.”
Vanessa shook her head. “I can’t believe someone has started that rumor again.”
“Well, they have, and now we need to work on damage control both with our employees and the community. Although I do find it really strange it’s started up again only since Morgan is seeking public office. It wouldn’t surprise me if someone is trying to play dirty politics.”
Vanessa nodded. She thought the same thing. It was her job to make sure the Steele Corporation maintained a positive image, and the sooner she got back into her job, the less time she would have to think about Cameron.
“What time is the press conference?” she asked Chance.
“At noon.”
“All right, how about if we meet in an hour so you can go over some things with me?”
“That’s a good idea. We’ll leave so you can get settled.”
“Thanks.”
When her cousins walked out of her office, closing the door behind them, she leaned back in her chair, grateful she had plenty to do to keep her mind occupied. The last thing she needed was to dwell on the memories of the past two weeks.
“I saw the press conference on television the other day. I think it went well, Vanessa,” Sienna said as she sat across from her best friend at lunch.

“Thanks, I can’t believe we’re still tackling that issue but all it takes is a rumor to make people panic when it comes to their livelihood,” Vanessa responded. The two women were grabbing a quick bite at the Racetrack Café, a popular restaurant in town and one they frequented often.

Moments later Vanessa smiled over at her friend. “I can’t get over just how pregnant you look. I’ve only been gone for two weeks and your stomach has grown tremendously.”

Sienna chuckled. “To hear Dane tell it, I’m still not showing much, although I can’t get into any of my clothes. Heck, I’m five months already, but the doctors told me the baby will probably be small. But then Dane was a preemie when he was born.”

The smile left Vanessa’s face. “Are you worried the baby might come early?”

“Not really, but if it does, I’ll be getting the best medical care. Dane’s mother tried to insist that we use Dr. Tucker, but Dane and I told her we were perfectly satisfied with the doctor I’m using. Needless to say, she wasn’t happy about it, thinks I’m to blame and hasn’t said too much to me since. She doesn’t know how close I finally came to telling her off.”

Vanessa frowned. The rift between Sienna and her mother-in-law was an ongoing one that had started when Sienna and Dane had first begun dating. Sienna was not the woman Mrs. Bradford had wanted for her son. Dane had been born into a rather wealthy family, while Sienna was what Mrs. Bradford considered a “nobody.”

Vanessa clearly recalled how a little over three years ago, Sienna and Dane’s marriage had seemed doomed, headed for divorce, until a snowstorm had left them stranded together at their cabin in the mountains. The forced togetherness had given them a chance to talk, to analyze what had gone wrong in the marriage and to decide that they still loved each other enough to stay together and make things work. Now they were doing just fine and would continue to do so as long as they kept Dane’s interfering parents out of their business.

After the waiter had delivered their meals and left, Sienna glanced over at Vanessa. “Well, are you going to tell me what went down in Jamaica between you and Cameron Cody?”

Vanessa glanced at Sienna over the rim of her glass of iced tea. After taking a sip, she said, “Come on Sienna, you know what a couple do when they’re involved in an affair. Ours was no different and it was fun and enjoyable while it lasted.”

“And you think it’s over?”

“I know it’s over. Cameron and I were very clear on the terms,” Vanessa said. She hoped, for both their sakes, that he honored the agreement as he’d promised. But then she had no reason to think he wouldn’t given that she’d been back in Charlotte for almost a week and he hadn’t tried contacting her.

It would have been easy for him to do so. Her office was down the hall from Morgan’s so it would have been relatively simple for him to drop by and visit Morgan and find a reason to seek her out. She didn’t want to admit it, but she was a little disappointed that he hadn’t.

“I take it the sex was good.”

Vanessa blinked when memories assailed her mind. The sex wasn’t just good, it was amazing. She couldn’t help but think of all the satisfaction she had gotten from Cameron that she hadn’t gotten from Harlan. Cameron had been a thoughtful, caring and unselfish lover.

“Well?”

Vanessa was pulled out of her thoughts. She glanced across the table and saw a silly-looking grin on Sienna’s face, as if she’d been privy to her thoughts. Gosh, she hoped not! She cleared her throat. “Well, what?”

“Was the sex good? I happen to think it must have been.”

Vanessa raised a brow. “Why would you think that?”

“Because you seem more at ease, relaxed, less tense. I can tell you’ve taken the edge off. And I have a feeling I should be thanking Cameron for that.”

Vanessa didn’t want to admit it but Sienna did have Cameron to thank for it. An affair with him had been just what she’d needed and just what she’d known it would be. Unforgettable. Since returning to Charlotte she hadn’t been able to sleep a single night without reliving those moments in her dreams.

“Don’t look now, but he’s here.”

Vanessa’s stomach suddenly clenched. “Who’s here?”

“Your lover boy. Cameron Cody. He just walked in with another man and the waiter is leading them over to a table near the wall. I don’t think he’s seen us.”

Thank God for that, Vanessa immediately thought, fighting the thousands of butterflies that had been released in her stomach. Maybe they could finish eating and leave before he did notice them.
“Oops. He glanced over this way and saw us.”
Sienna’s words weren’t what Vanessa had wanted to hear. “Then let’s pretend we haven’t seen him.”
Sienna smiled. “Too late. I looked right in his face.”
Vanessa picked up her tea glass with somewhat shaky fingers. “Fine, then I’ll be the one to pretend.”
“Too late again. He’s coming over this way.”
“Great! That’s all I need.”
Sienna lifted a brow. “If you keep acting this way, I’m going to think you’re in need of something else. Are you getting your edge back on again?”
Vanessa hadn’t thought Sienna’s comment the least bit funny and was about to tell her so when she saw a shadow cross their table. She swallowed as she glanced up into the darkest, sexiest eyes that had ever been given to a man. And at that moment she remembered how those same eyes got even darker just moments before he—
“Sienna. Vanessa.”
Cameron’s greeting broke into Vanessa’s thought, just at the right time. “Hello, Cameron,” both she and Sienna said at the same time. Vanessa couldn’t help but take in the sight of him. He was standing beside their table, dressed in a designer business suit, seeming completely at ease in the sexy stance she liked so well, his feet planted apart as if he was ready to take on anybody, especially her. And he would do it in such a way that would leave her totally breathless if not totally wrenched from never-ending orgasms.
“I saw the two of you and wanted to come over and say hello,” he said to both while fixing his gaze directly on Vanessa.
Vanessa cleared her throat. “That was kind of you,” she responded.
He nodded slightly and then said, “Well, I’ll let the two of you get back to your meal. I’m dining with my attorney.”
“Thanks for dropping by and saying hello,” Sienna said smiling.
“It was totally my pleasure,” he assured them.
Vanessa caught on to that one word. *Pleasure.* The man was the king of it. He could deliver it like nobody’s business.
“It was good seeing both of you.”
“Same here,” Sienna said.
Vanessa, who was trying to recover from a flash of one particular memory that had taken place in Cheyenne’s shower, merely nodded.
He turned and walked off. When Sienna was sure he wasn’t in hearing range she asked, “Am I to assume you no longer dislike him as much as you used to?”
Vanessa shrugged as she bit a French fry. “He’s all right.”
“That’s not what I asked you, Van.”
Vanessa frowned. Sienna wanted things spelled out for her. “Yes, you can assume that. But…”
“But what?”
“Cameron Cody is still Cameron Cody. He just happens to handle things differently in the bedroom than he does in the boardroom. I’ve seen him in action in both, Sienna.”
“And the way he carries himself in the boardroom is the one you can’t get over, isn’t it?”
“Should I be able to? It showed me what I can expect after the touching, kissing and the deep thrusts. You still have a man who likes being in control. A man whose actions can actually destroy a person’s livelihood when they find themselves out of a job.”
“Didn’t you read that article in *Ebony*? Although there tends to be some changes whenever a new management team comes on the scene, from what I gather, Cameron actually looks out for the employees of any company he acquires. In fact, the benefits package he brings is usually better than the one it replaces. He ends up being a blessing in disguise.”
*A blessing in disguise.* Now that was a different way to look at him, Vanessa thought. And although he had been exactly that to her in the bedroom by literally destroying Harlan’s claim that she was not worth a damn in bed, she could not imagine him being thought of that way in the boardroom.
“Well, it no longer matters what I think of Cameron,” she finally said, wiping the corner of her mouth with her napkin and fighting the urge to tilt her head, ever so slightly, and look over to where he was sitting. The tension that had invaded her stomach moments earlier was now a warm, melting feeling of longing that was seeping right to her center. It was a part of her that knew Cameron by name.
“Well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, Van, but Cameron still wants you. Evidently he didn’t get enough in Jamaica.”
Sienna’s words sent heat pouring through her. She swallowed deeply. “What makes you think that?”
“The way he was looking at you. He was talking to both of us, but he was looking at you, with that I-want-you-in-my-bed look. I recognized it since I’ve seen it in Dane’s eyes plenty of times.”

“Well, he might as well get it out of his eyes,” Vanessa said with irritation in her voice. “We made an agreement and I expect him to keep it. We reached a clear understanding before he returned to the States. What we shared in Jamaica ended in Jamaica.”

“And you actually believe that?”

Vanessa couldn’t fight it anymore. She gave in to the urge and took a quick glance across the room to where Cameron sat. Automatically, as if he’d been expecting her to look, their gazes caught, locked, held. She felt something. A hypnotic connection that was having a strange effect on her. From across the room she could feel his gaze. It was an intimate caress, touching her everywhere, leaving no part of her body without contact. And she could smell his scent. It was as if they were still out there on the beach and his scent, all manly, robust and sexy, mingled with the salty ocean air.

“Vanessa?”

She drew in a deep breath, forcing her gaze to return to Sienna. She found her friend studying her intently.

“Yes?”

“Why are you fighting it? Why are you still fighting Cameron?”

Vanessa’s hand tightened on the glass of tea she picked up. She needed a sip to cool off. Instead she took a long swallow. “I don’t want to be just another thing that he controls,” she managed to say moments later.

“And that’s all you think you would be to him?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you might not want my two cents but I happen to think you’re wrong. I believe, if given the chance, Cameron could be the best thing ever to happen to you, and how he conducts business has nothing to do with you.”

A part of Vanessa wished that was true, but still, she couldn’t separate the parts of the man. She didn’t want to know there were two parts of him, one she liked and one she didn’t. She wanted to like the whole man. “Can we talk about something else now?” she quietly asked.

Sienna nodded as she leaned back in her chair. “Okay, what do you want to talk about?”

“How about names for your baby? Have you come up with any more since the last time we talked?”

Vanessa needed this, a change in subjects. It would help her ignore the sensations flowing through her. As she sat and listened to Sienna, she fought the urge to look at Cameron one more time. It wasn’t easy.

“Who’s the woman, Cam?”

Cameron didn’t have to ask what woman X was referring to. “The one in the green pantsuit is Vanessa, Morgan’s cousin, and the other woman is her best friend, Sienna Bradford.”

Xavier nodded. He studied his friend over the rim of his wineglass. “And what’s going on with you and Ms. Steele?”

Cameron lifted a brow. “What makes you think something is going on?”

Xavier chuckled. “Mainly that you can’t seem to keep your eyes off her, and I’ve never known you to be that attentive to any woman.”

Cameron placed his fork down by his plate and leaned back in his chair to meet X’s curious gaze. “Vanessa isn’t just any woman.”

“She isn’t?”

“No.”

“Then who is she?”

Cameron glanced back over to where Vanessa was sitting, wishing she would look over at him again, feel everything he was feeling, want everything he was wanting. When time ticked by and she didn’t look his way, he finally returned his attention to X to answer his question.

“Vanessa is the woman I intend to marry.”

Cameron thought that the shocked look on Xavier’s face was priceless. “Marry?”

“Yes.”

Xavier shook his head, chuckling. “Does she know that?”

“She doesn’t have a clue. Vanessa has no idea that she will be the most important merger of my life.”
Chapter 15

“Alden looks so much like you that he could be your son,” Kylie Steele leaned over and whispered to Vanessa as she stood holding the newest member of the Steele family.

Vanessa grinned. “Only because people always said Chance and I favored each other. For a long time all my friends at school thought he was my big brother instead of my cousin.”

She looked back down at the baby she held in her arms. “He’s simply gorgeous, Kylie, and I can see him being a heartbreaker just like his uncle Donovan when he grows up.”

“Gosh, I hope not.” Kylie laughed. “There’s the doorbell. Another guest has arrived. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Wait! You want me to hold him until you get back? I know nothing about babies.”

Kylie grinned. “You’ll be fine, but if you start feeling an anxiety attack coming on, Chance is right across the room talking to Bas and his parents, and I’m sure Tiffany or Marcus will be coming in off the patio at any time. They enjoy taking care of their baby brother.”

Before Vanessa could say anything else, Kylie was gone. She glanced down at Alden, almost tempted to cross the room and hand him over to his father, but then she couldn’t help but be taken in by those dreamy dark eyes staring back at her. Yeah, this kid would grow up to be a heartbreaker. He was such an adorable baby.

She’d never given any thought to having a child of her own, at least not that she could recall. At some point she probably had, most likely during her childhood years when she’d played with dolls. After that, all she’d ever wanted to do was grow up and work alongside her father, uncle and cousins at the family corporation.

She would admit that after meeting Harlan and assuming she had fallen head over heels in love, the idea of having a baby might have slipped into her thoughts for one fleeting moment, but that was about it.

And then there was that time, just a few weeks ago in Jamaica when Cameron had brought up the possibility of a baby after they had carelessly made love on the beach without any protection. She was certain she was fine, but he evidently didn’t trust the potency of the Pill. As she gazed down into Alden’s beautiful face, although she didn’t want to she could imagine holding another baby, her baby. He would look just like his father with dark eyes, a deep cleft in his chin…

She sucked in deeply, wondering why she was even going there. Why was she imagining Cameron as her baby’s daddy? He should be the last person that she would envision in that role.

Suddenly her pulse kicked up a notch and she quickly glanced around. Most of the people Chance and Kylie had invited to their dinner party were family members and close friends. She’d overheard Donovan mention to Bas earlier that Cameron had left Charlotte a few days ago to check on problems he was having at his company in Texas; he wasn’t expected back for another week or so. Upon hearing that news, she had immediately let her guard down and relaxed, thinking she didn’t have to worry about seeing him here tonight.

But now…

She recalled Kylie had gone to the door and she turned toward the foyer. Her breath caught. Cameron was standing there, leaning in the doorway, staring at her. Under his intense gaze she felt tense, exposed, taut, and she turned around, intending to leave the room. But before she could take a step, Cameron was there, standing behind her.

“Vanessa.”

His voice, deep and husky, made goose bumps rise on her skin, and she could feel the heat of him standing so close. She knew it would be rude to walk off now, so she was forced to turn around to face him.

“Cameron.”

The moment her gaze locked on his face, up close and personal, she felt her heartbeat kick up another notch. This was the face she had awakened to each morning in Jamaica. This was the man whose body had cuddled so close to hers at night. The man who could make her scream out at a mind-blowing orgasm—anytime, anywhere and in practically any position.

She felt her cheeks flush at all the memories that flashed through her mind. She dragged in a deep breath and forced herself to speak. “I thought you were out of town.”

“I flew back for a few days then I’ll be leaving again.”

She nodded. “Is everything all right? I understand you left town because you were having problems at one of your companies.”
“Yes, there was the matter of a small explosion I had to deal with.”

Vanessa gasped. “An explosion?”

“Yes.”

“Was anyone hurt? Was there much damage?”

“Luckily no one was hurt and the damage was minimal. I gather whoever set it didn’t intend to hurt anyone, they merely wanted to make a point.”

Vanessa raised a brow. “A point?”

“Yes, to me.”

Vanessa was about to ask what he meant by that when Kylie walked up. “I guess you thought I had deserted you, Vanessa, but I wanted to check on everything in the kitchen. Jocelyn’s sister Leah is a sweetheart for volunteering to come to Charlotte and prepare such a feast for everyone. She’s a fantastic cook.” She then reached out to relieve Vanessa of Alden.

“Yes, I heard that she was,” Vanessa said, gently placing the baby into his mother’s arms.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes so the two of you can continue to enjoy yourselves until then,” Kylie said, smiling at the both of them before walking off to join her husband who was talking to one of their neighbors.

Vanessa knew there was no reason she should feel nervous about being with Cameron. She certainly knew him well enough. Just thinking of all the things they had done together was downright scandalous. And she knew that although they were here together, neither one of them had actually broken their agreement. She couldn’t blame him for his relationship with her family and it would be unfair to do so. Today they were victims of circumstances, and it would not be right to expect him to stay away from various functions and events just because she might be there.

“How have you been, Vanessa?”

She looked into his face but tried not to gaze directly into his eyes. “I’ve been fine. What about you?”

“I’ve been doing okay. Did your sister return to Jamaica in time to finish overseeing the construction of her pool?”

“Yes. I talked with her a few days ago and the pool’s almost completed. They’re putting water in it next week.” She suddenly felt tense and swallowed deeply, then she flicked her tongue out to wet her lips. When she saw Cameron’s gaze latch on to the movement of her tongue, her stomach clenched and intense heat settled right smack between her thighs.

She inhaled deeply. The more they stood here talking to each other, the more they were playing a game of self-torture, wanting something neither could have again. It was time to move on. “Well, I think I’ll go talk to Sienna for a while. It was good seeing you again.”

And without giving him a chance to say anything, she quickly walked off.

Later that night, after her shower, Vanessa slipped between the cool, crisp sheets. She stared up at the ceiling, her mind consumed with thoughts of the time she had spent this evening at Chance and Kylie’s home.

There was no way she could deny there was still a very strong attraction between her and Cameron. In fact, it was possibly even stronger than before. How else did she expect her body to react when it came within ten feet of the man who had indulged it, made love to it?

It seemed that no matter where she had gone in Chance and Kylie’s home, all she had to do was turn around and Cameron was there, staring at her with those deep, dark eyes of his, though always keeping his distance. That hadn’t stopped her body from desiring him, though, from wanting him and from needing to indulge in the forbidden just one more time with him.

She flipped on her stomach and buried her face in the pillow. How could she even consider such a thing? She had risked an affair with him before and she was paying dearly, mainly because he had brought her body back to life. He had made her aware of places on her body that could stir feelings within her from a mere touch.

His touch.

She shook her head, determined to get under control these hot emotions she was experiencing so that when she saw him again she could handle herself in a totally professional manner. Any other reaction toward Cameron was unacceptable.

She jumped when the phone on the nightstand rang. It was her landline. Most people called her on her cell phone; few had her home number. Glancing at the caller ID, she smiled. It was Taylor. Neither Cheyenne nor Taylor had made it to the dinner party tonight. It was unusual for either to miss a family function of any kind. Chance indicated both had called with their regrets. Cheyenne had come down with a stomach virus and Taylor was knee-deep in trying to work out a large business deal for a very influential client.

Vanessa quickly picked up the phone. “Okay, Taylor, it’s not my birthday, and there’s no such thing as Sister’s Day, so why do I deserve the honor of a phone call?”
She could hear Taylor laughing on the other end of the line. It wasn’t that Taylor never called, she just didn’t call as often as Cheyenne. But lately even Cheyenne’s calls didn’t come as often as they used to. And there were times she couldn’t be reached at all. Donovan had once teased her about leading a double life, which was something Cheyenne hadn’t thought amusing at the time. She had simply explained that as a model she would often frequent countries with poor cell service.

“Don’t mess with me, girl,” Taylor said. “I shouldn’t be calling now. I still have tons of work to do on this deal I’m trying to close for my client.”

“It’s that big?”

“Bigger. With the commission alone I’ll be able to buy that place I’ve been eyeing for a while in D.C. The one that’s right on the Potomac.”

Vanessa smiled. Taylor had fallen in love with the nation’s capital when she’d lived there while attending Georgetown University. At the time, she’d had an apartment in Virginia, but had always had dreams of returning one day and buying a place right in the heart of D.C., preferably on the water.

“Hey, I’m not mad at you. Go for it,” Vanessa said, knowing what a workaholic her sister could be at times.

“Speaking of going for it, I talked to Cheyenne earlier and she told me that you and Cameron finally hooked up.”

Vanessa frowned. Cheyenne had a big mouth. And she didn’t know the full details of what had transpired between her and Cameron those two weeks. Since Vanessa hadn’t told her youngest sister anything, she’d evidently drawn her own conclusions. “Cameron and I have not ‘hooked up.’”

“Sorry. I was just going by what Cheyenne said.”

“And you of all people should know better than that. He bought the house next to Cheyenne’s in Jamaica, so he was there at the same time I was. No big deal.”

“Sure, if you say so,” Taylor said chuckling. “You know I’m not one to get in anyone’s business, Van.”

“Please, don’t start now.”

“I won’t, but I wasn’t born yesterday. I know the man wants you. Now, whether or not he’s finally gotten you is your business. But I think he’s cool and handsome and everything you need.”

“And just what is it that you think I need?”

“The same thing most women need. A good man in your life. A man to hold you close at night, keep the demons away, be there when the going gets tough.”

“And you think Cameron would do all those things?”

“I don’t know why he wouldn’t. He seems like the type of guy who takes his obligations seriously. You could do a whole lot worse.”

Vanessa fought the urge to tell her sister that at one time she had. And “worse” was a man by the name of Harlan Shaw. Before Harlan there had been Dr. Derek Peterson. She’d met Derek at a party right after returning to Charlotte from college. She had liked Derek and had quickly accepted his date, although her cousins had warned of his reputation.

Derek had come to pick her up one Saturday night and they hadn’t been out of her driveway five seconds before the good doctor began growing hands. They were hands he intended to use on her at every traffic light and stop sign. The words, No, Behave yourself, and Keep your hands to yourself, had fallen on deaf ears. By the time they’d reached the restaurant she had taken as much as she intended. As soon as he came around to open the door for her, she had kneed him in the groin so mercilessly, that the restaurant manager had thought they needed to call an ambulance. An embarrassed Derek had assured everyone that he was okay before literally crawling back into his car and leaving her stranded. She had called her cousins to come get her, and to this day there was still bad blood between them and Derek.

“Vanessa?”

She remembered she still had her sister on the line. “Yes?”

“Think about what I’ve said about Cameron and I promise that will be the last time you hear anything from me on the subject.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“Touchy, touchy.”

“Only when people get into my business. I can’t wait until you get a love interest so I can get into yours.”

“Is Cameron a love interest, Van?”

Before Vanessa could utter the denial on her lips, Taylor giggled and said, “That’s okay. You don’t have to tell me anything. It’s your business. So tell me, how is Sienna doing?”

Vanessa was glad for the change in subjects. The mere mention of Cameron had ignited a throbbing between her thighs and that wasn’t good, especially since she would be sleeping in her bed alone tonight. But later, she would
have her dreams.

“Yes, X, I’m flying back to Texas tomorrow. I returned to Charlotte because there was a function I couldn’t miss attending.” And a person I couldn’t miss seeing. “Arrange a private meeting between me and McMurray. What he’s paying his thugs to do has to stop,” Cameron said angrily, rubbing a hand down his face. “It’s time for him to know who I am, why I took his company away and why I intend to keep it, no matter what he does.”

Hours later, a tense Cameron couldn’t sleep. His restlessness had nothing to do with his ongoing problems with McMurray, but with a certain young woman by the name of Vanessa Steele.

He had needed to see her again. He had needed to know that that same potent chemistry he’d felt all during their time together in Jamaica was stronger than ever.

She was fighting him. He could feel it every time their eyes met. He knew he was gambling, but he had to believe their island affair meant more than just sex to her, just as it meant more to him. She might not be able to put it all together now, but eventually she would. Although he would keep their agreement, he intended to be at every function that she attended if he could. His flights back and forth to Texas were becoming a nuisance, costing him valuable time; time he should be using to get on the good side of a certain woman.

That was why his ongoing problems with McMurray were unacceptable and had tried his patience for the last time. For some reason the man believed that if he kept up his dirty work Cameron would eventually throw in the towel and sell the company back to him.

McMurray couldn’t be more wrong.

John McMurray sat at the conference table beside his attorney with his arms crossed over his chest and fixed Cameron with a mean, level stare. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Cody, and you don’t have any proof, so don’t waste your time accusing me of anything.”

Cameron sat at the head of the table, with Xavier Kane on one side and Kurt Grainger on the other. “But we do have proof, McMurray, which is why one of your men is behind bars now.”

McMurray’s attorney touched his client’s elbow, cautioning him from saying anything more. He then spoke on his client’s behalf. “Again, Mr. Cody, contrary to whatever proof you think you might have, my client is innocent, which means you are mistaken.”

A smile split Cameron’s face. “Then ask your client if the name Samuel Myers means anything to him?”

The attorney didn’t have to ask McMurray anything. The nervousness that darted into McMurray’s eyes was a dead giveaway. However, the attorney said, “My client doesn’t know a Samuel Myers.”

Cameron leaned forward. “Myers says differently. Let’s cut the bullshit. Frankly, I’m getting fed up with this entire ordeal. Your client lost his company.”

“You took it from me!” McMurray yelled out in anger.

Cameron nodded. “Yes, I took it from you and do you know why?”

When neither McMurray nor his attorney responded, Cameron said, “Because you don’t deserve to have a company, McMurray, and how you solicit loyalty in a few of your employees is beyond me. But then, for the right price, anyone can be bought.”

“You are accusing my client of bribery?”

“Yes, for starters. Does the name Fred Cody ring a bell?”

John McMurray’s face twisted with more anger. “I wish you would stop throwing out the names of people I don’t know. Judging by the surname I can only assume he’s some relative of yours.”

Cameron shot the man another forced smile. “Yes, he was my grandfather. He had worked for your company for over forty years, and right before he was to retire—less than a year before, in fact—you had him fired. That was almost twenty years ago.”

“Twenty years ago! You’re getting back at me for something I did twenty years ago? Hell, I was in my late thirties. Whatever I did then was because I was following my father’s orders. What else was I to do?”

“Have a conscience. That year you released six men from your employment, men who had given Global Petroleum their blood, sweat and tears, yet you fired them without any compensation or benefits. And when they tried banding together to take your company to court, you and your father paid people to harass them and their families, scaring them to the point where they wouldn’t fight the big corporation that had done them wrong. They barely had money to eat and live on, and you and your father made it impossible for them to afford to fight you any longer by deliberately dragging things out in court.”

“If we fired them, then there had to be a reason for it,” McMurray snapped.

“Oh, you had a reason all right. You and your old man didn’t want to give them what they deserved after working for you all those years. But now I will. For the first five years, any profit I make from Global Petroleum
will go to those men and their families. Of the six, four are still living, almost impoverished. So as you can see, McMurray, I’m trying to right a wrong that you and your family did.”

Cameron nodded to Xavier who slid a manila envelope over to McMurray and his attorney. “I suggest the two of you read those documents, ponder them,” Cameron said. “If I’m forced to expose them, I will. I have sworn affidavits from Samuel Myers, as well as from the woman who was your father’s secretary, Hannah Crosby. Ms. Crosby claims she was paid to falsify documents, and Samuel Myers has confessed to being one of your father’s henchmen. He’s provided us a list of all the bad deeds that your father paid him to do. If you’re willing to have the press dig into history and dishonor your family’s name, then go ahead, keep doing what you’re doing, in other words, basically the same tricks your father pulled years ago.”

Cameron leaned over the table and his smile was gone. Instead his face was a mask of pure anger. “The only difference is, your henchmen don’t bother me, McMurray, and I’m not going anywhere. Do you and your family a favor, accept your loss and take an early retirement. Otherwise, you leave me no choice but to send a copy of what’s in that envelope to every newspaper in Texas.”

McMurray jumped out of his chair, almost knocking it over. “You won’t get away with this, Cody.”

“I already have. You don’t own Global Petroleum anymore. I do. Accept it. And let me give you a friendly word of warning. If there are any more mishaps to my company that I trace back to you, instead of spending your remaining days in retirement, I’ll going to see to it that you rot in jail. Count on it.”

An angry John McMurray stalked out of the conference room with his attorney—who’d taken the time to grab the envelope off the table—following right on his heels.

Xavier shook his head and glanced over at Cameron. “That man is bad news.”

Kurt nodded in agreement.

Cameron released a deep breath as he leaned back in his chair. He had a feeling they hadn’t seen or heard the last of John McMurray.
Cameron walked into the kick-off party for Morgan’s campaign with two purposes in mind. He wanted to show his support for his friend and he needed to see a certain woman again.

It had been two weeks since he’d last seen Vanessa at the small gathering in Chance’s home and now he was in a bad way. And no matter what it took, he was going to make sure she was in a bad way, too, by the time the night was over.

“Cameron, it’s good to see you.”

He smiled when he was approached by Jocelyn Mason Steele. She was the woman he had chosen to run his construction company based in Charlotte. Already nearly one hundred people were on payroll, with several lucrative projects lined up to keep them busy.

He leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek. “You look beautiful as usual. Where’s that husband of yours?”

She grinned. “Bas is around here somewhere. I think he’s trying to dodge his old girlfriend,” she said teasingly.

Cameron glanced around. The party was being held on the main floor of the Steele Building and decorative streamers and red, white and blue balloons were everywhere. “Cassandra Tisdale is here?” he asked.

“Yes, Cassandra and the entire Tisdale family. Time will tell if she’s here to throw her support to Morgan or to be nosy. But then, we really don’t care. Since throwing his hat into the ring, Morgan has received numerous financial backers even if the Tisdales decide to support Roger Chadwick.”

Cameron nodded. He knew the story. The Tisdales had wanted Morgan to marry a member of their family by the name of Jamie Hollis, a senator’s daughter. When Morgan had refused and told them in no uncertain terms that he would be marrying the woman he loved, namely Lena Spears, that hadn’t sat too well with them…until Morgan had taken matters into his own hands and made sure Cassandra and her cousin Jamie knew that he meant business. He’d warned if they continued spreading gossip about him and Lena, he would start spreading some of his own about them.

“The buffet table is set up on the other side of the room and there’s plenty to eat,” Jocelyn told him.

“Thanks, but I’m going to let Morgan and Lena know I’m here before I start mingling.”

A few minutes later he found them, talking to Vanessa and another man. He frowned. Was the man her date? His stomach clenched at the possibility. There was only one way to find out. Without wasting any time he approached the two couples.

Lena was the first to see him and turned and smiled radiantly. Not for the first time he thought Morgan had struck a gold mine with this woman. A Queen Latifah look-alike, she looked gorgeous in her mint-green pantsuit. Whoever thought Lena Spears would not complement Morgan was sadly mistaken.

“Cameron, I’m glad you could make it,” Lena said, reaching out and giving him a hug. “I understand you’ve been out of town a lot.”

“Yes, I have.” He then shook hands with Morgan. “Seems like a nice turnout.”

“It is,” Morgan said. He turned to Vanessa. “Cam, you already know Vanessa.”

“Yes. How are you tonight, Vanessa?”

He picked up on the unevenness of her breathing when she responded in a soft voice, “I’m fine, Cameron. And you?”

“I’m fine, as well.” He glanced over at the man standing by her side. Too close, as far as he was concerned. “And this,” Morgan was saying, “is Reverend David Carrington. He recently moved to town to become the new pastor of the Redeem Baptist Church.”

The man might be a minister, but there was no wedding band on his finger, Cameron noted, so anything was possible. But not with his woman. “Nice meeting you, Reverend. I’m going to have to visit your church one of these Sundays.”

Reverend Carrington smiled. “Please do. In fact, I plan on having a blazing sermon this coming Sunday.”

Cameron nodded. His mind was not on the good man’s Sunday sermon. Instead he was trying to come up with a way to get Vanessa alone without breaking their agreement, even if only for a few minutes.

“Oops, I left my speech upstairs on my desk,” Morgan said, looking apologetic.

“I can go get it for you,” Lena quickly volunteered.
“No,” Morgan said just as quickly while settling his arms around her waist. “I need you to stay down here with me and greet our guests. Vanessa can catch the elevator and get it for me.”

Vanessa looked surprised. “I can?”

“Yes, you don’t mind, do you?”

Vanessa sighed. What could she say? Of course she didn’t mind. Besides, it would give her a chance to escape Cameron’s presence. She had seen him the moment he had walked into the room. It was as if she had radar and it had homed right in on him. He was impeccably dressed in a dark suit and looked as though he had just stepped off the cover of GQ. Her equilibrium hadn’t been the same since he’d arrived. Weeks of nonstop dreaming about the man was taking its toll. Standing so close to him, breathing in his manly scent, was definitely too much.

“Of course I don’t mind. I’ll be back in a second,” she said, turning to walk off.

“Thanks. And take Cameron with you.”

She swirled back around. “What? Why do I need to take Cameron with me?”

“Because Derek Peterson is here. Surprised the heck out of us.”

At the swift elbow he received in his side from Lena, Morgan glanced over at the Reverend and said apologetically, “Sorry about that. What I meant to say is that he surprised the heck out of us, since he dislikes the Steeles so much.”

“Who’s Derek Peterson?” Cameron asked curiously.

Morgan wanted to paint the true picture of the man, but out of respect for Reverend Carrington again, he merely said, “Let’s just say he’s a not-so-nice person who has it in for Vanessa.”

She frowned. “He doesn’t have it in for me, Morgan.”

Morgan chuckled. “Yes, he does. You almost crippled the man.”

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “That was almost six years ago.”

Morgan smiled. “Doesn’t matter. There are some things a man doesn’t forget and almost losing his balls—”

He cleared his throat and glanced over at the Reverend again. “I mean, almost losing his jewels is one of them.”

Reverend Carrington tried to hide his grin. “Please point this gentleman out to me. I definitely need to invite him to church on Sunday.”

“If you think it will help,” Morgan said, more than happy to oblige.

“The Word always helps,” was the minister’s response.

“Then I say go for it,” Morgan replied. “And you can kill—or save—two birds with one stone since he’s standing over there by the punch bowl talking to Cassandra Tisdale. I think she’s a person who will need to hear your sermon on Sunday, as well.”

Reverend Carrington nodded. “My sermon will be for everyone, so I’m looking forward to seeing your face in the congregation on Sunday, too, Mr. Steele.” He then walked off to where Derek and Cassandra were standing with their heads together.

“I’m going upstairs now,” Vanessa said, turning to walk off.

“Now that I’ve heard about this Derek guy, I think I’ll go with you after all.” Cameron followed in step beside her. He owed Morgan for this. Chances were Morgan hadn’t left his speech on his desk upstairs. Cameron had a feeling it was right in his friend’s pocket.

He and Vanessa didn’t say anything as they walked toward the bank of elevators. They slowed their steps when they heard loud, angry voices coming from behind a closed door, Vanessa chuckled.

Cameron glanced over at her. “What’s so funny?”

“From the sound of things, Sienna has finally gotten fed up and is giving her mother-in-law hell. It’s about time.”

They rounded a corner to the elevators. Luckily, one opened right away. The moment they stepped in and it closed behind them, Cameron could feel the heat. He moved to the far side of one wall and she moved to the other.

“I’m sorry that Morgan put you on the spot like that, Cameron. I really didn’t need an escort.”

He glanced over at her. “I don’t mind.”

He averted his eyes from her so he wouldn’t be tempted to close the distance between them, take her into his arms and kiss her. She looked so good in her red dress that showed just what a gorgeous pair of legs she had. And it didn’t take much to remember how those legs could wrap around him, holding him tight inside her and—

“How’s that problem going with your business in Texas?” she asked, looking everywhere but at him.

He released a deep sigh, glad for her interruption into his thoughts. “I’m hoping it’s been resolved. Time will tell.”

She nodded and turned to stare at the wall again. Moments later he couldn’t fight it any longer and looked at her. Gosh, he loved her. And he wanted her. Here. Now. Right this second. As if she read his thoughts, she slowly turned toward him.
The moment their gazes connected, sexual tension seemed to crackle in the air between them. He saw the deep look of desire in her eyes and took a step toward her at the exact moment the elevator came to a jolting stop.

That seemed to snap her to her senses and she took a step back. “We need to get off now.”

He’d had enough. He refused to torque himself any longer. “I personally think what we need to do is go somewhere and make love.”

He watched her eyes darken even more, confirming she was thinking the same thing but was still fighting it.

“What about our agreement?” she asked softly when the elevator door opened and she backed up slowly, stepping off.

A smile touched his lips as he followed her. “I won’t tell anyone that we broke it if you don’t.”

She stopped walking. He waited for her to say something, to respond. It seemed like forever before she asked quietly, “You promise?”

His mind was muddled and at the moment he didn’t understand the question. “I promise what?”

“No to tell anyone that we broke our agreement?” she whispered.

His smile deepened and took a step toward her. “I’ll promise you anything.”

She inhaled deeply and glanced down at her watch. “Morgan is expecting us to return with his speech.”

At that moment, Cameron’s cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and answered. “Yes?”

After a brief pause, he said, “No, we hadn’t made it to your office yet. No problem, I’ll tell her.”

He clicked off the line and put the phone back in his jacket pocket. “That was Morgan. He didn’t leave the speech on his desk after all. It was in his pocket.”

Vanessa frowned. “Umm, now, isn’t that amazing. Seems like perfect timing.”

Cameron nodded. “Yes, it does, doesn’t it?”

“We were set up,” she said.

“Looks that way.”

“And you’re not upset about it?”

His low chuckle sent soft shivers all through her body. “Not in the least. Are you?”

“No.” She glanced around. “While we’re up here I might as well show you my office. You’ve never seen it before.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“All right, it’s this way, right down the hall from Morgan’s.”

They walked side by side and all Vanessa could think about was that he was here, and they were alone, hot and horny. Thanks to him she knew what horniness felt like; she’d been suffering from it for weeks.

When they got to her office door she pulled a key out of her small purse, but her hands were shaking so hard she couldn’t fit the key in the lock.

“Let me help,” he said, sliding a hand around her to the door. When he opened it, she quickly stepped inside and he followed, closing the door behind them. And relocking it.

He didn’t even glance around. Instead he snaked out his hand and captured her wrist and pulled her to him. The moment he did so, it seemed something between them broke loose, and he went for her mouth at the same moment she went for his.

Spontaneity.

He’d missed it. He wanted it. Now.

He picked her up and swirled around, placing her back against the closed door while their mouths were still locked. Hungry, they devoured each other like starved, crazed addicts. He broke the connection just long enough to flip her dress up and push her silk panties down. With one hand he unzipped his pants, pulled out his shaft, and before either could take another breath, he thrust into her.

“Cameron!”

She screamed his name and just that quickly, an explosion went off inside her, sending shivers of pleasure all through her body. But he kept going, demanding that she come again. She did and with her legs wrapped tightly around him, and the way her fingers were digging into his shoulders, he could tell that this orgasm was just as powerful as the first.

“Don’t stop, Cameron. Please, don’t stop,” she whispered frantically, kissing his face all over.

Little did she know he couldn’t stop now even if he wanted to. Not even if the building were to catch on fire. They were burning to a crisp right now anyway. He kept thrusting into her, nonstop, fast, hard, needing her, needing the connection with the woman he loved.

When he felt it, the sensation started in his toes and slowly worked its way up to his shaft. Vibrations, shock
waves. It was an orgasm so powerful, it tore into him. He threw his head back to the point that his veins nearly burst in his neck. But he didn’t feel any pain. He felt only ecstasy. Pleasure. Vanessa.

Breathing once again, he buried his head on her chest, between her breasts. He could die at this moment and he’d go happy, satisfied, feeling total completeness.

When the shivers stopped, he pulled back, but he did not pull out of her. He kept her pinned against the door while he was still inside her. He met her gaze and said softly, “Please don’t say this shouldn’t have happened.”

She licked her lips before asking, barely with enough breath to speak, “Can I think it?”

He shook his head. “No.”

She nodded. “You did say, anytime, anyplace and…any position.”

A smile touched his lips. “Yes, I did.”

“And I see that you meant it.”

“Every word.”

Vanessa felt him growing hard inside her again and tightened her legs around his waist to keep him locked to her. “Some people might be wondering where we’ve disappeared to.”

“Let them wonder. I’m sure Morgan will tell them something believable.”

She nodded again. “I hope so because I haven’t gotten enough of you yet.”

“And I haven’t gotten enough of you, either.”

And then he leaned forward and captured her lips at the exact moment he thrust deeper inside her. Once, twice. Again and again.

The heat was on again and he planned to take it to the limit.
Chapter 17

“Woman, you’re killing me,” Cameron said through clenched teeth. They were at his house, in his bedroom, and Vanessa was on top of him, riding him like crazy. He clutched the bedspread and balled it in his fist. The woman was amazing, simply amazing. He had thought that same thing in Jamaica but now, on American soil, he was doubly sure of it.

After leaving her office they had finally gone back downstairs to join the party, barely hearing the last of Morgan’s speech. Then they had quickly said their goodbyes, not caring that after having been missing from the party for over an hour, they were making a grand escape.

She had followed him home and they had barely made it inside the door before they were at it again. This time she was in control. First they had made love on the floor in his living room until their strength was depleted. And then he had carried her upstairs to his bedroom, where he had undressed her properly before making love to her again.

They had fallen asleep, but she had awakened him—less than ten minutes ago—saying she needed to ride him, and he had flipped on his back, happy to oblige. Now he was looking death in the face. The woman was going to kill him.

“I won’t kill you if you stop holding back. I made it clear what I want.”

Yes, she had. For some reason she enjoyed the feel of him exploding inside her, shooting his semen all the way to her womb. The moment he did so, she would clench her inner muscles and pull everything out of him, as if his release was something she had to have.

“Damn, you’re really asking for it this time,” he warned, barely able to get the words out.

“Good, now let go and give me what I want, Cameron. Now!”

“You better hope those pills you’re on do their job tonight. If not, this is a baby in the making,” he muttered just seconds before his body bucked and he exploded, giving her just what she wanted.

As if his orgasm had lit her sensuous torch, she climaxed, as well, clenching him more deeply while calling out his name. Knowing she needed this from him, he gently flipped her on her back, happy to oblige. Now he was looking death in the face. The woman was going to kill him.

“Sneaking out on me, Vanessa?”

Vanessa swirled around, holding her shoes to her chest. “I thought you were asleep, Cameron. It’s time for me to leave.”

He glanced to the window. It was daybreak. In essence she had spent the night. He moved to get out of bed.

“Let me slip on something and walk you to your car.”

“No. Please don’t. I’m fine.”

He stayed put, seeing the look of uncertainty in her eyes. Did she regret what had happened last night? There was only one way to find out. “When will I see you again?”

He watched her nervously lick her lips, and his stomach clenched when he recalled just what she had done to him with those same lips and tongue last night. He also noticed she was backing up slowly toward the door. “I’ll call you.”

“When?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I hadn’t counted on this.”

He figured now was not a good time to tell her that he had. A part of him had wanted to believe she still desired him and the attraction between them was just as strong and hot as it had been in Jamaica. What had happened last night had proven him right.

He knew he couldn’t be completely honest with her anymore. He stood. “Can I give you something to think about?”

“Yes, what?”
“I love you.”
She closed her eyes and her shoes dropped to the floor. The sound made her snatch her eyes open and she
dropped to her knees to pick her shoes up. Without looking at him she gathered them in her arms and said, “This is
getting complicated. I have to go.”
He took a few steps toward her. “What’s so complicated about me loving you?”
She looked at him as she stood up. “Because I’m not sure how I feel about you.”
He reached out and pulled her to him again, making her drop her shoes for a second time. He picked her up in
his arms and moved to sit on the bed with her cradled in his lap. His teeth caught her earlobe before he whispered
huskily, “Don’t you? I’m betting my money that you love me, too.”
She pulled back and stared down at him. “Why do you think that? Because we enjoy great sex together? A lot
of people enjoy great sex, Cameron.”
He shook his head. “We’re not talking about a lot of people. We’re talking about us. And we share more than
great sex. You’re everything I want in a woman, Vanessa. You’re compassionate, honest, trustworthy and—”
“But I’m having doubts about you, Cameron. You take people’s companies away. What you do affects their
lives. I read an article on the Internet a few weeks ago about what you did to that company in Texas, Global
Petroleum, and how the people resent you for taking it over and that’s why you’re having problems there.”
Cameron moved her off his lap and stood, somewhat irritated and trying like hell to hold on to his temper.
“You can’t believe everything you read, especially not off the Internet, Vanessa, and particularly not off that
particular site. John McMurray had that site up and running for a while mainly to discredit me.”
“But—”
“But you have to trust me. I know what I’m doing.”
“But I don’t. My family could have been in the same boat that Global is in now had you succeeded in taking
over the Steele Corporation.”
“No, the circumstances are different, Vanessa.”
“I don’t think that they are.”
Cameron inhaled deeply. He loved this woman with all his heart and soul but more than anything, he wanted
her to believe in him and trust him completely. “I’m leaving for Texas tomorrow and will probably be gone for a
week or two. When I get back, let’s have dinner and talk. There are a few things I think we need to clear up, okay?”
She slowly nodded and then stood and slipped into her shoes. “I have to go. If I don’t see you or talk to you
before you leave, I hope you have a safe trip.”
And then she was gone, hurrying out of the bedroom and down the stairs to leave his home.

“So, Vanessa, how do you think things went at the party the other night?”
She glanced up from the document she was reading to see Morgan in the doorway of her office, a silly grin on
his face. He knew better than anyone that she had missed most of the party while she was in this very office playing
hanky-panky with Cameron.
Even now the memories were still vivid. She wished she had gone to church on Sunday to hear Reverend
Carrington’s sermon. She glared over at her cousin. “I have a bone to pick with you, Morgan.”
He smiled. “What kind of bone?”
“Not a juicy rib-eye, that’s for sure. I don’t like being set up.”
“And you think you were set up?”
“Yes.”
“Umm, I don’t recall you complaining about it that night when you came back downstairs. In fact, you looked
rather giddy. Like the cat who’d gotten the canary.”
“That’s not the point.”
“Then what is the point?”
She inhaled deeply and decided to use another approach. “What is it with Cameron? Other guys have tried
dating me, and you, Bas, Donovan and Chance have always been overly cautious, checking them out to make sure
they don’t intend to run off with the family china. Yet, Cameron is a man known to take over companies and it
seems like the four of you, especially you, Morgan, are all but handing me to him on a silver platter. Hell, let’s
forget about silver, let’s even try a gold platter.”
“We like Cameron. He had a rough life with the way he lost his parents, yet he made it. He’s a survivor.”
“But look at what he’s doing to those companies,” she implored.
Morgan rolled his eyes. “Name one company where the employees haven’t benefited from Cameron’s
takeover.”
“What about that one in Texas? Global Petroleum.”
“That’s personal for Cameron.”
Vanessa arched a brow. “And how is it personal?”
“He had a score to settle with the owner.”
“And for that reason he took over an entire company? What about the employees?”
“Like I said, they will end up in better shape. A lot better than Cam’s grandfather did over twenty years ago.”
Vanessa frowned. “What about Cam’s grandfather?”
Morgan came into her office and closed the door behind him. “You know about him?”
She shrugged. “Only what Cameron shared with me. I know he was fired from his job of forty years less than a year from retirement, and he lost all his benefits.”
“And did Cam tell you the name of the company responsible?”
“If he did, I don’t remember. Why?”
“Because Global Petroleum is the same company that fired not only Cam’s grandfather but five other men who were about to retire. None of them had a grandson like Cam who was willing to drop out of school to help make ends meet. Two of the men died within the first five years, the others still living are destitute. They’re old men, in their late eighties. One is in his nineties. Cam took over Global Petroleum not only for revenge, but he’s taking the company’s first five years of profits to give to those remaining four men so that they can live out the rest of their lives without wanting for anything. All the profits will be split among the survivors and their families.”
Vanessa leaned back in her chair, amazed. “He’s actually doing that?”
“Yes. And in my book that’s a pretty nice gesture for a guy you think is nothing more than a jerk.”
“I never said he was a jerk. I just never understood him, until now.”
Morgan shook his head. “And you still don’t understand him, Vanessa. The man loves you. That’s why I don’t worry about what may or may not be happening between the two of you. One thing I’ve discovered since becoming Cam’s friend is that true friendships are important to him, and because of it, he picks his friends carefully. And the reason he loves you is that he truly believes you’re more than worthy of his love.”
Morgan crossed his arms over his chest and met her gaze. “The big question of the hour is whether you’re going to prove him right or wrong.”

That night, after taking her shower, Vanessa slipped into bed with Morgan’s words from earlier that day on her mind.
“…And the reason he loves you is that he truly believes you’re more than worthy of his love.”
She shook her head. If Cameron did think at one time that she was worthy of his love, chances were that after what she’d said to him their last morning together he didn’t feel that way now. She had told him that she doubted him, and now he probably wouldn’t want to see her.
She sighed deeply, knowing she would go stark raving crazy if she had to wait another week before he returned to Charlotte to find out. She quickly reached across the bed for the phone.
A sleepy feminine voice answered after three rings. “Hello, Lena, how are you? May I speak with Morgan for a minute?”
It took another minute for him to get on the phone. “Vanessa, it’s almost midnight. What is it that can’t wait until you see me at the office in the morning?”
“I hope to be on my way to Texas by then.”
“What are you talking about?”
“I’m going to Austin and I need Cameron’s address. Hold on, let me grab a pen.”
A few minutes later, she ended her call with Morgan. She believed she was worthy of Cameron’s love. Now she had to make sure he still believed it, as well.
Chapter 18

“Cam?”

Cameron glanced up from the papers he’d been reading and saw both Xavier and Kurt standing in the doorway to his office. It was late afternoon and the three of them were working at his Austin home. So far, since his meeting with McMurray a few weeks ago, things had been running smoothly at Global Petroleum and he hoped they continued to do so.

“I thought the two of you were leaving to pick up dinner.”

Kurt cleared his throat. “We were, but you got a visitor.”

Cameron frowned, wondering who it could be. Very few people knew about the small ranch-style home he had inherited from his grandfather. He had to assume his visitor was one of the neighbors. Lately, more than one had come forth offering to buy his house mainly to get the land, which consisted of over ten acres. “Tell whoever it is that I’m busy.”

“I don’t think you want us to do that,” Xavier said with a smirk on his face.

“Why not?” Cameron asked, not understanding just what was wrong with his two friends.

Kurt grinned. “Maybe you ought to see for yourself and then I think you’ll understand.”

“Fine,” Cameron said angrily, tossing the report on his desk. He stood. “Where’s this person?”

“In your living room.”

Cameron left the office with Xavier and Kurt right on his heels. He’d taken a few steps and then turned around with an arched brow. “Just what the hell has gotten into you two?”

Kurt gave a sly chuckle. “Ask us that after seeing your visitor.”

Cameron frowned, thinking he really didn’t have time for this.

He walked into the living room and stopped dead in his tracks. The first thought that came into his mind was that he had time for this. Vanessa was standing in the middle of his living room wearing that black skirt he didn’t like, the one she had purchased in Jamaica. His throat went dry and his gaze traveled the full length of her, up and down her legs, her thighs…Speaking of her thighs, the skirt barely covered them.

Their gazes connected. He felt the heat. It didn’t matter why she had come, all he cared about was that the woman he loved was here in his place, invading his space, affecting the very air he was breathing.

“Now you understand what we meant, Cam?”

He blinked, suddenly remembering Xavier and Kurt. He quickly turned to them. “Leave!”

Kurt, being the smart-ass, said, “Are you sure? She could be an enemy. Maybe we ought to search her first.”

“Touch her and I’ll have to kill you,” he said through clenched teeth. “Leave and don’t come back.”

Xavier raised a curious brow. “I thought we had a lot of work to do. You said we’d be working well into the night.”

“Out!”

He watched the two men make a beeline for the door, and, as soon as the door shut behind them, Cameron turned his attention back to his visitor.

He took a couple of steps forward. “I never liked that skirt on you.”

Vanessa met his heated gaze and said, “Then take it off me. But I need to warn you it’s the only thing I have to wear.”

“I don’t think you want us to do that,” Xavier said with a smirk on his face.

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He took a couple of steps forward. “I never liked that skirt on you.”

Vanessa met his heated gaze and said, “Then take it off me. But I need to warn you it’s the only thing I have to wear.”

He frowned. “You wore that all the way from Charlotte?”

She shook her head. “No, but I did wear it from the hotel in downtown Austin. I had that full-length raincoat over it,” she said, indicating the yellow slicker tossed across a chair. “A lot of people stared since the sun was shining outside.”

He released a deep sigh. “Thank God for that.”

“For what? That the sun was shining outside?”

“No, for that full-length raincoat.”

She nodded. “Aren’t you going to ask why I’m here?”

He shook his head as he crossed the distance of the room to stand in front of her. “You can tell me later. Right now I can only concentrate on one thing.”

“And what are you concentrating on?”
“Taking that damn skirt off of you.”

Vanessa’s body reacted instantly to Cameron’s words. Blood rushed through her veins, every cell seemed sensitive. The tips of her nipples beneath her top tightened and a warm pool settled between her thighs. He was the only man who had the ability to do this to her. With just words and an intense look, he could put an achy need within her so compelling and deep that she knew of only one way to soothe it.

“Don’t concentrate too hard,” she heard herself saying.

He didn’t.

The next instant Cameron reached out and with a flick of his wrist he undid the fastener at her waist and the skirt dropped to her feet. Just that easy. Just that quick. She was left wearing her top and a silky strap of barely nothing that was meant to cover her feminine mound. He thought it wasn’t doing a very good job and he licked his lips in anticipation of tasting her. Without wasting any time, he removed her top and then got down on his knees and eased her thong down her legs.

He inhaled deeply, taking in her scent, and then he dipped his head and tasted her, right in the juncture of her thighs.

“Cameron.”

He sucked in a deep breath when he rose to his feet. Every muscle in his body ached for her. God, he wanted her. He wanted to make love to her all day and all night. And he didn’t intend to waste any time.

He swept her into his arms and strode quickly to the bedroom where he placed her on his bed. He drew back to remove his own clothes but she caught hold of his collar and pulled him back to her and began nipping at his bottom lip, licking it from corner to corner with the tip of her tongue.

Sensations within him intensified, making his need for her monumental, nearly insane. He was so fully aware of this woman—his woman—and he intended to leave his imprint all over her. He pulled back again and this time he swiftly removed his clothes, then rejoined her on the bed. He wanted to erase whatever doubts she had about him. He wanted to fill her with his love, so much that it would spread to her own heart. He had enough for both of them.

“Cameron.”

When she opened her arms, he went into them, and when she captured his mouth, he surrendered all. Something akin to desperation swept through him, and he ran his hands everywhere on her body, needing the feel of her beneath his palms and fingers.

A distant part of his brain told him to take things slowly, but he couldn’t. He needed this session to be fast and quick, deep and hard, and he needed it now. He eased his body into place over hers and entered her, and the moment he was inside her. And when he felt her own orgasm rip through her, his heartbeat accelerated and his pulse kicked up another notch. He was too far gone to hold on any longer and when the world seemed to explode all around them, he felt it. It seemed the bed rocked, the ground shook, the lights in the ceiling began falling….

“What the hell!”

He jerked up. He was not imagining things. He pushed Vanessa out of the way before a layer of plaster fell down on her.

“Cameron, what’s going on?”

Instead of answering her, he snatched her wrist and handed her his shirt as he quickly slipped into his pants.

“Hurry up and put it on so we can get the hell out of here.”

It didn’t take long for him to figure out that someone was outside firing explosives into his home with the use of a handheld missile launcher. He dropped to the floor and pulled Vanessa down with him when all the walls seemed to start tumbling down.

When they crawled to the living room the place was in shambles, and he jerked her head down as a missile flew past her head. He cursed. The damn thing had barely missed her. He knew whoever was on the outside expected him to run out through either the front or the back entrance, thinking that they had him cornered.

“Cameron, what’s going on? What are we going to do?” Vanessa whispered.

He glanced down at her. She didn’t deserve to be involved in this. The person on the other side of that door had a beef with him and not her. He needed to get them to the part of the house that he knew was safe. The storm cellar his grandfather had built right after Hurricane Gilbert.

He glanced down at her. “I need you to trust me, Vanessa,” he said meeting her gaze and gently rubbing her cheek. “I’m going to get us out of here.”

She nodded. “I do trust you, Cameron, and I love you. That’s why I came all the way to Texas. I couldn’t wait to tell you.”

Her words touched him and he wanted to kiss her, but time was not on their side. He needed to get them out of
there. They made it to the kitchen and he pushed open the cellar door. It had been years since he’d been down there but this would be their refuge until help arrived. Someone had to have alerted the authorities by now that his ranch had become a war zone.

He led Vanessa down the stairs and except for a little dust and a few spiderwebs here and there, the place was okay. He took them as far back into the cellar as he could and then pulled her into his arms. This was a waiting game and he only hoped whoever was out there would eventually assume he had succeeded in what he came to do and haul ass.

In the meantime…

He turned Vanessa to him and leaned down and kissed her, needing the taste of her, the assurance she was all right and they were together. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight.

Cameron wasn’t sure how long they huddled down there before he heard someone call his name. He placed his fingers to Vanessa’s lips, not yet certain whether the person beyond the cellar door was friend or foe.

A smile touched his lips when his name was called out again and he recognized Xavier’s voice. “Stay put for a second while I let him know we’re down here.”

Vanessa watched as Cameron raced up the wooden stairs and responded to his friend’s call through the door.

“Stand back, Cam!”

He did and then she saw the head of a huge ax slice through the door frame before it was kicked in. And then those two men stood there, the ones who had let her into Cameron’s house earlier. The expressions on their faces showed they were relieved to see he was okay, but they were mad as hell.

Cameron turned, opened his arms to her and she raced across the cement floor and up the stairs to him. And when he gathered her into his arms, she knew that everything would be all right.

Later that night, back in her hotel room, Vanessa cuddled close to Cameron in bed. “I’m sorry about your home, Cameron.”

When Xavier and Kurt had pulled them out of the cellar and they’d had a chance to see the damage, her heart had ached for him. But then that same heart had filled with anger that someone had wanted to do that much harm to the man she loved. He was not intended to survive the attack.

“I was thinking of rebuilding anyway. I’ve received a number of offers to sell but couldn’t bring myself to part with it. That land is where I spent some of the happiest days with my grandfather and I needed that link.”

Vanessa nodded, then frowned. “Well, at least they caught those guys.”

“Yes, and they’re spilling their guts. I can’t believe John McMurray would go that far. The man is truly demented.” McMurray’s arrest had made national news. The shame that had been brought on his family had come from his hands and not Cameron’s.

“And how on earth were they able to get those types of weapons? Something like that could probably shoot a plane out the sky.”

“It can, which is why in most states they’re outlawed. I’m just glad that Kurt brought Xavier back here to get his car and saw what was happening.”

Vanessa nodded. She was, too.

Cameron glanced down at her. “Did you mean what you said earlier, just before we made it to the cellar? That part about loving me?”

She smiled. “Yes, I meant every word. You’re not only my sex mate, you’re my soul mate, as well. I do love you, Cameron.”

“And I love you. Does this mean you’d consider marrying me?”

She grinned. “Yes, if you ask.”

He turned toward her in bed, took her hand in his and gazed deep into her eyes. “Vanessa Steele, will you marry me? For better or for worse? Will you be my soul mate and my sex mate? The mother of my children? My best friend? My—”

She placed her finger to his lips. “Cameron Cody, I will be your everything.”

He leaned closer, and, right before he captured her lips with his, he whispered huskily, “You already are. You were definitely one risky pleasure worth taking.”
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