

*Lumber
and Lace*

L. R. Wards

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PROLOGUE

“I don’t know Cara.” Said Brianne brushing a delinquent curl off of her face that had escaped her loosely made chignon. “I don’t want to impose.”

“Impose?” Cara raised her delicate brows, “Are you kidding? You’ve carried me through this semester. I would have never made it without you and you’re stuck with me for the next year and a half, so let me help you.” She reached over and touched her friend’s arm, “I can’t possibly let you go back to an empty apartment and a summer of checking groceries.”

Initially Brianne agreed to go and work for Cara’s brothers, even giving up her job and apartment, but now she had reservations.

She and Cara met when they ended up Roommates in the dorm and instantly hit it off. Although Cara was extremely outgoing, Brianne wasn’t and they both had completely different upbringings but opposites must attract because Brianne thought the world of Cara. “But I don’t know anything about being a secretary.” She protested not only feeling like she was imposing, but insecure about meeting Cara’s four older brothers. Cara had talked about them nonstop, and in Cara’s eyes they were perfect. What if she did something to offend them? It worried her that she might put her friendship at risk with her, because she never had anyone that showed her such consideration before in her life.

“I’ll teach you. It’ll take you a week or so to catch on entering accounts into the computer and such, and I’ll do the rest—don’t look so worried, that alone is a full time job. My brothers have two full-time and two part-time secretaries, but during the summer business triples.” She gave her friend a generous smile that showed even white teeth, “Bree, trust me, you’ll be doing them a favour. That way they don’t have to advertise.” She used her nickname endearingly hoping that

would help persuade her.

“What’s wrong with that?” she asked.

Cara groaned and rolled her eyes, “You have no idea the amount of woman that strut through the office trying to gain attention of any one of my brothers especially Rem and Gabe. They’re outrageous flirts, and Jeb ends up getting more and more unapproachable when he has to interview so many women who make no attempt to hide their intentions. He won’t let my other brothers do it, because they’d hire any woman with—” she made a crude gesture with her hands in front of her chest and Brianne burst out laughing, “—so *he* has to, and he really hates it. So you see, you’ll be doing them a big favour, especially Jeb, because he won’t have to do that.”

“I don’t know.” She said apprehensively.

“Please.” She begged with her large blue eyes twinkling.

“I suppose that look works on them too.” She pinched her lips together to keep from grinning.

“Of course.” She beamed and blinked dramatically fluttering her long blonde lashes.

After a moment of contemplation Brianne rolled her eyes, “Who could say *no* to you?” she got a generous hug for her agreement.

“I’m so excited!” Cara said releasing her, “Why we’ll be able to spend the whole summer together! I’ll teach you how to ride horses, we’ll fish—”

“Okay, okay!” It actually sounded like fun, and she’d never been on a horse in her life but as a little girl she always wanted one.

“—and” she continued, “I’ll have an actual friend, not all those women who try and butter me up to get close to my brothers.”

“That’s awful.” She admitted. Cara was a wonderful person and very likable. It was obvious that she was

outrageously spoiled from the amount of phone calls and spending money she got from the four of them. As for her buttering her up, that was out of the question. Brianne wasn't interested in a man, any man, she was terrified of them. Her father was an alcoholic and used to beat her up until cirrhosis of the liver claimed his life when she was twelve. Since then she'd been juggled around to foster home after foster home and her experiences there gave her nightmares, literally. Unfortunately she never knew or remembered her mother. She left when she was just an infant.

"Also," she added, "if they don't have to interview a hundred husband hunters for this job they're giving you, that will make them twice as happy." Her eyes widened slightly, "I bet even Jeb will be happy about that!"

"He's the oldest, right?" she said trying not to laugh at the 'husband hunter' comment. Of course Cara would think her brother's were handsome because she adored them more than anything else in her life. However, Brianne couldn't imagine that any man was worth that much praise. Then again, her past experiences with men had a negative impact on her life and her opinion of them.

"Yes, he's the one that took shrapnel in the leg in overseas in the war." Her face became solemn, "I should tell you to avoid him Bree, he's not an easy person to get to know and I fear that he'll frighten you with what you've told me about your childhood."

Bree's eyes widened, "Does he have temper?" she was able to suppress the shudder that went through her. Every man in her life that displayed a temper also had violent tendencies. She was sure she had experienced more broken bones than a stunt man in her young life.

Cara shook her head and waved her arms to try and dispel Brianne's worries, "No, nothing like that. At least he's

never used it on a woman. I just think his demeanour will be intimidating for you. He's not very warm to strangers. I could tell you not to fear him until I'm blue in the face, but you will because he's an assertive man, and can be very blunt and unyielding. I don't blame him. He looks after four younger siblings." She laughed, "And my brothers are a handful at the best of times, except maybe Glen, he's kind of a saint."

"Saint? Brianne laughed.

"you'll understand when you meet him." She explained. "He never raises his voice to anyone, unlike Jeb."

"Well, from the stories you've told me, I can see where he's coming from. I'll remember your warning though." She studied her friend's expression for a moment. She had no worries, it was obvious that she was raised with a lot of love and she envied her because she'd never known that type of affection.

Even though she was nervous about meeting her family, in a way she was excited too. They did such a good job on raising Cara that they couldn't be as rough as the stories she told of them. However, Jeb already intimidated her and she never met him. Cara had told her that he was a war hero but didn't talk about the things he did overseas. It also seemed like he was the only one without a sense of humour. As she thought before, he was the oldest of five, so maybe his seriousness was well founded. Cara had told her that her parents were killed in a car wreck when she was ten and Jeb had instantly become the head of the family. By then he was home from the war with a wrecked leg, and not only had to rear four younger siblings, but he had to take over his father's business too. She had to admit, the man must be admirable to do all that and not go insane.

Cara continued to talk about her oldest brother, "He was part of an elite group of soldiers that were used for special missions." Her voice dropped, "I don't know much, because like I told you before he doesn't talk about it, but apparently out of

eight of them, he and one other man survived. He deals with some pain in that leg too so it tends to lead to him seeming a little cranky. He uses a cane most times, but he doesn't like it." She smiled slightly, "but he rides a horse like the wind, so at least he doesn't let his injury to slow him down. Also he works along side of the other three like he was born to it." She smiled with pride.

"I envy you to have someone love you so much." And she meant it.

"They'll love you to, just wait." She said with her voice still laced with excitement. "I need to call them and let them know you finally caved." She pulled out her mobile phone and dialled her brother's house. "Start packing." She said putting the phone to her ear.

It rang a few times before someone answered, "Durant's" came an older feminine voice.

"Hi Lucinda, is anyone around?"

"Oh Miss Cara!" Came the excited voice, "Mr. Gabriel is out by the pool. We miss your lovely face around here."

"I miss you to." She really did. Lucinda had been their housekeeper since she could remember and she was like a surrogate mother to her since hers died ten years ago. She was stern but kind. Although she didn't manage to keep the boys in line as well as she wanted to, they did listen to her up to a point. Cara was sure she'd come close to quitting a few times at the antics they pulled. When Gabriel was fourteen he put a mouse in the flour tin that he found in the stables. Lucinda screamed all the way out of the house. You'd think that he'd stop doing those things after Jeb took him out back and knocked some sense into him, but it only made him wiser to not get caught.

After a moment a deep masculine voice was heard in a distant conversation as Lucinda told him who was on the phone.

"Hey mouse!"

She grinned at the sound of her nickname. They all called her mouse because of her small size compared to them, “Gabriel, could you let Jeb know that I’m bringing home a friend to help out for the summer?”

“She finally agreed huh?” he chuckled. “Who said you weren’t persuasive?”

“It took some convincing.” She winked at Brianne who shook her head in defeat at her friend’s teasing while pulling out her suitcase.

“What does she look like? Is she single? Better yet, what’s she wearing?” he said teasingly.

“She’s too sweet for you,” She said seeing Brianne’s eyes widen at her words, “and yes, and none of your business!”

“Sweet? I like sweet!”

She was worried about that. Her brothers were bachelors and liked women, and Brianne was beautiful. She couldn’t help but be concerned about them coming on to her. Even when they teased it was flirtatious and harmless, but Brianne’s experience with men would make her fearful of them. Jeb and Glen she didn’t have to worry about, but Rem and Gabriel were forces to be reckoned with. Their looks and charisma could bring just about any woman, including one as beautiful as Brianne, to their knees.

Cara stood up and casually walked over to the window to put some distance between her and Brianne who returned her attention to packing and hopefully didn’t know what they were talking about. She didn’t want her to hear what she was going to say next, “You leave her alone Gabe, she’s been through too much, okay?”

“Like what?”

“I’ll fill you guys in on a little more when I come home, but please don’t tease her too much. She’s very shy of men.”

After a brief pause he sighed, “Well that’s going to be hard

considering that's all we do around here and there's a house full of us, but I'll let the others know. We'll do it for you honey." He grinned while crossing his fingers.

"I love you. Thanks."

"Me too mouse. I've got to go, Glen wanted me onsite an hour ago. Can't wait to see you on Sunday!" he said right before he hung up.

CHAPTER ONE

That evening the four Durant brothers sat down to dinner. As usual, being the oldest, Jeb sat at the head of the table and asked Remington say grace before they started eating. It was usually a time for an informal board meeting between all of them so they could discuss business because they were usually spread out during the day on different construction sites. Gabriel told the other three that Cara had called earlier. They usually spoke to her several times a week to check up on her. It was hard for all of them to let her go to that ballet school in Boston, but she flashed those gorgeous blue eyes at them and Jeb relented. However, it took her almost two months of it before he did. Once Jeb made up his mind, nothing short of a miracle could change it.

Of course he put several strict rules in place before she left. She wasn't allowed to date, at all. He used the excuse that if he was sending her to that expensive school that she was going to devote all of her time to her classes. Yet the other three knew exactly why he told her those things, because they felt the same way. Cara was gullible and pretty and more than likely she'd fall for the first man that paid her flattery. If she'd met a man, they certainly wanted to be standing behind her letting him know what would happen to him if he hurt her.

It was true that they indulged her, because she was the

only girl in a household of men, but also because she was precious to them.

“How’s she sound?” Said Glen.

“Like she’s enjoying herself too much.” Gabe answered with a mouthful of food.

“Who’s going to get Cara and her friend?” Added Remington.

“I am.” Said Jeb, or JC to everyone who knew him except Cara who still referred to him as Jeb. “Don’t talk with your mouth full Gabe.” He added giving his youngest brother a stern look.

He gave him a sheepish look and swallowed hard before he spoke again, “Are you taking the Cessna?”

“Why?” Jeb said looking at Gabriel suspiciously.

“Well—I was thinking about flying to Greensboro, because there’s this sweet little—“

Jeb held up his hand cutting him off, “I don’t need to hear about your love life Gabe, just take the Cessna. I’ll call Jack and take the leer.”

“I wouldn’t mind hearing about it,” Said Remington with mock seriousness, “She got a sister?”

This got a round of deep laughter from everyone except Jeb who just shook his head. Things at the dinner table were usually this crazy. Poor Lucinda usually didn’t eat with them because of their behaviour saying they needed to spend more time in church than they usually did to pray for forgiveness at the amount of drinking and womanizing they did. *She was probably right* he thought with an internal smile.

Jeb, however wasn’t much of a drinker, or a womanizer as his younger three brothers, well not much anymore, but they worked hard so they played hard so he didn’t mind how they behaved as long as he didn’t have to bail them out of jail. Actually the younger two brothers along with Cara were his half

siblings, but they were closer than most families. Remington, Rem or Remmy for short, Gabe and Cara had blonde hair and blue eyes, while Glen and he had their father's black hair and dark eyes.

"That reminds me," said Gabe as he relayed what Cara told him earlier on the phone about her friend's aversion to men.

"A dancer that's shy of men, that's new." Grinned Rem, "I know a lot of dancers that—"

"—Shame on you Mr. Rem." Lucinda interrupted as she walked in at that moment placing a platter of freshly baked buns on the table, "To speak of such things and at the dinner table no less." She shot him a hard look.

Rem grinned apologetically, "Sorry Lu. I was just going to say I guess Cara's drawn to charity cases dancer or not."

"She sounded quite concerned about her too." Gabriel added, "So maybe we should tone it down a little around her."

"You should tone it down anyway." Lucinda said before she left the room clucking her tongue.

"This is the construction business," Said Jeb to his youngest brother, "If she can't be ready for men being obnoxious and overbearing maybe she shouldn't come."

"I told her we would behave." Said Gabriel, "She doesn't ask for much."

Jeb made a frustrated noise, "Well, you should've spoken for me. I'm not pussyfooting around some female to make her feel welcome. The rest of you can if you want. I already hired her against my own judgment when I haven't even met her, so I've done my part."

"Now with that aside, no one's going anywhere this weekend." Said Glen looking pointedly at Gabriel, "We have to break ground for that new condo complex and I want to make sure everything's ready by Monday."

Rem groaned and Gabe fell his head on the table in a

dramatic gesture.

Glen was a workaholic and expected his younger two siblings to acquire that same trait. Jeb was a lot like Glen in that way, but he knew what it was like to be young whereas Glen wasn't interested in dating again since he was betrayed by a woman years ago.

"Let them go Glen." Jeb said quietly while spearing a potato with his fork. He could feel Glen look at him, but he wouldn't argue, he knew Jeb wouldn't change the plans unless he really felt the need to. "These two have been working for four weeks straight, they need to cut loose."

Glen considered that for a moment and settled his gaze on his two over dramatizing younger brothers still acting like they were in the throes of agony, "yeah, all right. But you be back by Sunday because Cara's coming home—and come back sober." He added while pointing at the two of them with his steak knife.

"No problem, I'm not starting a love affair." Gabe said looking at the knife and grinning while lifting his hands in surrender.

Another round of laughter, this time Jeb even smiled.

"There are a few things we need to go over about the condo project anyway JC." Glen said, shifting his attention to his oldest brother. "The plans are in the Den."

"No problem." Jeb nodded, "You pour me some of that hundred year old scotch you keep hidden in the bookshelf, and I'll do just that."

Glen grinned, "I knew you'd find that sooner or later." He wiped his mouth with his napkin and stood up, "I'll see you in a bit then."

Jeb watched him go then caught sight of his younger brothers' hopeful expressions, "Oh *hell* no, you two don't deserve anything that good."

"It's good scotch whiskey Jeb." Pleaded Gabe.

“Yeah, and I’m working for it, while you go sow your wild oats. So unless you want to work, get lost.” He growled causing both Rem and him to grin.

When Jeb walked into the Den, Glen already had the plans laid out on the big drafting table and was pouring the scotch he promised him. He was the architect in the family, Jeb was the money man, and the younger two were still working on their degrees. He wasn’t sure if Rem would finish because he was still a little wild, and was enjoying the work he did now. He and Gabe supervised the construction work and were perfectly capable to do so. Yet, Gabe had real estate deals on the side too. He’d buy properties and fix them up to resell them. It was quite lucrative for him.

“This friend of Cara’s what do you make of that?” Glen said as he handed his brother the glass of scotch.

“Not sure. She’s never brought anyone home before.” He took a sip from the glass and made an expression of pleasure.

“It’s not like she’s starving for friends.”

“no.” Jeb said thoughtfully, “However she was always a sucker for a stray.”

“Yeah.” Glen said sitting on the sofa and resting his long legs lazily on the coffee table crossing them at the ankles, “I remember that stupid kitten she brought home one time. Blasted thing was so sick it died three days later and she cried for a week.”

“I remember that.” Jeb said lifting the glass and admiring the scotch before he took a large swallow.

“I hope this friend is really a friend and doesn’t prey on Cara’s sweet nature.” Glen said.

“If she does, we’ll smoke her out.” Jeb wouldn’t be used by anyone; man or woman, and neither would his sister. He sat down in a large sofa chair across from Glen with a wince. He’d been working too hard today at the site and his leg was sore.

Glen saw it and shook his head, “Maybe you should get that looked at again.”

“It feels worse than it looks.” Jeb joked with a partial smile to hide the pain while reaching down and rubbing his knee.

Glen chuckled, “stubborn ass.”

He shrugged and changed the subject. Glen knew talking about his injury irritated him, everyone knew that. None of them knew how it happened and Jeb didn’t offer an explanation when he came home eleven years ago. “Well, if Cara’s bringing home someone, chances are her story is a sad one.”

“Speaking of Cara, she’s not too subtle about her spending lately.” Jeb lifted a brow, “Last month her credit card bills were over a thousand dollars.”

Glen released a laugh, “Well, quit indulging her then.”

“We all do.” Jeb defended with a dark look, “I’ll speak to her. However, my point is that it’s obvious that we have money. Maybe this friend of hers sees an easy mark. She’s a big city girl after all.”

“Just because she was born and raised in Boston?” Glen gave a scoff, “There’s a lot of hardship there too. From what Cara has told me, this girl is an orphan. She got into college on a scholarship. So she’s more of a survivor than a victim. I admire that.”

“You would.” Jeb said, “You’re just as much as a sucker.” He stared at Glen for a moment, “Just the same, I’d like you to check her out.”

“Fine.”

“Don’t breathe a word of this to Cara, she’ll kill me.” Jeb reminded him.

“I’ll phone the detective agency in the morning Jeb, but I don’t think Cara’s that gullible.” He paused seeing the amused look from his older brother, “Hell, maybe she is.”

Jeb just smiled and polished off his scotch and made a

deep sound of satisfaction, “Well, let’s take a look at the changes you made.” He said getting to his feet.

CHAPTER TWO

“You don’t need to look so sophisticated,” Cara said smiling at her friend’s black slacks white blouse and a colourful scarf. “Look at me, jeans and a t-shirt.” She spread out her arms and did a single twirl.

Cara’s may have made her clothing sound simple but they were designer labels as was every stitch of clothing she owned. Brianne shopped at bargain and second hand stores for hers. “I can’t help it, I’m nervous.” She said, “After all I’m meeting your family. I don’t want them to think I’m a hick.”

Cara laughed, “Well, my brothers will look at you and fall to their knees if you show up like that. They like women, especially Gabe and Rem. You look sophisticated enough for the both of them.” That made her friend blush scarlet and began quickly undoing the buttons of her blouse.

Brianne should have known better from the stories that Cara told her about her brothers and she certainly didn’t want to give them the wrong impression. “What should I wear then?”

“Jeans and a sweater—that pretty green one that matches the color of your eyes. Chances are they won’t let us get settled much and you tottering around on the ranch in those heels is not a good idea.” She said looking at the black dainty ankle strap heels Bree was wearing. “Remember, this is a ranch, we don’t dress up. You can wear your nice skirts to work, I do, but around the house it’s just casual.” She said giving her a reassuring smile, “And don’t worry so much.”

“Okay,” she said nervously slipping off her blouse and reaching for her sweater. Then she headed into the bathroom to see if there was anything she forgot.

When Bree disappeared into the bathroom there was a loud knock at the door. Cara opened it to see six foot four man wearing a black Stetson, white buttoned up shirt with a black suit jacket and jeans. His frame practically filled the doorway and he might have seemed a little intimidating if it weren't for the wide grin he wore making him look undeniably handsome.

"Jeb!" Cara hugged the oldest of her brothers. "We didn't expect you for another half hour."

"Traffic was good." He said ruffling her hair and stepping past her, "So where's this roommate of yours that you're bringing home to nurse." He said scanning the room with dark suspicious eyes.

"Bathroom—and what do you mean nurse?" she narrowed her pretty blue eyes at him. Just then the door opened to the bathroom and out walked Brianne only wearing her bra and panties.

"Cara, I can't figure out if I should—" she froze at the sight of the tall man next to her friend. Later she would chastise herself over not going back into the bathroom, but he was a shock to her. If this was Cara's brother, he was nothing like her. First of all he was a darn *giant*, and Cara was a tiny little thing. If it wasn't just that presence he gave off that froze her where she stood, his deep burnt honey eyes did the trick.

Jeb turned at the sound of the soft feminine voice and raised his brows. Though his expression never said anything beyond that, inside was a different story.

She wasn't the only one that was surprised.

Fuck me.

Here was obviously Cara's roommate standing in the doorway of the bathroom with just her bra and panties on, all lacy red to boot, holding up a green sweater in one hand and a blue one in the other with an expression of wide-eyed shock toward him.

She was gorgeous.

She had large almond shaped green eyes surrounded by thick lashes and framed by a heart shaped face. She had glossy strawberry blonde hair that tumbled past her shoulders hinting at a slight curl. Her lips were parted to release an audible gasp and he couldn't help but look at them. They were full, lush, and a perfect shade of pink. It was obvious that she wasn't wearing any makeup but she didn't need to. Her complexion was flawless even when it went from pale to scarlet. However, that wasn't what caught his attention to begin with.

It was the sizzling body she possessed.

His eyes started at her toes and slowly heatedly worked their way up her entire form. The woman had the most delectable curves he'd ever seen. It didn't matter to him that every bare inch of her was turning pink as he raked his eyes appreciatively over her. Then he went and embarrassed her further, "Nice, red's my favourite color." He said evenly as if nothing was wrong with that scene while dropping his gaze to the creamy mounds of her breasts visible above the lace.

"Oh *God*." She breathed feeling her cheeks heat up from scarlet to flaming. It was then she realized that she still didn't cover herself up and quickly used the two sweaters to cover the front of her.

It was too late. Jeb already got an eyeful of nice pert breasts that could probably fill his hands easily and he had rather large hands. This woman didn't have the body of a dancer; she had the body of a swimsuit model. Cara was slight with a petite figure and barely made it to his chest, but this one was voluptuous and the top of her head probably came to his chin, which meant she was tall because he was well over six feet, but not too tall to be deemed an Amazon and she was put together in very nice proportions—very nice indeed! Those legs of hers were mouth watering and gave him all sorts of ideas that he wouldn't

dare repeat in front of his sister. They were definitely the legs of a dancer, long, firm, smooth and perfectly shaped.

“Jeb!” Cara said while smacking his thick arm with the back of her hand causing him to turn his head toward her to see her scowl. It wasn’t an easy task to say the least because he had to remove his eyes off of that feminine masterpiece.

A door slammed abruptly after that, letting him know that she retreated back into the bathroom.

“You didn’t need to gawk at her!” Cara stated clearly upset for her friend. “She’s shy enough as it is. Now I’ll never get her out of there.”

He gestured toward the bathroom, “Jesus, Cara, can you blame me? Does she usually run around half-naked?” He said letting his irritability show. It wasn’t because of Cara, it was because he couldn’t get that image out of his mind. Now, every time he looked at her over the next two months he knew he’d see that half naked Goddess standing in the doorway of the bathroom wearing those little lacy pieces.

“We didn’t expect you for another half an hour. She was dressed to the nines thinking she wanted to impress you—“

“It was impressive.” He said guiding his eyes back toward the closed door of the bathroom. Damn, was that *ever*!

“Jeb!” Cara said in equal shock, “Don’t say that. She won’t come with us if you embarrass her further. It took me a week to convince her as it was.” *What a nightmare*, thought Cara, she did her best to butter Bree up to her brothers only releasing a bit about them as not to frighten her, but this changed everything. Not only were her brothers hard workers, they were hard players too, and it was the most intimidating of the lot that came to pick them up. Silently she was hoping it was Gabe or Remmy even though she loved Jeb deeply. He could be quite a shock to shy man fearing women like Bree. However, she never worried about him being attracted to her because when he dated,

it was usually socialites, but now after that interested look her brother just gave her half naked best friend, she knew there was going to be a problem.

First of all, Bree was beautiful, but she didn't realize it, and secondly, Jeb is relentless when he wants something. Silently she prayed that she was mistaken.

Jeb narrowed his gaze suspiciously. What if she allowed Cara to think that just to make sure she couldn't be talked into not going?

"I know that look." Cara said with a prying tone.

Jeb returned his eyes to his sister with a look that said, I-don't-know-what-you're-talking-about.

"You are distrustful of everyone, but Brianne is very nice, I'm begging you to be nice to her. She's terrified of men as it is. I told you that."

"Why?"

"I promised I wouldn't say." Cara's expression became guilty, "I shouldn't have even said that because she trusts me with her confidence."

Just then the door opened and out stepped Brianne, with clothes on. Jeb noticed that the woman's blush was still present and she wouldn't meet his gaze. Although he didn't feel the least bit uncomfortable because it wasn't the first time he'd seen a woman without her clothes on, and it took a lot to embarrass him, he was a gentleman deep down. He should be more courteous about her discomfort. Yet something had stirred in him over that brief vision of her lush body in red lace, something he hadn't experienced in a long time. However, Cara cast him another pleading look and he released a frustrated breath seeing his eyes on her friend. *Fine*, he thought, *I'll play along*. "The car is double parked. I'll be downstairs." He said taking two of three of Cara's luggage and leaving the room.

As soon as the door closed Cara rushed over to her friend,

“Don’t you dare change your mind, it’s not like my brothers haven’t seen a woman without their clothes on.”

Brianne groaned and flushed again. “Cara, that does *not* make me feel any better.”

“Look, he won’t say a word, I promise. He’ll behave. Please don’t change your mind!”

“I already made a commitment to you Cara, I won’t go back on it.” She finally said. It might have been okay if her brother wasn’t so appealing. He wasn’t drop dead gorgeous or anything, but he gave off an image of strength and self confidence that made him seem that way, even with the brief glimpse she got it was clearly recognizable. Then, to have him see her standing there half naked while he ran his dark gaze over her body not the least bit concerned for her embarrassment was shocking. He didn’t even bother to look ashamed at what he did or even give her the decency of some privacy. In fact, his expression was completely unreadable except for the glint of approval in his coffee-coloured gaze.

Although she could’ve gone back into the bathroom sooner, but she was so rattled at the image he gave off that it momentarily stunned her. For some reason she thought that they’d all be blonde like Cara and not so darn tall! Cara was barely over five feet and he towered above her and she was five foot eight. That wasn’t all; the breadth of his shoulders under the black suit jacket he wore let her know that he was well built too.

He had a black cowboy hat, pulled down over his brow making him look undeniably arrogant, but who could blame him? His face had an even tan but with a day’s worth of stubble on a nice strong square jaw. His mouth was wide and sensuous and her eyes lingered there maybe a little too long because it wasn’t just from embarrassment that she heated up.

“He won’t say anything to anybody either, Jeb’s not a gossip.” Cara added watching her friend bite her bottom lip.

“I don’t think things could get any worse even if he did. He saw me practically naked, like some free woman.” She moaned picking up her luggage wondering how she was going to survive two months of embarrassment. Every time she saw the oldest brother, she knew she would blush remembering this incident. And those eyes! They were more mesmerizing than the rest of him. They weren’t that deep blue like Cara had, they were more of deep brown, and there was no doubt that they held a sharp intelligence.

When she took her luggage downstairs to the car she had to pause. It was a sleek black luxurious sedan with chrome wheels and tinted windows. She’d seen a few of them around but it still surprised her that her friend’s family had so much money. She wasn’t used to it, and it just made her more uncomfortable. Jeb was loading Cara’s bags into the trunk and she shyly gave him hers. She could feel the heat of his eyes on her but ignored it. How the heck was she supposed to live with him during the summer when he’d give her that knowing look that he’d seen her half naked?

When they got to the airport, the Jeb turned the car down another road to a different exit and pulled up beside a small jet.

Cara saw Brianne’s surprise, “It’s ours.” She admitted a little sheepishly to her friend before darting another angry look to her brother, “Jeb I thought you were bringing the Cessna.”

He lifted a brow, “What for?” He noticed his sister blush as a smile quirked at the corner of his mouth finding her rare frustration amusing. Cara was well grounded, like him and Glen despite her age and their constant coddling of her. She always seemed in control and knew herself well, she had too, she had four brothers that could easily bully her to do what they wanted.

Cara didn’t like to show off how much wealth they had when Brianne had nothing. It felt like she was bragging. She just shrugged a shoulder not wanting to say anything while her blush

deepened.

Jeb looked past her to Brianne just to see her stare in awe at the Jet and he finally understood. However, he still couldn't help wonder if there was other reasons behind this young lady taking a job with them for the summer, "Cara, it's a little late for that, after all I have your credit card bills." His sister snapped her mouth shut and gave him a scorching look.

Why couldn't he just do what she asked, and keep a low profile?

He ignored her and got out of the car to get the luggage out of the trunk while shaking his head. He drove a rented Audi, she had Louis Vuitton luggage and carried a Gucci bag, but she didn't want her friend to know they had money? Even if he had the option of being subtle, he wouldn't. Jeb was a straight shooter, and anybody who knew him always knew where they stood. There was no way in hell he'd put on a plastic front, even for his beloved sister and she should know better than expect that from him.

Cara led Brianne onto the plane and apologized, "I'm sorry, I know this seems a little overwhelming." She said gesturing to the luxurious interior.

"It really is." She admitted scanning the cream leather, polished wood and gold trimmed accents while releasing a surprised breath of air, "I've never been on a private jet before. This is *beautiful!*" She paused settling her questioning eyes on her friend, "I thought you said your brothers owned a construction company?"

"They do—it's just that—well—we also *design* the buildings too. My second oldest brother Glen is an architect. They usually cater to very wealthy people." She sighed, "I'm sorry Bree, I just didn't want you to be so overwhelmed."

Didn't Cara realize that she was when she caught sight of her oldest brother? Brianne raised her brows, "You do realize

that I've seen your purse, you have four credit cards in it."

"So?" she said with confusion.

"Well, I don't even own one, let alone four. I sort of figured it out on my own, especially when you spend two hundred dollars on a pair of shoes."

"Oh I am an idiot." She said as it dawned on her, "I must look like a snob. A dumb snob with an insensitive brother." She added remembering the incident back at the dorm.

"No, you don't," Brianne squeezed her hand, "You're a good friend."

Cara might have thought she was until then. She realized she didn't have a clue on how the other half lived. She'd dragged Brianne around to boutiques and expensive salons and realized that she never spent a cent in them. It never occurred to her that it was because her friend didn't have money. Cara never had that happen to her, not having money. She spent and Jeb paid the bills. She couldn't have felt any worse at that moment.

Taking a seat on one of the luxurious cream leather she vowed to try and be more open where Bree was concerned. "Here sit down, she said padding the seat beside her, "Please don't let Jeb bother you. He seems overbearing, but he's got a good heart."

Brianne sat beside her, "You were right about him being blunt." She said hesitantly and near groaned out loud when he stepped inside the plane at that exact moment. *Strike two*, she thought.

"I am that." He said plopping down across from them easily and letting his eyes go to the other woman who abruptly averted her gaze. It made him want to reach across and nudge her chin to make him look at him. One thing he wasn't used to was woman avoiding his attention. "How long have you known Cara?" This made her bring her gaze back but she shyly focused on the vee of his shirt not his face. Obviously that incident in the dorm really embarrassed her. He almost smiled at the memory,

but knew that Cara would pick up on it and chastise him later.

“Since we ended up roommates in September.” She finally said while her eyes couldn’t help but notice the fine mat of dark hair through the open area of his shirt. Was all of him like that? Thick with a covering of dark hair?

“She helps me with our classes Jeb, she’s a much better dancer than I am.”

“Izzat so.” He drawled running his eyes over her jean clad legs. From the length of those legs, he knew Cara was probably telling the truth. She probably moved with the grace of a swan. He would like to see them in a skirt or better yet wrapped around him. They probably went all the way to her neck—.

“Jeb.” Cara said in a harsh whisper noticing that her brother was staring at her friend’s legs. She expected behaviour like this from Gabe and Rem, but not him.

He didn’t realize that he was staring at her legs until his sister said his name. When their eyes met and hers narrowed he actually smiled as if to say, “So?”

Red’s my favourite color. Brianne couldn’t seem to shake that deeply spoken statement and was unable to meet his eyes since then. Now she was sitting across from him and got a scent of his cologne. It was really nice and smelled spicy.

At the same time the jet was lifting off the runway he started asking Cara questions of how her classes were going she actually became brave enough to take another look at him. Slowly she lifted her eyes to his face. There was no denying he was overpowering in a masculine way even though he wasn’t exceedingly handsome and he had loads of self confidence to go along with it and it only expounded his attractiveness. Brianne knew absolutely nothing about men, and her experiences with them were not pleasant, but this man put them to shame in a heartbeat. He knew himself well, that was obvious, and he had a way about him that told her he didn’t make mistakes and even if

he did they wouldn't be deemed as mistakes. Everything he did probably came out perfect. Then there was the way he looked at his little sister. He adored her. The warmth he showed her lightened those honeyed eyes of his and Bree swore her heart just melted in her chest. Yes, he had that menacing overpowering air about him, but there was no doubt that he was capable of love from the look he gave Cara. It was like having a lion behave like a bunny rabbit if only for a moment. His whole demeanour screamed the opposite, but when he cared about someone, he showed a different side. Yet, Bree was a stranger, not family and she doubted he would ever look at her like that, but after seeing it, she craved it—badly.

She swallowed hard and took a deep breath trying to erase those crazy thoughts, when instead she ended up inhaling another waft of his cologne as her eyes ran over his face. He wasn't handsome in a pretty boy way, it was more of a rough off the range look, but neater. His hat, jacket, and even his jeans were expensive looking, and she knew that he probably didn't pull punches when he dealt with people as she found out.

Red's my favourite color.

Although she found that incredibly embarrassing, she had to admire his ability to say what he's thinking and not be ashamed about it. His employees probably always knew where they stood with him, because he'd have no problem telling them.

Just then Cara excused herself to go to the bathroom and he set his dark gaze on hers. It was so sudden that she'd forgotten to lower her own, now she couldn't. His eyes were amazing. Up close she noticed that they were brown with flecks of gold, so many that his eyes nearly looked golden, and the dark rims around the irises made them purely hypnotic. She heard of the term 'bedroom eyes' before from her classmates and their escapades, but never did she think there was such a thing until now. They were surrounded by thick black lashes and hooded by

a strong brow. *Oh dear*, she thought still unable to tear her gaze away from him despite the fact that he was looking back at her and not saying a word. No, he wasn't gorgeous, but he had that air of power about him and those eyes alone made him incredibly captivating.

Then a warmth started in the pit of her stomach as he just sat there staring back at her seeming totally relaxed as if this was a normal occurrence for woman ogle him. Yet it wasn't normal for her. Along with the rising heat that began to spread throughout her, there was the pace of her heart that quickened and she breathed deeply needing some extra air to compensate. That's when his eyes slowly dropped to her chest and she stilled her breath causing them to flick back up to hers. Then leisurely and very sensuously, he smiled as if he knew every thought going on in her head.

"Stop it." She breathed, unsure where she got the guts to say that.

"Honey, if you wanted me to stop, you wouldn't be eyeing me like I'm a grade A steak." He said huskily.

Oh gosh, was she? Yes she was! "I—"

"Sure you weren't." he interrupted knowing she was going to try and deny it causing her to flush crimson. It was refreshing to see a woman blush so easily, because it couldn't be faked and a glint of appreciation entered his eyes. Jeb knew he wasn't ugly, even if he wasn't handsome like the rest of his brothers, but he was rich and comfortable on who he was. He was also confident in his abilities as a lover even thought he was more reserved than they were with women. He was a man that believed in mutual affection before he took a woman to bed and not one night stands. Although he was guilty of that in his wild youth, he was more mature and worldly now. As he sat there staring at his sister's gorgeous friend like he had every right in the world, he knew that they would be more than compatible in that aspect. It

was obvious that she was attracted to him also, but he didn't miss the flash of fear in her eyes every time he made a suggestive comment. He found it odd, that a woman who looked like her was fearful of flirting. Yet, he also knew she had secrets because Cara hinted to it. Maybe her last boyfriend was abusive. Right then and there he made a promise that he would cure her of that. He had a whole two months to do it, but first he had to find out more about her.

It wasn't often that he found himself attracted so quickly, in fact he couldn't remember a time that he was, but who the hell could blame him. She had a genuine shyness despite the way she looked that was quite alluring, and any sane man would feel the same especially if they saw her half naked in red lace. Most of his adult life was devoted to providing a living to his younger siblings, so it wasn't often he stopped to play, but looking at the beauty across from him made him want to—badly.

Just then Cara returned and looked back and forth at them. She gave Jeb an accusing look before she took her seat next to Brianne who looked like she wished she could jump out of the plane parachute or not. She would try and speak to him again later about his candidness. God only knows what he said to her when she was gone. His expression of mock innocence made her know he didn't behave. Cara knew her brother was conceited where women were concerned, all of them were, but Bree was fragile and a man like Jeb would intimidate her to no end. She wanted to help her friend grow, not frighten her and Jeb was very capable of that.

Brianne was too humiliated to say anything for the rest of the flight. Thankfully Cara and Jeb spent time catching up on what was happening at home and in their business. It was fine with her because she could stare out one of the circular windows to the land below. She was on a plane once before to a dance competition and enjoyed it a lot. Most people are afraid the first

time, but not her, it was exhilarating, just like now.

The plane glided down on a runway to Wilmington International airport and Brianne was breathless with how pretty the scenery was and she said so. Boston was her home and she loved it, but this was breathtaking.

“wait until you see the ranch.” Cara said, “You’ll never want to go back to Boston.”

A black Lincoln Navigator with dark tinted windows pulled up next to the stairs when the plane stopped and the door opened. Another man about Jeb’s height got out. He was wearing a dark grey suit, white shirt and matching tie. Unlike Jeb, he wasn’t wearing a cowboy hat, but that wasn’t to say he was less intimidating. Then he smiled when he saw Cara. Brianne thought she’d never have a smile the likes of that set on her. It was warm and full of love. It also displayed dimples on either side of his mouth. Unlike Jeb, it made him look boyish and completely harmless whereas the slight one he gave her on the plane was definitely dangerous, and said a lot of sinful things without speaking.

“Hey mouse!” Glen said opening his arms.

“Glen!” Cara said rushing down the stairs and hugging her second oldest brother.

“Good to have you home.” He kissed the top of her head. “We’ve missed you something fierce.”

She released him and introduced Brianne.

“Well, I hope you’re a fast learner Brianne, because we’ve already got twice as much work as we did last year.” He said shaking her hand.

He was easy to like because he didn’t hold that dangerous look in his eyes like Jeb’s and he seemed genuinely glad to meet her. “Oh?” She said looking concerned. She knew nothing about office work, but at least she knew about computers. Cara as usual, saw her expression and tried to alleviate her

apprehension.

“Don’t worry Bree, We’ll go to the office tomorrow but today we’re going to relax.” Said Cara, “She’ll catch on in no time Glen, don’t worry.”

“It must be nice to relax,” said Jeb loading the luggage into the back of the Navigator. He was the financial genius when it came to the company and his mind was always working. Glen and he were always talking business even during the weekends. It had been a long time since either one of them had taken time off.

Cara just grinned at him then took Brianne’s arm and led her toward the door of the vehicle that Glen just opened and with a flick of his handsome head told them to get in. He shut the door behind them and walked around to Jeb, who just closed the rear doors.

“She seems nice enough.”

“Yeah.” Jeb said.

“Still think she’s a gold-digger?”

He stood straight and looked at the two women who were busy chatting inside the vehicle, “I don’t’ know what to think.” He made a bit of a face remembering her lush scantily clad body back in Boston.

“What?”

“I need a smoke.” He said stepping by Glen without looking at him.

“You quit.” He said with surprise.

“Yeah and sometimes I wish I didn’t.” he said right before he got in the passenger side.

Glen just raised his brows wondering why his older brother seemed more irritable than usual. Usually he only got like that around spending money. He thought of something else, but immediately shook his head.

They left Wilmington behind and headed through the

country. A half an hour later they turned down a paved road that had a large sign saying ‘Blue Moon Ranch’

“Oh my Gosh!” exclaimed Brianne when the house came into view. It was huge!

“Glen designed it.” Cara said with unmistakable pride.

“It’s beautiful!” she said in a breathless voice.

Glen grinned and spoke over his shoulder from the driver’s seat, “It’s a neoelectic style, with a queen Anne turret—” he pointed.

“The circular thing?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Wow, Glen you’re really talented, I’ve never seen anything so amazing.” She said in genuine awe admiring the white and gray stonework.

“It’s designed from the nineteen sixties styles.”

“Colonial windows too?”

“You have a good eye.” He glanced at her in the rear view mirror soaking up her compliments.

Jeb was getting more and more irritable. She wouldn’t talk to him but she’d flatter Glen as if she knew him for years. He didn’t know why it bothered him, but it did. It also prickled him that she may not be as good of a friend as Cara thought. That she may be using her to try and get to them. He knew Cara loved them, and probably talked about them endlessly. So chances were good that she knew they were all single and wealthy. Until he had gotten a report back from the detectives they hired, he wasn’t going to trust her.

They pulled up around the long circular cobblestoned driveway that had several more vehicles parked on it. Brianne’s eyes widened as she recognized one as a Porsche, and another as a Ferrari. The third one she wasn’t sure about, because she didn’t know vehicles all that well.

When the navigator stopped, Jeb was the first one out of

the vehicle to unpack the luggage.

"I'll take you for a tour later if you like." Glen said flashing her a handsome smile.

"No," said Cara, "I already told her I would. I was around when you built it, I'm sure I can fill her in." *What was wrong with these guys?*

Just then she heard Gabriel and Remington's voices hollering at her. She turned and ran to the two blonde headed men that were just emerging from the double maple doors of the house only to be tossed over the younger mans shoulders causing her to squeal.

"What are they feeding you at school, you've gained weight!" Gabriel said tossing her up on his shoulder like she weighed no more than a leaf.

Brianne was too stunned to say anything. None of these men were ugly. The one holding onto Cara was Blonde like his sister and had cut-off shorts, a green t-shirt and a baseball cap that was on backwards. His blue eyes were glittering as he walked toward Brianne holding out his arm, "I'm Gabriel." He said without hesitation despite the squirming squealing girl on his shoulder.

"I'm Remington, but most people call me Rem or Remmy." He said mimicking his brothers gesture and holding out his hand.

"Brianne." She said shyly looking at the other man as she shook his hand. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but no cap.

"Put—me—down." Came Cara's exasperated yelp.

"Sure." Gabriel said without taking his eyes off of Brianne, "I heard you were single."

Cara could have died for her. Didn't anything she told them sink in? *Lunk heads*, she thought when the blush Brianne displayed probably went all the way to her toes.

"Lay off." Jeb's voice cut in, "get your butts down to the

office. Glen wants to go over the last minute changes.”

They both gave her a lazy smile and Gabriel nodded to Jeb while Rem said “sure thing.” Before they walked away. Brianne watched Gabe say something she couldn’t hear and Rem shove him for it while casting a look over his shoulder at her with a grin still on his face. She could only imagine after meeting the brothers what they said.

Cara mouthed the word ‘thanks’ to Jeb who just nodded while picking up the luggage.

It was obvious that Brianne wasn’t used to male attention and his brothers could overwhelm the most experience women when they gang up like a wave of testosterone. “Next time you want to thank me, how about not bringing the whole department store home.” He said to Cara while unloading the third bag of luggage. He noticed that Brianne only had one and it wasn’t as half as heavy as any of his sister’s.

Cara just grinned at him completely unaffected at his abrupt tone before she grabbed Brianne’s arm and headed toward the house.

Glen came around the vehicle then and took two of them from him giving him a wary look. He knew it was because he’d been limping more lately due to the extra work they’ve been doing. Jeb conceded and carried one of Cara’s and Brianne’s.

Brianne had never seen such beautiful woodwork in the railings, the maple panels on the walls and even the stairs themselves. She was so busy admiring the interior that she hardly heard Cara explain what influenced Glen’s design of the house. Then she saw the room they were putting her in, it was fit for royalty. A large king sized four poster canopy bed done in gold fabric with beige walls and a gorgeous Asian rug in the middle of the floor.

“Look up.” Said Glen.

When she did, she sucked in her breath. There was

painting of the sky with clouds and it was done so well it looked real. "This is like a dream. I'll be sleeping under my own private heaven."

"You should see Jeb's room." Cara said absently. "He's right next door. The rest of us are on the third floor, but I knew you'd like this room the best."

Jeb cleared his throat and tossed her suitcase on the bed. "You have an hour before dinner." He said

"Come on Cara, let's get these to your room, it'll take that long to unpack all of this." Said Glen casting an odd look at his brother who didn't look like he was ready to leave. He didn't miss the odd atmosphere between the two, and if he hadn't experienced it himself, he wouldn't have known what it was, but he did. However, this was Jeb's turn and he'd leave him be.

Cara picked up her other case that Jeb set down and followed Glen, "I'll be back in an hour to take you to dinner." She said over her shoulder before she left.

Brianne unzipped her case then paused, remembering Jeb was still standing there. She turned and looked at him with a questioning look. He looked totally at ease with his hands in the pockets of his jeans. If she wasn't so nervous about being there she would have appreciated how arrogantly appealing he was as his eyes dipped over her one more time before settling on hers with a questioning lift of his brow.

"I was just wondering if you had anything to match what I saw you in earlier. Green is pretty sexy too especially with those eyes of yours." He said without a concern to the now familiar flush rising in her cheeks.

Her mouth fell open at his brazenness and his eyes dropped to it.

"It's a simple question honey." He said studying her expression.

"For whom?"

He smiled knowingly, "I suppose you're going to tell me that the way you were looking at me in the plane was my imagination."

She couldn't. He was sexy to the roots of his hair and it would be a lie if she denied it. "I didn't realize I was."

This time both of his brows rose, "Interesting to know I'm that hypnotic."

She flushed and pursed her lips, "I'm sorry if I gave you an impression."

"That wasn't an impression honey, don't pass it off as one. By all means, look all you want." He said smiling, "I'll see you at dinner." He turned and left the room. What he meant was he knew she was attracted to him and it was too late to take it back or hide it.

Oh, she was in so much trouble. Jeb actually thought she was interested in him. She wasn't! Was she? It was true he was really nice to look at, but she couldn't risk a relationship, especially with one of Cara's brothers. Leave it to her to be attracted to the Alpha male of the pack.

At dinner, Brianne was introduced to their housekeeper Lucinda. She was a jolly looking woman that must've been in her late fifties or early sixties with a very round figure and grey streaked black hair that was pulled tightly back in a bun.

"You don't mind those men, Miss Fraser." She encouraged, "Maybe they'll have a civil conversation at dinner and mind themselves with a lady around. It seems that they've gotten worse since Miss Cara went away."

Brianne's eyes widened wondering what that meant. Did that mean they were more brazen than she had come to realize.

"Lu, you're scaring her," Gabriel said coming up behind them. "Come on Honey, we'll be good I promise." He moved his eyes over her face and took her hand at the same time to lead her to a chair beside Cara, while Rem jumped up and pulled it out for

her.

Cara fell her face in her hand in embarrassment. Nothing she said to these guys was getting through. Although she really couldn't blame them, they probably forgot their promises when they laid eyes on her. Brianne was stunning with that copper coloured hair, green eyes, and carried herself with an innocence unbecoming her twenty one years of age. She just wished that they would show a little more restraint around them. She knew she needed to tell them part of what Brianne confided in her to get them to leave her alone. It seemed to be the only solution at this point especially seeing the look of apprehension on her face after Gabe took her hand. Brianne wasn't used to assertive men, even though it was all harmless. They enjoyed flattering a beautiful woman and normally it would go over well, but she was concerned that Bree would cut and run if they kept it up especially with the look of apprehension on her face now.

Jeb saw his sister's frustration and skilfully started talking about business to distract them. It worked to a point, Gabe still had his attention on their new houseguest and employee even though he was talking to Glen while she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. It actually irritated him. He made a mental note to take him aside and speak to him about his behaviour. Gabe wasn't used to women being so shy around him and if they were, they overcame it quickly with a bit of attention from the handsome younger man. However, this woman's shyness was more discomfort and he felt momentarily bad for her. Obviously Cara wasn't wrong when she mentioned that she was wary of men. He wondered what kindled that because by the way she looked, she should have had loads of experience by now. Part of him wished she did, because he could easily envision that ripe body under his tonight, but for some reason that didn't sit well with him either. How many lovers had she had in her past? And what mistreatment caused her to be wary?

When dinner was over, Jeb told Cara to take Brianne out to the stables so she could see the horses and he called both Rem and Gabe into the Den. Once inside, he closed the door and turned to both of them, "I want you two to lay off of Cara's friend." He said in that tone they knew so well. No one would go against him when he spoke like that.

"Aw hell JC, she's hot!" Protested Gabe, "And did you see the length of those legs—" He started to say while rolling his eyes in disbelief.

Jeb held up his hand cutting him off. He should have known he wasn't the only man to notice. Testosterone drove those two like jet fuel. But he kept his expression firm. "Yeah, well Cara's upset because of you two running around after her like two bucks in rutting season. It's obvious that she's uncomfortable with the attention and she's going to be here for two months." He gave them one of his speaking looks, "This is the only warning you're going to get from me or I'll work you two so hard this summer you'll forget your own names."

Rem clapped his younger brother on the back, "Come on Gabe, you had two lovelies all over you yesterday who appreciated that attention, maybe Jeb's not wrong."

Jeb cocked a brow at the word 'two'.

Gabe just gave him an arrogant grin and a shrug to say 'is that new?'

Jeb just shook his head. He should have known better, "Remember my warning."

"Sure thing." Said Rem, "Come on Gabe, it's not like you didn't have your pick last night, leave Cara's shy friend alone. Maybe JC's not far off. She didn't seem too comfortable with the attention we were giving her. Besides, Cara said her experiences with men weren't all that good."

"Yeah, you're probably right." He finally agreed, "But Jeb, you gotta admit, she's a piece."

Of course she was. She was beautiful, leggy and he couldn't get those lacy undergarments or her body out of his mind and he was angry at himself for his reaction toward her. As for his brothers, he'd always put his family first even before his own needs, but this was different. He had selfish tendencies where she was concerned and that was the main reason he warned his two younger brothers off of her. Part of it was for Cara, but he wanted Brianne, and he would have her even if Cara didn't approve, "Remember what I said." He reminded them with a firm look ignoring Gabe's statement

"This is Honey." Said Cara pointing to the white Arabian mare, "You can ride her. She was good to me when I was little. Jeb trained her."

"Of course he did." She said unable to help herself, "She was probably too darn intimidated of him and when he told to her listen and she did."

Cara burst into laughter, "You're catching on quick Brianne, you'll do just fine."

"Too bad my women don't listen as well."

Brianne could have crawled in a hole at the sound of that deep drawl. How come, in the past four hours he was around when she made some comment about him? Cara on the other hand, thought that was funnier than what she just said. Brianne didn't see humour in it at all. She kept putting her foot in her mouth around him.

"He's kidding Bree." She said seeing her friend's embarrassment, "He doesn't have any women, they can't get past the thorns."

Jeb put his arm around his little sister and gave her a squeeze, "You don't seem to mind them tidbit."

She looked up at him adoringly, "I'm immune."

"Sure you are." He leaned down and kissed her forehead,

“Lu says she needs you in the kitchen.”

“Oh, I know what that’s about.” She said, “I’ll see you in a bit Bree, Lu wants to know all of your likes and dislikes so she can make you some killer meals.”

“But—“ that’s all she got out before Cara left. Then she focused on Jeb, “Someone would think you did that purposely.”

“Someone might.” He answered leaning against the stall wall and folding his arms across his chest while she reached out and scratched the mare’s head without taking her eyes off of him.

“What do you want from me Jeb?” she said apprehensively.

He stared at her for a moment not revealing anything in his expression. At least he had to give her something, she was brave. It wasn’t as if he was subtle, but Cara said she was wary of men, and it must’ve taken quite a lot to say that to him so the least he could do was be honest with her, “I want you honey.”

The mares’ ears pricked up at the sound of her name, but no one noticed.

Brianne’s hand stilled on the horse’s nose and she just stared at him as if he just said he was from another planet. No one has been so bluntly up front with her like that. Her heart just turned into a thundering stampede in her chest.

“You did ask.” He said quietly.

She did. She blinked heavily before answering him, “I—I don’t want a man.”

“What a coincidence, neither do I,” he said with a crooked smile.

“I don’t want a relationship either.”

“All right.”

Yet, he still stood there as confident as ever. Then it hit her that he wanted an affair, “I don’t do that either.” She said shaking her head rapidly.

“Then it seems we have a bit of a dilemma.” Christ he

could use a smoke. Although he was as calm as could be on the outside, on the inside he wanted to reach her in several strides, drag her back into the tack room and ravish her on a mound of straw. "Cara said you're frightened of men. I'll let you know right now, that I won't hurt you, but I can be quite convincing."

"I'm here for the job." She blurted out trying to ignore the thundering of her heart.

"That's fine. However, I'm not an easy man to say no to, and quite frankly when I see something I want, I get it."

"Then you'll be wanting for a long time." She managed despite her failing brevity.

He chuckled and straightened himself up not the least bit deterred by her statement from the confident look in his deep brown eyes.

"I'll see you at breakfast Brianne, sweet dreams." With that he turned and left the barn.

Brianne waited until she was sure he disappeared before she took several deep breaths. For two months she'll be here with that man and his assertiveness toward her. She was frightened of him, but there was also something else underneath that and knew it was attraction. She wasn't the only one, he seemed to have a sixth sense where her thoughts lay. No wonder he was so arrogant when he was dead on insightful. Obviously it was well founded. It probably didn't help that she couldn't take her eyes off him for very long either. He wasn't handsome like Glen, or had that boyish charm and like Rem and Gabe, but he had that hardness about him that she found attractive besides his self-confidence. Normally she'd be more afraid of someone like that, but somehow she knew that he wouldn't hurt her, not like the others. Still, men frightened her because her experiences with them were not happy ones. Cara knew a bit about what she went through, but there were some things that she couldn't discuss, ever.

When she got back in the house Cara sought her out not even seeming the least bit concerned that she left her with Jeb. Maybe it was the fact that she was too excited.

“Glen told me that he purchased tickets for you and me to the fireman’s ball this weekend. Isn’t that the best?”

Brianne could spend the rest of her days being grateful for a friend like Cara. She was always cheerful and looked on the bright side of everything. Every now and then it made her bad memories fade away. She knew she had to give credit to Jeb and his brothers for that because they raised her with love. It made her remember that he couldn’t be as threatening as she thought he was. “That sounds wonderful—“ she paused, “What’s a fireman’s ball?”

Cara laughed, “It’s only the event of the year—oh gosh! We have to get you a gown. Tomorrow after work we’ll go shopping. I’ll have Jeb take us then he can pay for whatever—What?” she said when Brianne started shaking her head.

“Cara, your brother can’t pay for a dress for me.”

“Of course he can. He won’t even bat an eye, you’ll see.”

“You don’t understand. I can’t have your brother buy my clothes. It’s not right.”

She waved a dismissive hand, “either way you need a gown Brianne. You can’t possibly miss this gala. Everyone who’s anyone will be there, and it’s all for charity. Certainly none of my old gowns will fit you because we’re quite different and Glen paid five hundred dollars a plate.”

Brianne’s jaw dropped. She’d never heard of such a thing before. Who would pay five hundred dollars a plate? Obviously Glen would.

“So,” Cara continued, “We can’t say no or the ticket would go to waste and it’s all for charity. Besides you’re my guest and my best friend.” She frowned seeing that Brianne was getting uncomfortable, “look, I’ll make you a deal. You’ll let Jeb buy you

a gown, and you can have him take the money out of your pay check if that makes you feel better. He'll take a little at a time, so you won't even notice. I'll talk to him about it okay. Okay?"

Cara didn't have a clue what Jeb had told her only moments ago. If she let Jeb buy her a gown, she would be indebted to him, "I can't."

She pinched her lips together contemplating Brianne's refusal. She knew she had a problem with charity and not paying her own way, but this was a chance in a lifetime to make Brianne feel as glamorous as she knew she was. She wanted to give her this. "How about I pay for your gown and you can pay me back."

Her brows lifted, "Isn't it the same thing?"

She smirked, "Yes, but I shop a lot. Jeb just pays the bill." When her friends expression didn't change she sighed, "I sound like a spoiled brat."

"No," she instantly disagreed, "You sound loved." She knew Cara was just trying to find a solution the best way she could.

"Please Bree, I really want you to go. It is a chance in a lifetime."

Not only didn't she want to disappoint Cara, Brianne didn't want the five hundred dollars to go to waste so she finally, reluctantly nodded causing Cara to give her an affectionate hug.

"We are going to have a blast. Just think, you get to go with four of Rockville's most eligible bachelors. You will be the envy of the ball!"

Yippee. She thought.

CHAPTER THREE

There were strong hands shaking her and the darkness of her dreams finally evaporated into dust.

"Dammit girl wake up!"

Brianne's eyes shot open and she focused on Jeb who was bare from the waist up, leaning over her and shaking her. "What!" He must've turned the bedside lamp on when he came in the room.

"You were screaming," he said calming his voice seeing that she was awake, "Bad dreams?"

She released a shudder and folded her arms across her breasts. He still had a hold of her shoulders.

"Come on, sit up and take a deep breath." He said gently contracting his large hands on her shoulders for encouragement.

She nodded and let him help her up averting her gaze so she would see his naked upper torso.

"Did I wake you?" She said rubbing her arms as if it were cold in the room, but it was just out of discomfort and embarrassment. Cara knew about the dreams, but she was sure she never told anyone.

"I don't sleep much." He admitted.

This brought her eyes to his, "Why?"

"Same reason." He looked over her head for a moment out the window to the sliver of moon then brought his eyes back to hers, "Things from my past."

"I didn't think there was much that bothered you." She confessed. The man was made of rock solid self assurance and to hear him say that floored her.

"There are a few things." He said deeply as if he wasn't talking about the dreams. His eyes guided over her choice of pyjamas. It was a two piece set, satin, pink, and actually fell nicely over her breasts even though it was long sleeved, he could still pick out her shape. He gave himself a mental shake. Obviously she was having bad dreams and he was thinking of her naked again. It was bad taste even if she looked deliciously vulnerable. "Did you want to tell me about it?" He watched her purse her lips, *such a nice full mouth, a perfectly kissable mouth.*

Then his eyes went to hers and she shook her head answering him.

“I—can’t.” she admitted, “It’s something I don’t talk about.”

“Cara said you were an orphan.” His intelligent eyes searched hers, “So I’m guessing this is something that happened in foster care.”

He was perceptive. “Many things happened in foster care.” She shuddered again and averted her eyes. “things I’d like to forget about.”

Jeb felt angry then oddly protective of her at that reaction. There was no way on God’s green planet that someone could fake that fear. And to fathom how someone could hurt a defenceless child, probably a beautiful child, only deepened his ire, but he didn’t let it show. “All right Brianne, I won’t push.” He said gently and glanced at her bed. “I’ll stay if you like.”

Her mouth fell open at his forwardness.

He grinned at her stunned expression, and nodded toward the sofa near the window, “Over there,” his eyes glittered, “unless you change your mind and want me to help you forget about the nightmares.”

“Jeb, please.” She said in a desperate voice. She couldn’t handle his insinuations right now because his naked upper half was doing enough distracting. He may not have been as handsome as his brothers but his self esteem and physique seemed to make up for it. He wasn’t ugly, far from it, but he didn’t have that sweet nature singing charm that the other three possessed. Everything about him was pure masculine, not male model gorgeous, but more of a rough construction worker type. A construction worker who wore a cowboy hat and jeans that left not much to the imagination of the muscular thighs underneath the denim. Then there was the perfection of his male torso. He had large thick arms, and expansive chest and to her surprise a

washboard stomach. Honestly she didn't think there were men who really looked like that except in magazines and she wasn't sure how much of that was airbrushed. It made her realize how naïve she really was about a man's body. There was no more a man than Jeb that she knew of. So much so that his masculinity seemed to soak her when he was around making her seem oddly lightheaded.

He chuckled, "You're so shy honey and there's no reason on this planet you should be." He reached up and took her chin between his thumb and forefinger to tilt her head up to his, "With the way you look, you could bring any man to their knees."

She flushed, "Thanks Jeb." Despite the dreams, his compliment did make her feel better. Brianne didn't think she was attractive because she'd been told countless times that she wasn't. There were male dancers at her school, but either they weren't into a relationships or they were gay, or they were too involved in their dance to notice her. She knew he was just trying to make her feel better and the fact that he was trying made her realize that for all of his gruffness, he was kind.

His eyes guided to her mouth again, then he released her. It was that or he was going to bend his head and kiss that full luscious mouth of hers.

"I'll be all right now. I usually only have the dreams once, then I settle." She lied. They actually occurred commonly through the night, but she knew that he would stay if she confessed that and having that man in the same room with her would definitely give her a sleepless night.

"Have you seen a doctor about them?"

"Yes, but it was only at one of those free clinics, because I couldn't afford a proper appointment. He gave me some sleeping pills, but I react funny to them."

"I'll set you up with my physician and he can refer a good psychologist—"

“No,” she protested, “I can’t.”

He held up his hand, “This wasn’t a request Brianne. I’m insisting.”

She just stared at him, “just because I stay with your family and work for you doesn’t mean you can dictate to me.” She said feeling her anger rise.

“You’re wrong there honey.” He said smiling, not the least bit affected by her temper. Then he stood up, “Look I’ll grab a pillow and a blanket from the closet.”

“I can go sleep with Cara.”

“What, and not let her get her beauty sleep? If you think I can be a bear, you should see what she’s like.”

He had a point. Cara was possibly the kindest person in the world, but she did have a temper when she was out of sorts even though it was never directed at her. However, she was going to be training her for the job in the morning and she needed her at her best to do so because she wasn’t sure how well she was going to catch on and she needed her friend to have patience and lots of it. Nevertheless, there was the other concern. Her biggest worry was him being discovered in her room in the morning but his next words eliminated that.

“I’ll be gone before the household wakes.” He said turning toward the door as if the decision was made.

Brianne couldn’t help but watch him. His strong muscular back was mesmerizing. The navy blue silk pyjama bottoms he wore hung low on his hips showing the slight dip of his lower back above his nicely shaped bottom. Her palms started to tingle at thinking about running her hands over the taut brawny flesh. She pinched her eyes shut and gave herself hell for even looking. But how could she help herself? How could any woman? She lay back down and adjusted herself under the covers as he came back in and tossed his blanket and pillow on the sofa.

She should have told him to put a shirt on, but he'd know that he affected her and he didn't need any more help in that department. After he settled on the sofa, she reached over and turned out the lamp trying her best to go to sleep while he adjusted himself on the makeshift bed. How his large frame fit on there, she'll never know, but he was the one that insisted on it. For a moment all she did was listen to his breathing and she realized that he wasn't sleeping. "Jeb?" she said softly.

"Uh-hmm?"

"Did you mean what you said in the barn?" She was really hoping he was kidding after all, Cara said her brothers were famous for that, but then again she also said Jeb was more serious than the other three.

There was a slight pause before he answered, "Every word."

There went her doubts.

"Go to sleep. I'm nearby." He added

That's assurance, she thought sarcastically. How could she possibly sleep when there was a man not fifteen feet away from her? A man that could rival any Greek deity. He was coated with thick muscle and tanned flesh and even though she tried not to look, what she saw was burned in her memory forever.

Somewhere in the middle of the night she awoke hearing his deep easy breathing and with it the sensation of strong arms around her. It took her a moment to realize that at some point he came to bed. Her bed, and upon opening her eyes she saw his face was inches from hers as his arms wrapped around her waist. She lifted her head and looked at him.

"Go to sleep, I won't molest you." Came the groggy reply without opening his eyes. "The damn couch is too small."

She laid her head back down too stunned to say anything, but stare at him. There wasn't much light in the room save that

from the sliver of moonlight, but it was enough to see how heavenly he looked when he was peaceful. “Jeb—“

“Shush.” He said quietly still not opening his eyes.

Gosh the man was so darn forward. She wanted to throw him out of her room, but she didn’t. In fact she couldn’t even form the words. His arms felt so wonderful—so safe. He wasn’t doing anything else; he was just holding her and obviously sleeping. After a moment she shut her eyes. If it weren’t for the jet lag, and the excitement of being there she might not have been able to sleep at all, but as it was she did.

Jeb wasn’t asleep, he was burning with need after touching her, but he wasn’t going to rush her either. He didn’t lie, the couch was too small, but he also knew that she was attracted to him and wouldn’t ask him to leave. Maybe he was being a bit of a bastard playing on her vulnerability like that. She was naïve, but he wasn’t sure how naïve, and from the little bits Cara told him, she was abused but she never told him to what extent. However, he was an assertive man, any of his family can confirm that, but she didn’t seem to be afraid of him at the moment. It gave him some relief to think that she wasn’t molested or raped. At least he hoped she wasn’t. He never had any kind of experience with women like that, but he was smart enough to know that there would be some fear there. That meant that she was probably abused in other ways. Maybe beaten, starved, or emotionally neglected by a man. It made more sense in the way she was around him. Before the end of the summer he aimed to get the truth out of her one way or another. For now, he was enjoying the feel of her and damn, did she feel good. If that wasn’t enough she smelled amazing, like fresh roses. His hand contracted slightly on her waist to see if she was sleeping sound. She was. Then, he lifted his head and pressed his nose into her hair and inhaled deeply. Yes, definitely roses. Laying down he stared at her sleeping profile. She was beautiful and it had been

a while since a woman had affected him so quickly. If this was a normal occurrence he'd let her go, but he knew from the first moment he laid eyes on her in that sexy lacy bra, that he couldn't. He wanted her. The only thing was, he would have to approach this differently than what he was used to, but he was cocky in his ability with woman, and would allow her time to become accustomed to him before he put the pressure on.

His eyes coasted over her peaceful expression. He would have to take his time with her because she was as timid as a mouse which was fine, he knew it would be worth it. There was a fiery passion that burned in those sea green eyes of hers and he was willing to help her discover it.

The next morning someone was shaking her awake. It was Cara.

She sat up like a shot making her friend move back before they butted heads. She looked beside her but as Jeb said he would be, he was gone and so was the pillow and blanket.

"What? Are you okay?" Cara said concerned, "Did you have a nightmare."

She absently rubbed her eyes, "No, I just was in a deep sleep." It was a partial truth. She didn't think she ever slept so well before in her life. The feel of Jeb's strong arms around her was still fresh on her body and it caused her to momentarily pause to remember how it made her feel.

"You don't look all right. You look a little spooked." Cara said with deepening concern.

Bree shook her head and gave her friend a smile, "No, really I'm fine. I slept really well. This bed is a dream." *And so was sleeping next to your sexy brother*, she thought to herself.

"Well, we have an hour before we leave for work, so Glen sent me in to wake you."

"Oh thanks." She said tossing back the covers, "I'll be

ready in a jiff.”

“Low maintenance,” Cara laughed, “You get ready in less than half the time I do. Any man would love you.”

She shrugged there wasn’t much of a choice with her there, she had to keep up with other people’s schedules, not set her own. “I’ll have a quick shower—“

“Breakfast will be ready in twenty minutes. Lu asked me to tell you.”

“Wow, we don’t have to cook.” She said blinking and unable to contain her glee, “What a treat!”

“I told you I was spoiled.”

“And I told you that you were loved.” She reminded her as she squeezed her hand, “I’ll be down in twenty.”

“Good, I’ll be twice that long.” Cara said getting off Bree’s bed and heading for the door.

Twenty minutes later almost to the second Bree entered the dining room to see only Jeb sitting there reading a paper and sipping on a cup of coffee. He looked up, smiled and set the cup down.

“How’d you sleep?” She was wearing a nice grey skirt that came to her knees, a matching jacket, pink blouse and a colourful scarf. Those splendid legs of hers were perfectly shaped like he knew they were but he preferred them naked all the way up. Her gorgeous hair was piled on her head in a neat chignon. His eyes guided over her soaking up her lovely image as she took a seat and looked around.

“Where is everyone?”

Not surprising she didn’t answer his question, “On site.” He answered with a sloppy grin knowing she was evading his question, but he decided not to push it. “No need to feel nervous Brianne, I’m wearing clothes.” He watched her lovely cheeks pink up and she averted her gaze just as his little sister walked in, but she still shot him a look that said to keep quiet about the

previous night. His answer was a challenging grin.

Bree visibly relaxed as Cara coasted in the room like a breath of fresh air.

“Why so happy?” she asked her older brother and sat next to him.

“I had a wonderful sleep last night.” He said picking up his coffee again while keeping his eyes on Brianne watching her flush deeper. “First time in a long time.” He added despite her discomfort.

Cara didn’t notice because Lu came in with several platters of food. “Oh thank goodness, I’m starved.” She dug into the eggs and hash browns and had half a mouthful when she recalled what her brother said, “I’m glad Jeb, I know you don’t sleep well. Are you on meds or something?”

He’d certainly like to be on *someone*, “Something.” He said quietly casting Brianne another look who refused to meet his gaze this time and concentrated on eating her scrambled eggs and sipping coffee.

“Miss Cara—Phone!” Called Lu from the other room.

Cara got up and rushed out of the dining room.

“You have to stop. Someone’s going to see how you make me feel.” Brianne said finally finding her courage after Cara left. To her surprise Jeb nodded.

“All right.”

She narrowed her eyes, “All right?” she said with a suspicious tone. That was too easy.

He gave her a smile, “Honey, if you didn’t react so darn blatantly to my teasing, I probably wouldn’t do as much, but I’ll stop.” It wasn’t the whole truth. He wanted to be in her bed again tonight, and if he made her defensive, she probably wouldn’t let him in the room. He really wouldn’t blame her, but if she didn’t look so lovely blushing the way she did, he would have stopped already.

“Thank you.” She said softly finishing her breakfast quietly.

His eyes remained on her. He was screwed and he knew it. He knew it from the first moment he laid eyes on her, but she was closed up tighter than a concrete tomb. “Just wondering—” he started, “If I should put pyjamas on tonight, because last night I barely had enough time to get some bottoms on. I don’t wear anything to bed.”

“Wear a three piece suit.” She shot back causing him to chuckle.

Cara came back at that moment sighing dreamily. Brianne noticed that Jeb’s eyes darkened.

“Let me guess—that was Greg.”

She gave him an equal glare as she sat down again, “What’s the problem? You like him.”

“I like him as a foreman, not a lusty leech that’s chasing my baby sister.”

“He’s not a leech.” She defended realizing her mistake on not mentioning the other. Actually it was a blunder in her defensiveness, but Jeb caught it.

Jeb stood up, planted his hands in front of her on the table and glared down at her, “So he’s lusty?”

She moved to protest but saw his expression and snapped her mouth shut. If she were to say anything it would have made things worse and his next words confirmed that.

“I’ll shoot him Cara, if he so much as looks in your direction with an inkling of interest and *then* I’ll fire him.” He stood straight gave her another fierce look and walked out of the room.

Brianne saw her friend’s bottom lip tremble and reached over to squeeze her hand, “this is the Greg that you’ve been pining over while you’re at school isn’t it?”

She brought her gaze to her friends, “Oh Bree, he’s so

dreamy! I don't understand what the problem is. Jeb likes him well enough to have him work for him, but he's not good enough for me?"

She smiled, "Jeb loves you Cara, and he thinks he knows what's best."

"I hate him." She mumbled.

"No you don't." she squeezed her hand again, "He'll come around."

She widened her eyes slightly, "You don't know Jeb. He doesn't change his mind—ever."

She didn't doubt that for a minute after he asserted himself in her bed the night before. A tremor ran through her remembering how he felt and smelled. She felt oddly secure with him there and she'd never slept next to a man in her life.

"If you saw Greg Bree, you would know why I'm crazy about him. He's got dirty blonde hair and these killer brown eyes that a girl could turn into a puddle of mush only by looking at her and he's been asking me out since Jeb hired him last summer. I mean that's not all, he's smart, sexy, fun to be around, and I'm just crazy about him. There are six girls in the office and he asked me out. Gosh, you've never seen eyes like that." She added with a heavy sigh.

Actually she had, but she wasn't going to tell Cara that they belonged to her oldest brother and made her heart act like it was possessed whenever he looked at her. Still, Brianne felt terrible for Cara, she was a soft heart, and she obviously really liked this man. "Cara, you're gorgeous, of course he asked you out and then when he got to know you, I'm sure he fell head over heels."

"I wouldn't know, I never went out with him."

Her eyes widened, "No?" Cara seemed crazy about this man and she'd never dated him. Maybe Jeb wasn't far off in being protective. Brianne knew she was naïve, but she never

thought that Cara was. She never thought she fooled around, but with her wealth and prestige, she thought she'd have some experience in dating.

"My brothers never leave me alone and they don't think I'm mature enough to date. Gosh! I should just join a nunnery."

Brianne laughed. She couldn't help it. What she wouldn't give to be loved so much, "I'm sorry." She said seeing Cara's confused expression, "I don't mean to laugh, I just wish I had someone that loved me even a fraction of what you have."

Cara felt incredibly selfish. Brianne didn't mean it that way but still she was being ungrateful again. She should be happy with her family even if they were a bunch of brutes. "I love you Brianne." She said, "I really do, if I had a sister, I would be lucky that she turned out as wonderful as you are."

Brianne felt like weeping. Those words were profound to her.

Cara saw her eyes tear up and knew she'd be embarrassed if she pushed her on it, "Come on Jeb's probably drawing thunder clouds waiting for us."

Bree stood up, "Is this okay." She said smoothing her skirt.

"You look elegantly sophisticated Bree, quit worrying."

Brianne blushed and allowed Cara to take her hand and lead her outside. Thunderclouds were an understatement. His expression could have summoned a Tsunami.

Jeb was leaning against what looked like a polished dark grey Land Rover with his arms crossed across his thick chest glowering at them. She figured he was still angry about Cara's latest love interest. He turned and opened the passenger door and nodded to Brianne to get in. She shot a look to Cara who didn't seem to notice and got in the door behind hers. She really didn't want to sit next to him, but Cara was still mad at him and she'd rather take the brunt of his temper than expose Cara to it

so she slid the elegant leather seat.

Thankfully Jeb didn't say much on the forty-five minute ride to the office. Cara stared up at the tall glass building he drove towards and shook her head. Why she expected a couple of trailers on a dirt filled lot stumped her. Maybe she watched too many movies with construction themes.

"Glen designed it too." Cara leaned forward and clasped her hands over the headrest in front of her so she could talk to Bree. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Wow." She murmured looking up. "He's really talented."

"It has twenty floors, and our company has the top two. They rent out the rest in office space."

For some reason Brianne thought this was along the lines of a mom and pop business, but looking at the people coming and going out of the front door in expensive suits made her give her head a shake. They looked like lawyers, accountants, and stockbrokers. "I feel like a hillbilly." She said without thinking. A deep chuckle made her swivel her head in Jeb's direction. All the trace of anger was gone while he stared at her in amusement.

"I take it you didn't think Cara's family was worth so much?"

There was almost something accusatory in his tone but she didn't take the bait. She should have realized after the leer jet, the expensive cars, and the house, but this building was phenomenal. You'd think that the family would be spread all over in their own houses, but they stayed together. It just gave her an idea of how much they loved each other. She just turned her head away to look out the passenger window as he pulled into a gated parking garage. She always thought that people who had money like this were selfish, but this family was very close. The security man saw who was driving and pushed a button to lift the blockade letting them through.

Brianne remained silent through the trip up in the

elevator to the top floor. When they got off he took her arm and before she could say anything started to lead her down the hall with Cara in tow. However, she decided against it because his grip wasn't the least bit harsh, it was firm and steady and only meant to guide her to where she was supposed to be and how would it look if she started protesting on her first day on the job. Bree thought that Cara would have said something but she kept stopping and saying hello to people that rushed out to meet her. Obviously she was well liked.

They walked down a long hall in silence and Brianne noticed several odd looks from people who passed them. Jeb even greeted a few. They all referred to him as Mr. Durant. She made a silent note to do the same. This was a different environment and she needed to be professional, even if he took it upon himself to touch her.

Finally, he stopped in front of a middle aged woman who was sitting at a desk typing on a computer. She stopped when she saw Jeb and smiled while reaching up and removing her spectacles, "Mr. Durant—" then her eyes guided to Brianne and slid down to where he held her arm before going back to his in question.

"Violet, this is Brianne, Cara's friend. I need you to set her up in Brenda's place."

Brianne didn't miss the older woman's brows rise in question, but she didn't say anything. Instead she got up and came around the desk to shake Bree's hand and gave her a warm smile, "Nice to meet you Brianne. I'll do my best."

Jeb looked down at her just as she gave him a look of confusion, "I know Cara said she would orientate you, but chances are she'll be busy for the next hour or so just trying to get down the hall. Violet is the best I have, she'll make sure you'll settle well," he gave violet a speaking glance before he turned and went through the double doors to his office.

“You look nervous.” Vi said looking at the younger woman.

“Scared stiff.” She said honestly.

Vi smiled, “You’ll be a pro by the end of the day, and I won’t sugar coat it. You’ll be exhausted.”

Good, I’ll sleep without Jeb’s help, thought Brianne.

Vi pointed to the desk across from hers, “That’s Brenda’s old desk, have a seat.”

Brianne did as she was told.

“Now, “ she said leaning over her and turning on the computer, “Tell me what skills you do have and we’ll go from there.”

She felt like an idiot, “Not much if I’m honest. Cara said that the brothers needed help with receipts and things. I know computers well, and I can type but beyond that—“

Violet held up her hand and gave her a reassuring smile, “That’s a great starting point.” She pulled up several formats on the computer and began to explain them to Brianne. In the back of her mind she knew the look her boss gave her and knew that this girl was to be treated right. Usually they hired a few extra students to help out in the summer months, but only as Brianne just said, so why he gave the new girl the position of being his personal secretary floored her. She had barely managed to keep the surprise off out of her expression. Then he told her she was Cara’s friend, the favouritism made sense. The brothers doted on Cara and rightly so, she was very sweet.

Brianne was thankful for Violet, who told to call her Vi, she was very patient even though she fumbled through the instructions and constantly asked her for help. Not once did the woman act like she was annoying her. Cara finally caught up with her gave Violet a surprised look who just shrugged and shook her head to answer her unspoken question that she didn’t know why Jeb chose to make Brianne his personal secretary.

Jeb came out of his office at that moment and told Violet to get one of their latest clients on the phone.

“Jeb—“ Cara started, but he gave her a look that made her snap her mouth shut. Obviously he was still angry at her, but she really wanted to know why he threw all of this responsibility on her friend. She was worried that Brianne would feel overwhelmed. However, she would talk to him later, not in front of Bree and violet.

“Well, I guess I’ll go earn a living too.” Cara finally said, watching Bree concentrate on something on the computer screen. “I’ll come get you at coffee, okay?”

“Sure.” Bree said trying her best to learn the program that Violet pulled up for her. Somehow she’d completely forgot that she was suppose to be just entering receipts in the computer like Cara had said and when she finally did remember, she thought that was why she was learning the programs Vi was showing her. It didn’t occur to her that she was sitting outside Jeb’s office and not with Cara at the moment because she was too involved in learning everything.

Cara gave her a worried look before she left. Jeb wasn’t making any sense to her. They had an agreement about where Bree was going to be placed and it was going to be next to her so she could protect her and help show her the ropes. Hopefully Jeb was doing the same thing. However, this whole change in plans disturbed her. Also she couldn’t help but worry if Jeb was using Bree to upset her because of that argument they had that morning over Greg.

Jeb had a large corner office that had an adjoining door to Glen’s studio on one side where he employed half a dozen other architects. On the other side were his younger brother’s offices but they were rarely there. Like Jeb, they preferred to be on site to manage the construction crews. That was their main job and they were good at it. However, Jeb had a desk load of paperwork

to get through and it took him better part of the morning. He reached up and rubbed his face with his hands and looked around once before he reached over and pushed the pager on his phone.

“Yes, Mr. Durant.” Came Violet’s pleasant voice.

“Coffee, now.”

“Yes sir, there’s a Mr. Hosking on line two.”

“All right.” He said and released the button to answer the call.

Outside Brianne couldn’t help but hear the conversation, “Is he always that blunt?”

Vi just smiled, “It’s not personal Brianne, it’s just the way he speaks to people.”

She took a deep breath, “I suppose it takes some getting used to.”

The older woman shrugged, “I actually never really noticed it. He’s always been very good to me.” She paused studying her for a moment, “I guess someone your age isn’t used to it, but you will be by the end of the summer, just remember, don’t take it personally. Mr. Durant is a wealthy, hardworking man, and beating around the bush is not in his nature. He likes things to get done so he can see results.”

“That’s good to know.”

“Now for his coffee.” Violet stood up and told Brianne to follow her to the small kitchen area reserved only for Jeb and Glen’s personal staff. “He takes it strong and black.” She said as she prepared it.

Brianne watched her carefully making note of how many scoops of grains she put into the machine. “No sugar?”

“No.” she said casting her a look over her spectacles, “Though there are times I wish he would because he could use a little sweetening up.”

Brianne couldn’t stop the laughter that bubbled up in her

throat.

“I see you understand.” She said taking a mug out of the cupboard while smiling herself. After she poured the coffee, she reached in and grabbed a few whole grain crackers from the cupboard and put them on a plate, “Tell him to eat those too. He’ll work through lunch.”

“Me?”

Violet handed her the mug and the plate, “Yes dear, you’re his secretary.”

“I’m his what?” she said stunned.

Vi couldn’t help the amusement that reached her eyes, “Honey, what do you think you’re doing sitting at the desk outside of his office for?”

“You are too.”

“Yes, but I’m Glen’s personal secretary. He fired Brenda last week when she stripped naked and sprawled across his desk thinking he’d want her.”

Brianne’s jaw dropped in utter disbelief, “Who would do such a thing?”

Vi stared at her for a moment to see if she was serious then burst into laughter, “Now this makes sense.” She patted Brianne’s shoulder while turning her about and giving her a gentle push toward the double doors that suddenly looked very intimidating.

Brianne knocked gently casting an unsure glance over her shoulder at violet who gave her an encouraging ‘go on’.

She opened the door to see Jeb sitting in his high back leather office chair with his back to her and on the phone while looking out the large windows. She drew in a long breath. The view from there was incredible. He reached up and waved his hand over his shoulder without looking at her to come in while answering whoever it was on the phone. It sounded as if he was speaking in French. This man never ceased to amaze her.

Approaching the desk she managed to glance around at the expensive, yet masculine taste that the large office held. Obviously Glen designed this too because it was absolutely breathtaking in masculine style. Her eyes set on a painting and she stilled while immediately recognizing it.

“Yes, to answer your question. It is.” Jeb said nodding toward the famous painting while hanging up the phone. Obviously she knew it. He held out his hand, “Brianne.” He said when she didn’t respond.

“Oh—sorry.” She handed him his coffee and set the plate of crackers down on the desk.

“You can get rid of those.” He said sipping the coffee and making a sound of satisfaction as he shut his eyes to enjoy it.

“Violet said you had to eat them.” She heard herself say. For some reason she found that expression oddly attractive.

He opened his eyes and focused them on her with his expression altering to be about as readable as brick.

Her heart started thundering hard in her chest remembering how close she was to him the night before and how tender he’d been. “What?” She didn’t mean to sound so breathless but she did and he knew it from the slow smile that spread across his face. Maybe the unreadable one was preferable, because her heart shifted into overtime.

“Honey, you could melt butter on an icy day with that innocent look.” He said deeply while setting his mug down and getting to his feet.

She had no idea what that meant but as she tried to figure it out he’d made it around his desk and stood only inches from her. He was so darn tall! His eyes roamed over her face causing it to heat up and she knew she was blushing already and he’d hardly done a thing to cause it. However, she still couldn’t pull her eyes from his. Then he reached up and took a strand of hair between his thumb and forefinger while keeping his eyes on hers.

“You feel it too don’t you?”

“Feel?”

“That heat between us.” He clarified and grinned when she shook her head slightly.

“I—I can’t get involved.” she said brokenly.

“Why?”

“It’s my business Jeb.”

“I’ll make it mine.”

“Please, you’re frightening me.” She said stepping back so he had to release the strand of hair.

“Last night, you didn’t seem to mind my hands on you.” He said closing that gap again. She tried to move again and his hands moved to her hips stopping her. She gasped.

“Was it a boyfriend?”

“Don’t.”

“A foster family—a man?”

“Stop.” She said averting her gaze.

He reached up and cupped her chin forcing him to look at her, “Did someone touch you Brianne? Touch you after you said no.”

“Only you.” She said feeling the burning in her cheeks. She was frightened. His whole presence frightened her because he was so forceful. She had to keep telling herself not to be afraid, that he wouldn’t hurt her, Cara was living proof. Finally he let her turn her head away but he didn’t release her.

“I wouldn’t do anything you didn’t want.”

“You are.” She said.

“No, I’m showing you what you want but don’t have the courage to do so.” That brought her gaze back to his and this time she was angry.

“You don’t know what I want. You don’t know me.” She shot back. To her surprise he gave her a devastating grin.

“That’s better. I knew you had fire in there somewhere.

The passion I can see in your eyes needs to be stoked somehow.”

Her mouth fell open, “Jeb—“

“Let me kiss you Brianne.” He said deeply letting his eyes drop to her mouth. “Let me kiss you and I’ll prove it to you.”

“I—I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I’m afraid of men.”

“No, you’re afraid of a certain type of man, and I’m not him. I asked your permission. Now I’m waiting for an answer.”

“I gave you one.”

“you gave me an excuse. Now say yes or no.”

“N—no.” she breathed lowering her eyes to his sensual wide mouth.

“That’s a hell of a way to say yes.” He said bending his head

Brianne wasn’t ready for the electricity that shot through her at the touch of his hard mouth on hers. It was the sweetest thing she’d ever encountered. He was tender and patient as his mouth moved over hers, not the least bit demanding as she thought he would be. He must have some sixth sense when it came to women because he knew exactly how to coax her. He nibbled delicately on her lower lip until she parted hers unexpectedly. Then his tongue traced a path just inside her parted mouth and she nearly groaned at the erotic sensation that caused.

She didn’t even notice that his hand left her hip, took hers and placed it palm down on his chest under his suit jacket. He even started to guide her hand to feel him but after a few seconds she didn’t need help. Her other hand even joined the first. Jeb felt triumphant and gripped her head in his large hands to deepen the kiss, “Open your mouth farther for me baby.”

Later when she thought about it, she didn’t know how she heard him. Her hands were exploring the hard bulking contours

of his chest and her skin was on fire where his hands were on either side of her face. As soon as she obeyed him he took her mouth completely and deepened the pressure. Soon she could feel his tongue flicking against hers and never in her life could she remember feeling such fire well up inside her. It ricocheted down her body into her pelvis and swirled into a growing inferno.

Jeb was caught in the same maelstrom and quickly removed one hand to undo his tie and flick the first few buttons of his shirt open. She was kissing him back now, with a fever, and he was able to tighten his arm around her back to pull her tighter against him. She was tall, and seemed to fit against him in all of the right places. She didn't need encouragement to find the open buttons of his shirt and move her hand inside. Jeb heard himself groan against her mouth and bent her back over his arm.

Just then the intercom buzzer went.

"Jeb do you have Bree in there, I promised her a walk during coffee." Came Cara's sweet voice.

In a flash he erected himself and released her. He turned away walking toward his desk while doing up his buttons and his tie. He loved his sister, but he could have killed her right then.

Bree must've blushed a thousand shades of red at what she'd just done.

Jeb pushed the button on his phone, "She'll be out in a minute." His eyes went to her scarlet blush, "She's—occupied." He said not showing anything in his expression.

If Brianne could blush further she just did. *Occupied?* She was acting like a wanton woman!

He erected himself with his eyes still on hers and finished fixing his tie lifting his chin slightly as he set the knot.

She kept silent. She was speechless and ashamed at her behaviour.

Jeb lifted a brow, "See?" he told her, referring to the

chemistry between them.

“Stay away from me.” She said barely above a whisper before she turned on her heel and left the office. How could she have acted in such a way? Well it was completely his fault! He put a spell on her, she was sure of it. She never was so forward before in her life. Glancing down at her hand, the same hand that was on his flesh only moments ago, she clenched her fist trying to forget.

Cara greeted her with a smile, “There’s a lovely park across the road, Come on, I’ll buy you a cappuccino and we’ll go for a walk.”

“That sounds wonderful.” She said breathlessly trying to force a smile of her own. How Jeb could act so nonchalant over such a display floored her. It made it seem that what they’d just shared seem cheap, but she knew nothing of attraction, or sex for that matter, and didn’t know if that was normal between two people to turn it off so easily. She was still rattled to the bone.

Jeb sat in his high back leather office chair after Brianne had left and ran a large hand over his face. Then he reached down and adjusted the crotch of his dark slacks to accommodate his erection. Never before had he fooled around with an employee, much less to that extent and in his office of all places. He could have had her, he knew he could have. Even now he had images of pinning her up against the wall, wrapping those gorgeous legs around his hips and plunging into her until he was spent. This won’t do at all. He couldn’t be alone with her here. Cara was right on time to interrupt what he was going to do to her next. Hell, she smelled good and when she was turned on it became more potent. He lifted his hand and smelled it, roses. Laying his head back against the chair he knew he had to find some privacy and speak to her. She looked hurt and embarrassed when she left, but he had his own urges to control and couldn’t say anything to her without fear of ravishing her.

Standing up, he ran his hand through his hair. He had to get out of there. He would head out to the latest condo site where his brothers were.

When Brianne returned she was relieved to hear from Vi that Jeb had left for the day. At least she was able to concentrate on learning the routine that Vi was able to guide her through. Actually she was lying to herself and doing a poor job of it. She couldn't concentrate at all. It was hard to forget how he made her feel over a few moments of intimacy.

She felt beautiful.

That is until he was able to turn it off so quickly and the shame hit her. She had never been kissed in her life, so her reaction completely floored her.

Vi was still talking and she had to write everything down just to make sure she wouldn't forget because she kept feeling his hard sensuous mouth on hers and his hard body with it's hot flesh under her fingers.

Absently she reached up and wiped her brow with the back of her hand. She felt like she was perspiring, but it was just the heat prickling her skin remembering the incident.

"Are you okay?" Vi said noticing the sudden blush in Brianne's cheeks.

"I'm fine." She smiled, "I'm just finding this overwhelming." She lied hoping that it worked. It did.

Violet gave her a reassuring pat on the hand, "Honey, if you can type, you can do this job. My husband is a mechanic and he works with a lot of motors. I asked him how he could do it—remember all the differences in the engines, and he said 'it's all nuts and bolts Vi, if you know how you took 'em out, just remember how to put 'em back in' and I try to apply that philosophy to everything." She gave a laugh, "So, just think of it that way. The computer, Mr. Durant's ritual routines and until he tells you different, just do it that way."

“That’s good advice. I’ll take it seriously.” Bree answered feeling a little better.

As the end of the day grew near Cara showed up almost skipping, “Bree I need you to cover for me.”

“What?” she said shooting her an apprehensive look, “What for and to who?”

“Greg wants to take me out for coffee, can you tell Jeb that I’m at Tracy’s. I’ll be home for dinner”

Brianne shook her head, “Cara—”

‘Look, he’ll tear Greg to bits and fire him. I haven’t told Greg that Jeb doesn’t want us seeing each other or he’ll dump me.” She pleaded, “I’m sorry to put you on the spot, but I really like him.”

After all she had gone through for her, Brianne couldn’t deny Cara that request. Reluctantly she nodded.

“You’re the best!” she said before leaving.

Sure she was. She practically molested her brother in his office earlier. Again she felt her cheeks heat up. This was endless, she thought bitterly about the permanent blush.

Shortly after, Jeb strode down the hall toward her tossing his keys in his hand. His whole presence was devastating, she thought to herself trying not to let him see that she watched him. So much so, that she barely even noticed the limp he had

“Are you ready?” he said looking down at her.

“Let me get my purse.” She said standing up not able to meet his eyes.

“Where’s Cara?” he said looking around. She wasn’t in the outer offices, so he thought she was waiting with Brianne.

“She said she’d get a ride home later.” She explained still not meeting his eyes hoping that he didn’t ask, but he did.

“Who’s she with?”

“Some friend.” She answered walking toward the elevator with him close behind. Thankfully he never said another word,

but it didn't last. When they were in the Rover and halfway home he finally asked the question again. This time there was a suspicious tone to it.

"Who is she with?" he repeated giving her a sideways glance. At first he thought she was avoiding his gaze because of what had happened between them earlier, but now he knew this was different and it stemmed from him asking where Cara was.

Brianne knew he set those eyes on hers and she couldn't lie to him so she said nothing at all.

After a moment Jeb realized that she wasn't going to answer so there was something going on that he wasn't supposed to know about, and he pulled the vehicle off the highway following a scarcely used country road. Then he jammed on the brakes causing her to brace her hands on the dash and gasp. He shifted the vehicle into park and cut the engine before he turned to her.

Brianne still couldn't look at him. She never could lie, even if her life depended on it, and this was Jeb. Without even looking in his direction she knew he was glowering at her. His whole persona was intimidating and despite what had happened earlier he still frightened her to some degree. In fact, she doubted the devil himself couldn't lie to this man and sound convincing.

"Damn it Bree, answer me!"

"She's with that man!" she blurted out, "Are you happy? I just betrayed my best friend."

His face contorted in rage. "I told her—"

"Well you're being unfair!" she cut him off. It had been a long time since she showed her temper but Cara was a sensitive issue for her, she'd helped her, listened to her when she let things get to her, and took care of her when she had the nightmares.

Jeb's brows lifted, "Well, well, there is some fire there."

"We're talking about Cara." She saw his expression

darken again, “If you say anything she’ll be upset with me Jeb, and I don’t think I can deal with that.”

“Don’t play on my sincerity sweetheart, because I don’t have any.”

“Fine. I’ll just go home and pack my bags.”

“What the hell for, because you told the truth about my lying sister?”

“Friends don’t do that to friends, but you have that darn look that could drag a confession from a rock—”

He laughed, “Is that right?”

“It is.” She said wondering if his anger had passed. The man changed moods faster than the weather.

“If that was true, you would tell me what happened to you when you were younger, and why you have those nightmares.” He saw her expression close up and it just confirmed his statement, “As I thought.”

“Don’t presume you know me Jeb, you don’t.”

He narrowed his gaze, “no, but I intend to.” He had an agency digging into her past. Even though he wanted her more than his next breath, he didn’t trust her.

She took that as a different way entirely and she flushed crimson. “What happened can’t happen again.”

“No, not in my office.”

“Anywhere.”

“That’s where your wrong honey.” He said deepening his voice

She bit her bottom lip. She couldn’t go through that shame again, “I can’t. You may be able to handle things like that, but I’m not used to it.”

“Look,” he said seeing her expression and finally figuring out what the problem was, “I couldn’t say anything to you at that time. I had to control my own body.”

Her eyes came up to his with a question in them.

“Surely you know—“ he paused studying her expression, then his own went slack as it finally dawned on him, “Oh hell.” He straightened in his seat and leaned back looking at the interior roof of the land rover, “Leave it to me to find the only twenty year old virgin on the planet.” He said in a rush of breath.

That statement made her more ashamed than she could possibly imagine. Yes, she was a virgin, but she had to fight like hell through her childhood to keep it and Jeb had just spoken as if it was a curse. To her it was a measure of her pride. It was one of the few things her foster father couldn’t take from her.

Hot tears burned her eyes and she released a wretched sob.

“What the—“ he swivelled his head in her direction, “You’re crying? For Christ sake Brianne!”

“J—just take me home.” She managed.

“Not when you’re like this, my family will skin me alive.”

“Good!” she shouted at him. “You could stand to lose a few layers of that thick hide.”

“Here.” He said giving her a handkerchief. “Quit your crying.”

“It’s not a switch you can turn off,” she said sarcastically snatching the cloth from him and wiping her eyes vigorously angry and embarrassed at the same time. She never cried, ever. Not even in front of Cara.

He really wanted to reach over and gather her in his arms. It was killing him to see her cry, but he wouldn’t stop there and he knew that, “What did I say?”

“What haven’t you said? You have to be the most insensitive—“

“Christ Brianne, do you want me to hold you? Last time I had you in my arms, I near had you against the wall.”

“You didn’t.” she protested shooting him an expression of disbelief. “You acted as if it was nothing.”

“Honey if you looked down at the time you would have seen it was far from nothing. I near split the material of my pants.”

She flushed.

“And—“ he added deeply, “—just because you’re weeping, it doesn’t mean a damn thing to my body, virgin or not. I still want you.”

“Quit that.” She shot at him.

“What?”

“You refer to my chastity as a disease.”

Did he? To him it could easily be seen as one. His eyes studied her. She’d quit crying now, but the look underneath that hurt was devastating. He’d taken something that she deemed precious and twisted it. “So that’s it.” He said quietly. “You’ve fended off men to keep it and I sound as if I’m ridiculing you over it.”

“You are.” She admitted. She was right about him having that sixth sense. She never told anyone what her foster father tried to do to her. Not even Cara. All Cara knew was that she was beaten from time to time, told she was ugly, and no man would ever want her.

“No. I’m not.” He leaned toward her and brushed a strand of hair off her face tucking it behind her ear tenderly, “Look at me Brianne.” Slowly, she did, “If you understood anything about men, you’ll find that it’s frustrating for me because I want you so bad. I don’t think I can be gentle with the need that you evoke in me. Don’t you understand?”

“I never asked you to want me.” She answered narrowing her gaze at him, “and I never offered it to you.”

“You will.”

She lifted her chin, “You are so conceited to think—“

“Brianne, it wasn’t like you were fighting me off today.” He reminded her with a pointed look. “Practically every inch of

your body was embedded in mine.”

She snapped her mouth shut and turned her head away to look out the window. He was right she wasn't. She wanted him to but she'd never openly admit that. A tug on a lock of her hair made her look at him again. His eyes had softened to a light honey brown and she found herself unable to take her eyes away again.

“I'm being truthful. You're obviously saving yourself for marriage, or you wouldn't be untried.”

“I'm not.” She said before she could stop herself. Her parent's marriage was a mess, her foster families marriage was downright scary. She didn't want marriage of any kind, she didn't want a man.

His brows arched near burying themselves in his dark bangs, “No?” that at least, was good news.

“Everything I've known about that union ended in disaster Jeb. I just don't want to get involved.”

He remembered what she'd said that first day about not wanting an affair, “So you want to be a spinster.”

“Don't tease me about this.” She said angrily. “I may not be sharing all of my reasons, but they are valid.”

“I'm not teasing. It's the truth and first of all, that's not going to happen. A woman who looks like you will never end up alone.”

“That's my choice.”

He released her hair and sat straight, “not anymore.” He said starting the engine.

“What does that mean?”

“It means—” he said shooting her a look as he swung his arm over the seat to back up, “That my original goal hasn't changed.”

Her eyes guided to his chest where his jacket hung open and the material of his shirt stretched tightly across his pectorals.

Because of that, she couldn't even find it in her to argue. "What are you going to do to Cara?" she heard herself say.

"None of your business." He added while slanting her an amused look knowing why she changed the subject. He saw her looking at him.

"Cara said that Greg doesn't know that you don't want him to see her. So don't assume he knows."

He shifted the vehicle into drive and headed back toward the highway, "And you're telling me this so I won't fire him?" He cast her a glance, "Admirable. However, you don't need to defend her, she can bring down the roof on her own with her temper."

"You are being unfair Jeb. Cara's twenty one."

"She's naïve." He answered tersely, "And don't presume you can tell me how to handle my sister."

He was protective of her and she had to admit that she envied that, but so was Brianne, and Cara really liked this man, "How would you think she would feel after the things you've said to me."

He stopped the vehicle, slammed it in park and turned to her with his gaze menacing, "That's something she won't find out." He said abruptly, "Cara doesn't need to know about my personal life until I make it known."

"That's a double standard." She said lifting her chin despite the fear that started to rise in her from that harsh glare.

"You do not get to dictate to me about my family Brianne." He added angrily, "You don't know us."

She tried not to let her bottom lip tremble but his eyes guided to it so she knew it was, "You're right, I don't know about family Jeb, but Cara is closer to me as anyone has been in my life, and I want her to be happy."

That statement floored him. What did that mean she didn't have anyone else? It was no wonder she was so defensive

with his sister if that was the truth. His eyes studied her for a moment seeing that she was on the verge of tears again. He had been a little abrupt, but that's the way he was with people, even women when it came to his family, but a woman's tears never bothered him as much as Brianne's did, not even Cara's even though it was a close second. He held up his hand, "All right Brianne, I'll take that into consideration. I swear to God if you start crying again, I'll make you walk home."

"I wasn't," she protested.

Of course she was, "First of all, Cara is twenty, not twenty one. She's still my ward and I'm going to protect her and love her until I die. She's also wealthy and if you knew anything about Cara, she'd fall for the first handsome beau that flashed her a smile. Now, until I get Greg checked out completely, there will be no relationship." He tilted his head at her, "Why do you think all of us brothers are still single?"

She shrugged, "Because you play the field." She said before she could stop herself, "Why there's not an ugly one in the bunch of you."

He chuckled and gave her a sly look at the compliment, "No, that's not it. It's because we can't trust a woman not to zero in on our fortunes. A few of us have learned the hard way. Glen was engaged to a woman he thought he loved, until her true intentions came out. He broke it off with her two weeks before the wedding."

"He was?" she couldn't imagine the hurt he'd gone through.

He narrowed his gaze seeing the compassion on her face, "Don't even think about Glen beyond a boss of yours Brianne, or I'll throw you out of the house so fast your head will spin."

"You sound jealous!" she snapped getting tired of him dictating to her.

"I am."

She stared at him in disbelief.

"I told you from the beginning that I wanted you, now if you dare turn your affections on anyone else, I will toss you out on your ear, Cara be damned."

She folded her arms under her breasts and stared straight ahead, "for someone who doesn't want a virgin you sure are demanding."

"I never said I didn't want a virgin, I want you. There's no way in hell that you're going to go through life and not experience a man, Brianne. I'm obliged to introduce you to that."

"Hell will freeze over first." She grumbled ignoring his chuckle as he started the vehicle again.

"Then it'll be cold there soon."

They drove home in silence, her fuming and him with a permanent look of amusement on his face.

CHAPTER FOUR

That night after dinner, Jeb didn't pull any punches when Cara joined them. He told Cara that he was going to fire Greg if she went behind his back and saw him again.

Cara shot an accusing look at Brianne who immediately ducked her head and looked guilty.

"Don't you blame her Cara, you lied to me!" Jeb pounded the surface of the table with his large fist making the silverware rattle.

"You don't trust me!" she shouted back. Now she knew why her brothers hardly said a thing through dinner. At first she thought it was because of their guest that they were being polite and downplayed their normal crudeness, but Jeb's glare told her different. She wasn't sure if he knew about Greg, but she also knew that Brianne said she'd cover for her, so she was confused.

The two glared at one another and Glen's voice broke in

calmly. "The fact that you weren't truthful with us and used Brianne to cover for you is unacceptable."

"I had to. You guys wouldn't let me see him." She sat back in her chair and pouted.

"This just goes to show the thanks we get for allowing you some freedom at that school." Jeb went on, still furious, "I'm limiting your expense accounts—"

"You can't!" she shot forward in her seat.

"It's done Cara." Glen said, "Get your credit cards. All of them."

She stood shot an accusing glance around the table at her four brothers and saw similar expressions on all of their faces. Rem's might have been leaning toward sympathetic but he still didn't budge. She stomped off.

"Don't feel guilty." Gabe told Brianne. He reached over and squeezed her hand that was resting on her lap, "Cara has been indulged and we're all guilty of it. She'll get over it. She's very forgiving."

"Excuse me." She said softly while sliding her hand out from under his and standing up, "I don't feel so well." Four pairs of eyes followed her out of the room.

"Ah hell." Said Jeb letting himself feel guilty over Brianne.

"Regardless JC, you weren't wrong." Rem spoke up. "Cara is indulged as Gabe says. The fact that she used her friend to cover her tracks was deceitful. We didn't raise her that way."

"I forced it out of Brianne." He said still staring at the dining room door she went through.

"Cara will figure that out. She knows you and she knows Brianne is no match for you."

"She defended her too even though she knew it may cost her a job and a friendship with Cara."

Glen looked surprised, "She defended her to *you*?" Jeb

was the most intimidating of all of them, mostly because he was the head of the household and the president of their company. Besides Glen there weren't many people who would stand up to him.

He smiled grimly, "She told me I was being completely unfair to Cara, that she's old enough to make her own decisions. That was after she panicked about losing her as a friend. She said Cara was the closest person to her. She was going to go and pack when I brought her home."

A noise drew their attention as Cara stood inside the door with a shocked expression on her face, "She said that?"

Jeb nodded, "After she gave me hell, she did, yes."

Cara walked up to him and gave him her credit cards, "I'm such a spoiled jerk." She mumbled feeling horrible for the way she'd treated her. Brianne had no place to go and she'd put her in a very awkward position.

"Hey mouse." Said Rem, who jumped up and embraced her, "You know we're overprotective because we love you and you're such a sweetheart. We just don't want anyone to take advantage of you."

She sniffed, "Brianne's a better person than I ever will be." Then she lifted her head and looked at her oldest brother, "Greg's a nice man Jeb."

"We'll see." He said matter of fact.

"Can't you trust my judgment?"

"Cara," Glen said, "Greg's a good worker, he's smart, but he comes from a poor family. We have to be careful."

"Why does it always have to be about money?" she threw up her hands.

"Because that's the way things are. Don't you want someone to love you for you, and not your pocket book?"

"He's not Monique." She knew she shouldn't have said that to Glen about his ex-fiancé because his expression darkened

although his voice remained calm, but everyone heard the control in it to know it wasn't easy. "That remains to be seen. Just because he's a man doesn't make a difference." He answered tersely. Then he got to his feet, "I need a drink." He said leaving without a backward glance.

"Great." She blew a strand of hair out of her face watching Glen leave. She didn't mean to upset him, but she was mad. It was a stupid thing to say and she instantly regretted it. Glen was hurt over Monique and she threw it in his face.

"It's a sore spot with him, he'll get over it." Said Gabe.

"I just seem to be offending everyone." She said solemnly.

Rem put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a brotherly squeeze.

Jeb stood up gave him a warning look for comforting her before he turned his dark intense eyes on Cara, "No more sneaking around." He said waving a finger at her, "I will fire him and then I'll blackball him so no one will hire him." He watched her pinch her lips together so she would say what was on the tip of her tongue. Satisfied that she would listen, he gathered the credit cards and left the room to check on Glen.

Brianne had her suitcase open on her bed and was folding her clothes neatly in it when there was knock on the door. She paused, wondering if she should answer it. After the look of betrayal on Cara's face she couldn't face her. If it was Jeb, it would be suicide to open the door because she couldn't be alone with him without wanting to put her hands all over that perfectly shaped muscular body of his. She ground her teeth together wishing she would quit thinking like that.

"Bree, it's Cara." Came a soft muffled voice through the door.

Brianne knew the tone of that voice, and it wasn't one that was angry. In fact she sounded sorrowful. She released the shirt she was folding and went over to open it. She'd barely got it

ajar when Cara pushed it open the rest of the way and threw her arms around her.

“I’m an ass.” She said.

“No, you’re not. I told.” She answered.

Cara released her, “I shouldn’t have asked you to do that. Jeb is formidable.”

“You got that right.” She said feeling her eyes water. No one else ever showed her as much compassion as Cara did.

“He made me feel two inches tall.” She admitted feeling guiltier at her friend’s defeated expression.

“Well, I could have jumped out of a moving vehicle when he asked me who you were with. I tried Cara, but he’s so hard to stare at and lie. I even forgot the name you gave me to tell him—or Greg’s name for that matter, I called him ‘that man.’”

“No kidding?” Cara almost laughed but then saw the suitcase, “What are you doing?”

“I didn’t think you wanted me here.”

“Over something like that? Bree, I’d never let you go over something silly like me throwing a tantrum. You’re my friend.” She said feeling worse with every passing second. She knew that Bree didn’t have any close family and she acted completely spoiled and treated her badly expecting her to lie to Jeb for her. Cara knew him all her life and she still couldn’t lie to him and she expected her best friend to. She just wanted to see Greg so bad that she only thought of herself.

The ripple effect she created was devastating. All of her brothers were upset with her, she lost her expense accounts, and she’d hurt Glen. Worst of all, she’d put Brianne in a terrible position and out of loyalty to her she tried to do it. She was so lost in Greg’s invitation she neglected to remember that Brianne was frightened of Jeb. It would have been easier to face off a mountain lion. “Please don’t go, I’ll never do that again. None of my brothers blame you at all. They’re all mad at me. I’m

completely ashamed over my behaviour. Besides you keep me grounded and remind me what it's like in the real world."

Brianne brushed her fingers through her hair to get it out of her face and started packing again, "It's not you Cara, I just don't feel like I belong."

"Then tell me what I can do to make you feel like you do." She said trying not to cry. She'll never forgive herself if Brianne left because of something she did.

Brianne gave her a false smile, "having loving brothers like yours would be nice."

"Give them time, they'll love you too, I mean look at Jeb. He was the one I was worried about but he gave me hell over you."

Her brows rose in surprise, "He did?"

Cara saw her expression and just for a moment she wondered if Bree felt something for him. She nodded, "He was right too." She said frowning, "You're the last person I'd want to put in a position like that."

She released a rush of air, "I'm sorry I couldn't lie to him. He's got that look about him that—"

She laughed, "Well, even trying was a feat in itself. I know how Jeb can look on a good day."

"Gosh, he was so mad." She said with widened eyes remembering.

"And you stood up to him? I'm so shocked." Cara said laughing again, "It might have been easier to stand up to a ticked off grizzly bear, I'm impressed."

"He knew even before I said anything. No one is that smart." She said shaking her head.

"Jeb is." She grinned with pride, then frowned, "But—I'm still mad at him."

"He'll come around. Just you wait and see." She was sure of it. Cara always seemed to get what she wanted out of them in

the end because they doted on her so much. She was certain she'd have her credit cards back by the end of the week and probably Greg the week after that.

Cara took Bree's hands in hers, "Now please stay." She stuck her bottom lip out trying to give her the best sulky face she could make.

Brianne rolled her eyes, "Fine, but no more making me stand up to Jeb, he scares the wits out of me when he's mad."

"He'll never hurt you." Cara said quickly knowing that other men did.

"I know that, It's my own hang up, I've got to deal with it." she smiled, "I see the way he is with you. He loves you to death."

"He's my jailer." She laughed bitterly.

"You may think that but he told me."

"He told you that he loved me?" she said with surprise.

"Don't tell me after that display at the dinner table you doubt it? He was very protective."

"No, it's just that he never really said much along those lines. He's always had to be strong and he shows me—you know—with certain looks, the credit cards, letting me go to Boston, but he's never really said it."

"By the sounds of it, he doesn't have to." She said pulling her clothes out of her suitcase wishing she had a fraction of that from someone.

"I did it again didn't I—play the spoiled friend I mean." Cara frowned looking at Bree's saddened expression.

Brianne stopped what she was doing and just stared at her, "I do envy you Cara, but not once have I thought anything negative about you. You mean everything to me."

Cara smiled and hugged her again, "You'll fit in this family just fine Bree, you'll see. My brothers are already half in love with you."

She laughed, "Sure they are."

Jeb was sitting at his desk in the study going over his schedule for tomorrow on his PDA when Cara walked in. He looked up, set the device down, and leaned back in his chair. His expression was etched in stone as he rested his elbows on the arms of the chair and interlaced his fingers. He half expected a fight from her but instead she glanced around almost nervously.

"Where's Glen?"

"He went to the office." He answered studying her expression waiting for another outburst.

"Is he all right?"

"He'll be fine."

"I didn't mean to say that to him." She said slumping her shoulders.

"He knows." She actually looked guilty. Cara was very caring, but she was also spoiled by the four of them and sometimes she did things to get attention, but what she expected Brianne to do was very unlike her. It made Jeb realize how much she did like Greg and although he told Brianne to stay out of it, he did take her defence of his sister into account. He certainly wouldn't like his love life dictated to him, but he had to make sure she wasn't being used.

She stared at him for a moment, "I'm sorry Jeb."

He sighed and stood up holding out his arms, "Come here honey." She ran around the desk and let him hold her, "You're still not getting your credit cards back." He murmured causing her to laugh which was muffled against his chest.

She was on the verge of tears but managed to contain them, "I won't do it again."

"That's good to hear"

She lifted her head and looked up at him, "Do you have a minute or did I interrupt?"

“I always have time for you Cara.” He answered indicating for her to sit down on a nearby sofa.

She sat and folded her hands on her lap while Jeb sat beside her and gave her his full attention while leaning back and putting his arm across the back of the couch. Brianne was right, he did love her. There was nothing less than adoration in those intelligent eyes of his. It made her feel even guiltier. She had lied to all of them. Somehow she’d make this up to them, especially Bree. “Why is Brianne at Brenda’s desk?” His expression became guarded.

“Because you said you wanted her protected, that she was fragile.”

“Is that all?”

“Of course it is.” He lied straight-faced. There was no way in hell that he was going to tell his sister that he wanted her best friend beneath him, naked and writhing with those long legs wrapped around his hips while he buried himself in her over and over again.

“It’s just such a hard routine to learn.”

“Vi’s helping.”

“You’re not an easy man to work for.”

“Hush up imp.” He teased causing her to grin.

“You won’t be hard on her will you?” she said looking up at him with concern in her big blue eyes.

Hell he’d just like to be on her, hard or soft, it didn’t matter. “No, I’ll be nice.” She made a face, “I can be, you know.” He added with a chuckle. “It just takes some effort.”

“Thanks Jeb. I appreciate you looking out for her, but could you please ease up on your alpha male qualities around her. It’s intimidating.”

He arched his brows, “Alpha male?”

She waved a hand in front of him, “Jeb, you can be very scary to people who don’t know you.”

“That’s their problem.”

She laughed, “That’s what I mean.”

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded. “All right, I’ll do my best not to club her over the head and haul her off by her hair.” He said letting a smile tug at his lips.

She stood up and hugged him again, “Thanks Jeb, you’re the best.”

“Yeah, you’d better remember that.” He said in mock anger before she left the room laughing.

His tendencies were more of a selfish nature where Brianne was concerned, but he took Cara’s gratitude anyway. They were helping each other out. He wanted her, and she needed to be protected. He’d protect her from any other man, that was a guarantee. That included his lusty younger brothers.

He stood up and stretched wincing. Maybe he shouldn’t have gone to the job site today. His leg was killing him. Absently he reached down and rubbed it while walked over and turned out the lights before he limped up the stairs to his room on the second floor.

He had to hand it to Cara, she was at least compassionate enough to mend her mistakes. Glen was upset, but he knew that Cara said that in anger. They all had that dynamite temper when provoked, even Glen. He’d only seen it once when his fiancé’s intentions were made known. He practically threw her out of the house. No one asked him what had happened, but he did tell them that she was a gold digger and that was the end of it. Glen’s emotions ran deep, and it had hurt him deeply. He really loved her. Jeb knew not to let anyone that close because it took Glen several years to get over her and start dating again, but he was cautious and never let anyone get to close despite how easy going he was.

He paused by Brianne’s door and listened for any noise. Hearing none, he continued on down to his room and got

undressed. He hesitated at pulling off his boxers with his thumbs in the waistband and cast a glance at the closed door. If she started screaming again, he should at least be partially dressed.

After a moment he pulled them off and stepped out of them. If she was going to start hollering in the middle of the night in his house, he wasn't going to do anything more to accommodate her. This was the way he was, and be damned if he was going to change. He wasn't ashamed of his body and he liked sleeping naked.

As it was, he didn't get a stitch of clothing on.

He was jolted awake by her screams and bolted out of the bed down the hall half asleep. It wasn't until he felt her cool blankets on his naked ass when he sat down that he realized he was stark naked, but by then he had the light on and had her shaken awake.

"Ah hell." He said watching her wide eyes go down the length of him and slap a hand over her mouth to cover a loud gasp.

"Jeb!" she whispered harshly, "You're naked!"

"Don't look then." He said completely unmoved, "It's my damn house, you started screeching and woke me out of a deep sleep. How the hell am I going to remember to get dressed when it sounds like you're being murdered?"

She shook her head, "Put some clothes on." She said pushing at his shoulders.

He gave her a sloppy smile, "Or what?"

"My God, I can see every inch of you."

She had *no* idea how that sounded. "Brianne, that is something you shouldn't say to a man."

Blushing, she turned her head.

"I'm sure you've seen a naked man before. Maybe not in person, but there's magazines and movies—"

“Not like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you.”

“What the hell is the difference?” he said abruptly getting more and more annoyed. The innocent little responses that she let off were quite frankly, turning him on.

This time she slowly brought her eyes back to his. It was with tremendous difficulty after what she’d seen but he had to know, “It’s—well, you’re just so beautiful,” she said in a barely audible whisper.

That wasn’t the response he expected. If she wasn’t embarrassed enough before, she certainly was now with his body’s instant heated reaction to that sultry confession, “Baby, you’d better go and lock yourself in the bathroom right now.” He growled.

It took a minute for that to sink in, then her eyes widened and she jumped out of bed quicker than she could blink in a flurry of flying blankets and raced to the bathroom slamming and locking the door behind her.

If he wasn’t so damn turned on he might have found that funny. Instead he looked down at his full solid erection and swore. Then he got up and left her room. If she was going to have another nightmare, she’ll have to scream through it because he’d be sleeping on his back tonight because of her. It was that or drill a hole in the bloody mattress because this wasn’t going to go away for awhile.

The next morning, the third cup of coffee couldn’t take away his foul mood, and when Brianne came into the Dining room for breakfast with Cara, his mood darkened to black.

“Didn’t you sleep well Jeb?” Cara asked sitting down and filling her plate from one of the many platters Lu left. She didn’t see Jeb’s eyes focus on Bree.

“Not entirely, no.”

Brianne flushed and averted her gaze taking the seat beside Cara.

“Do we have time to eat?” Cara said looking at her brother again. It looked as if he was waiting a while.

He nodded, “Glen’s taking you today. I have some things to do at the job site.”

She became worried, “Can’t Rem and Gabe handle it, you’ve been limp—“ she stopped in mid-sentence recognizing the fierce look he gave her. It was then she remembered that Bree was sitting next to her. Jeb hardly talked about his injury around them, and she’d just brought it up in front of their houseguest. She gave him an apologetic look before glancing at Bree who didn’t seem to notice. She seemed awfully quiet this morning, even when she went to get her from her room. She quickly changed the subject, “Jeb, since you took my charge cards away, Bree and I need gowns for the fireman’s ball this weekend.”

That made Brianne bring her head up and look between the two. She opened her mouth to protest but Jeb cut her off.

“I’ll take you after work.” He gave Brianne a sinful smile loaded with a dare, “I don’t mind. After all clothing is important.” He said with his eyes glittering.

He was making a reference to last night. She flushed as his eyes darkened daring her to say a word about not accepting a gown or he’d say something in front of Cara about the night before. She had hardly slept after he left because she couldn’t get the image of his gorgeous naked body out of her mind. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him anywhere, and he was so beautifully proportioned. A dark mat of hair covered his chest, formed a vee between his pectorals and gave way to a hard muscular washboard stomach where a dark line of hair swirled around his navel and travelled lower to what made him completely masculine. She blushed further thinking that he *definitely* was all man. From pictures and movies that she’d

seen, he was well endowed and proud of it, because he wasn't the least bit embarrassed, even when she saw his reaction to her comment. She never knew it could happen that quickly and it frankly scared her to death.

This morning it was obvious he was in a mood, and she'd wondered if it was because of the night before. She had read somewhere that men get cranky if they don't get release. Just because she was a virgin didn't mean that she wasn't curious. She did read a few books on the subject and after seeing him her curiosity expounded. First of all, how was that supposed to fit in a woman? She was positive that she wasn't built to accommodate him, but then again, what did she know. Cara tapped her foot under the table with her own and it was then that she realized that she was staring at Jeb again. She averted her gaze to her friend to see one of her delicate blonde brows raise in question. Obviously Jeb wasn't the only Durant gifted with that talent. If it wasn't obvious before how she felt about him to Cara, it certainly was now.

Thankfully Glen walked in at that moment and asked them if they were ready. Cara jumped up and gave him a hug. "I'm sorry." She murmured.

He bent down and kissed the top of her head, telling her not to worry about it. Meanwhile Jeb still had his eyes on Brianne and he was definitely grinning now. He knew she was thinking about last night and how she reacted to him. *Not much longer*, he thought, *and you're mine honey.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Brianne spent the better part of the day being tutored by Vi. The woman was amazing. Not once did she show impatience or frustration at her slow learning. In fact, she told her that she was catching on quick despite her lack of experience.

Lack everywhere, she said to herself remembering Jeb's naked body. Not once had she been able to get that out of her mind that day. It was torture. Was this the way everyone felt when they were attracted to someone? Did thoughts consume them like this? She sorely wished she had someone to talk to, because she felt so stupid about it. She certainly couldn't tell Cara that she'd seen her brother naked, and the feelings that he'd aroused in her.

Just then Cara came rushing down the hall, "Brianne, Jeb's waiting in the garage for us."

"For us?"

"Our gowns." She reminded her while glowing. "Remember?"

"Oh," she lifted her wrist and glanced at her watch. It was ten after five. By rights she should have quit ten minutes ago. However Vi was still here.

"I'm disgustingly devoted to the boys." Vi said seeing her expression. "I'll leave in a few minutes, you go shopping."

Bree smiled at the older woman, "If you're sure." It made sense why they kept her. If she had a mother, she'd want her to be just like Violet.

Once in the elevator and they were alone Bree reminded Cara how she felt about her brother buying her a gown.

"Look Bree, I spoke to Jeb and he worked it out already so don't worry about it."

"How?"

"I don't know. He'll tell you." She said not understanding the worry that crossed her friend's expression.

Brianne never said another word because she was too busy worrying about how Jeb 'worked it out'. She refused to be beholden to anyone especially a man and if he expected her to perform for him buying her a gown she would show up in rags.

Cara talked her ear off all the way to the garage and

Brianne was grateful. It kept her occupied from thinking about Jeb, his body, and her reaction to him.

“I’m hoping that Jeb will let me go with Greg.” Cara continued as they made their way through the parking garage to the land rover. Jeb was standing beside it talking on the phone. “Do you think he’ll give in?” Cara said casting a sideways glance at Brianne.

“I don’t know.” She gave her friend a supportive smile, “He does love you. Maybe if you approach—”

“Can you ask?” she interrupted.

She stopped, “What?” Brianne said in a shocked whisper while looking over at Jeb to see if he watched them, but he had turned away while deep in conversation. “Why would you think he’d listen to me? Look what happened yesterday.” She reminded her while resisting the urge to cringe.

“Bree, it’s not like that. He has some respect for you and I’m not asking you to lie at all. Just ask the question. If I ask it’ll be a definitive ‘no’. Besides I saw how you looked at him this morning. You’re not that scared of him.” Cara said with a smile in her eyes.

Brianne blushed furiously, “Cara—”

She squeezed her friend’s hand, “—it’s okay Bree, I’m not upset—not at all!” she reassured, “Jeb’s a hard man, we all know that, but he said that you stood up to him. I know for a fact that he admires you for it.”

“How could you know that?” She said with surprise. As far as she was concerned he was doing his best to intimidate the hell out of her, besides trying to get her in bed.

“He defended you yesterday.” She took a deep breath, “If you know my oldest brother at all, he usually doesn’t admire many people beyond family. In fact, I’ve never heard of him stick up for anyone like he did for you.”

“Really?” that small statement made her feel alive more

than she thought it could.

"It's true. I'm just thinking that if you asked him, he might listen. He certainly won't listen to me."

"Gosh, I don't know." She said casting him another glance, "He frightens me."

"He'd frighten any sane person to moving to another country when he's mad, but you're still here and I know he probably tore the hide from your bones." She said apologetically.

"I'm not upset with you, so quit that." Bree said looking at her guilty expression, "I understand why you asked me to do that after witnessing his ire." She pinched her lips together casting an unsure look in his direction, "I'll try, but if he starts to get angry, I'm not doing that again."

"He won't get angry at you. He felt bad about dragging the confession out of you yesterday. Rem told me he did."

She was even more surprised to hear that, "He felt bad?"

"He does have a soft heart, even though it's encased in stone." She added with a laugh.

"Today Cara." Came Jeb's impatient voice as he hung up the phone.

"Coming." She called happily while taking Brianne's arm and led her to the vehicle.

Again Jeb opened the passenger door for Brianne and Cara got in behind her. One thing was certain, the brothers were gentlemen when they needed to be. She didn't think she opened a vehicle door since she met them.

Jeb got in behind the wheel and Cara made an exasperated sound. He turned around, "What is it?"

"I forgot my purse—" she said reaching for the door handle, "—I'll be back in a jiff."

Before either one of them could say anything she was out of the vehicle heading back toward the entrance of the building.

"Okay, out with it." Said Jeb centering his gaze on

Brianne, "What's she want?"

"Oh for Gosh sakes!" she blurted, "She planned this whole thing."

"Of course she did. Now what does she want you to ask me for her. I already told her she's not getting her credit cards back."

"You can't get mad." She said hesitantly casting him a wary glance.

He clenched his jaw, "Bree, I'm already irritable." He said using the nickname Cara gave her.

"fine, she wants to know if Greg can come to that ball with us—"

"No."

"Jeb—"

It took him a moment to still his temper. It wasn't Brianne's fault that Cara was relentless where this man was concerned, "I'm not paying five hundred bucks a plate for a man that wants to get in my sister's pants."

She just stared at him, "For crying out loud Jeb, when you put it that way—"

"So you see then." He said as if he was discussing the weather.

"No, I don't." Where she found it in her to argue with the man, she never knew, but there it was. "What if he really likes her?"

"And I take it this is from your extensive experience with men?" he cocked an arrogant brow, "I mean, if I take into account last night, I think I'm the only one you've seen naked."

She released a frustrated breath and waved her arm while blushing furiously, "Fine then, I don't care. Both of you are as stubborn as sin."

"Sleep with me." He said suddenly with a sensual smile

Brianne's jaw fell and she was just about to give him hell

just as Cara hopped back in the Rover. “Hi!” then she looked back and forth at the two, from Bree’s flushed cheeks to her brother’s amused expression, “What?”

Jeb burst into laughter and started the vehicle.

Brianne realized that he’d seen her coming and to her own complete surprise found herself laughing right along with him. So much for Cara saying he didn’t have a sense of humour.

Cara sat back in her seat and smiled at the both of them. The thing was Cara didn’t realize that laughing was rare for Jeb, and Jeb didn’t know the same thing about Brianne. It was really wonderful to see that they made each other laugh. She knew that she wasn’t wrong about Jeb having a soft spot for her friend, even if Bree didn’t know.

Twenty minutes later, Jeb pulled up in front of an expensive looking boutique and Brianne looked out the window with reluctance knowing that whatever she bought in there, it would take her a year to pay Jeb back.

“Come on Bree.” Cara said reaching for the door.

Brianne turned in her seat and looked at Cara, “I can’t go in there.” She said embarrassed.

“Of course you can.” She said not understanding.

She cast a look at Jeb before settling her eyes back on her friend, “Cara I can’t afford anything in there.”

“I already told you—“

“Cara go in the store, Brianne will be in shortly.” Jeb interrupted.

Cara nodded, spared him a glance and got out of the vehicle.

Jeb waited until she went through the doors before he turned to Cara, “We built her house.”

“What?”

“The woman who owns the boutique. That’s why I came here. I called her earlier and told her you were on a budget, she

said she'd make you a good deal and take payments."

"You did that for me?" she said completely stunned.

"Go get a gown." His eyes went down her front, "Make it green, like your eyes. That way I know you're thankful."

She didn't know what to say. No one had gone out of their way like that for her. She had to earn her own way tooth and nail to get where she was. A wash of emotion went through her that she never experienced before, and it was the first time she felt the urge to hug someone of the opposite sex. He could have held her indebt to him, but instead he gave her a way out.

He saw her expression and shook his head, "Jesus, you're not going to cry are you?" he said gruffly.

She pursed her lips into a smile and shook her head to try and hold back the tears.

"Thank God, because I've had all about I can take of your tears, now go." He said abruptly.

She nodded and got out of the vehicle not being able to find the words to thank him.

Jeb watched her go into the shop. He knew she was too proud to explain her predicament to Cara, and Cara, whose intentions were genuine, never had to struggle in her life for anything so she didn't understand Brianne's issue with accepting an expensive gown from her brother.

He got out of the vehicle and walked around to the front to lean against the side panel and wait. Ladies shops weren't his style and he didn't mind waiting. It was a nice sunny day.

Just then an expensive white sedan drew up in front of his vehicle and a nice looking man about Gabe's age got out, but that's not what drew his attention. It was the woman he helped out of the passenger side.

Monique.

Jeb stood straight and watched the dark haired woman. She hadn't changed much. If anything she seemed to have filled

out a little more and it suited her. Jeb always thought she was a little on the slender side. It seemed like yesterday when she was nearly a part of their family. Glen didn't talk about it, not once, since that day. None of them knew what had really happened, and out of respect, no one asked.

She stilled when she saw him, "Hello JC." She said politely overcoming her momentary shock.

"Monique." He answered with a nod. Only for a second he saw some flash of deep sorrow flash in her dark brown eyes then a question.

"H-how is everyone?"

"All pains in the ass." He answered with a smile.

She gave him a small unsure one and nodded.

"Glen's fine too." He added knowing what she meant.

"Thank you." She said genuinely before turning to the man with her, "this is John Cutter. He's my—well—"

"I'm her fiancé." He said pleasantly while putting his arm around Monique's waist protectively.

Jeb glanced at the expensive car and nodded. Obviously Monique found money after all. "I heard about your father. My condolences." He was a lawyer, and died of a heart attack three days ago. As far as lawyers went, he wasn't wealthy at all, which made them all know that he wasn't very good at his job. He also seemed miserable most times when they'd met him, but he seemed respectful enough to them. Glen seemed a little irritable lately and maybe it was because he knew Monique would come back to town for the funeral and he was worried about seeing her. It actually surprised him that Cara's words hurt him the night before, because it just revealed how much he still let that incident bother him.

Just then the door opened and a little girl around four, climbed out, "Mommy, can you get me an ice cream."

Jeb's eyes riveted on the little girl who had his identical

eyes, more importantly, Glen's. She had long black hair and was quite pretty. Then he gave Monique a questioning look.

John cleared his throat, "Come on honey, I'll take you." He answered her seeming to understand that the two needed to talk. He cast a glance at the two of them before he went to the little girl and took her hand.

"Thanks." Monique said.

"No problem. Are you going to be okay?"

"I will." She said truthfully.

John nodded seeming satisfied with her response, and gave Jeb another look before he walked off down the sidewalk.

Jeb saw the concern in the man's eyes and he felt his ire rise. He wouldn't ever lay a hand on Monique or any woman for that matter. Until Glen found out her true intentions, he really liked her. He thought that she genuinely cared for him.

Monique shifted uncomfortably, "Please don't say anything."

"Glen doesn't know." If he did there was no way in hell that little girl wouldn't be under their roof now. Glen loved children. They all did.

She shook her head.

"I'm not keeping that promise Monique. It's not right. Glen has a right to know he's a father." He chastised her. "I don't blame him if he gets angry. I would be fit to kill."

She swallowed thickly, "He didn't want me. I—I was humiliated—" she stopped to try and control the tears that threatened to fall. Her watery brown eyes guided past him for a moment at nothing in particular. She took a deep breath when she knew she could continue and looked at him again, "He said some horrible things. It was so hard and—"

Jeb held up his hand, "Before you say anything, you should know that Glen hasn't spoken about that day to any of us."

Her eyes widened, “No one?”

“Maybe our priest, but it isn’t my business to pry into my brother’s life.” He didn’t miss the quiver of her chin a moment ago when he mention Glen and he wondered if she really did care about him back then, “Look, where are you staying?”

“At the house, until things get settled. John has to go back to work in a few days.”

“Is he good to you?” It shouldn’t have concerned him, but it did. She looked incredibly vulnerable.

“He is.”

She looked so sad, thought Jeb, but then again she did lose her father, “I’ll talk to Glen. He’ll get a hold of you after John is gone.”

“He’ll want custody.” She said unable to keep the tears from falling, “I can’t lose her. She’s everything to me. She’s the only thing I have of his.” She reached up and wiped them away with the heel of her hand.

“Why didn’t you think about that years ago?” that statement was so full of emotion that Jeb felt it all the way through him, *She’s the only thing I have of his.*

She looked up at the sky for a moment trying to compose herself again, “God, he was so mad. I was frightened. I never knew he had that type of anger in him. You’d think after five years I’d be able to get over him.”

That’s what happens when you feel betrayed, he thought. Glen put his heart on the line and it got stepped on. However, something didn’t seem right about all of this. Monique looked broken in a way. Maybe it was because her father died, but maybe it wasn’t. If she was gold digging, she’d be bitter, but she sincerely wanted to know how he was. He wasn’t going to harass her about the ‘whys’. He’d leave that to his brother.

“I’m not going to sugar coat it Monique, he will be angry.” He dug in his inside pocket and pulled out a pen and one of his

business cards scribbling on the back of it, “that’s my personal mobile number. If you feel fearful just call me, I’ll come and maybe I can keep him civil, but I won’t get between you two. There are some things that need to be worked out.”

“Yes, there is.” She agreed taking the card with a trembling hand and turning away. Then she paused and looked at him, “It was never about the money.”

“Monique.” Jeb said causing her to pause, but she didn’t turn around, “What’s her name?”

“Christine.” She answered before she walked away with her head held high fighting the tears.

Jeb watched her thinking emotions don’t run that deep unless there was something genuine there. Monique was young and naïve—like Brianne. Even though he was having her checked out, that display in the vehicle moments ago, told him she wouldn’t ever use Cara. She was embarrassed about being put in the situation and not once had she accepted charity from any of them. She was also willing to work for her pay check and her room and board.

He thought that Monique wasn’t much different. She was working at the library when Glen discovered her. She was from a middle class family and was one of the few people that could make Glen laugh. He always had a problem with the gold digging label that Glen slapped on her, but it would take something short of a miracle to get him to believe anything dirty on a girl he was in love with. There would have to be definitive proof. Then there was that little girl. She had named her after their mother. Something definitely wasn’t right about this.

Damn, he wished he had a smoke!

He glanced toward the shop the girls went into wondering if Cara saw Monique. Like the rest of them, she liked her too even though she was only fifteen at the time. She must not have, because she’d be out there half dressed if need be. When Glen

broke off the engagement and cancelled the wedding Monique left town several days later and no one heard from her, not even her closest friends. Was she that devastated, or that embarrassed that she'd been caught?

After a moment Jeb shook his head. It wasn't his business. It was Glens', but he would make sure that the meeting was fair.

It wasn't too long after that the women came out smiling from ear to ear. Cara hopped in the back and Jeb, as usual, opened the door for Brianne, "Is it low cut?" he said in her ear as she walked by him causing her to inhale audibly, but she never said anything. She didn't even look at him as she got in the vehicle. He shut the door chuckling and walked around the front of the vehicle getting behind the wheel. "Any more stops mouse?"

"No," she said smiling at him as he turned to look at her over his shoulder, "I'm very happy thanks."

"How much did it cost me?"

She shrugged and grinned.

He released a breath of frustration, straightened in the seat and started the vehicle, "That's a thousand dollar smile." He said without looking at either one of them.

"Not quite." Came the voice behind him not the least bit bothered by the tone of disapproval.

Brianne never said anything. How he knew what the dress had cost surprised her. It was a few dollars shy of that. Hers was considerably less. The woman was so kind and gave it to her for a few hundred dollars saying it was last year fashion. For some reason she knew that wasn't the truth and thanked her repeatedly.

"We weren't all born to money." She whispered to her when Cara went back in the change room, "Don't worry about it." She gave her a smile and patted her hand.

Brianne didn't realize that there were such kind people in the world until she met Cara and her brothers, now this woman.

She cast a glance at Jeb who was concentrating on the road and was thankful he didn't ask her the same question. She didn't want to tell him what it cost. Suddenly he smiled, and flicked her a quick glance before returning his attention to the road. She quickly turned her head away to look out the window at the passing landscape. How he always knew when she was looking at him, just flabbergasted her. It was even worse because that smile seemed to get more and more sinful every time he used it. Not only that, her heart had a mind of its own when he did it by trying to beat rapidly out of her chest every time.

Once at the house, Jeb sought out Glen and found him in the Den going over the latest changes to the plans of the Condo project. He looked up and nodded.

"I need to talk to you."

"All right." He straightened and gave his brother an odd look seeing his concerned expression, "Do I need to break out the scotch?"

"That depends on you. Lu will probably chastise you until next Sunday if you have drink before supper, but then again you could probably use it."

"I could?"

Jeb nodded.

"That doesn't sound good." He said now giving him his full attention, "What's up JC?"

"I ran into Monique." He answered seeing Glen's eyes darken.

"It has nothing to do with me anymore." Glen said abruptly turning back to the plans on the drafting table.

"Glen, you need to listen."

Glen didn't look at him. Instead he reached into the inside pocket of his suit to pull out an envelope tossing it on the

drafting table. "That came in the mail last Wednesday."

Jeb walked over and picked it up. It was from a lawyer. "What is this?"

"Read it." He said straightening and putting his hands in the pockets of his dark navy slacks.

Jeb pulled out the letter and scanned over it. It was a request for Glen to come to the reading of Monique's father's will. "What is this about?"

"I don't have a clue, but the old man died three days ago and this was sent to me last week. He must've known he was going to die."

"It can't be about money, old man Sinclair didn't have much. He wasn't a very good lawyer, and mostly did tax work."

"I'm not going anyway." He said, "I've closed that part of my life a long time ago."

Jeb watched his brother turn and begin working on the plans again. "Who told you that Monique was after your money?"

Glen paused but didn't look at him, "Why does it matter now?"

"If I know one thing Glen, it would have to be someone who knew Monique well enough that you would listen. I'm guessing it was her father because you loved that girl too much to listen to gossip."

"No one said you were stupid Jeb, drop it." He scowled.

He shook the envelope in front of him, "Maybe the old man has something to say."

Glen stood straight again, "Like I said, what does it matter?"

"She's engaged." Jeb added watching his brother's expression carefully.

"Ah hell." He released a breath of air. Then after an extended silence he finally spoke, "I was pretty cruel to her." He

reached up and ran a hand through his neatly combed hair. "I called her a whore among other things I'd not repeat." He turned and went to the liquor cabinet, "Did you want a shot?"

"Sure, I'll have one with you." Jeb answered, knowing his brother seemed to need someone to share a drink with at that moment.

"Sinclair said she was only looking for a way out and I was the third guy to fall for that sweet innocent look of hers." Glen continued while pouring them both a drink. "She swore on her mother's grave that she loved me." He turned and gave Jeb a glass.

"What did you think?"

"I wanted to believe her." He shrugged, "Maybe I was young and stupid and head over heels for this girl and I had cold feet about the wedding—her own father told me that and for some reason I didn't question it. Things were so perfect between us, almost too perfect. So I started to doubt it. As for the information, I know I would of I contested it if it was anyone else. He said she watched her mother die broken and knew she could be so much more because she was pretty. He said her mother consistently told her to marry a rich man so she could have all of the things she wanted even if she didn't love the man. He told me that Monique told him herself that was why she was marrying me."

"Maybe he had his reasons for saying those things. What if it wasn't true."

"If I'd listen to her maybe I could have been able to tell—hell you should have seen the look on her face when I said those things to her, she was devastated." He lifted the glass and swallowed the contents. "The more innocent she looked the more I thought she was duping me."

Jeb took a drink of his own. He didn't say anything. It had been over four years and Glen never talked about that day, so

he wasn't going to interrupt him.

"I reflect back often and wonder if I'd been wrong. Not one day goes by that I don't see her face and the hurt in it when I exploded on her."

"What did she say?"

"She denied everything," his expression became pained, "—told me she loved me—she begged me Jeb, she even got down on her knees in front of me swearing that it was a lie and she loved me." He turned and went to pour himself another drink and spoke without turning around, "I called her a lying bitch, grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the house. Hell, I was so hurt. She left town two days later. No one knew where she went. Not even her father. After I came to my senses, I wanted to talk to her, but I couldn't find her. I even hired several detective agencies, but for some reason she didn't want to be found."

That was bad. No wonder Glen didn't talk about it, and no wonder Monique was still upset over the incident. Glen didn't have a violent bone in his body so for him to do that must've shown how deeply he was hurt. As for her not wanting to be found, it probably had something to do with the precious package she was carrying.

"So much time has passed. Even if she's well, I don't want to know. It's like twisting a knife in my gut thinking about that day."

"Do you still believe what her father said?"

"Hell, I don't know. There are times I wonder—he was a bit of a drinker you know?"

"No I didn't."

"It sort of made me think that maybe she did want out of his house and I was the patsy. She never talked about it, but he had that look about him."

Jeb nodded remembering the way he looked.

"Did you meet Monique's fiancé?" Glen asked.

He nodded, "The guy looks nice enough." He said remembering the protectiveness he showed her.

"I take it he has money."

"He looks like he does."

"Well, it looks like she got her wish then."

"She was in tears when I saw her Glen."

He shrugged a shoulder and swallowed the contents of the glass again while turning away from him. "Tell Lu I'll be missing you."

Translation: this discussion is over, "Sure." Jeb said finishing the contents of his own glass before leaving the den. Glen had thought he burned that bridge, but if he saw Monique and how she looked at the mention of his name, he might reconsider. It was true she was engaged but shouldn't she be happy? What he saw told him she was far from it.

He didn't mention his daughter, but he would. This just wasn't the time. If he told him, he knew that Glen's feet wouldn't touch the ground as he left to go over to the Sinclair's to confront her. Monique was vulnerable being home again and after what Glen had told him, she needed some time to prepare for this meeting he intended on putting together. It was only Wednesday and the funeral was Saturday. He would tell him after her fiancé left so there wasn't any interference.

CHAPTER SIX

After supper Cara insisted on teaching Brianne how to ride a horse.

Brianne couldn't believe the patience Cara was giving her as she sat nervously on top of the horse she called Honey.

"Don't be nervous Bree, she's a good sound mare."

"I can't help it, the ground seems so far away." She said looking down wearily.

“It’s not as far as you think. The height is deceiving.”

“Do these things come with a seatbelt?”

Cara burst into laughter making the horse prick up her ears.

“Stop it, you’re scaring her.” Bree said wide-eyed.

Cara waved a hand, “she’s what we call thunder proof. Nothing can scare her.”

“I’m scared.”

“Horses smell fear, like bees, so be calm.” She added.

“Oh then I’m in so much trouble.”

“She’s very safe. Trust me. Just stay put and I’ll go get my horse. We’ll ride around the corral for a bit until you feel comfortable.”

“Please just hurry,” Bree said not taking her eyes off the horse in case it decided to sprout wings and take off. She tried not to breathe when Cara disappeared inside the stable. How she let her talk her into this, she’ll never know. This was very scary and she realized it wasn’t as wonderful as she thought it would be. “We’re going to be friends, aren’t we Honey?” she spoke nervously to the horse whose ears flipped back like she was listening to her.

“For God’s sake woman, you act like you’re about to be murdered.”

Jeb’s voice did nothing for her, she was still too frightened to move, “Shush.” She said not taking her eyes off the horse’s head. The creature’s ears pricked up again. “She’ll get nervous.”

“The only way she’s going to get nervous is if you act the way you are now. You’re as stiff as a board.”

She finally looked at him, “I can’t help it.” Then Honey shifted and she gasped gripping the front of the saddle with striking speed.

“Jesus.” He said shaking his head and approaching her.

“You’re as skittish as a virgin in a whorehouse. Let go.”

She glared down at him at that comment, “Just go away.”

He ignored her, “Brienne. Let go of the saddle and hold the reins.” He reached up and gripped the leather straps that she dropped on the horse’s neck.

“The what?”

“Oh for crying out loud, move your foot out of the stirrup.” He said with obvious impatience.

That she actually understood and took her foot out hoping he would help her down. However, that isn’t what happened. Not three seconds later he stuck his foot in it, placed a hand on either side of her gripping both ends of the saddle she was in, and swung his leg over the back of the horse like he was born to it. Bree squeaked and stiffened again as the horse shifted to accommodate the extra weight while he settled behind her. “Oh Gosh, get off.”

“I’m trying.” He chuckled not able to help himself causing her to gasp indignantly. “Now relax.” He placed his hands on her hips, “You’re too stiff, relax your pelvis.”

How could she possibly. His chest was warming her back at the moment and she was heating up with every passing second, “I want to get off.”

“Nonsense. You are not staying here all summer and not learning how to ride. Besides it keeps you in shape, now relax or I’m going to start putting my hands elsewhere because the way you’re leaning back against me as stiff as you are is incredibly tempting.”

She shot straight not even realizing she was doing that.

“Good, now take the reins like this.” He showed her with his own hands before handing them to her, “always think that there’s a raw unbroken egg in the horse’s mouth when you use them. That way you won’t pull to hard.” He reached over and covered one of her hands with his and gave a gentle pull causing

Honey to turn in that direction then stop.

“That’s amazing!” she said in awe.

Jeb grinned, “Now on all those big cowboy shows you see them heel the horse to death to make them go, you don’t need to do that. It’s a sensitive area, just touch both of your heels to the horse and gently pull on the rein to turn her and she’ll move forward in that direction.”

Brianne did just that and couldn’t believe that the horse just started walking. She was in complete awe. It felt weird to not use your own feet and the horse shifted when it walked causing her to find her own balance.

“Keep your back straight, tighten your knees a little and relax your hips.” He said deeply behind her.

Again she obeyed starting to feel a little more comfortable.

“now do you see how natural the balance comes to you?”

“Yes, I don’t feel like I’m going to topple off of her.”

“See, you’re a natural, we’ll have you racing across the land in no time.”

She gave him a disapproving look over her shoulder, “No more virgin jokes.”

He grinned down at her and circled his arms around her waist while bending his head and inhaling her scent deeply, “Did I ever tell you that you smell like roses.” He said huskily in her ear.

“Jeb—“ she breathed closing her eyes completely forgetting about the massive creature under her.

“My mother used to grow roses, it’s one of those scents that gets ingrained in you.”

Why did he have to be so darn sensual? She had enough trouble resisting him without his sexual connotations. “Stop.” She breathed and it was very unconvincing.

His hands slid down her hips and he ran his large palms

over the tops of her thighs, "I wonder," he continued in the same deep voice, "If you smell like that all over."

Her head fell back against him.

"Is it shampoo or body wash?"

"—body wash—" she said in a barely audible whisper.

"Oh yum." He said grazing his lips over her cheek. "I bet you taste like roses too."

"Cara—" she remembered.

"Is probably trying to figure out how to get the saddle on her horse, because she's too little and the groomsman left on a break when I came down here, I passed him."

"She could see—"

"No, she can't." he answered in the same tone. "No one can."

Brianne opened her eyes to see that they were around the side of the building and no one else was in sight. He was good. She'd forgotten about the horse and he was able to manoeuvre them out of sight while he was in the process of seducing her. No one could be that talented, could they?

His hands slid back up her waist and circled under her breasts, "You have no idea the visions going through my head right now."

"Please don't share them." She couldn't handle it. He was driving her crazy. Somehow she managed to lean back against him again and was savouring the feel of his hard body against hers.

"And corrupt your pure mind?" He chuckled softly, "Never. I'd rather take the time to teach you."

She shut her eyes again.

"Every time I touch you, there's something more sinful about you that sets me on fire." His mouth brushed down the curve of her neck.

He wasn't the only one. Brianne was tingling from head

to toe and with it came a wave of heat that she felt all the way through to her bones. Absently, her hands reached up behind her so she could entangle her fingers in his hair. In the process his Stetson got knocked off his head and landed on the ground, but neither one of them noticed, especially when Jeb turned to nibble her earlobe.

“You have beautiful breasts,” Jeb said thickly into her ear with that deep timbre he possessed. He had the advantage of her position of looking down the v-neck of her t-shirt, “I’m aching to touch them.”

“No.” she wasn’t sure how she managed to protest because she started to feel as though her body wasn’t her own anymore.

Jeb felt himself grinning, “Like I said before. You have a hell of a way to say yes.” His hands moved upward to graze the area under her breasts with his thumbs barely skimming over the underside of them.

“Oh lord!” she turned her face toward him and buried it in his neck.

“You feel that, don’t you? That hot static between us isn’t normal—“ he lifted his head suddenly and released a rough sound.

“What?” she said still dazed.

“Cara.”

That seemed to have brought her out of it. She shot forward in the saddle causing the horse to shift and her to grip the saddle again.

“Brianne, relax.”

“Look at what we were doing. How could you ask me to relax?” she shot at him feeling more embarrassed at her behaviour. “You need to get off.”

“I will in a minute, I’m not done with the lesson.” He paused while grinning sinfully, “And what we were *doing*, was

nothing to be embarrassed about.”

She was sure he wasn’t talking about the riding lesson. “Cara’s my friend.” She said guiltily. “How do you think it makes me feel that I’m throwing myself at her brother like a harlot.”

He chuckled, “Harlot? Brianne, you are a very sexy woman. A man can’t help but want to put his hands on you. You just need to learn to enjoy it.”

“I can’t Jeb, I really can’t.”

“Now that we’re on the subject—“ he said ignoring what she’d just said, “You are going to the dance as my date, not anyone else’s.”

She flipped him a shocked look, “What—how?”

“I talked to Cara earlier in the week about this. It’ll keep the predators away from you.”

Her gaze narrowed, “You mean less competition.” To her surprise he grinned.

“Of course. I’ve never kept my intentions a secret. However, I know how you feel about Cara, and I don’t mind helping out the façade.”

“It’s not a façade, it’s the truth.”

“You lie terribly.” He said gently while he brushed his knuckles gently across one of her soft cheeks.

She pinched her lips together and his eyes were drawn there. Nothing got by him. “I think she has an idea.”

“Probably, but let’s not make this easy.”

Despite her guilt Brianne almost laughed at that. She was sure that Cara hadn’t had to work much at anything and one of the men who was responsible for that was just doing the opposite. “You have the devil in you.”

His eyes glittered, “For a long time honey and you have no idea what he’s telling me to do, but for now, back to the horse.”

“Oh, I forgot.” That was the second time she’d forgotten

about Honey. How could she not. Everything about this man was sinfully seductive and she was still vibrating from his touch.

He chuckled, "I distracted you."

She never said anything because he certainly did and he knew it. Thankfully he didn't clarify anything beyond that and instructed her to nudge the horse forward again just as Cara came around the side of the building on a pretty sorrel. She pulled up and watched them with a smile on her face.

"Good. Now pull back on both reins gently to get her to stop." Jeb said.

She did and honey stopped.

"Now to back up—"

"Back up?"

"yes they can do that too. Keep the reins tight like they are now and nudge her with your heels."

"But, if she knows pulling on the reins stops her, then I nudge her, she'll get confused. Won't she?"

"Try it."

Brianne did and was even more surprised that honey started backing up, "Wow, they're smart."

"Do you feel a bit better?"

"I think so." Then she stiffened as she felt him shift before he hopped to the ground, "I think you'll do fine calamity Jane."

Cara giggled and Brianne rolled her eyes, "go away now, please."

He gave her a sloppy smile and an appraising look that only she could see.

Brianne was barely able to contain the flush that hit her cheeks as he turned around and strode away whistling stopping to pick up his hat. Then he stopped by Cara and told her to stay in the pasture beside the stable until Brianne gets a better handle on riding. She nodded and gave him a look that said she idolized

him.

Brianne waited for Cara to ride up beside her before she picked up the reins and gently touched the horse with her heels. Honey started walking and she was very impressed with herself.

"Jeb's really good isn't he?" Cara said seeing the excitement on her friend's face.

Brianne started coughing.

"Are you all right?"

She waved a hand, "I'm fine—good?"

"Silly. At teaching people how to ride. You were scared stiff twenty minutes ago, now look at you. I bet we'll have you in a nice trot by the end of this ride."

"This is kind of fun Cara. I'm glad you talked me into it."

"You're kind of sweet on Jeb aren't you Bree?"

She shot her a startled look.

Cara laughed at her expression, "Well, he was sitting on Honey behind you, and I don't ever think I've seen you let a man get that close to you before in all the time I've known you."

"H—he's very easy to trust." Thank God she didn't see *how* close he'd been getting.

"Yes, he is."

"Oh Cara." Brianne said in a rush of air, "Please don't think I'm using you to get to him—"

She was appalled, "What? Oh for heaven's sake! You'd never do such a thing, besides Jeb could see through anybody like they're made of glass." She gave her a sideways look, "furthermore, I've never seen him smile so much lately, usually he's very serious."

"Really?"

Cara nodded, "You do like him don't you?"

No matter how much Brianne wanted to lie, she couldn't. She loved Cara and even though she was having problems coming to terms with her own feelings, it was undeniable what

she felt for her oldest brother, “Gosh, he’s just so beautiful isn’t he?” she gushed out.

Cara bubbled into a fit of laughter, “That’s not something I would describe Jeb as, but I guess for you would think so. You’re just such a wonderful person Bree.”

She flushed lightly, “Thanks Cara.”

As a dancer, Brianne thought she was in pretty good shape, but when she got off the horse an hour and a half later, she swore that even her teeth ached.

Cara saw her wince and she giggled, “Sometimes we don’t realize the muscles that riding works. Now you know.”

“Gosh, I feel like I ran a marathon.” She bent forward and rubbed her thighs. “Jeb was right, this is good exercise.”

“See we’ll be able to stay in shape even though we work an office job.”

“Mouse!”

Both women looked up to see Remmy walk into the stables grinning that handsome boyish grin that could charm just about any woman it came in contact with. However, for some reason it was lost on Brianne and right then and there she knew she had it bad. Jeb had made her immune to other men. Part of her was angry at him over it, and the other part wanted to tear his clothes off and touch him everywhere. She sighed hopelessly and rubbed her forehead.

Cara gave him a warm smile, “What?”

“I need to talk to you for a minute.” He looked at Brianne, “its nothing personal honey, I just need to speak with Cara.”

“Oh,” she held up her hands, “That’s okay, I think I need a bath to help with the aching muscles before bed.” That made him quirk both of his eyebrows in interest, but Brianne didn’t notice as she left the stables.

“Stop it.” Cara said not missing his expression.

“Wow, imagine that woman naked in a tub. I think I’m drooling.” He said watching her leave.

“Oh my *God*—Rem!” Cara said in astonishment, “She’ll die if she heard you say that, besides she’s sweet on Jeb.”

That got his attention, “You don’t say—imagine that.”

“Please don’t say anything, I’m not sure how Jeb feels, and I don’t want to humiliate her.”

He stared down at her for a moment thoughtfully, “All right mouse, I’ll do it for you, but damn, what a shock. A hot piece like that wants JC? I thought you said she was timid.”

“She is.”

“JC’s very aggressive.”

“I know, that’s why it’s so shocking.” She said shaking her head, “I would have never thought.” She said almost to herself.

“Well well, maybe the old man has some charm left in him after all.”

“He’s not old.”

“He is compared to me, why I’m still young enough to show the ladies—“

“Enough!” she said unable to help her laughter. “You are a rake and I don’t need to hear about your exploits.” He grinned, “Now what did you want?”

“Oh hell, that woman made me forget,” he wiggled his brows causing her to giggle again, “I wanted to tell you that I gave my ticket and my tux to Greg. He’ll meet you at the dance tonight at seven.”

“What did you say?” she said breathlessly.

Rem smiled, “Jeb will beat me stupid when he finds out and I’m sure he will, but I couldn’t handle your sad face last night.”

“Rem, after what I did to Bree and said to Glen, I don’t deserve this.”

“Nonsense, you’re a sweetheart and you’re allowed to date

someone, just remember, if he touches you, I'll kill him myself."

She threw her arms around her brother, "Oh thank you so much! I must be the luckiest person alive to have such wonderful brothers!"

"Ahem, missy, don't you mean me. After all, I am the most handsome."

"I'll agree to anything after that." She said with a sniff. "Thanks Rem."

"Anything for you mouse. Now, I'm flying to Greensborough tonight so JC can't find me and beat the snot out of me. I'll be back tomorrow evening. You have fun."

"I will."

Jeb was sitting at his desk with an expression of utter shock as he flipped through the photographs. Glen was sitting on the couch. He had stopped drinking and was only a little tipsy from the scotch he did have. Jeb knew that he might have had one more shot after he left, but he must've thrown himself into the blueprints on the drafting table because he saw all of the eraser crumbles around the plans. *It was a better way to cope than drinking*, the thought.

When Jeb came back in Glen told him that Greg and Brianne's files were on his desk. The Private investigator showed up while he was schooling Brianne. *Schooling her in more than just a little horseback riding*. He grinned at the thought. However, that was wiped off his face as he went through the photos and hospital reports.

"Numerous broken bones including several ribs, and several spiral fractures on the arms." Glen said watching him.

"This is inhuman." Jeb finally managed.

"yes. I can't imagine what she went through. This is only part of what he was able to obtain. It talks about old breaks bruises—"

“Sexual assault?” Jeb lifted his head and looked at his brother. Although she had told him she was a virgin, there were other ways to abuse little girls. The thought alone made him shudder. So much so that he could no longer look at the pictures and asked Glen because he knew his brother had gone through the file already and if there was, he didn’t want to go any further. To his relief Glen shook his head.

“But there looked to be several attempts. She had been shifted around to foster homes quite a bit. Even her father used to beat her up. It’s really depressing if you want to read the whole thing.”

“Now I know why she didn’t trust men.”

“*Didn’t?*” Glen asked quirkling a brow.

Jeb just gave him a look that told him not to push it.

“So that’s it.” He said watching him intently, “You have something for this girl.”

“It’s nothing.” He lied flipping the folder closed. He couldn’t look at it anymore. If that had been Cara, he’d be brushing the dust off of his guns about now even if it was years after the fact. He would hunt every single one of them down and kill them. He was capable. Too capable. In fact he was close to doing just that.

“That’s so full of bullshit that I can smell it. I sure as hell hope you know what you’re doing JC.”

Jeb conceded and nodded. He’d just as much admitted that he wanted her, “So do I.”

“Cara will not be happy.”

“I couldn’t care less.” He said leaning back in his seat and rubbing his leg. Of course he cared, but he wanted Brianne so bad he could taste it.

Glen actually smiled, “You will when she turns into a screeching harpy. She already warned us to behave. I mean look at what that poor woman had to endure.”

“Well, she doesn’t have those reservations around me.” He was shocked that she didn’t with what he knew now, but the way she did behave certainly did make sense. He admired her even more now because she had been beaten down her whole life and although she had showed fear around him several times, she had a fiery passion and possessed some deep seated self protectiveness that showed a sassy side.

This time Glen’s brows nearly went to his bangs, “You don’t say?”

Jeb shrugged, “When I first met her in Cara’s dorm, she was standing there in red lacy underwear. It was so damn sexy that I near came to my knees.”

Glen stared at him stunned for almost a full minute before he erupted into laughter. Jeb said it with about as much excitement as if he were talking about the weather, but the statement itself said plenty.

“Apparently they didn’t expect me for another half an hour.”

“Lucky for you.” He said trying to regain composure, “That must’ve been one hell of a shock. To look at her with clothes on is eye catching enough.”

“I don’t see any clothes.” Jeb admitted with a sly grin, “It’s like that image is burned into my mind.”

“Well, happy hunting big brother, because you’ll need it.”

“After seeing that,” he nodded toward the closed file, “I will need it.”

“Did you want to see Greg’s?”

“Sum it up for me.”

“Well, despite his reputation, he only had a couple of steady girlfriends. He is ambitious, but past testimony from his previous lovers state that he’s genuinely nice.”

“Of course.” Jeb scowled.

“We really don’t have a reason to keep him away from her

except for our own protective instincts.”

“Yeah, I should have known.”

“He is ambitious though. He’s enrolled in night classes at college. Did you know that?”

“When does he find the time?”

“Not sure. We work him pretty hard and he never complains. I guess his father left when he was young. No one knows where he is, and his mother’s really ill. Emphysema. So who knows how long she’ll hold on. She can’t work so he supports them both.”

“Ah hell, I guess we have to let Cara see him then.”

“I suppose.”

“I’ll tell her in the morning.” He rubbed his forehead worriedly, “Our baby is growing up.”

“Yes she is.”

Brianne slid into the hot water of the tub with an audible sigh. She felt incredible relief at Cara’s approval over her attractiveness to her older brother even if she was still fighting it. Summer would be over in a few months and she would go back to school with Cara and Jeb would be open to pursue another woman. Probably some socialite which is what Cara said he normally dated. She wondered if he was able to instil that same vibrating desire that he did to her. Gritting her teeth, she chastised herself for even thinking like that. Jeb wasn’t hers and she was feeling the first effects of jealousy. It was horrible. Thinking about his hands on another woman the way he touched her made her heart twist in her chest. It was almost painful.

Sitting up she grabbed the soap and started scrubbing her legs. This wouldn’t do. She couldn’t think about him as a love interest. She promised herself she wouldn’t think of any man that way and here she was longing for probably the most difficult man she ever met.

Jeb made his way to his room shortly before midnight. He paused by Brianne's door like he'd been doing since that first night she had the nightmares, and listened. Feeling assured that she was asleep he carried on to his room to get ready for bed.

However, two hours later he was still wide awake and irritable because of it. He couldn't get those images out of his mind. Although he'd seen some pretty horrific things in his tour overseas, nothing affected him like that. How someone could take something so beautiful and try to destroy it was twisted.

Finally he sat up on the edge of the bed, placing his elbows on his knees and rubbing the back of his neck with his hands. This wasn't going to get him anywhere. Maybe a warm glass of milk would help. A warm glass of milk and some rum, he thought.

Pulling on his pyjama bottoms, he'd forgone the robe and left his room for the kitchen downstairs.

When he got there, he noticed the light to the stairwell that led to the basement was on. It was odd, because he was sure Rem took the plane and Gabe went with him. Glen had gone to bed hours ago and Cara wasn't interested in playing any of the games down there. The only thing that was down there was a games room with several pool tables, some pinball games and the small theatre.

Hearing a noise he went down the steps to see Brianne leaning over the pool table and shooting the balls. She was actually quite good. It was at least a full five minutes before she walked around the table and noticed him, and froze. She was wearing a pretty pink satin robe that clung nicely to her curves.

"I—I thought you were sleeping."

"I thought you were." He answered walking in the room.

Brianne's eyes roved over his naked chest. "Go put a top on."

He smirked, "Why?"

"You know why." She answered narrowing her eyes.

"yes, but I'd like you to say it." He said while continuing to walk toward her.

Brianne finally clued in that he was coming toward her and started to back around the table.

"I won't hurt you."

"I know that, but you keep touching me, and I forget my own name when you do that."

He chuckled at her honesty, "My ego is inflating."

"Like you need it." She said still backing around the table while gripping the pool cue tightly.

"Where did you learn to play pool?" he nodded toward the table without taking his eyes off of her.

"My father."

"He taught you?"

She shook her head.

"Brianne, what do you expect me to do with information you tell me, rush out and tell the media? It's not a crime to talk about yourself."

She stopped backing away from him at those words, and guided her eyes to the green felt of the table. He was right. However, her secrets were shameful and embarrassing. She was trying to get passed the memories. Yet, maybe if she told him, he'll think the same way and leave her be. Although she was attracted to him, having an affair with this man was out of the question.

"My father was an alcoholic and used to take me to this seedy pub with him so he could drink." She said without looking at him. "The wife of the owner took pity on me and kept an eye on me while he got blitzed on a bar stool. Sometimes he would forget me there and in the process, they let me use the table to play and occupy my time until the pub closed and she would

drive me home.” Her eyes guided to his, “happy?”

His expression softened, “Of course not.”

“You just keep pushing Jeb.” Her eyes began to water despite her efforts. “There’s just some things I don’t want to talk about.”

“I understand. There’s things in my past I haven’t told my family. Sometimes we need to deal with our demons in our own way. However, the difference between you and me, is that you are letting it affect how you live. I don’t.”

“If I had a family it would be different, but I have no one.”

“That’s not true.” He said stepping up to her and taking the cue from her hands and placing it on the table, “You have us.”

“It’s temporary.”

“Not necessarily.” He reached down and placed his hands on her hips to pull her against him, “It could be as long as you want.”

“For a price.” She said looking up at him.

“It works both ways honey, you just don’t see it because you’re naïve.”

“I hate you for how you make me feel.”

“That’s good, it’s a start.” He bent his head and took her mouth.

Whenever he touched her now, little thrilling waves pulsed through her. They were addictive to say the least and it made her want more. The fact that she opened her mouth and accepted him without even the slightest hesitation told her that. Then when she wrapped her arms around his neck to get closer, it was just confirmed. Maybe it had something to do with the gentle tantalizing way his mouth and tongue worked hers until she began to respond experimentally. She felt a draft as her robe was suddenly parted and hard calloused hands moved around her waist to her back pulling her tightly against him.

“Jeb—“ she tried to pull back knowing where this was

leading.

“Stop it.” He said with quiet firmness lifting his head and looking down at her. His eyes blazed with hunger.

“This is wrong.”

“No it’s not.” In one swift movement, he ran his hands down to her bottom, cupped it and lifted her up onto the ledge of the pool table bringing himself between her thighs.

She gasped, “Jeb!” her hands went to his thick shoulders as she tried to push him back.

“I said stop it.” He added more gently while moving his hands to her waist again.

She felt her eyes burn with tears, “I—we can’t.”

“You want to. You’re just afraid,” he traced his fingers up to her breasts and brushed the robe aside to look at her, “Christ you are so beautiful.”

She bit her bottom lip and trembled.

He felt it and raised his eyes to hers, “I would never hurt you Brianne, but you need to stop being afraid of me.” He moved his hands and cupped both of her breasts while his thumbs moved over her nipples. She gasped as they instantly responded, “See baby, if you were so frightened, your body would not respond so quickly to me.”

“I’m scared.” She admitted in a barely audible voice.

“Let me cure you of that.” He bent his head and took her mouth again, “Let me show you how wonderful we can be together.”

He was right. She was afraid of the unknown, but soon he had her responding to him again and she forgot her fear, forgot her protests, and most importantly forgot that he’d managed to slide the robe off her shoulders so she was bare from the waist up. Even his hands were hypnotic and seemed to know exactly where to touch her. Soon she released a moan of surrender as his hand slid down her abdomen and under the material of her

pretty white lace panties. Her eyes shot open and focused on his. She was sure the shock of such intimacy was written all over her. A moment later, she wouldn't remember a thing. Her eyes pinched shut, her mouth parted and her head lolled back arching the rest of her toward him.

Jeb took advantage of the invitation and lowered his head to one of her perfect breasts. The fact that she was untouched and he was the first man she allowed near her made him red hot with desire. He reached over and took one of her hands placing it at the waistband of his pyjamas. His erection was profound through the cloth but she couldn't see it from the way she was positioned, but he knew enough about desire that if she was as turned on as he was, she'd be initiating some sort of response soon. And he was right.

His throaty growl vibrated in the room as her hand slid down to his hardness.

"Is it the same." She breathed, "As what you're doing to me?" Somehow in her haze she managed to ask a question. For some reason she had to know if it felt the same because this was the most incredible thing she'd ever experienced and if it was like this for a man it was no wonder they were always thinking about sex.

He lifted his head to see the curious desire in her eyes, "Yes. But I can do better." He adjusted his hand and slid two fingers in her while his thumb remained on her most sensitive area.

"Oh—God—" she groaned. There went her train of thought.

About the same time he bent her back so she was flat on the green felt of the table, moved aside and quickly disposed of her panties tossing them to the floor. Then he moved back between her thighs and bent over her taking her mouth again.

If his mouth and hands weren't hypnotic enough, when

he started to move against her she couldn't even find the memory to breathe.

He groaned against her mouth and stopped moving.

It took her a moment to realize that he had, and when she opened her eyes he was looking down at her.

"What is it?"

"We have to stop now, or I'm not going to be able to."

She heard the cracking in his voice and knew he was serious, but the problem was, she didn't want him to stop. She took a deep breath and released it slowly, "Oh lord, I'm in trouble." She said softly.

A slow sinful smile drew across his handsome face, "Baby, you're not alone." He bent his head and gave her an equally devastating kiss before lifting himself off her and helped her sit up. Then he reached down and helped her back into her robe, taking his time so he could appreciate how beautiful she was. A crimson tinge appeared on her chest and rushed up to her cheeks. His eyes lifted to hers. "Brianne, there's absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about. You are beautiful."

"I—I just can't believe what we did—" she swallowed heavily, "It was—" she faltered not being able to finish.

"It was pretty scorching wasn't it?" his eyes darkened with desire just thinking about it. Hell, he was still hard as a rock. How he was able to find a sane thought in his skull to stop what they were doing was mind blowing, because she was absolutely delicious when wound up.

Blushing further she nodded.

He cupped her head in his large hands and kissed her tenderly, "I'll show you more of that, I promise." He said lifting his head slightly to look into her eyes, "You can believe that."

She couldn't help but smile, "I should go to bed."

"I'd love to help put you to sleep, but chances are, if I come to bed with you, we won't be sleeping at all."

“Oh, I agree.” She said with wide-eyed innocence.

He laughed. He couldn't help himself. The change in her was a complete about face and if his ego wasn't fed before, it certainly was now. He bent over and picked up her underwear, paused to look at it for a bit before giving it back to her, “Nice. Still not as nice as red.”

“Jeb, could you possibly embarrass me any more?”

“I love the way you blush.” To get his meaning across he reached up and parted the robe slightly to show the pink tinge above her breasts. His eyes soaked it up before he set them back on hers, “See?”

She snatched the edges of her robe from his hands and pulled them tight together, “You are completely obnoxious.” She tried not smiling but it escaped anyway.

“Go.” He said patting her thigh giving her a sensual grin, “Or I'll change my mind.”

She hopped down and cast him a heated look before she ran up the stairs.

Jeb turned and leaned back against the table and looked down at his erection. This was getting to be a problem, and uncomfortable. He reached down and adjusted himself remembering how she had gripped him only moments ago and groaned. He didn't have protection or he would have taken her over the edge with him. However, Glen's little girl flashed in his mind and he couldn't do that to her, to either of them.

Suddenly an odd sensation went through him and his eyes guided to the empty doorway that she just went through. Imagining a little girl like Glen and Monique's except with strawberry blonde hair and green eyes sent a longing through him the likes of a tidal wave.

He turned and looked down at the pool table knowing he could have done that, right then by taking her completely and not using any protection. He was so aroused, there was no doubt

that he could have gotten her pregnant.

Calling himself foolish for even thinking like that, he ran his fingers through his already mussed up hair and made his way back to his own room. Despite his thoughts of a child, he was still erect and knew only a cold shower could cure it—maybe.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next day Brianne was relieved to see that Jeb didn't show up for breakfast. Somehow that would seem weird and embarrassing especially after she remembered everything about the night before. She had touched him! It was not what she expected. She thought she'd be frightened, but instead it seemed to fuel her desire.

Cara came in wearing jeans and a pretty pink blouse that seemed to make her eyes glow. The smile she was wearing also added to that.

“Why so happy?”

“I ran into Glen on the way down the stairs and Jeb says I can see Greg. I guess the background check they ran on him came up clean.”

“Background check?”

Cara took some toast and began to butter it, “Yes, they do that with everyone because they're worried about gold diggers. None of them want to go through what Glen had to deal with—” Cara stopped talking when she noticed that Brianne got very quiet. “Bree?” She was sitting as still as ice staring down at the glossy surface of the table with her fork poised in her hand.

She swallowed and guided her eyes to her friend, “Do you think they would have done that to me?”

“No of course not! That's awful. Besides you're my friend.” Cara knew there were things about her past that she didn't talk about. Those things gave her nightmares and she

knew Brianne would have told her if she wanted to talk because she was her best friend. All she knew was they must have been really terrible for her to keep them to herself for so many years.

"I'm also a woman who is very poor Cara." Brianne reminded her, "and they didn't know me from a hole in the ground. And all of those stories you told me about their mistrust of women. Of course they would have done the same to me. They love you very much and wouldn't want you to be taken advantage of by someone like me."

They wouldn't, Cara thought, *they wouldn't dare*. They trusted Cara's judgement on her friend, didn't they? The answer was as obvious as a neon sign. No they didn't. "Oh dear." She said quietly seeing the reality of their conversation sink in on Brianne's face by the hurt and betrayal reflected in her expression.

"Excuse me." She said standing up. "I need to go find Jeb."

"Maybe you should let me talk to him first. It might not be what you think." Cara said standing up quickly trying her best to talk Bree out of it. She knew that Brianne was attracted to Jeb, but she wasn't sure how her brother felt, and if Brianne started accusing him of something, she didn't want him to unleash his temper on her like he did the other day.

"I think it's time I stood up for myself Cara."

Cara nodded feeling like it was all her fault. If Brianne's secrets were discovered, she'd be devastated.

Jeb was sitting at his desk while on the phone with a client. It may have been Saturday but he and Glen usually were still working. Glen was leaning over the blueprints drafting more changes to the condo project. There was a light knock on the door and Glen told whoever it was to come in. By the sounds of it, it was his sister, but it turned out to be Brianne.

“Hey, good morning.” He said with a cheerful smile.

“hi,” she said a little less enthusiastic looking at Jeb.

Glen glanced at Jeb who also noticed Brianne’s grim expression and quickly wrapped up the conversation on the phone.

“You look like someone stole your puppy.” Jeb said as he hung up the phone.

“Did you get someone to look into my past?” she said bluntly. Although it was totally out of her character, she was already upset at the thought of him even doing such a thing, so she certainly wasn’t going to beat around the bush and delay her anguish any longer.

Glen cleared his throat, “I think I’ll leave you two alone.” He didn’t wait for an answer and shut the door behind him.

“Yes.” He said after Glen left.

The betrayal on her face must’ve have been profound, because his expression softened.

“Brianne—”

She pointed a finger in his direction with a mixture of hurt and anger on her expression, “You had no right!”

He stood up and started walking toward her in which she stepped back and shook her head.

“Don’t you dare come near me!”

He stopped several feet from her, “If you had any idea what I’ve had to do to keep this family from being taken advantage of, you would understand.”

“My personal life is mine!” she burst forth unable to hold back her hurt and rage.

“If you knew how a few of Cara’s friends turned out, you’d understand. Several of them were found in Gabe and Rem’s beds and sometimes they obliged them. Cara never knew why they didn’t hang around and it was after that the boys had no use for them. Cara’s gullible and we need to protect her. This check we

had done on you was no different.”

Cara heard Brianne’s voice all the way into the dining room and came rushing out just to be stopped by Glen in the hall outside the door of the study.

“Leave them alone Cara.”

“Oh God, Glen, she sounds so upset.”

“She is, and probably has every right to be, but something is going on between those two and they need to work it out.” He placed his arm around his sister’s shoulder and pulled her against him, “You’ll understand when you go through it too.”

The voices, mostly Bree’s with a less loud male voice continued to carry out into the hall.

“I can’t stand it.” Cara said. “Not only can’t I understand what she’s saying, I don’t know how Jeb will deal with it. He’s like a bull in a china shop.”

“Maybe she needs to be coaxed into talking about it Cara, some of those hospital photos were pretty horrific.”

“Really?” she said glancing up at him, “There are photos?”

“Jeb burnt the file last night after he went through part of it. I saw the whole thing, it was horrible.”

“Oh no.” she said taking a deep breath, “I only knew a little, just that she was beaten by her father and then several of the homes she was moved around to, it seemed some male in them would hurt her somehow.”

“She never told you much?”

She shook her head, “If you saw how she looked with the little bit she did tell me, you wouldn’t press either. Brianne is a very private person.”

“Cara, Brianne went through hell. In one home, her foster father used to make her sit on his lap for his own kicks and fondle her—“

“What!”

“He never went beyond that but she confessed it to a social worker when she was ten, and he broke a couple of her ribs over it. She had already been with him for two years. She was removed shortly after. Can you imagine the amount of damage that could cause in two years?”

Cara started crying, “I never realized how good I had it.”

“Honey, some people are lucky born to privilege like you with such a loving family, but never think that you aren’t wonderful, because you are. God has plans for us all.” Glen kissed the top of her head.

There was a loud crash beyond the doors and Glen instantly released Cara to open the door worried that something terrible had happened. What they saw within stopped them both in their tracks. Glen had his hand on the door handle halfway in the room when he froze. Cara actually bumped into the back of him because he paused so quickly.

There was evidence of what used to be an antique vase shattered at the foot of the wall behind Jeb. His antique vase to be exact, but that wasn’t what they gawked at.

Jeb had Brianne in a tight embrace and was kissing her so intimately that Glen even felt embarrassed. He quickly, but quietly closed the door.

“Oh dear.” Said Cara after the door was shut turning her wide eyes on Glen.

Glen just grinned down at her, “Well it’s about time, Jeb was kind of letting dust settle on him.”

“You are too Glen. Letting dust settle, I mean.”

His grin disappeared and his expression became masked, “I tried the love thing Cara, it ripped my heart out.”

It was the first time that Glen had ever mentioned anything about that day, “Wow, you say it like it was yesterday.”

“It feels like it.” He smiled without emotion, “That’s why

we are so careful about you,” he nodded toward the closed door, “so we check out everyone, even someone as sweet as Brianne.”

“She was so hurt Glen.” Cara said feeling her eyes water again.

“Well, I think Jeb’s helping her deal with that.” He mused remembering what he saw.

She shoved at him, “That’s not funny. She really likes him, and she’s vulnerable. There’s no way she’s any match for his take charge attitude.”

“From the looks of my ten thousand dollar vase, I’d say she was.”

Cara swallowed, “Oh Gosh don’t tell her, she’ll die.”

He waved a hand, “I won’t, it was old anyway.” He teased causing her to wince.

Glen loved art, especially old things, really old things. It was the architect in him and the need to create beautiful things. He was probably lying to her about the vase, it was probably worth twice that. Then an odd look came over his face as if something had occurred to him. He looked down at her with the tenderness of a caring older brother.

“Leave them alone Cara and if Jeb comes out, tell him I’ll be home later all right?”

“I’m certainly not going back in there,” she said gesturing toward the closed door with some embarrassment, “That was really surprising.”

“That’s good to hear because if Greg so much as touches you in our presence we’ll pound him stupid.”

She grinned at her older brother’s protectiveness.

He gave her a warning look before he turned and headed for the front door.

She still didn’t wipe the grin off her face and ran to the phone to call Greg and talk to him about tonight.

In the study, Jeb finally lifted his head and stared down at

Brianne's teary face. His chest clenched at the vulnerability on her there and in her large green eyes. "If I let you go are you going to start throwing things at me again?"

"You deserved that."

"I did." He agreed with a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. Before then, her voice kept rising and she finally snapped and picked up one of Glen's antique vases off the mantle and hurled it at him. He ducked and it shattered against the wall. So he did the only thing he knew that would settle her down and grabbed her smothering her mouth with his before she went for something more expensive. He could feel her fight him, but it didn't last and she finally softened against him. He could feel the wetness of her tears against his skin and felt a deep sorrow for her. He knew she had gone through some unspeakable things and to let people know about them wasn't easy. She probably thought they'd think different of her, but nothing had changed. If anything Jeb was relieved that she wasn't deceitful, and it removed that distrust that held him back from getting completely involved. "Do you feel better."

"I'm ashamed." She admitted softly.

He smiled down at her, "Because I know things about you?"

She nodded, "Jeb, those things that happened to me are better in the past."

"Not if they keep giving you nightmares." He countered.

She shrugged and averted her eyes to the open collar of his shirt, "I told you I tried to get better."

"I have a good medical plan and my company psychiatrist is probably one of the best around."

"People will think I'm crazy."

"I see him." He admitted, "And I know I'm not crazy."

That certainly got her attention.

"His name is Allen Fordyce. He's really good. I told you I

have nightmares, but I don't let what happened interfere with my family or my business. When I came back from Iraq, my father insisted because I could barely function properly."

"I find that hard to believe."

"It's the truth. My team and I did some pretty bad things, and the irony was, it was an IED that wiped them out, not some elite team like us. I and another were the only survivors, and I had shrapnel embed in my leg and knee to remind me how precious life is. The shrapnel was removed, but the damage was done." He cupped her face in his hands, "I'll take you and if you want I'll stay with you."

"Why would you do such a thing?"

"Because I'm desperate to sleep with you. I'm trying to win brownie points." He tried to say straight-faced but his twinkling eyes betrayed him.

Brianne burst into laughter, "You're incorrigible!" She managed to get herself under control and stared at him, "You'd better be careful Jeb Durant, someone might think you're actually quite nice."

"Don't spread it around." His gaze darkened and he pulled her tight against him, "I have a reputation to protect."

"God forbid anyone would believe me." She said with mock innocence, causing him to laugh and release her. "You'd better leave, or I'm going to commit sin and ravish you on the floor in front of the fire."

This time her wide eyes were genuine, "fine, but I should clean up my mess." She pointed to the vase, "Gee, I hope that wasn't expensive." She added as an afterthought out loud.

Jeb shook his head, and lied beautifully, "It was Glen's and it was ugly."

She frowned, "Poor Glen." She looked up and him a grinned, "Now if I thwacked you with it, I would feel less guilty."

"You are getting sassy aren't you?" he grinned, "but go on,

I'm sure Cara has your day planned so you look perfect tonight." His eyes raked down her form with no hidden agenda in them, "I'll clean up the glass."

"Thanks." She said giving him a smile before she left.

Jeb waited until she was gone and raked his hand through his hair while turning and looking at Glen's vase. He knew for a fact that he paid quite a bit of money for it. He'll talk to Vi and see if she could find a replacement at an auction. Hopefully Glen won't notice it was missing and *hopefully* Brianne doesn't display her temper around anymore of Glen's prized possessions. However, he had to give it to her; she was sure hot when she finally let herself go.

Something else was nagging him besides the broken vase. Guilt.

No one could accuse him of that over a woman before, but Brianne had gotten to him. She was beautiful, vibrant, sexy and downright sweet as all get out. She felt betrayed and after he saw what had happened to her, he had to admit that he felt like he was trespassing, but she needed help. Unlike him who had been able to get past the horrors he'd seen, she still let them affect her. He may have been more irritable in recent years and bit of a hard ass, but he did enjoy his life. Brianne was stifling herself by not enjoying hers and she had so much to give someone—to give him.

Outside, Cara had attached herself to Brianne like Velcro as soon as she walked out of Jeb and Glen's study.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry. I brought you all of this way and you get treated so badly by all of us."

"I'm fine Cara." She said seeing her friend's teary eyes.

She released her and saw her red rimmed eyes, "Really? Because you look terrible."

"I actually feel better. Jeb says that there's a doctor that he wants me to see about my past and maybe it'll help the nightmares."

“Like a shrink?” she said with surprise. First of all, she didn’t know that Jeb knew any shrinks, and secondly, she never thought in her wildest dreams that Cara would go to one. Her brother must’ve been very convincing.

She nodded smiling at Cara’s word for the psychiatrist, “I think Jeb’s right in a lot of ways. I’ll see his doctor and maybe the nightmares will stop.”

Cara breathed a sigh of relief. She knew what she’d seen beyond those doors moments ago, but she wasn’t sure if Jeb had been overly forceful and frightened her. “I hope so.” She said sincerely.

“I feel bad though, I—“ she blushed, “Threw something at Jeb. He said it belonged to Glen. I hope it wasn’t expensive.”

There was no way on God’s green earth that Cara was going to tell her how much it cost, “So, he probably deserved it! I’m still mad that they did that to you. You may forgive them but I don’t.” There was also no way that she was going to show the shock she felt earlier that her friend had the gall to throw something at her brother. Jeb of all people! If it was anyone else, and not a woman, he probably would have laid them flat. A woman, on the other hand, he probably would have skinned the hide off her bones with his temper. Instead he’d kissed Brianne to probably calm her down, she could see that now.

“Good.” Brianne said momentarily forgetting about the broken vase, “Because I can’t seem to stay mad at any of them. Maybe it’s because they are so protective of you and love you so much that I understand why they did that.”

“Well, they should trust my judgement every now and then too.” She said still angry. Then her face softened, “Anyhow, I want to treat you to a trip to the salon—and before you say no, please let me do this for you as a friend. It’s not going to be costly and you should look your best for the Firemen’s ball tonight. It’s a charity dinner and auction.”

After what Brianne had just experienced she had to admit that she would love to be pampered in such a way, so she reluctantly agreed which got her another one of Cara's exuberant hugs.

"Good! I'll tell Jeb so go get ready and we'll leave."

It wasn't until early afternoon that the two returned. What Brianne didn't know is that Cara went and was able to sweet talk Jeb into giving her back one of her credit cards so she could treat her friend to an afternoon of complete pampering. He agreed without hesitation after she blasted him for what he did. Even though his hard expression never gave her any indication that he felt bad, there was something in his eyes for a moment, and she didn't doubt he did when he reached into the pocket of his jeans and took the card out of his wallet and gave it to her.

They had just come in the house and Jeb was coming across the large foyer when he called Cara into his study after a glint of approval toward Brianne.

"I didn't spend that much!" she defended as soon as he shut the doors.

He chuckled, "It wasn't about that." He walked over to his desk and removed a long velvet box and gave it to her, "this is for Brianne."

Cara gave him a look of disbelief and took the box, opening it with an audible gasp, "Jeb—this is beautiful!" she darted her eyes from the diamond necklace and tear drop earrings to her brother, "She won't accept it though."

"I know. I need you to tell her it's yours and you're loaning it to her—tell her it's glass, a loaner from the jewellers, or whatever, I don't care."

She laughed, "Jeb, you are a sly devil."

He shrugged. "She can't go to the most prestigious event

of the year with no jewellery.”

“That’s true,’ she said running her fingers over the finely made stones, “Gosh this is gorgeous.” She looked up at him again, “Someone might think that you felt guilty about earlier.”

“Someone might.” He said shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans. Looking totally at ease with himself.

She narrowed her gaze, “Don’t you string her along Jeb, she’s special to me.”

“I know she is.” He said without elaboration.

She shut the case, “I’ll never forgive you if you hurt her.”

“Go get ready honey. The car will be here in an hour.” He said tenderly, not answering her statement.

Cara knew he wasn’t going to. Jeb rarely explained himself, and she knew his personal life was off limits even if it was her best friend he set his sights on. If he set his sights on her. It was obvious that Brianne really liked him, and she did see them kissing, but like all her brothers, Jeb had no problem where women were concerned and she didn’t want Brianne to be another statistic. She nodded and reluctantly left knowing that he wouldn’t answer any of her questions. However, that was quickly forgotten when she remembered what Rem did for her and Greg and began to get excited.

She raced up the stairs to her room to get dressed.

Brianne was struggling with her gown when Cara came in unannounced wearing a silver taffeta. She’d already seen it on her in the boutique but now that her hair and makeup were done, she had to admit that Cara was stunning.

“Wow you look fantastic.” Brianne said smiling at the vibrant image her friend presented. “You certainly look like you were born to wear that kind of fashion.”

Cara grinned, “Thanks. Do you need help?”

Brianne released a frustrated breath, “Do I ever!”

She walked behind Brianne and did up the eyelet hooks at

the back. “That’s what happens when you get an expensive gown. They make you know it by the amount of time it takes to get into.”

Brianne laughed, “You are not kidding.” She reached up and adjusted the bodice. “I feel really weird. I mean I’m used to our dancing costumes, and this gown covers my lower half so well that it drags on the floor, but I feel half naked.”

“It’s a different kind of atmosphere Brianne, you’ll get used to it.”

She turned and looked at her, “Over two months. I don’t think so.”

Cara didn’t mean two months. For some reason she was thinking years, but didn’t say anything, “You need a stole.”

“A what?”

“A stole—a wrap. I have one that will look perfect with that gown. I’ll be right back.” She swept out of there like a breeze.

She was back a few minutes later. The reason she left in the first place was that she forgot the velvet box Jeb had given her earlier. When she returned she tossed the white faux fur on Brianne’s bed and handed her the box.

“What’s this?”

She reached up and caressed the sapphire pendant she wore, “As you can see, a woman has to be sophisticated. It’s just a little something to help you fit in.”

Brianne’s sharp intake of breath seemed to echo in the room when she opened the box, “Oh my *God*.” She glanced up at Cara with a guilty look and tried to hand the box back to her, “I can’t take this! It looks expensive.”

“It is.” She beamed, “But Jeb would kill me if I took them back.”

She blinked twice in disbelief, “W—what did you say?”

“He told me to tell you that they were mine or not real,

but I think you should know that he bought them for you.”

“Cara I can’t possibly—” she tried giving them back to her again.

Cara held up her hand cutting her off, “Before you try and return them, everyone whose anyone of Rocksville, will be at this event tonight,” she nodded toward the case, “I guarantee they’ll all have expensive jewellery. You can’t possibly go without any and Jeb picked these out specifically for you.”

“They look disgustingly expensive.” She said in awe looking back at the contents of the box.

She grinned because Jeb didn’t buy cheap trinkets, none of her brothers did. What was shocking, was that he bought something for a woman. “I’m sure they are.” She saw the reservations in her friend’s expression, “Look, even if you just wear them tonight, you can give them back to him after.”

“Why would he do such a thing?”

“I don’t know. In fact, you probably know more about that than I do. My brothers don’t share their personal lives with me.”

Brianne blushed, “I didn’t sleep with him.”

Cara’s eyes flew wide, “Of course you didn’t! I never thought that.”

Her blush deepened, “Well, I just thought, that when a man buys a woman something like this—well.”

Cara burst into laughter, “Have you ever thought that you are so beautiful that a man will just buy you gifts because he wants to.”

She shook her head rapidly.

“Then I guess Jeb has his work cut out for him.” She said taking the box and removing the necklace. “Turn around.”

Brianne did, “What does that mean?”

“It means he’s trying to make you feel pretty.” She said clasping the ends together. “Put the earrings in and you should

hurry because the boys are probably waiting impatiently downstairs.”

They were waiting. Glen, Jeb, and Gabe, but no Rem.

Jeb lifted his arm and looked at his gold and platinum Rolex, “Did he call any of you?”

Gabe shrugged and Jeb looked at him. He looked guilty and was just about to interrogate him when a noise drew all of their attention to the women coming down the stairs.

Gabe let out a long slow whistle and Cara grinned from ear to ear.

Jeb didn’t hear or even notice how beautiful his sister was because his eyes were riveted on the gorgeous strawberry blonde in green velvet. In turn her eyes were on his as she held the skirt of her gown, lifting it as she came down the stairs.

At that moment he didn’t care if two of his brothers were present. He stepped forward and took her hand lifting it to his mouth murmuring the word ‘wow’ against her knuckles.

She darted her eyes past him to the amused expressions of Glen and Gabe. “They’re staring.” She whispered.

“I don’t care and you’d better get used to it, because you’ll have all the attention tonight whether you want it or not.” Jeb couldn’t get over the transformation. She was stunning before, but now she was deliciously exquisite. Her long hair was piled on her head with several strawberry curls tickling her neck. She looked so amazing that the jewellery almost looked cheap on her and it cost him six figures. Something he would never reveal to anyone. It wasn’t like he ever indulged anyone before except Cara, and seeing it on her made it worth every penny.

Then there was the dark green velvet gown she wore that clung to every elegant curve she owned. Strapless, and smooth leaving her delicate shoulders bare, it was definitely created for her body and practically made those large emerald eyes of hers glow.

She brought her eyes back to his and saw that he was dead serious. He didn't care what people thought and as before she admired him for it.

Glen cleared his throat and turned to open the door, "If you're done seducing our guest Jeb, the limousine is waiting."

That didn't even change his mood. He just grinned at Brianne and put her arm through his.

"You look pretty nice too." She said after finding her voice. Tall, sexy and absolutely masculine in his tuxedo with satin lapels.

"I'm glad you think so," he leaned down and said in her ear while following the others, "If you're a good girl I'll let you peel it off me later."

She gasped and brought her eyes to his to see the teasing in them. "Don't start."

"Stop me." He grinned devilishly.

"Oh lord." She said under her breath then stopped at the sight of the stretched sleek black limousine as the uniformed driver held the door open as the other three got in.

"Come on." He urged gently, "I'll take care of you. Don't get nervous."

It wasn't just the words; it was the encouragement in them that made her get in the car.

If that wasn't overwhelming the line of expensive cars and limousines at the fancy hotel was. Absently she reached over and took Jeb's hand. Not one person in the car didn't notice that gesture, but not one of them would dare open their mouths and say anything from Jeb's warning glare.

Cara realized then and there from the way he held on to her that Jeb was protective of Brianne and she could have felt her heart soar. He was only ever protective of family. There was no doubt now that he cared about her friend even if Brianne couldn't see it. She then turned her attention to Gabe who was

grinning and she could see the urge in him to say something but knew better. "Don't you have a date Gabe." She said hoping to distract him before he gave in to that urge.

He settled his blue eyes on his younger sister and nodded, "She's meeting me there."

Cara's eyes widened, "Oh no, she's not a exotic—"

He laughed, "Give me some credit; she's actually a daycare worker."

She was speechless.

"I met her a few days ago at one of Rem's remodelling projects. She lived in a little house next door."

Glen's interest perked up, "So, let me get this straight. You're bringing a daycare worker to the Firemen's ball?"

"Is it so hard to believe?" he said innocently followed by a chorus of yeses.

He held up his hands in surrender, "Okay, I deserve that, but you'll understand when you see her."

Brianne had to agree with Gabe, the woman was stunning. She had ebony hair, blue eyes, and a petite figure like Cara. She wore a black gown that contrasted her eyes nicely and seemed very pleasant when he introduced them. She was waiting just outside the hotel doors.

"This is Melody." Gabe said then went on to introduce his family.

"It's nice to meet you all." She said genuinely and instantly noticed Brianne's jewellery, "Wow, what a beautiful necklace."

"Thank you." Brianne couldn't help the blush that started to rise.

"We should find our table." Jeb said seeing Brianne's discomfort and avoiding his brother's curious looks. He took Brianne's arm and escorted her through the doors into the ballroom.

"Oh my Goodness, this is really elaborate." Brianne said

taking in the large room already loaded with mingling guests. There was string quartet playing over on a stage and the music was very pleasant.

Jeb didn't hear her because he saw Greg in an expensive looking tuxedo waiting just inside the doors. He looked incredibly handsome and already had several women around him when he broke free and bee-lined for his sister. He made the move to go and intercept until he felt Brianne not moving and in fact her arm tightened on his. He narrowed his gaze on her.

"you said she could see him." She reminded him unaffected by his harsh stare. Somehow it didn't bother her like it used to and she knew it was out of love for Cara that he was so protective.

He gritted his teeth and glanced at the couple as Greg bent down and whispered something in Cara's ear making her blush as he took her hand, "I did." He reluctantly admitted.

"Leave them be Jeb. Cara really likes him."

He could feel the muscle in his jaw bunch as he watched Greg lead her toward the dance floor. "How the hell did he get a ticket, and that tux—" he stopped and finally realized why Rem wasn't there. "I'll kill him."

"Who?"

"Rem."

Brianne had to think about what that meant and when she did finally understand she laughed.

He swung his gaze back to her, lifting a brow, "You find that funny?"

"Oh yes." She said still laughing.

"Hell, they're all against me." He resigned looking heavenward.

"I don't think so. Glen doesn't look to impressed either."

"No he doesn't." Jeb said seeing his brother glaring at Greg and Cara with his hands thrust in the pockets of his pants.

“He looks like you when he does that. It’s very sexy.” She teased.

“Don’t get any ideas.” He warned causing her to laugh again.

“I think I will enjoy myself.” She added still laughing while he swore under his breath and threaded them through the crowd.

“you are getting much to sassy.” He added letting her teasing lighten his mood a little, “keep it up honey and I might have to teach you a lesson to remind you who you belong to.”

That made her stop and purse her lips together. Only it wasn’t in anger. She felt a wash of pleasure at that statement and was trying to keep the blush from rising.

“Nothing to say now huh?” he added smiling down at her. She shook her head.

“You’re lucky we’re in a crowd Brianne, because I’m aching all over to touch you inappropriately.”

“Be quiet.” She said not meaning to sound so breathless.

He chuckled deeply hearing the tone of her voice and pleased with himself that he was able to affect her so easily.

Several hours later Brianne was still having a wonderful time. The auction was amazing and Glen actually bought another vase. She felt so guilty but he told her not to worry about it.

Several times Jeb took her up to the floor to dance after dinner and he danced beautifully despite his limp, but she could see that it was bothering him when he led her back to their table for the fourth time.

“I think we’ve done enough dancing.” She said looking up at him.

“It’s nothing that I’m not used to Brianne.” He said a little tersely.

She knew from Cara that he didn’t like to talk about his injury so she let it go. She felt bad because she knew he was

doing this just to make her happy, but she was happy. She was having the time of her life. She had been introduced to so many people that she'll never remember all of their names and more than once there were comments made about her gown, her jewellery or her appearance in general. She felt like the belle of the ball.

A short time later, one of the men that Jeb had introduced her to appeared at the table and asked her to dance. She thought his name was Michael. Almost immediately Jeb put his arm across the back of the chair resting his fingers on her shoulder as she started to get up and told the man that she was busy.

He held his hands up in surrender with a wary look and left.

"Jeb, that was rude." Said Cara surprised by his behaviour.

He shrugged like it didn't bother him in the least. Although Glen may not be too happy. That was one of their clients, a very wealthy one, but he probably wouldn't be anymore. Regardless, Jeb didn't sell women to make a buck and if that prick thought just because he hired the Durant firm, that he could help himself to their women, he'd rather dump him as a client.

Cara just shook her head and looked at Brianne who was just as much surprised by his reaction as she was.

Jeb stared at his sister, "It's obvious that she's with me. Besides, the man is an ass."

Greg laughed, "That's what I admire about you, Boss, you're a straight shooter."

Jeb did his best to take Brianne's advice and not glower at Greg all evening. Like now when he really wanted to, so instead he just kept his expression unreadable. He had to admit that they looked good together despite his reservations of the man. Greg sincerely seemed to adore Cara and it was obvious how Cara felt even if she wasn't looking at him with her heart in her eyes all evening.

Just then a loud noise from the hall drew his attention. It

just so happened that they were sitting on that side of the room. Jeb glanced over Brianne's head to the doorway and had to shake his head mentally, because he was certain he saw Glen and another man in a fist fight, but Glen didn't fight.

The noise elevated just as Gabe came to the table, and as the two figures wrestled their way by the open doorway again, he was certain that was Glen. "Ah hell!" Jeb stood up, "Gabe, get in there!"

Gabe didn't hesitate and rushed over to the open doors. It just so happened that he looked up in time to see what his brother was looking at.

Jeb took a little longer because of his leg, but thankfully Greg took the initiative and ran after Gabe. Cara and Brianne both stood up but he told them to stay put before following the other two.

Brianne and Cara exchanged a worried look.

"Was that Glen?" she said to Brianne.

"I don't know." Brianne answered, "but they sure left in a hurry.

"Glen doesn't fight." Cara said in disbelief, "—ever."

A crowd started to gather, and Jeb pushed his way through to see that Glen had the upper hand. Well, upper hand meaning he had the other man by the throat and was wailing on him. The other man was trying to defend himself the best he could, but he was no match for Glen's size.

Jeb groaned inwardly when he recognized him. It was Monique's fiancé and his lip was split and had the makings of what would soon be a black eye. Monique was unsuccessfully pulling on Glen's shoulder to get him to stop hitting him, but a few more blows to the man's midsection set him doubling over just as Gabe and Greg hauled Glen off him none too easily. Jeb stepped in front of him as he started back at the John and he held up his hand and gave him a warning look, "you may be

younger Glen, but don't think for a minute I can't take you."

That made him pause and focus his gaze on Jeb. He could see the anger there and it was then that Jeb realized that he was in that rage haze. Something he never thought Glen had in him. Jeb had experienced it himself when he came across a group of self proclaimed rebels slaughtering school children overseas. He made sure they'd never live to do something like that again. But Glen was very easy going ninety-nine percent of the time and never had Jeb seen him lose his cool, "Go get a drink." He added before he turned toward the other man. He didn't know what happened but he'd find out.

Monique was helping the John to straighten up. Tears were spilling from her eyes.

"Gabe, get Glen out of here." He said without turning around and looking at his brother. He knew he was struggling to regain control and would be fine if they got him out of there. He heard a few choice words from Glenn then Gabe's stern encouragement before he left. "Come on people fun's over." Gabe then said to the crowd that was murmuring behind them.

Brianne came through the doors about then and saw Glen's ruffled clothing that he was straightening as he walked by with Gabe on one side and Greg on the other like sentinels and an angry look on his face. "What happened?" she said to Jeb while noticing the man with the bleeding lip.

So much for her staying put. "Brianne, this is Monique Sinclair and her fiancé John Cutter." He might as well introduce them, he thought.

"Oh." Now things made sense.

"Are you going to live John?" Jeb said handing him his handkerchief.

John nodded and took the cloth pressing it to his lip. He was still trying to catch his breath. Two security men appeared then and he glared at them, "A little too late."

"It's under control," said Jeb.

They looked at each other then back at the four of them.

"He's right." Said Monique. They seemed satisfied with that and left while John grumbled something about private security. Then she turned to her fiancé, "Gosh John, I'm so sorry, he's usually not so violent." Monique said with sincerity.

"He's not." Jeb confirmed still taken back by Glen's temper though he didn't let it show.

"Well, he seemed quite crazy." John said glaring at the doorway that Glen went through. He finally straightened himself up while wincing.

"Yeah, well you are marrying his girl." Jeb explained trying not to smile at the man's expression. What the hell was Monique doing with a guy like this? He was too darn prim and proper to suit her. She was a hometown girl, not a socialite.

"I'm not his girl." Monique protested.

Finally it clued in on John who the man was. He didn't know what happened. He came down the hall with Monique and saw Glen who just attacked him. "*That's* Glen Durant, Christine's father?" he stared down at her in surprise.

"Yes it is," Said Jeb, "My brother."

John groaned, "Monique, why didn't you tell me the family was certifiable."

"There're not—usually." She said shooting an unsure glance at Jeb. That insult might have set Jeb off, but from the smile on his face it didn't. She was instantly relieved.

"No, we aren't." he couldn't help but sound amused. They *must* look like a bunch of lunatics.

"Did you tell him about Christine? Is that why he attacked John?" Monique asked Jeb accusingly.

"Of course not. I told you I'd wait until John left. I've never gone back on my word Monique." He said as if insulted.

She sighed, "Of course you wouldn't." her eyes guided to

Brianne. The woman was beautiful, but there was something different about her and she knew what it was. From the concern in her expression, she wasn't a snob like the rest of the crowd in the room, except for Cara of course. She make be done up like one but she seemed very genuine. Also she didn't miss the possessive looks that Jeb was giving her. Jeb wasn't possessive about women, so this woman had to be special.

Jeb saw her curiosity, "Brianne is a friend of Cara's."

"I'm sorry about meeting like this." Monique said with embarrassment while still trying to help John stand erect.

Brianne shook her head and smiled, "No worries. Every day is a new surprise." She said trying to make light teasing out of the situation.

Monique returned her smile, though less pronounced. It was nice of her to try and make her feel better. Her original thoughts about her were right. She wasn't a snob.

"We should go Monique. My night is kind of ruined." John interrupted. He didn't want to spend another moment there unless Glen decided to take another round out of him. Not only that, friendly chat with his brother was out of the question too.

Brianne noticed that Jeb didn't apologize or even make excuses for their behaviour. Wasn't he worried about the other man pressing charges? She couldn't help but feel sorry for the other couple. This must've been embarrassing.

Monique agreed and let John lead her from the hall.

"Who's Christine?" Brianne said after they had gone.

Well the cat was out of the bag. "She's Glen's daughter. He doesn't know about her. I just found out yesterday when they parked in front of my vehicle and I saw her. Monique admitted it then and asked me not to tell him until Monday when John left. I told her I would."

"That's incredible. Glen's a father and he doesn't even know. How could anyone keep that from a parent?" she couldn't

imagine not knowing that there was someone out there that could love her and she didn't know about them. If Glen found out, it was no wonder he was so angry.

"Glen told me a bit of the story which I won't repeat, so don't ask because it's his life, and by the sounds of it Monique had legitimate reasons." He reached over and took her hand, "Now, I'm not ready to go home yet so let's go back to the crowd."

"My God Jeb, doesn't that bother you? The fighting?"

He stopped and grinned at her, "Honey, when you've been through what I have, nothing does."

"But he looked terrible." She said referring to John.

"Well tough, he should learn to stick up for himself." He said with amusement at her growing irritation.

"Jeb—Glen's huge. That man was a head shorter than him." She protested, "It wasn't a fair fight."

"You're wrong. Glen has probably been in two fights in his life including that one, so they were probably evenly matched. He never was a scrapper growing up. He was more of an academic. President of the chess club, you know, crap that'll normally rot my brain."

Brianne released a frustrated breath. She felt terrible for Monique and John and Jeb didn't seem to share it. Glen obviously still had some deep seated emotions for her or he wouldn't have gone off on him like that. However, she knew it was pointless arguing with Jeb. Yet, when she thought about it later, Jeb hadn't actually taken sides between Monique and Glen which was interesting. In fact he told her that Monique had her reasons for keeping Glen's daughter a secret. Something that Glen told him. Whatever it was, it couldn't have been good the way they had split up especially when there was still some emotion there. Jeb was right, this wasn't her business.

Glen was nowhere to be seen when they went back to their table and Greg said that he'd gone home. Gabe was on the dance

floor with his date and Greg was just pulling out Cara's chair to take her dancing.

"Did you want to dance Brianne?" Jeb asked looking down at her.

"No, I'm tired." She lied knowing that it hurt him. Yet, it wasn't anything obvious because he danced beautifully, but once off the floor there was a slight limp that he seemed to be trying to hide. Somehow she knew he was doing it for her and she couldn't help but feel guilty. He must have a really high pain threshold to endure the dancing he'd done so far.

He narrowed his gaze, "I'm not some cotton filled child. Don't try and coddle me."

"Well you're limping." She blurted, "For heaven's sake Jeb."

His eyes darkened and his voice deepened, "Well, when I hold you close, it's as good as any narcotic."

She flushed

He didn't give her a chance to protest and threaded his hand in hers leading her back toward the floor.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brianne needed help with her gown when she got in her room and asked Cara. Jeb offered after Cara said she'd meet her there in five minutes.

"You are going to get us caught." She flushed looking at him shyly.

"Brianne, there's nothing more I would desire at this moment than to be caught with you." He smiled while bending his head to brush his mouth over hers. "Now if I don't see you tonight—" he paused to remind her of his sleeping issues, "—I'll arrange for you to see the doctor tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay Jeb. Thank you." She added with a smile and turned to go up the stairs. His hand shot out and grabbed her arm

causing her to turn toward him again with a questioning look on her face.

“Of course, you don’t need nightmares to bring me to your room.” He added huskily.

“Behave yourself.” She tried scolding unsuccessfully. It was that darn ribbon of desire that threaded through her that made her face flush at his blunt offer, not the offer itself. Only if he knew how that made her feel, he would probably be in her room regardless of what she said. But, she knew it couldn’t happen. She couldn’t take that step and betray Cara no matter what she said. It was true that Jeb knew more about her in the past week than even her best friend did, but that didn’t change that she didn’t want to get involved.

He chuckled and released her. Brianne rushed up the stairs as fast as her legs and the gown would let her. There was no denying the flush that went through her this time had nothing to do with embarrassment. She wanted him.

Jeb thought about going to bed after Brianne disappeared up the stairs, but his leg was killing him and he knew he wouldn’t be sleeping right away even if thoughts of her didn’t keep him up. However, a nice shot of that scotch that Glen had would probably help. However, when he opened the door of his study, Glen was already in the process of finishing the bottle.

His brother looked up at him, “I didn’t drink it all.” He said holding up the bottle to show him after he filled his glass again.

“I’m beginning to think you are crazy.” Jeb said shaking his head and retrieving a glass for himself before he sat beside his brother on the sofa.

Glen poured him a drink, “I saw her, Jeb.” He said quietly.

“Who?”

“My little girl.” He answered taking another swallow.

“Oh.” He said softly. He couldn’t lie to Glen over this.

“You knew didn’t you?” he said without looking at him.

“Yes.” He admitted, “I saw her when I saw Monique.”

“Well, I guess you had your reasons for not saying anything.” Glen wasn’t angry with Jeb at all. Maybe he knew he would react the way he did toward Monique’s fiancé and wanted to avoid that confrontation. Turns out he was dead on.

“Yeah, and I think my reasons were proven tonight.” He shot him a sideways glance while leaning back against the plush leather while balancing the glass on his thigh.

Glen finally looked at him, “I was an ass.”

Jeb released a laugh, “Hell yes, you were.”

“I just couldn’t stop thinking about him touching her and being a part of my child’s life when I wasn’t.” He took a deep unsteady breath, “I lost my mind. I’ll have to apologize.”

“It might be a plan if you want to see your little girl without having some conflict between you.”

“I should speak to her about shared custody.”

“You should *ask* her about custody.” Jeb corrected, “She’s scared to death that you want to take her away from her and after tonight, she might just be plain scared to death of you.”

“I wouldn’t do that. I would never take a child from its mother.” He said firmly.

“I know that and so do you, but she doesn’t.”

“Ah hell, I really screwed up.” He said plopping his head back against the sofa. He knew it was because of tonight and the last time he’d seen her.

“I’d say.” Jeb smiled.

“That man she’s going to marry is a twig.” He grumbled taking another swallow.

“You won’t get an argument from me.” Jeb answered.

“He’s got that look about him that makes him a boring accountant.”

“Yeah, but he’s probably a doctor or a lawyer. He has money.”

“He looks gay.”

Jeb laughed, “You would think so.”

Glen turned his head and looked at him, “I wasn’t making joke. He seriously looks gay.”

“I didn’t see it. I guess I was too worried about Monique. Besides I don’t know what ‘gay’ looks like.” he mused.

Glen watched his brother for a moment, “I am an ass.” He sighed heavily. He was too busy raging with jealousy than worrying about the mother of his child and how much he embarrassed her.

“I didn’t disagree the first time.” Jeb chuckled.

“Hell, is she alright Jeb?”

He nodded, “I think you really shocked her. Maybe even impressed her a bit, but she’s fine.”

Glen’s eyes guided toward the walnut panelled ceiling of the study for a moment before settling back on his brother, “So, when are you going to ask Brianne?”

Jeb’s eyes guided to his untouched glass of scotch knowing exactly what Glen was talking about. The fact that he noticed irritated him because he wasn’t normally so obvious, “Don’t be a bastard. I’ve only known her a few days.”

Glen chuckled, “Sometimes that’s all it takes.” He paused, “How much did you fork out for that necklace? And don’t even begin to tell me you didn’t give it to her because the way she was caressing it tonight whenever she looked at you, told me something different.”

Jeb shrugged conceding, “A quarter of a mill.” He admitted with a sheepish edge.

Glen sat up and started at him stunned, then burst into laughter and slapped his thigh, “You are completely gone, you do realize that right?—what a hypocrite—red lace—” he laughed. “Gabe and Rem look like amateurs.”

“Shut the hell up!” although it wasn’t said harshly because

he was finding himself laughing right along with Glen. He was right and he damn well knew it. “Man, that was fucking sexy though.” He chuckled. “Red lace!”

“The engagement ring will have to be worth twice that to make an impression.” Glen said still laughing.

It was about two hours later that the two older brothers retired for bed. Jeb felt better in knowing that Glen would do his best to speak to Monique on a more civilized manner if he wanted himself and his brothers to be part of his little girl’s life. The reading of her father’s will is tomorrow. He glanced at his watch, well—today considering it was early in the morning. Glen said he would speak with her after that.

As usual he paused by Brianne’s room and hearing nothing beyond the heavy wood, he continued on to his room. She was probably just as tired as he was and hopefully sleeping sound. And his leg was killing him. He stripped off his clothes and raided the rarely touched bottle of painkillers he had in the medicine cabinet before he went to bed.

What Glen said earlier was nagging him. The thing about marriage. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to get married, but he was more set in his ways and was sure that after the first few months he’d start to get annoyed.

Maybe not.

A woman like Brianne would probably keep him on his toes for the rest of his life, but there was that other thing. He was sixteen years her senior. Then there was her confession about not wanting marriage or even a relationship because of what she went through. He was pretty sure he had her just about convinced on the relationships aspect because of the way she was responding to him. Yet, marriage?

His thoughts drifted to Glen’s daughter. More and more he found himself thinking about that pretty little girl. Brianne was loaded with compassion and love and would make an amazing

mother.

A mother to his child?

That same wash of emotion went through him when he first thought about children with her and he knew it wasn't just a spur of the moment thing. His heart seemed to have overruled his head in this instance. After all, he'd never spent that much money on a woman, especially one he just met. Maybe Glen was right. Maybe he did feel something more for Brianne even in the short time he'd known her. Glen was always very insightful except when it came to his own love life, obviously.

He got under the covers and stacked his hands behind his head to stare at the ceiling. He always loved the feel of cool satin on his naked body. He could only think of one thing he'd like on his body better than that.

Brianne.

He smiled to himself. Yes, that would be really nice especially remembering the way she looked tonight. She put every other woman there to shame. Cara was right, he was rude to the man who asked Brianne to dance, but then again, they didn't see all of the men ogling her either, but he did. Not only that, he didn't want another man touching her—ever. If she danced with someone else, they would put their hands on her and know exactly what he knew.

The next day Glen walked into the lawyer's office to see Monique standing by the window. She looked beautiful, radiant and still affected him as if five years of separation never happened.

She turned and looked at him with an expression of disbelief then cast an accusing look at Curtis Phibbs, her father's friend and the man handling his will.

"Your father wanted him here Monique." Said the elderly man. "Please sit down both of you."

She glared at Glen who just stared at her, “Only if you promise to behave.”

“I regret that yesterday.” He said.

“Yeah, well John went back to work this morning because he couldn’t stay in our town any longer if all of the folk were as crazy as you.”

Poor bastard. He wanted to say, but she’d most likely slap him, because it wasn’t in sincerity that he thought that.

“How’s my daughter?” Monique visibly paled.

“Glen—”

He held up a hand, “I’m not going to take your daughter away Monique. So you can stop worrying, and in Jeb’s defence, he didn’t say a word.”

Her shoulders slumped, “Do you mean that? I mean about custody?”

“I do. I just want to handle this amicably so she doesn’t get affected, that means—” he cast a glance at Curtis, who was listening with interest, “—no lawyers. I’ll pay you support—whatever you need.”

“I don’t want anything from you. I wish you realized that years ago.”

“I should have—but I was stupid.” He admitted. That got him a look of expressed shock. He knew why. He was arrogant like his brothers, but he’d been humbled over this situation and it wasn’t often that he apologized for much, but the situation with his ex-fiancé was a complete royal screw up.

Curtis cleared his throat, “We need to get on with this.”

Monique and Glenn took their seats on the opposite side of the desk as Curtis pulled out an envelope and removed some papers from it. His eyes went to Monique, “I just want you to know that this is in no way personal. Your father felt he had a lot to make up for.” She gave him a puzzled look and Curtis folded his hands in front of him on his desk, “He left everything to

Glen.”

“What!” she shot to her feet, with Glen staring at him in disbelief.

“I’m sorry Monique, but he had his reasons.”

“What reasons?” she couldn’t help the tears that started to fall, “He really didn’t love me—after all of this time—he—”

Glen couldn’t help himself, “Here.” He said gently moving his arms around her, “I know I’m not the best person for this right now, but take it please.”

To Monique’s own surprise, she did. She clung to him and wept. Gosh he smelled so good!

Glen looked at Curtis over her head, “What reasons Curtis?”

“He thought he could make things up to you two. He said he lied about everything and you would know what that meant.”

That brought Monique’s head up, “Lied? About what?”

Glen looked down at her, “He was the one that told me about you only marrying me for my money. He told me you did this to several other men—that you—”

“You believed him!” she shoved herself away from him.

“He’s your father.”

“He was a drunk, and he didn’t want to be alone! That’s why he did that! Glen—” she yelled at him, “You should have asked me!”

“I tried.” He said feeling more guilty by the second, “When I came to my senses you left town. I spent months looking for you!”

“God! I was so ashamed.” She buried her head in her hands remembering that day. “I was pregnant and single. My fiancé threw me aside—rumours started circulating. I couldn’t bring Christine up in a place like that with an alcoholic grandfather who would rarely let me out of the house for fear of being alone.”

“I lived with this every day.” He confessed.

That brought her attention back to him, “*You* did? Glen you

have no idea what I've been through."

He visibly winced, "No, I can't even imagine." He went to reach for her and she slapped his hand away.

"Don't, just don't. I can't handle that." What she didn't say, is that being in his arms felt as though it was yesterday, the last time he held her and told her he loved her. He hadn't changed much either. He was so strikingly handsome with his dark looks with the exception of streaks of grey at the temples which made him look even more distinguished. Even now she knew that John didn't hold a candle to him, but she had promised John that she'd marry him.

"Monique." Curtis' voice interrupted, "In Glen's defence, your father said he was very convincing and he also didn't know about Christine, or things would have been different."

She gaped at him, "Five years Curtis." She turned her eyes on Glen, "Five years!"

"Damn it Monique." Glen went to reach for her again.

"No!" she tried to sidestep him but he caught her anyway. He also felt her tremble, "I won't hurt you." He said gently, "I promise—that'll never happen again." He took her arm and led her back to the chair, "Sit down."

She did only because she had problems standing. She was too upset. Everything was a lie! She was lied to by her own father. Her father, who was involved in destroying her relationship with Glen. She became oddly quiet and stared down at her clasped hands. Now she had nothing still. She was hoping for the money from the sale of the house to procure a trust fund for Christine. John was good to her but she couldn't expect him to pay for everything even if he adored Christine.

"I'll sign everything over to you." Glen said taking the seat beside her, "I don't need it."

"You would do that?" she brought her head up and stared at him in awe.

“I would do that for you, yes.” He answered sincerely. Curtis cleared his throat again, “There’s a problem with that.”

“What problem?” Glen asked.

“Sinclair said that you would try to do that because you’re an honourable man, and if you did, I have orders to liquefy his assets and give them to charity. That means if there’s any evidence that you even try and give her money out of your own pocket—”

“Jesus Curtis, she’s the mother of my child, I owe her support!” he contested.

Curtis shook his head, “I told you Sinclair didn’t know about that. Even if he did, I don’t think things would change. So, beyond giving her a few hundred dollars for necessities each week, you can’t give her anything more.”

“No one can live on that!” Glen ran his fingers through his dark hair in frustration, “What about his savings accounts—anything?”

Curtis shook his head, “Everything goes to you.”

Glen cursed. Then he looked at Monique who looked completely defeated. He’d take out a large sum of cash from his own accounts and give that to her, however the old man must’ve thought about that too.

“Before you get any ideas Glen, when this money goes in your name, you need to sign a release for your own bank accounts and assets. Sinclair wanted to make sure you would try and spend your own money on her.”

He cursed fluently in French for a full minute.

“There’s more—”

Glen groaned.

“It’s crazy but there is a way you can have the money Monique.”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do Glen, but he didn’t

have much anyway. It's not like I haven't struggled before—" she said solemnly,

"Actually—he did have money." Curtis said. "Yes, he was an alcoholic Monique, we all knew that, but he was good with money. He knew a lot of loopholes and acted like a scrooge with it."

"How much?" Glen asked.

Curtis looked back and forth between the two, "Well if everything gets liquefied today, five million."

You could have heard a pin drop in the room as the two gaped at the older man. It was Glen that spoke first.

"What's the stipulation that gets her the money?" After hearing how they were betrayed and especially knowing that she must've gone through hell, he wanted her to have it and was willing to do anything within his power to help her get it.

"That she marries you."

Monique shot to her feet, "My father was crazy!"

"No he wasn't." he said leaning back in his seat watching the two of them. It was obvious that the sly old dog wasn't too far off in trying to get these two back together, because there was still some fire between them.

"Could it be possible that he had some sort of alcoholic dementia?" she said exasperated.

"Absolutely not. I'll tell you right now Monique—this will is as solid as a rock. There's no loopholes."

"My lawyers will look at it." Glen said.

"Look all you like, but he spent years preparing this after she left him. " he waved a hand toward Monique, "He knew he did something terrible when she ran away and didn't contact him. It was lucky that you did finally phone him last month."

"I thought it was time we mended things." Her eyes guided to Glen, "I was getting married, and I don't have any other family."

Glen watched her thoughtfully not missing the flash of hurt in her eyes. He knew he'd hurt her back then now, probably more than he could possibly repair, but he was also betrayed, "It's not the end of the world Monique."

"Now you're sounding crazy." She plopped herself down and buried her face in her hands, "Oh God!"

Glen put his arm around her, "We'll get married, then we'll get an annulment."

Curtis cleared his throat again.

"Good God man—give her a break." Glen said knowing that something else was coming.

"You need to stay married for five years and she needs to live with you, under your roof. He had several years to think this through while his guilt was eating him alive at what he'd done to you two. He'd lost his daughter over his selfishness and wants to make things right."

"I'm marrying John!" she protested.

Even though Glen was sympathetic to her anguish he couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of relief. *Not anymore.*

"I won't live off of you." She darted her eyes to Glen.

"I owe you anyway Monique—for Christine."

"I don't' want anything."

"No? And how do you suppose you are going to eat? Then think of our daughter. I can send her to the best schools, dance classes, horseback lessons—"

"I have John." She accused. What she didn't tell him was that John had been supporting her for the last six months because her job as a secretary ended and she wasn't able to get another job and find a decent sitter. It was eating her up with guilt to be living off of him. Then there was what Glen was suggesting about Christine. She'd have the best. He'd see to it. She knew he would.

“I see, so he’s willing to support my daughter too knowing that I’m wealthy and perfectly capable?” He shouldn’t have sounded defensive, but it angered him that this man was seen as her saviour.

She pursed her lips. John probably would if she asked him, but she couldn’t bring herself to do that. He was already supporting the both of them, and she was worried about Christine’s future. It was Christine’s money that her father left them, because she didn’t want a cent of it. “He’s not a bad man.”

“I never accused him of that. He seems to have done a good job so far, but my daughter is my responsibility.”

She dropped her shoulders in defeat. Although she’d never tell him, she still loved Glen and she couldn’t possibly deny him Christine. She needed to get to know her father and his proposal was more than enticing.

“Does she even know about me?” he said raising his brows.

“She does.” She said defensively, “I’ve told her wonderful things about you even if I hated you.”

Another wash of relief. That meant that Monique didn’t try and pass John off as her father which she had every right to do. “Thank you.” As for her other statement, he was pretty sure she didn’t hate him.

She shrugged, “She’s curious. She knows you live here and after I saw Jeb the other day, I told her that she was going to meet you.”

Glen stared down at her vulnerable expression, “Monique, it does sound like you father was trying to do his best to make up to you.”

She took a deep breath, “I know. I guess it’s just hurtful that he was responsible for destroying something I loved.”

Loved? Glen heard the word and a thrill went through him. After her father told him things about her, he doubted her feelings for him, but now she had nothing and nothing to lose so

the confession was genuine. “I still love you Monique.” He admitted softly unsure where he got the guts to say that. Her eyes shot to his and the vulnerability in those deep brown depths was profound and pulled at his heart.

“—Don’t—“

“I do. I always have.” He continued.

“I’m getting married.”

“He’s not for you.”

“He’s a better man than you Glen Durant.” She shot at him.

“That’s probably true because he wouldn’t have hurt you the way I did.”

“No one could do that ever again.”

“Marry me, and we’ll make things work—do it for Christine.”

“Don’t’ use her to drag my feelings into this.”

“I’ll make you happy.”

“I’m already miserable with these demands.” She waved an arm toward Curtis, “I won’t love you again. I can’t.” her voice softened. *Never again.*

CHAPTER NINE

Over the next six weeks, Cara had been spending all of her spare time with Greg, but Brianne couldn’t complain because Jeb had made a point on showing her how to ride a horse properly. Every minute spent with him had her seriously falling deeper and deeper in love.

When she first realized that’s what it was, she was in shock because she’d told herself that she’d never let a man get close to her, but Jeb was no ordinary man. He showed her that men aren’t always brutes. She knew he had a temper, but for once she wasn’t afraid because he’d never lay a hand on her in anger. She

was sure of it.

Equally as shocking was Glen had brought Monique and Christine home and moved them into a room across the hall from hers. For the first week, Christine stayed with Monique until Glen had his company reconstruct one of the other guestrooms on the floor that would be the envy of every little girl on the planet and he designed it while consulting his daughter. He seemed happy, very happy. Only Monique didn't seem to share his enthusiasm. She watched the other woman though, and she looked at Glen when he wasn't looking the same way she knew she looked at Jeb and felt herself smile. There was still love there. Maybe they could work things out. She heard a little of the story from Cara about the will and the terms of the inheritance but Glen seemed to be taking this whole family thing seriously. He arranged for a massive wedding out at the ranch and everyone who was anyone came. Yet they stayed in separate rooms.

Christine was a treat and Brianne thought she was an angel. Monique had done a good job at raising her because she was well mannered. Glen spent all of his free time with her. She was enrolled in dance and her father was teaching her how to ride a pony. She wasn't the only one. Rem, Gabe, Jeb and Cara, treated her like a princess, and the little girl loved it. It made her wonder what it would be like to have a child herself. Glen glowed when he looked at her. To think that a father could love a child so limitlessly created a longing in her heart. The things that she missed out on.

"Pay attention Brianne." Jeb's voice cut in as she was daydreaming and nearly led Honey into a fence. He was riding a big black stallion and looked incredibly sexy with his tan jodhpurs and black riding jacket. For some reason she thought that he'd be wearing jeans and a cowboy hat which is what he usually wore, but he explained that he preferred the proper getup for this type of riding.

She had to practically pick her chin up off the ground when he met her in the stables wearing those tight pants. Then he turned around to adjust the cinch on his saddle and her eyes went over the tight smooth lines of his backside. She had to bite her lip to keep from groaning. My God, he was so perfect! To her own complete shock she actually imagined digging her nails into that firm area.

When Jeb turned back around Brianne was flushed to the roots of her hair, and she looked guilty. It took him a moment to figure out why, then a slow sinful grin spread across his handsome face, “Why Brianne, you little minx. If you like I can take them off.”

Her eyes flew wide, “How is it possible that you always know what I’m thinking. It’s entirely unfair.”

“Not for me.” he said with an arrogant tilt of his mouth.

She narrowed her gaze at him. She was angry that he knew her so well and angry that he always seemed to catch her at her worst. “Well if you didn’t flaunt yourself in front of me—” she waved an arm at him.

“Flaunt?” He burst into laughter, “Honey, this isn’t flaunting.” He said huskily, “but I’d love to show you what is.”

Her eyes got wider, “Just get on your horse.”

He chuckled again and turned around, “You might want to close your eyes.”

“I hate you.” She fumed turning away to mount Honey, but his laughter just got louder.

But she didn’t. She loved him so much that it hurt to even think about it. He was affectionate, but things never carried on like they did on the pool table that night. He kissed her, held her hand, and was a complete gentleman, but that’s as far as it went and quite frankly, he was driving her insane!

The sexual implications he’d make never offended her anymore, they thrilled her, and she ached for the next time he

took her hand, quivered when he kissed her and lay awake a night thinking things that she never thought about before with a man.

The nightmares had all but stopped too. The therapy he took her to was helping, but she was disappointed that he didn't have to come to her rescue anymore. She still couldn't get that man's naked body out of her mind.

She and Cara were leaving to go back to school tomorrow morning. Cara probably wouldn't be home until late, because she'd be spending her last day in Rocksville with Greg. She'd passed Gabe leaving the house with Christine on his shoulders telling her they were going for ice-cream. Brianne laughed at the two of them.

Gosh she was going to miss them all.

Tears started to well up in her eyes. There was so much love here and when you think it would run out, there was more. The whole family moved over for Monique and Christine to make them comfortable, just like they did for her.

Monique was leaning against the doorframe of the house watching her them leave. Brianne didn't notice her until she came up the steps. "Hi."

"Are you all right?" Monique said seeing her eyes water.

She smiled, "I'm fine. First time in a long time." She reached up and wiped her eyes dry with the sleeve of her shirt, "I was just thinking how nice it felt to belong for once."

Monique frowned slightly but did her best to keep her expression hidden from the younger woman. She thought that once too and it split her heart. "I know it's none of my business Brianne, but just be careful."

"I'm trying." Brianne confessed. There was no use denying how she felt about Jeb, it was written all over her all of the time.

Monique breathed deeply, "I guess it is hard isn't it?"

"It?"

“Not falling for one of those men.” She nodded toward the sports car that was zipping down the drive with a laughing four year old in the seat.”

“I always thought that I should be alone because of what happened to me as a child.” Brianne confessed for the first time since she started therapy, “Now, I wonder if I made mistakes.”

“Something happened to you?” Monique’s heart went out to her. She already knew why Jeb was crazy about her. She was beautiful, but she had this quiet strength about her no matter how vulnerable she seemed at times. But to know that someone had hurt a child was unforgivable.

Brianne nodded, “It was quite a few things, but Jeb has been good to me, and even if my heart gets broken—“ she paused giving the other woman a smile, “Which I don’t doubt, I’m going to relish the time I spent here.”

Monique gave her a reassuring smile, “As long as you know that these men leave women heartbroken all of the time.” Her eyes drifted away for a moment and Brianne knew she was thinking of Glen. Brining her eyes back to Brianne she smiled again, “Anyway, I’m glad to have met you.”

“Me too. Cara already told me that I have to come back for Christmas.

“I’ll still be here.” She said less enthusiastically.

Brianne went to walk by her, but then paused. She had nothing to lose for what she was about to say next, “Glen loves you Monique. Jeb told me he did.”

She didn’t seem surprised, “He’s told me every day I’ve been here.”

That made her brows raise, “He did?”

She gave Brianne a partial smile, “I trusted him before and got my heart broken—no crushed. I’m so scared to have it happen again.”

Brianne saw her wrenched expression and didn’t doubt it for

a minute. "I'm not one to pry Monique. It's none of my business, but I can tell you that to love someone and take that risk, like I did, made me feel alive for two months. More than I did in my whole life. I meant it when I said I know my heart will get broken, but I don't regret a moment that I got to spend with Jeb."

"Do you really mean that?"

Monique looked past Brianne who paled significantly at the deep sound of Jeb's voice. Then she gave Jeb a smile that Brianne hadn't seen since she moved in with them and abruptly excused herself.

Brianne couldn't move, she couldn't even turn around and face him after that voiced confession.

"Brianne."

She felt his hands on her shoulders as he turned her around to him. Then he nudged her chin with his fingers to get her to look at him.

"Tell me that again."

"I'm such a fool." She said close to tears. Surprisingly he grinned.

"No, not even close. Now that part about you loving me. I'd like to hear it again."

She shook her head.

His grin widened and he bent his head and brushed his mouth across hers, "Say it."

"No."

He kissed her again, "Say it Brianne."

"No." but it was more breathless this time.

He nudged her up against the door and kissed her hard. It was the first time in weeks since that time in the games room that he did that to her and he had his reasons. He wanted her to miss him intimately even though it was killing him and he'd spent the last month and a half with a permanent erection just thinking about how she felt under him.

His thigh moved between her long legs so he could bring his body intimately against hers. She moaned. He lifted his head and stared down at her, "Say it or I'm going to make love to you right here."

"Oh lord." She murmured moving her arms around his neck and pulling him back to her. Then he shocked her by bending down and scooping her up in his arms. Before she could say anything he kissed her again, fumbled for the door handle and practically rushed up the stairs to his room, bad leg or not, he was having her now. It had been a long time since he wanted someone so bad. In fact, he couldn't remember wanting someone as bad as he wanted Brianne.

Laying her down on his bed, he went back and locked the door while removing his riding jacket tossing it on the floor, followed by his shirt.

Brianne watched as he started to strip off his clothes and raised herself up on her elbows to watch him in fascination. When it came to his pants he paused. She darted her eyes up to his to see them smouldering and a lazy sexy smile drip across his face as he started undoing them. He knew she desired him and was willing to draw this out as much as he possibly could just for her enjoyment.

At the last moment she tore her eyes off of him. She wanted to watch but she suddenly became bashful. She felt the bed shift as he sat down.

"Your turn."

Should she have hesitated as her hands went to the buttons of her blouse? Even as she thought that, she didn't get them all undone before he flattened her out and rolled on top of her. It turned out that she wasn't the only impatient one.

Brianne's eyes shot wide at the sudden movement, "Jeb—"

"I want to do this," he said huskily while undoing the buttons of her top and slipping his hand inside to caress one of

her breasts. He groaned at the feel of her soft skin, “No bra?”

She shut her eyes, “No, it’s hot out.” She said breathlessly.

“In a moment it’ll be hotter in here.” He grinned lowering his mouth to hers.

“Gosh—“ She moaned as his hand continued to work its magic, “You’re just so—“ she arched toward him biting her bottom lip cutting her own words off.

“So what?” he murmured brushing his mouth tantalizingly down her neck while moving the material out of the way.

“So sexy—“ she managed.

He lifted his head and looked down at her, “You think so?”

“You think that enough for the both of us.” She came back with a smile.

“Touché.” He grinned. “So tell me,” he said while manipulating her nipple between his fingers causing her to release a sexy moan, “are you going to tell me to my face what you said to Monique?”

All she could do was shake her head.

“then tell me you want me instead.”

She nodded.

“Say it Brianne.”

“I—I want you.”

“How much?”

“You’re killing me—“ she groaned.

He chuckled softly and took her mouth under his in a crushing passionate move. He wasn’t holding back anymore, he wanted her too. “I’m so glad we’re on the second floor.” He said against her lips.

“Why?”

“Because honey, we’re definitely going to make some noise and this floor is soundproofed.”

She actually found herself laughing right before he possessed her mouth again.

Brianne wasn't sure about her actions, but feeling Jeb's large hard form on top of hers caused such an incredible yearning in her that any hesitation she felt about coming to his room, was gone.

The night before, she lay in bed for several hours wondering if it was the right decision and reflected over everything Jeb had said about her not experiencing a man. Of course she would have never thought that she would, but Jeb managed to change her mind. She wanted him to the point of obsession because she couldn't ignore the things that she felt when she was around him. It was like an addiction. Images of his naked body kept popping into her mind and despite being incredibly curious, she also found herself burning up inside. He was so male, so masculine and she thought he was a perfect image of what a man should look like, all hard and large. If she were going to give herself to someone, it had to be a man that she thought was perfect in her eyes. To her, Jeb was perfect.

"Brianne."

The huskiness in his voice when he said her name made her heat up a few more degrees. It was then she realized that she had her eyes close. Slowly she opened them and stared up at him.

"You need to be sure." Normally if a woman crawled in his bed, he wouldn't care, but this was Brianne and he did care. He cared a lot.

"I am." She said surprised at the unsteadiness of her voice.

A slow sexy smile spread across his face, "There's no turning back after this. I may seem in control, but I won't be as soon as I get your clothes off and feel your body under mine."

"Oh, that sounds amazing." She breathed. Even the thought of his hard form pressing onto hers made her hands slip around his back and feel the contours of his muscles, "Jeb, you are so perfect."

"Ah hell." He growled and took her mouth again. This time

with complete urgency. She was touching him without encouragement and if he had any resistance before, it was gone. He lifted himself back on his heels much to her protests, grinned down at her and pulled off her jeans, then her panties.

“Wait.” She said.

Jeb paused wondering if she’d changed her mind, but instead she sat up and looked down the length of him, her eyes were wide with wonder. He sat there and let her, trying not to feel his ego inflating with the unmasked expression of awe on her face. Then her eyes went up to his with hesitation and he shook his head slightly understanding what she meant and reached over to take her hand and placed it on his thick chest, “You definitely don’t need permission to touch me.”

And she did. Her other hand joined the first as she came up on her knees and ran her hands over his upper body. Meanwhile Jeb reached up and finished undoing the buttons on her top. Every time he undid a button he gave her a sensuous kiss. He brushed the material aside and ran his eyes over her. She was so beautiful.

Brianne became braver with his encouragement and finally dipped her eyes down his body and gasped. Then she brought her eyes back to his with a blatant question in her emerald gaze. She just couldn’t find the words to ask it.

Jeb knew what had startled her, “God made us so we’d fit Brianne.”

“I—I don’t know, I’m frightened.”

“Here.” He said taking her hand and placing it further down his abdomen, “touch me.”

She did before in the games room and was fascinated by how solid that part of him was. However, there was material in the way. Now she could see all of him and although she wanted him, she was hesitant. However, she was also curious and slid her hand down to his erection. Her eyes widened as he hissed

through his teeth and sucked in a deep breath as her fingertips brushed him.

“Am I hurting you?”

“God no.” he said focusing his gaze on her, “It feels like this—” his hand roamed down to the junction of her thighs to remind her of that night on the pool table.

“Oh—” she moaned and tightened her hand around him causing him to groan.

“Baby, this isn’t working for me, I’m going to finish before I get in you.” He reached down with his other hand and removed hers from him and placed it on his chest as he continued to pleasure her with his. He could feel her tremble then her hands gripped his shoulders to try and prevent her from falling. He managed to gently move her back down onto the mattress before she collapsed. He knew enough about women to know that she was close to her first orgasm. But he stayed between her thighs and continued to torture her with her own body. If she thought for a moment that he wasn’t getting anything out of it, she was wrong. He nearly came just watching her writhe naked in front him sprawled across his satin sheets.

Then he quickly covered her soft body with his, “Put your legs around my hips,” he said deeply and managed to help her show what he meant. Then he adjusted himself to probe for entrance and in one quick thrust, took her virginity.

Brianne felt a stab of discomfort but the feeling of him in her overwhelmed that. She might have even whimpered but it was smothered by his groaning mouth as he began a slow torturous rhythm. She was so lost in him already that it just exacerbated the pleasure she was already feeling. She released a moan against his mouth as his tongue toyed with hers because of the unbelievable pressure building low in her pelvis with every accompanied thrust.

He seemed to know exactly what she wanted and increased

the force and rhythm of his movement and before long she was clawing at his shoulders trying to reach--, "Oh!" she tore her mouth away from his as a powerful wave of pleasure washed through her the likes which she'd never experienced.

Jeb managed to still read her responses despite his own building climax. She was so damn tight and slick! Yet, he couldn't get close enough, couldn't possess her fast enough.

Finally he rose up on his hands and started to thrust powerfully into her. Brianne stayed with him and tightened her thighs around his hips while digging her sharp nails into his shoulders. Her head was arched back and her sensuous mouth parted while sexy noises came with every rapid exhale. It just heightened the act. The headboard of the solid maple bed thumped heavily against the wall with each dominant thrust he gave her and before long their voices matched one another. He reached over and grabbed the headboard with one hand, and scooped the other under her bottom with the other forcing himself deep within her. She clung to him, taking every bit of him with rabid passion. Then she cried out, stiffened and shuddered her release.

Jeb growled and gave her another good hard thrust to feel his. He swore he spilled every ounce of himself in her while gripping her ass tightly to pull her closer. Then he grunted, slackened and collapsed on top of her.

"Oh lord, oh lord, oh lord." Brianne mouthed in his ear.

His answer was a satiated groan.

"I saw stars." She breathed.

Jeb lifted his head and looked at her. Then he kissed her tenderly for a long while, adoring her completely. "stars, planets and the inhabitants."

She actually heard herself laugh, then became serious, "I want more." She said wide-eyed.

Jeb laughed, "Look what I've created."

“That was the most incredible thing I ever—“

“First, we need to talk. Then I’ll satisfy your lust.” He said raising himself off of her.

“No—“ she reached for him.

“Honey, we have all night,” he gave her a sexy grin, “but you must be sore.”

“I don’t know—“ she said moving her hips a little, “I don’t care either.”

He shook his head, “Brave words. Tomorrow will be a different story. Come here.” He rolled to the side and pulled her against him. “Give me a few minutes baby, and I’ll take you to heaven again.”

“Is that what that was? Wow!” she murmured against his chest. “Whatever religion you are, I just converted.”

“Careful darling, you’ll make my head swell.” He looked down at her grinning.

“I just never realized that it would be so profound. I think I lost consciousness.”

He chuckled and she felt the vibration from deep within his chest against her body. “There’s some things you need to understand and we need to discuss first Brianne.”

“Like?”

“Well, for one, I’m not going to tolerate another man in your life. Just because we are like this in bed, doesn’t mean you can share this with another. I’ll let you know right now that what we have is not normal.”

“No?” she smiled sensuously, “I really don’t think I need convincing in that area.”

He shook his head and gave her a serious expression, “I know what you said earlier about marriage, but you should consider it.”

“What?” she said pulling away from him, “Jeb, you have no idea what I’ve witnessed.”

“That’s true, but my father’s marriages were happy ones. He lost my mother to cancer and married my stepmother to have three more children. He loved both of his wives very much and never raised his hand to them.”

“Wait—“ something suddenly dawned on her, “Are you asking me to marry you?” she asked with a look of utter shock and fear.

“Yes.” He said studying her frightened expression, “I think we should especially after *that*. You could be pregnant Brianne. I was so hot for you, that I didn’t use protection. Something I could never be accused of before in my life.” He paused, “Hell, you’d be pregnant even if I did, after what we just shared.” This time he grinned.

“Pregnant?” she stared at him stunned and her hand coasted down to her belly spanning over the flat contour. A baby?

He leaned up on an elbow and looked down at her, “Yes honey.”

She couldn’t describe the feeling that went through her at those words. A baby—a baby that she could love, a baby of Jeb’s that she could give everything to.

“Brianne?” Jeb was surprised to see tears swell up in her eyes and spill down her cheeks, “Hey,” he said softly, “What’s wrong?”

“I just never thought that I would—could be a mother.”

“Why not? You’re full of love honey.”

She reached up and wiped the tears off her cheeks with the heel of her hand. “It just never seemed real. I mean I didn’t want a relationship or anything to do with men.”

He leaned down and kissed the wet paths her tears made, “I never saw myself settling down either.”

“You didn’t?” she said with surprise.

He shook his head, “Brianne, I’ve lived a pretty crazy life. My family is my priority, but from the moment I laid eyes on you

in that red lacy getup, I was completely screwed.”

She released a laugh, “You’re never going to let that go are you?”

“Not for the rest of my life I hope.”

Her smile disappeared and she just stared at him.

He could understand her reservations because he was sure that Cara filled her full of stories about him and he told her that, but she quickly shook her head, “What?”

“At first I thought she was exaggerating but now that I’ve met all of you, especially you, she was right on cue.”

He grinned, “Lucky me.”

“Jeb—I—”

“No, don’t you dare refuse Brianne, I want to marry you.”

“Because I might be pregnant and because you see how Glen is over his daughter.”

He shook his head, “How about, because I love you.”

It took her a full minute before she found her voice, “Is that an after sex thing that men do?”

He threw back his head and laughed and Brianne blushed bright red.

“Well, I don’t know!” she said exasperated.

He managed to bring his eyes to hers, “No, it’s something I’ve never said before to any woman—actually in grade two I think I told my teacher that.”

It was her turn to laugh, “You’re such a jerk.”

He grinned, “How about it. Marry me?”

“Do you mean it, that you love me?”

“I don’t say anything I don’t mean.” His hand came up and brushed a lock of hair off her cheek, “I’m nuts, stupid, crazy about you Brianne. I was from the first moment I laid eyes on you. Do you know that I’ve never laughed so much in the past ten years than I have in the past week with you? You make me feel so alive and after that mind-blowing moment a few minutes

ago, I know we're perfect for one another."

"I'm so scared." She hiccupped.

"So am I."

"Really?" Now that surprised her.

"Yes." He bent down and gave her a tender kiss, "But I'm willing to try."

That confession made every difference to her in the world.

"Now—" he said grinning, "—tell me you love me too and I'll make love to you again."

"Oh, I love you, I love you, I—" her words were cut off by his sensuous mouth.

Cara sat across from Glen at breakfast the next morning. Gabe and Rem had already left to the condo site. It was Sunday, but Glen already barked orders at him. She noticed that he looked like he tied one on the night before. Even though he didn't talk about his love life, she was concerned about him. "Are you okay Glen?"

"Fine mouse." He answered without looking up from the paper he was reading.

"You look like hell." That brought his gaze to hers.

"Don't curse." He scolded still not looking up and taking a long swallow from his coffee. It was ripping him apart that the woman he loved lived under their roof and he hadn't been able to touch her. He knew the betrayal ran deep, but he'd hoped that she'd come around with his gentle coaxing, but so far there was nothing. She still seemed to mistrust him.

She bit her lip, "You guys do."

He finally lifted his eyes to hers with amusement in their dark depths, "yes, but we're men, and we work in the construction business, its expected. And—" he added seeing that she was about to protest, "—I'll tell father Jim that you did and he'll make you say 'hail Mary's' until the cows come home."

“Ha.” She challenged causing him to give her a lopsided smile. Then he sat back and set his paper down, “Okay honey, out with it.”

“There’s just no use hiding anything from you guys.”

“Nope.”

Fine, she thought taking a deep breath. This would have to be quick because she knew he would stop her from talking. So she burst the words out quickly, “It’s just that I know that you still have some feelings for Monique—and did you see that guy? He was not meant for her, I mean, he seems nice enough—oh Gosh Glen, just go get her!” surprisingly he never said a word but just looked at her for a moment before he nodded.

“First of all honey, you don’t know the story—“

“She must love you. Who couldn’t?”

He grinned, “You’re such a sweetheart.”

“Oh Glen, she looks so pretty doesn’t she?”

“Yes.” He said without hesitation, “But she’s in love with the captain of the debate team.”

She gave him a perplexed look.

“Never mind,” he actually smirked, then took a deep breath and stood up, “Tell you what. I’ll go and try.”

“really!” She couldn’t believe her ears.

“I’ll give no guarantees, but sure.” If she knew how hard it was for him to come to terms with what he was about to do, she wouldn’t have asked him. His heart hurt as if it was yesterday that he’d thrown her out of his house. He couldn’t lose her again. He had to try. His feelings hadn’t faded for her at all, not in five years.

“Where’s Jeb?” Cara finally realized the early riser of them all wasn’t at breakfast.

Glen smirked, “I assume, that he’s getting engaged, so stay out of Brianne and Glen’s room, because I’m sure they’re in one of them.”

“What!”

He chuckled and walked out of the dining room leaving Cara gaping at his back.

And he was right.

“Like this.” Jeb said, his voice cracking with strain as he guided Brianne’s hips on top of his. He desperately wanted to take control, but she was trying to learn and he had to give her that freedom. Not only that, the restraint he was using was just turning him on more and she was a fast learner.

“Oh lord.” She groaned placing her hands on his thick chest to brace herself.

He reached up and cupped her breasts as she arched over him trying to keep a rhythm, but it was just so intense that she was ready to reach her peak.

She looked so damn sensuous above him, that he couldn’t take it anymore and grabbed her hips flipping her over in a single fluid motion to thrust into her until she cried her release.

At the same time Glen was thumping on the door of Monique’s room. When she opened the door, he didn’t give her a chance to talk. He just grabbed her and crushed her mouth under his. It might have been record time for a woman to respond after the initial shock, but she did. Glen kicked the door shut.

epilogue

It was the following week that Cara and Brianne went back to school in Boston. The only difference was, the wedding ring that Brianne coveted on her ring finger and the never-ending smile she wore. However, Cara would be by herself a week later when Brianne found out she was pregnant. Jeb refused to let her continue in school and insisted on bringing her home where he could look after her and shower her with love. At least that’s

what he told her and it seemed to be quite convincing.

Brianne was ecstatic to see that Glen and Monique made up and decided to try for a second child. It turned out that John and Monique were just very close friends. Apparently Glen was right, he was gay, and didn't want his family to know, so they were helping each other out. The marriage was a cover for him and in turn he said he'd help her financially.

Gabe and Rem hadn't changed over the next few months and still chased anything in a skirt, but Cara had gotten a promise ring from Greg. At least he did the wise thing and went to Jeb for his permission first.

However, it was Brianne who felt she was the luckiest woman alive.

"Imagine." She told Jeb one night in bed, "If I came out of the bathroom fully clothed that day."

He rolled on top of her, "Honey, you could have been buried up to your neck in sand, and I would have still lusted after you."

She laughed, "You say the sweetest things."



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