



*Knocked
Up* BY THE
BILLIONAIRE

TASHA FAWKES
M.S. PARKER

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Tasha Fawkes
M. S. Parker

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Published By: Safira Publishing

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Chapter One

Brady

"Hey, Brady, check her out, over there." Nick pointed to a blonde woman across the room. "She's been eyeing you since we walked in the door."

I barely heard my best friend's comment, busy with a tall, big-breasted brunette who had walked over to our table, abruptly sat down on my lap, wrapped her arms around my neck, and planted one on my lips. I didn't know her, at least I don't think I did. Did it matter? Not really. She made herself comfortable on my lap as I inhaled a combination of perfume and booze.

Well, how about that? Enjoying the buzz of my third or fourth Queimada—who was counting—I grinned lazily at the woman after she broke off the kiss.

"Do I know you?" I asked. I might have met her, but who could remember? I'd enjoyed so many one-night stands over the years it was impossible to recall them all. Big tits, little tits, it didn't matter to me.

Nick said I was a chick-magnet, and I believed it. Completely. I had been told so many times that I was hot and that my hard body was to die for, and that my features reminded them of this movie star or that musician, so who was I to argue? I loved it. Not that I had a big head... at least not the one on top of my shoulders anyway. I didn't do girlfriends... *no, don't go there*, so this was fine with me. Free sex. I'd never had to pay for it, and I never would.

"No, but you can if you want to." The brunette smiled, leaning closer to kiss me again.

The drink was supposed to provide mystical powers. Maybe it did. Then again, how many times had I also been told I had magic fingers? A well-honed skill, one that I practiced as often as I could. Nothing more distracting than having sex, no doubt about it.

One arm wrapped around the young woman's shoulders, the other cupping and gently squeezing an ample breast, I tried to enjoy the moment. The large, steady thrum of the bass in the dance club in the basement next door to my hotel kept time with the pounding of my heartbeat. The techno-

beat of the music nearly shook the walls as red, blue, and green strobe lights swirled over the dancing crowd, the popular nightclub packed to the brim.

I stared at the crowd, a surge of... of something different gnawing at my belly. My dick responded to the music and the woman in my lap, but my thoughts felt detached, observing and yet not joining in the abandon and *joie de vivre* expressed by the dancing couples on the floor or making out in their own half-shadowed booths.

I glanced at Nick. I knew why I'd come here, and it wasn't only because Nick had encouraged me. Anything to stave off the growing *boredom*, this growing sense of disconnection. I frowned. Bored? How could I be bored? Spending every night with another woman, indulging in booze, the fast cars, the jet-setting around the globe. How could I be bored. And yet...

I grinned as the woman in my lap leaned closer and sucked on my earlobe, evoking goose bumps along my skin. Distracted, I chuckled and offered her my neck while my palm lightly rubbed against her breast. I felt her nipple harden through the fabric. So did my dick, lengthening along the inside of my jeans as she wiggled her ass against my groin.

“Brady!”

I laughed as Nick reached across the table and tapped my shoulder. “What’s the rush?”

“Maybe I’ll take my chance with her,” Nick said, raising his voice to be heard above the music as he gestured over his shoulder. “Come up for air, bro. I need five hundred Euros.”

“For what?”

“For some blow.” Nick shrugged, again tilting his head toward the woman staring at us from across the room. “An icebreaker.”

With a sigh, I let go of the woman’s breast and dug my hand into my left front pants pocket to pull out several bills. “Don’t spend it all,” I warned, then turned to grin at the beauty still grinding on my lap. “I plan on doing some entertaining myself.”

I didn’t do drugs like Nick. Didn’t like the way they made me feel. I drank, sometimes to extremes, but that too was gradually taking its toll. I was getting sick—literally—of waking up with throbbing headaches and fuzzy hangovers. At twenty-seven, I was just beginning to realize that I couldn’t party quite as hard as I had at twenty. I pushed the negative thoughts from my head and watched as Nick snatched the money from the table and pressed his

way through the crowd to the other side of the room.

I momentarily ignored the woman on my lap, still gyrating, eyes closed, an ethereal smile lifting the corners of her mouth, imagining God only knew. I stared after my friend. Nick Calloway and I had been best friends and drinking buddies since high school. Originally from California, Nick was the quintessential typical surfer dude—tanned skin, unruly blond hair, and a happy-go-lucky, almost reckless attitude about life. All he wanted to do was surf, party, snort coke, and look for the next lay, and not necessarily in that order.

Unlike me, Nick didn't come from a well-connected family. After a brief stint as a bartender, he had quit. He told me that he wanted to become an agent; to book bands in clubs like this one, but he didn't seem to understand that his employment history, or lack of one, stood in the way of his dreams.

Over the past couple of years, Nick had often tagged along with me on my 'vacations'— me footing the bill of course. Earlier this week, we had landed in Ibiza, Spain. For the briefest of moments as I watched Nick make a beeline for the attractive blonde across the room, I felt a surge of... annoyance? Dissatisfaction?

The ample-breasted brunette on my lap distracted me when she not so surreptitiously slid her hand between my legs and groped my balls. I glanced at her and noted her dilated pupils and knew she was high, drunk, maybe even both. She wanted it. She wanted me, and I was all too happy to oblige. I had just reached for her breast again, almost desperate for the distraction, when out of the corner of my eye I saw someone approaching the table. With a sigh, I turned, thinking it was Nick wanting more money.

Not Nick, but a gorgeous brunette nearly identical to the woman who sat on my lap. I did a double-take and then glanced between the two of them, an eyebrow raised.

"My twin sister, Maria." The woman on my lap smiled and beckoned her sister to join us.

I slid over, the brunette on my lap giggling softly as she leaned close to nibble at my earlobe again. I couldn't remember her name, but it didn't matter. This must be my lucky day. I'd never had a threesome with twins before. This might be an interesting evening after all.

"Marta, let me have some fun," Maria said, sending a pout toward her sister.

Marta released my earlobe as Maria threaded her fingers through my hair and turned my face toward her, pressing her lips against mine with as much enthusiasm as her sister had moments before. At the same time, Marta traced the tip of her tongue down along the side of my neck and then nibbled my shoulder through my T-shirt. My dick throbbed in earnest now as Marta's hand massaged my balls and stroked my hard-on through my jeans.

Maria, apparently not wanting to be undone by her sister, slid her hand underneath the bottom of my T-shirt and circled my nipples with a long fingernail. Her tongue dove deep into my mouth. Her lips caught my tongue and gently sucked.

God, I was going to explode right here. I doubted anyone would even notice if I—

I felt a vibration in my back pocket that had nothing to do with sex. Dammit! My phone. I couldn't hear my distinctive ringtone 'Custard Pie' ringing over the pounding music but counted to five before the intermittent vibrations ceased. I knew who was probably trying to call me, but I was determined to ignore it. Wanted to ignore everything from back home in Texas, hence my presence in Ibiza.

An arm draped around each of the sisters, I pulled them closer and groped their breasts; Marta's right one and Maria's left one, wondering if because they were twins they would be the same size and fullness. To my delight, they were. I occupied myself tweaking their nipples into erect, hard pebbles as I—

The phone in my pocket buzzed again. Shit. With a sigh, I pulled away from both of them, untangled my arms from around their shoulders, and leaned forward to pull the phone from my back pocket. I glared at the phone screen, it's blue glow stark against the blackness. I saw that I had missed two calls from Frederick Brunson, my father's lawyer.

"Do you need to take that?" Marta said, leaning close to my ear, seductively tracing her tongue around its edges.

I shook my head. "You lovely ladies have my complete and total attention," I lied. I passed my gaze over the crowd and lifted a hand toward a passing waiter to order a bottle of Cristal champagne. So, what if it cost a thousand Euros? The more I spent, the more I annoyed my father.

I turned to one twin then the other and grinned. "Now, where were we?"
"Right about here." Marta giggled, her hand once again diving into my

crotch.

I took turns kissing the girls, trying to determine which was the best kisser, but so far, the contest was tied. My blood surged, excitement burgeoning into a growing ball of fire from my—no pun intended—balls to my brain. I pushed all negative thoughts from my head, only having to slightly force myself to disappear into the sensations the lovely twins provided.

I barely noticed when the waiter returned with a bottle and only broke off the kiss with Maria long enough to tell the man to put it on my tab.

“Certainly, sir,” the waiter said.

The waiter hesitated briefly, glanced between the two women, breasts nearly spilling from their scanty dresses. He glanced down and saw where Marta’s hand had disappeared. He blinked, then straightened and moved off, slightly shaking his head. I felt a perverse sense of satisfaction. Oh, to be handsome, young, and loaded. Did it really get any better?

The booth we sat in was shadowed in semi-darkness, so unless you were up close and personal like the waiter, no one could see what exactly was going on between the three of us. I felt tempted to slide my hand under the hem of Marta’s short dress. Was she bare under there? Was her pussy slick and wet, ready for some action?

I glanced around the throng in the room, the strobe lights briefly illuminating dancing couples, colors flashing, flesh bared, laughing faces, drinks held high by some as they gyrated and did their dirty dancing moves with one another. There must’ve been a couple hundred people in the club, but every couple was isolated in their own little bubble, paying no attention to anyone else around them.

I caught a glimpse of Nick at the other side of the room alone, leaning against a wall beneath the DJ, hands shoved into his pockets, shoulders slumped with obvious dejection. He’d struck out again. If I were feeling generous, I would’ve gestured my friend over to join us. I wasn’t feeling very generous at the moment.

I turned from one twin to the other and reached for the bottle of champagne on the table. “Ladies, what say we take this party to my suite at the hotel next door? We can continue the party there.”

Chapter Two

Dana

“If we look at some macroscopic animals and plants, we can discover that many have microscopic juvenile stages, which...”

I tried really hard to concentrate in class, my eyelids heavy and feeling like sandpaper. I counted the minutes before I could escape the most boring drone of the professor at the front of the room. Ugh. Ten more minutes. It seemed like forever.

Normally, when bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, I tolerated the professor—not that I had any control—but I’d been up late the night before studying. I’d fallen asleep around four o’clock this morning without shutting my bedroom window. That after a full day of classes and a pick-up shift at the diner on the corner. After falling asleep on the bed surrounded by my textbooks, I’d woken at seven o’clock with stiff joints and a throbbing headache. I grimaced as I clambered out of bed over my books and made a mad dash for my bathroom. I couldn’t be late for class again.

The bathroom was tiny, and that was being generous. Barely enough room for the camper-sized shower stall, a chipped and stained porcelain sink jutting from the wall, and beside that, an equally dinged porcelain toilet. Muttering, I reached into the shower and turned on the faucets, knowing exactly how far to turn each one to get the temperature I wanted—if I were lucky.

The piping made a groaning sound and shuddered inside the wall before the showerhead spurting unsteady bursts of water until pressure stabilized. I quickly pulled my T-shirt over my head and pulled off my sweatpants, naked underneath, and stepped under the running water. I inhaled sharply as cool water pelted my skin and then gradually warmed up. If no one on my floor flushed a toilet, which usually resulted in a sudden drop in not only water pressure but temperature, I'd count my blessings.

I was in and out of the shower in less than five minutes, probably a world record for me. I quickly yanked the towel from the rack and towel-dried as I stepped into the studio, scanning the clothes strewn on the floor, looking for something relatively clean.

The morning had gone downhill from there. I'd barely made it to my microbiology class, dull and challenging under the best of circumstances, but with lack of sleep and my pounding headache, I was barely able to concentrate. Spring finals were coming up, and I needed to focus. I closed my eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and made a conscious effort to sit straighter and to listen to the monotone drone of my professor, who, if possible, made microbiology even more mind-numbing than it already was.

I glanced up at the clock again. Thank God, five more minutes of this torture and I could escape, at least for twenty minutes before my next classes—Fundamentals of Patient Care followed by Developmental Psychology.

The phone in my back pocket vibrated. I ignored it at first. Probably Charlie, my brother. At twenty-one, Charlie was one year younger than me, although most of the time, he acted like an adolescent teen. I loved him dearly, but he could be challenging, especially after the death—

I surreptitiously slipped the phone out of my pocket, glanced down at the screen, and frowned. Not Charlie. I didn't recognize the number. I never took calls from numbers I didn't recognize. If it was important, they'd leave a voicemail. I slid the phone back into my pocket, quickly jotted down the assignment the professor wrote on the board, heavy-handed with his chalk, causing goosebumps to rise on my arms. He did that on purpose. Likely his own brand of revenge on his class full of uninterested students.

I headed out of class without speaking to anyone, not that I usually did. I had often been told that I was anti-social, but I wasn't. Not really. I was friendly and liked socializing. I make friends easily, but truth be told, I'm just too busy. Besides, I don't like the melodrama of which many of my peers

seemed to thrive. If they only knew how petty their whining about stupid things was compared to the really tragic things that could happen in life... Anyway, between studying and my crappy job at the diner just around the corner from my studio apartment, *and* trying to keep track of Charlie, I barely had enough time for myself, let alone friends.

I stepped onto the quad and stood for several moments bathed in warm sunshine, heaving a sigh of relief. Thank goodness, I didn't have classes all day today. The phone in my pocket vibrated again. I pulled it from my pocket and glanced at the screen. A text message. I opened it.

This is Mercy West Hospital. Charlie Sommer requested that we notify you that he has been admitted following an accident. Please contact hospital for information.

My heart skipped a beat. A cold chill swept down my spine despite the warmth of the morning. Charlie! "Oh Lord, what now?" I headed for the south side of campus where the buses stopped regularly, but a quick glance at my watch made me pause. A bus going in that direction wouldn't be coming along for another twenty minutes. With a breathy curse, I turned around and headed for the quad again. I couldn't wait for a bus. I would have to take a taxi. An expense that I rarely indulged in, but this was an emergency.

I half-walked, half-ran through the quad and toward the nearest corner along University Avenue. Traffic was steady, but after a few moments, I spotted a yellow cab and lifted my arm and waved. The cab merged with traffic on the street and pulled to the curb.

I opened the door and clambered inside. "Dallas University Hospital!"

I barely sat down before the taxi took off, meter running. Keeping one eye on the meter and the other on the street, I couldn't help but imagine the worst. What happened? Had Charlie been hit by a car? How bad was he hurt? And, although I was ashamed to admit it, *how much was this going to cost?*

Heart pounding in dread, I prayed that Charlie wasn't hurt badly. That he didn't need surgery. That he wouldn't die. I had dealt with enough heartbreak in my life. Charlie might have his problems, but he was my brother. I'd do anything for him.

By the time the taxi pulled up in front of the entrance doors of the five-story hospital complex, I trembled with anxiety, so much so that when I glanced at the meter and dug into my pocket for the twenty I always carried on me, I nearly ripped the bill. I told the cabbie to keep the change. Five

dollars wasn't going to make or break me, and I knew that like me, cabbies relied on tips to make it by. I barely heard the cabby's mumbled thanks—was that sarcasm or appreciation—before I scrambled out, slammed the door, and trotted toward the front doors. They swished open as a middle-aged couple exited, and I hurried through. Directly across from the entrance stood a reception desk manned by two older women wearing pink tops.

“May I help you, dear?” one of the ladies asked with a smile.

“Emergency room!”

“To the left, follow the corridor.”

“Thanks.” I quickly turned left. I'd never been inside this hospital before, although next semester, I might be enduring my summer practicum hours here. It looked like a nice place—floor-to-ceiling windows on the left, real potted plants, low-pile carpeting with a modern abstract design in colorful red, yellow, and blue.

After I rounded the curve of the building, I saw the waiting room of the emergency department at the far end of the hall. I quickly made my way to yet another reception desk, this one situated behind a half wall of stucco and wood paneling on the bottom, glass on top. The nurse behind the glass focused on her computer screen, fingers flying over the keys. I tapped on the glass. The nurse looked up and leaned forward to open the small sliding glass window over the desk.

“I got a text. My brother was brought here a little while ago—”

“Name?”

“My name is Dana Sommer. My brother's name is Charlie Sommer. S-o-m-m-e-r.”

The nurse picked up a clipboard beside her computer, thumbed through several papers, and then nodded. “Come on back,” she said, pressing a round red button on the wall beside her desk. A low buzz followed, and I turned toward the two automatically locking doors that slowly opened. The sign on one of them read: No admittance. Emergency Room Personnel Only!

I quickly stepped through as the nurse on the other side gestured. “Follow me please.”

Mouth dry and pulse racing, I followed quickly taking in the scene. Large floor space separated into trauma bays, and light blue fabric curtains divided the spaces neatly. Carts with drawers containing numerous ER supplies, and portable x-ray and digital scanning machines, wheelchairs, and several

gurneys lined the walls. Two of the bays were occupied, their curtains pulled completely around on tracks screwed into the ceiling, hiding the patients from view. The sound of a woman weeping came from one, the voice of a male doctor discussing test results with his patient from the other.

I followed the nurse as I took a hard right and then proceeded through another set of double doors. A smaller space equipped with four additional bays, each with another set of curtains hanging from their ceiling tracks.

“He’s over there, last one on the left. The doctor will come talk to you shortly.”

Before I could ask any questions, the nurse turned and left. It was quiet in here, barely any activity; was this a room where non-emergent cases waited to be seen or transferred to a room on the upper floors? A young nurse stood at a high-waisted mobile desk that served as a nursing station, tapping information into a tablet, a stethoscope resting beside it. She looked over at me, offered a small smile and a nod, and then returned to her charting or whatever it was she was doing.

My tennis shoes made no sound on the linoleum floor as I stepped toward the last bay. I grasped the curtain and slowly pulled it aside, afraid of what I might see on the other side. When I saw my brother, I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle my gasp.

“Does it look that bad?”

“Oh my God, Charlie, what happened?” Relieved that my brother was conscious, I swept my gaze over his usually handsome face. A two-inch cut on his forehead. It looked deep. A puffy right eye nearly swollen shut, the skin around it already starting to turn a deep purple. A horizontal gash over the bridge of his nose, probably broken. It too had started to swell, as had the right side of his jaw. Along with his bottom lip, dried blood congealing on it.

“Don’t freak, Dana,” he said. “A few stitches, a cracked rib, and a busted nose, but other than that, I’m going to be all right.”

“What happened?” I stared aghast at him, reaching for his hand. I noted his scraped and bloodied knuckles and frowned. A fight?

“Don’t get pissed, I—”

“A little late for that, don’t you think? Another fight?” He looked away, shoulders slumped. I felt bad. Why did I always feel sorry for him? No matter how frustrated I got with him, I couldn’t stand the thought of him thinking I was disappointed in him. He just couldn’t seem to catch a break. Bad luck

followed him, some of it his own doing, some of it merely that—bad luck.

“I owe some money... to a bookie—”

I barely stifled a groan. We had talked about this before. Or rather, I had talked, trying to get him to understand that his on-again and off-again penchant for gambling wasn't going to get him anywhere but into trouble. I struggled to hide my disappointment. His eyes looked so... so sad. He wasn't trying to play me. That's the way he always looked. Most of the time, anyway. I didn't know how to take that sadness away.

“Your bookie...” I didn't pursue that, at least not for the moment. “And he did *that* to you?” I felt sick to my stomach.

Charlie nodded. “Slim Pete. He said he was tired of waiting for me to pay up.”

How long had this been going on? I swallowed and struggled to hide my emotions. “Tired of waiting... how much do you owe him, Charlie?”

“Fifty grand.”

At first I thought I had misheard, but when I saw the look on his face, his ashen skin and the damage that had been done to his face, I realized I hadn't. Oh God. *Fifty thousand dollars?* The air left my lungs as if I'd just been punched in the gut. Never in my life would I have imagined that he would be so reckless as to dig himself a hole this deep. The worst had been two years ago. A two-thousand-dollar debt. I had worked hard to pay it off, as had Charlie, taking any construction job he could find. I thought he had learned his lesson. I thought my brother had been doing good lately, fighting his demons without throwing caution to the wind. Obviously not.

I stared at him, mouth open but no words coming out. His eyes filled, and he gently shook his head, ashamed. He spoke, his voice subdued.

“He said if I don't pay up within a week, the goons will pay me another visit.”

His good eye turned toward me.

“I got the impression that they wouldn't go so easy on me next time.”

Oh God, oh God, oh God. I shook my head and said the first thing that came into my head. “You've got to get out of town, Charlie!” Panic bubbled up inside me. “You can't stay here... you need to find a place to hide. Maybe you can go to Uncle Greg's.”

“No way!” he refused. “I'd sooner risk my life here than ask that lush for any favors.”

While I had little affection for my fifty-two-year-old alcoholic uncle on our dad's side, he was about the only family we had left. Our parents' had died in a plane crash seven years ago. After the tragedy, Charlie and I had moved in with Uncle Greg, but he was always drunk and paid little attention to us. He demanded that I take care of all the cooking, the cleaning, and the laundry.

At fifteen, with a fourteen-year-old brother, I had basically become Charlie's parent, but I took the responsibility seriously. Even at such a young age, Charlie had realized that Greg Sommer was worthless. Our uncle had only agreed to take us in because my father's life insurance policy provided him with an allowance that would enable him to support us.

Problem was, he didn't use the money to support me or my brother. He spent it on booze and women. How many nights had I relied on boxed macaroni and cheese to feed us? More often than not there was no milk for breakfast, and supper usually consisted of Campbell's tomato soup with saltine crackers. During the three years that we had lived with him, I had rarely tasted real meat. Everything came from boxes or cans.

"Dana?"

His voice pulled me from the awful memories, and I gazed down at him, torn between anger and compassion.

"I'm sorry, I. Really I am. I just got... got carried away. Thought that the next hand would be the winner..."

I said nothing, disbelief the strongest emotion I felt at the moment. Now was not the time for a severe tongue lashing. I fought back the growing lump in my throat. How the hell were we going to get out of this mess? He squeezed my hand.

"I can make a payment plan. A friend owes me some money. As soon as I get it, I can make the first payment."

I didn't believe a word of it. How many times had I been through this with him? Where he got the money to gamble was beyond me. Charlie was a handsome young man with lots of potential that he failed to recognize, either through a lack of self-confidence or just plain laziness. At seventeen, Charlie had dropped out of school and refused to return to complete his senior year.

Thinking that a change of scenery and getting away from Uncle Greg would help, I had started putting out feelers. The moment Charlie turned eighteen, Charlie and I had left Uncle Greg's and headed for Dallas, where I

had a job lined up at a local diner and a college scholarship. I encouraged Charlie to find a steady job, to take night classes at the local junior college to get his GED, to make some goals for his life.

Most of my scholarship went toward my tuition and my books. I had found a small studio off campus. While part of the scholarship money helped with that expense, the rest: utilities, food, and clothes, was generated from my job at the diner. I worked long hours and picked up every extra shift I could, even on holidays.

Charlie had worked various jobs after we arrived in Dallas, and I had never approved of many of them. The people he worked for were shady, perhaps into drugs and God knew what else. Honestly, I didn't really want to know. He shared a small apartment downtown with his best friend, Eric, who was two years older than Charlie. Shiftless, also hopping from job to job, fond of alcohol, prostitutes, and drugs. He was a bad influence on Charlie, but I couldn't do anything about that.

Charlie was an adult, by age anyway, and I couldn't make him do anything he didn't want to do. But I tried. I was all he had. I would always fight for him, no matter what.

"Oh, Charlie..." I sighed, wishing... wondering what I could have done differently to help him along in life. The death of our parents', the years spent living with my alcoholic uncle, devoid of affection with barely enough food to subsist on, had turned Charlie inward. He was an angry, bitter young man. I knew he loved me as much as I loved him, but he was dissatisfied with what life had offered. While I worked hard and focused on making my life better, for the both of us, Charlie had turned into a prisoner of his own bitterness. He never touched alcohol, but I suspected that at times he dabbled in prescription drugs to dull his pain. To escape. My heart ached for him.

"It'll be all right, I—"

I heard footsteps and turned to watch a nurse approach with a suture tray. In the not so distant future, that would be me, perhaps approaching another young man who'd gotten himself beat up over God knew what. Stitching up the superficial damage, though not healing the wound.

"The doctor recommends your brother stay overnight for observation. He might have a concussion."

My heart sank. I glanced at Charlie and then turned my shoulders slightly so he couldn't see my face. I looked at the nurse and gently shook my head.

“We don’t have insurance, and little money to pay for a hospital stay. But I’m a nursing student—almost done—and I’m familiar with the signs of a concussion. I can take him home with me and watch him,” I said. “If I even think he’s experiencing symptoms, I’ll bring him back. I promise.”

The nurse looked as if she would disagree, but she seemed to understand. “I’ll let the doctor know. You’ll have to sign the AMA statement—”

“What’s that?” Charlie asked.

“Against medical advice, Charlie,” I told him. “It just states that we know you’re leaving against medical advice.”

He nodded. “Fine with me.”

“You can go talk to the finance department while I get him stitched up,” the nurse said. “Then we’ll see about getting him discharged, okay?”

“Thank you,” I said, turning to Charlie. “I’ll go take care of this.” I then turned to the nurse. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Don’t discharge him until I come back.”

The nurse nodded, and I quickly left the room. The moment I passed through the emergency room doors and headed for the front desk to ask the way to the billing office, I slumped against the wall. Out of Charlie’s line of vision and hearing, I allowed myself a brief moment to succumb to my emotions. I buried my face in my hands. *Don’t cry. You don’t have time to cry!* God, when was this going to end? When would life start going my way? Charlie’s way?

Chapter Three

Brady

I woke with a pounding headache. It took several moments of staring up at the ceiling to remember where I was. Another luxury hotel room, but oddly enough, they had all begun to look much the same. Wincing, I glanced away from the brightness of the window and saw one of the twins; her long black hair spread out on the pillow and lying along her gorgeous back. I loved the feeling of that silky hair sliding through my fingers. My gaze dipped downward to the slope of her back and the rise of her ass, causing a renewed aching deep inside. I reached my hand toward her, placing it gently on that ass, smiling.

The two had exhausted me last night. I'd lost count of how many times I'd dipped into their slits, how many times I'd suckled identical tits, and even how many times one or the other, I couldn't remember which, had sucked my dick. Unbelievably, just looking at that ass made me horny again.

A soft, breathy sigh on my other side prompted me to turn and find the other twin lying on her side, facing me, the gorgeous, up-close and personal view of her luscious breasts prompting my balls to tighten with desire. I tucked my other hand between her warm thighs, cradling the edge of it against her pussy. The burning flame of desire deep in my groin came to life despite my pounding headache, my dry mouth, and my slight sense of nausea from overindulging last night.

What the hell? Maybe a morning fuck was just what I needed to start my

day. I gently squeezed the ass with my hand while I slowly stroked the cleft in the other one's pussy, eliciting a sleepy, soft groan of pleasure from her lips. I glanced down at my dick, at half-mast now and beginning to throb with desire. I closed my eyes and just focused on the sensations surging through me—

My cell phone rang, jarring me from my wayward thoughts. The dial tone was low and barely audible, but was accompanied by a vibration that caused the phone to move ever so slightly on the bedside table. I scowled at it and then, releasing Marta's ass... or was it the other one, Maria? With a sigh, I removed my hand from that ass and half-rose over the other twin, my hand sliding down to her thigh as I reached for the phone, intending to allow it to go to voicemail.

Until I recognized the number. Shit. My father, the oh-so-mighty oil tycoon and billionaire, Clint Shaw. I frowned. This was highly unusual. Normally, it was Frederick, my father's lawyer, or another one of his henchmen who typically called me. What did my father want so badly that he'd call me personally?

As much as I wanted to, I didn't dare ignore the call, knowing that doing so would bring all sorts of hell down on my head. Mumbling under my breath, I quickly scrambled from the bed and walked out of the bedroom and into the living area of the luxuriously appointed suite, my hard-on now shrinking as I quickly made my way to the wet bar.

I answered the call and put the phone on speaker as I reached for a bottle of Scotch, unscrewed the lid, and splashed half an inch into a glass. "Hey, Dad," I said, then lifted the glass to my lips and swallowed, my throat burning with the aftermath. "What's up?" I glanced down at my dick, which wasn't. My father's gruff voice and terse manner of speaking, despite traveling thousands of miles, sounded eerily close.

"We need to talk. I want you home. Tomorrow."

I scowled. He didn't know I was out of the country, but it didn't really matter. I had no intention of jumping on a plane to head back to Dallas, at least not yet. "What's going on, Dad?"

"I'm not going to discuss it over the phone. You'll come home. Tomorrow. We'll talk then."

I was about to reply when I heard the patter of feet and glanced over my shoulder to see one of the twins—not sure which one was it, they both looked

the same—walking toward me, as naked as I was. Her breasts bounced softly as she walked, her nipples hard and erect, her areolas incredibly large. I stared at those rosy red tips for several seconds before glancing down at her bare pussy—

“Brady.”

“Sure... sure, Dad—”

I grinned as Marta/Maria pressed her body against me, her breasts squishing against my back, her groin undulating against my ass. I glanced down and smiled, satisfied to see that my dick was already rising again. She reached a hand around my hip and grasped my dick, stroking it softly, her fingers lightly brushing the head. I cleared my throat.

“I’ll be home tomorrow.”

The call abruptly disconnected. I glanced down at the screen, shook my head, and then placed the phone on the bar as I turned and deliberately slid my cock between her thighs. It was slick and ready. I lifted an eyebrow. Those two were like little Energizer bunnies, always ready to go, seemingly without limits. I grinned and lowered my lips to hers, indulging in a bit of tongue play as I lifted my hands to cup her breasts, my thumbs first brushing over the nipples, then using my fingers to gently tweak and twist those nipples until they grew into hard nubs. Satisfied, I cupped her heavy breasts, one in each hand, testing their weight and then squeezing while my cock slid easily in and out of her thighs, brushing against her lower lips.

She groaned and broke off the kiss, gazing up at me with soft eyes. “Do you have to leave?”

I chuckled. “I have no intentions of leaving, at least for a couple more days. I’m having too much fun.”

Way too much fun, and I wasn’t about to cut my fun short because my overbearing father demanded it. I had long grown tired of him reminding me that I was the sole heir to the Shaw’s billion-dollar oil empire. Tired of my father telling me it was time to quit sowing wild oats and settle down, to learn more about the business end rather than merely reaping the financial rewards of his hard work. Tired of telling my father that I had no interest in taking that business over. At least not yet. No, I was having too much fun? and I wasn’t about to trade the women, the booze, or my jet-setting ways to sit behind a desk pushing papers for the rest of my life.

My father was one of the most powerful men in Dallas, hell, even Texas,

and when he said something, people jumped. I had begun to rebel against that by my fourteenth birthday, right after my mom died—

Marta or Maria chuckled softly and stroked her hands down along my ribs. A fingernail traced the line of hair from my chest down to my stomach, promoting my abs to contract. That finger continued to descend as it headed for my dick. Her other hand reached between my legs to cup my balls, heavy with desire, while the other gently wrapped around my cock and slowly squeezed as she stroked long, then loosened her grip. Her hand slid downward, her grip once again tightening as she reached the base, only to repeat the movement.

To hell with my father. I pushed thoughts of him completely out of my mind and focused only on the wonderful things that Marta/Maria was doing with her tongue on *my* nipples. After several seconds of that unique and exquisite torture, she slowly slid her body downward until she knelt on the floor in front of me, my cock jutting outward toward her mouth. I watched as she took my dick into her mouth and began her tongue play on my head. I reached for the bottle of Scotch and quickly poured myself an inch and then downed it, my attention torn between the heat making its way down to my stomach and the heat burgeoning upward from my groin at the same time.

I set the glass on the bar and placed both hands on her shoulders, reveling in the feel of her warm and wet tongue slowly sliding over my head. Hers bobbed gently as she gave me one of the most exquisite blow jobs I'd ever had the pleasure to receive, pausing occasionally to suck on my head before she began all over again.

It took most of my willpower to stand unmoving, reveling in the sensation of her hand manipulating my balls, the other grasping the base of my shaft while her mouth and tongue worshiped my cock. Once in a while her tongue stroked the length of my shaft, wrapping around it like a snake curling around a tree branch. My cock was thick and engorged now, the veins distended. Every new sensation prompted it to respond of its own accord. I sucked in a breath as she paused again to suckle deeply, taking nearly half of my length into her mouth. I couldn't resist. I tilted my hips forward and shoved myself deeper, and she took me. I tilted my head back and relaxed, feet spread slightly, my fingers resting on her bony shoulders... sinking into physical pleasure that had my blood throbbing hotly through my veins.

I frowned slightly when she stopped and pulled her mouth away. I glanced down at her, an eyebrow raised in silent question.

“Your friend... Nick... what if he comes back like he did last night? Should we go back to the bedroom?”

I thought about that. Had Nick joined in on the fun with the twins last night? No, I would have remembered that. I shrugged. “I’m not expecting him, but if he comes over, I don’t care. It wouldn’t be the first time I shared with him.”

She offered only the slightest of grins.

“I don’t want him. I want you.”

I chuckled and reached down, urging her to stand. Without ado, I lifted her up onto the top of the bar, which made it much easier for me to suckle her breasts. First one, then the other. I wrapped my lips around her areola and teased her nipple with my tongue, reveling in the textures... then I sucked, hard then soft, swirling my tongue over that luscious mound and nipple before repeating the process like she had done with my dick.

I teased and tweaked her nipples, pinching them softly while she made soft, mewling noises and spread her legs wider on top of the bar. I traced my fingers down her taut stomach, downward along her abdomen, and cupped her mound, massaging until she wiggled with impatience. Only then did I slide a finger deep into her. Her internal muscles closed around my finger, slick and hot as she slowly rocked against my hand, my thumb fingering her clitoris. She gyrated and thrust her breasts upward, begging for my tongue, head arched back.

I obliged. I sucked on her tongue at the same pace my finger slid deep inside and then withdrew. Soon she breathed hard, gasping for air. My cock throbbed and demanded release. I withdrew my finger from her wetness and wrapped my arms around her torso, my face nuzzling the crook of her neck as I gently sucked the skin there. She moaned and pressed her groin closer. I pulled her off the bar. Her arms reached for my shoulders as she wrapped her legs around my waist. I found her entry point with my dick and surged upward, burying myself deep into her depths. Her back pressed against the wall of the wet bar, I grasped her ass with both hands and pumped hard—two, three, then four times before I felt a surge. She ground down on me, her breath coming in sharp gasps as she met every thrust of my hips with a rotating grind of her own.

I felt the surge of hot semen erupting and briefly regretted not wearing a cover. While the twins told me last night that it wasn’t necessary, that they

were protected, I shouldn't have been so careless. No telling where those pussies had been before me. No, that definitely wouldn't happen again.

I was just coming down from the rush of pleasure, allowing Marta/Maria to slowly slide her feet down to the floor, when I heard a noise. I glanced up and found the other twin standing in the middle of the living room, also naked, the fingers of one hand plucking at her own nipple.

"You save any of that for me?" She smiled.

Both sisters giggling, I followed her back into the bedroom. By the time I entered, she was already on the bed, leaning against the headboard, knees bent and spread, offering me an ample view. The twin stepping into the room behind me chuckled softly and then headed for the bathroom. Moments later, I heard the shower.

I spent the rest of the day literally indulging the obviously insatiable needs of the sisters. By the time the sun dipped toward the horizon, I was exhausted. I couldn't get it up one more time no matter how hard I tried. Which was just as well, because after I treated the girls to room service and steak dinners while I showered, they bid their goodbyes.

It'd been fun, a welcome distraction as women always were, but after they left a silence settled over the room. It smelled of sex. I roamed the suite for a few minutes, pausing long enough to gaze out the windows at the bright lights of downtown Ibiza, watching the traffic, the airplane lights in the distance, idly wondering where all those people were going.

I downed another inch of Scotch, not wanting to deal with such insipid thoughts. My God, I had just spent twenty-four hours indulging in nearly endless sex, and that's all I could think about?

I turned from the window and used the room phone to call down to housekeeping, requesting a change of bedding. The housekeeper didn't like it, but I would tip her generously for her trouble, as I always did.

An hour later, another hot shower and fresh bedding awaiting, I collapsed onto the bed and sank into a deep and fitful sleep.

*

The incessant knocking on my door annoyed the hell out of me. The pounding wouldn't stop. I knew it was Nick, coming up for air from wherever the hell he had been since we'd parted ways in the nightclub the night before... No, the night before *that*. I had slept well, but I still felt exhausted. I could've stayed most of the day in bed and been perfectly

content. The knocking came in bursts of three, accompanied by my name.

“Brady, open the fucking door!”

With a growl, I threw the covers back and walked to the door in my boxers. I opened it open with a scowl as Nick stepped into the room and headed for the couch, eyeing me up and down.

“You look like shit,” he commented.

“What do you want, Nick? I was sleeping.”

“Front me some more money?”

I turned to my friend, who didn’t look any more rested than I did. Bloodshot eyes, hair mussed, cheeks stubbled with whiskers. That’s how Nick always asked for money, as if he always intended to pay it back. He never did. Most of the time, I didn’t really care. I enjoyed hanging out and partying with Nick. Only sometimes did I grow annoyed at my friend.

“What for?” I grumbled.

“Blow.”

Figured. “Let me get dressed.” Nick nodded as I stepped past him and entered the bedroom. I quickly donned clean jeans and a T-shirt, then yanked on a pair of tennis shoes sans socks. I headed for the wet bar and pulled my wallet from one of the drawers under the counter top and gestured toward the door. “Come on.”

We left my room and took the elevator downstairs. Outside, the air was thick and balmy with midsummer heat. Not as humid as Texas, but close to it. I headed for the ATM on the corner. The banks were closed, but the €600 limit would be adequate for the both of us.

Nick and I exchanged small talk, though I refused to indulge most of Nick’s questions about the hours I’d spent with the twins. I didn’t ask Nick where he had been. I was tired, my head was pounding again, and I was in a foul mood. I wasn’t certain why.

I slid my card into the ATM, punched in my password, and then selected the maximum withdrawal. My hand hovered near the money slot, waiting. Nothing happened. I looked at the screen and knew enough Spanish to translate. Card declined.

“What the hell?”

“What’s the matter?” Nick asked, peering over my shoulder.

“It declined my card.”

“Try another one.”

I did but got the same message.

“Maybe it’s broken?”

I returned to the main dashboard, but everything seemed to be working all right. I was able to access my balances. I certainly had enough money to cover the withdrawal. I tried another credit card with the same result.

“What the fuck?”

“That one too?”

I tried one more card before realization hit. “Dammit!” My father had found out where I was. Mumbling under my breath, I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and dialed Frederick, my dad’s lawyer.

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded the moment Frederick answered the phone.

“I think you already have a pretty good idea,” the lawyer replied.

I scowled. I had nothing personal against Frederick. The man had been my dad’s lawyer for over thirty years and was extremely loyal. “What’s going on, Frederick?”

“Your father wanted you home today. You didn’t show. He put a hold on your accounts.”

I strove to retain hold on my temper. “And how the hell am I supposed to get home without any money?”

“You didn’t tell your father you were in Spain, did you?”

For a second I wondered how Frederick knew and then remembered that as my dad’s lawyer, Frederick had access to just about every financial aspect of not only my father’s life, but mine as well.

“I booked a flight home for you. British Airways, with a connection in London. Flight thirteen-fifty-two. It leaves at nine o’clock this evening, your time. You’d better be on it, Brady.”

The words were not spoken as a threat, but the tone was unmistakable. I cursed under my breath. I didn’t take my frustration out on Frederick; it wasn’t his fault. Poor Frederick was often caught in the middle of the power struggle between father and son. Not the kind of power struggle that occurred in the business, but the kind of power struggle that was prevalent in my relationship with my father. The more my father tried to keep me under his thumb, the more I rebelled.

“Fine, on one condition.”

“And what’s that?”

“You have to buy a ticket for Nick too. He’s with me.”

Silence for a moment. “Of course he is,” the lawyer sighed. “There will be a ticket waiting for him too. See you tomorrow.”

Nick watched warily. “What’s going on?”

“Party’s over,” I said. “Get your stuff. We’re headed for the airport.”

Chapter Four

Dana

Walking away from campus late in the afternoon, I sighed. I had thought things couldn't get much worse than the day before when Charlie had been beaten up by his bookie. I was wrong. The moment we left the hospital together, Charlie had insisted on going home, promising that he would go right to bed and stay there. He promised to call me if he felt any symptoms of a concussion.

I had briefly argued with him, but not wanting to draw him into an argument, which wouldn't be good for his health at the moment anyway, I had finally acquiesced. Charlie could be stubborn. It was often difficult to find the balance between wanting to mother and protect him and wishing that he would just grow the hell up already. It was frustrating. Maybe if I didn't love him so much, I wouldn't care, but that's not who I was. I *did* love Charlie. Very much.

Just before microbiology class this morning, I'd received more bad news. A casual friend in my advanced anatomy and physiology class had told me that the school was going to close at the end of the semester. I didn't believe it. My friend insisted it was true. Her dad was on the school board, and apparently, the news would be announced just after spring break.

I fought the urge to cry. Why was everything so difficult?

After my last class, I had gone to the Dean's office. Not surprisingly, he'd

confirmed the rumor. He checked my records on the computer and confirmed my full scholarship, shaking his head in commiseration as he did so.

“You have a solid GPA and we can help you transfer your credits to Texas U, but unfortunately, Dana, there are no more scholarships available until next year. You’re paid up through the end of this semester. If you do transfer, you’ll have to find a way to pay the tuition for your last two semesters on your own, unless you wait to finish later next year.”

My heart sank. No, I couldn’t wait that long. “How much is it?”

“Living off campus?”

I nodded and watched as he tapped on his keyboard.

“About fifteen grand a semester.”

I nearly crumpled right then and there. Thirty grand! I swallowed hard, proud of myself for containing the surge of panic that swept through me as I calmly listened to his comments. Only two semesters left to go and then I’d be able to take my nursing boards. Two more and I could start earning a decent living.

I left the Dean’s office, and only after his door closed behind me did I allow the surge of tears to fill my eyes. Where the hell could I come up with that kind of money?

Upset and needing time to think, I had foregone the bus and decided to walk home, wracking my brain for ideas. I might consider skipping the upcoming semester and work my ass off to save up enough to pay my own way, but fifteen thousand dollars apiece? Not as a waitress.

I was barely managing to pay the rent on my crappy studio apartment and living expenses as it was. Even if I worked full time, I doubted I could save that amount of money in a few months’ time. At the same time, I knew very well that the longer I took off school, the less chance I would have of going back.

My thoughts heavy, I wasn’t paying attention to what was going on around me. It was the middle of the afternoon, the streets relatively quiet as I passed one business after another. Suddenly, I felt someone tap my shoulder. I gasped and quickly spun around, ready to chew out whoever it was, but froze.

Crap. It was Slim Pete, Charlie’s bookie. I had met him once. The guy gave me the creeps. He had some kind of thyroid problem that caused his eyes to bulge slightly. He was skinny, all flesh and bone, with greasy,

shoulder-length black hair tucked behind his ears. He had an overlarge nose and a slash of a mouth filled with a surprisingly well cared for set of teeth.

“What do you want?” Just what I needed. I barely held back a grimace when he licked his lips and smiled.

“I thought of a way that we could work off Charlie’s debt.”

I frowned. I had never known the slimy bastard to care about anyone. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, let’s put it this way. We can make some arrangements, so to speak. Call them appointments, whatever... I can pay you fifteen-hundred each time.”

My frown deepened. “What the hell are you talking about, Pete?”

“Sleep with me.”

I stared in stunned dismay. “What?”

He grinned, nodding. “See, it’ll work out for everyone. You know I’ve always had the hots for you.”

His gaze passed over my face, lingered on my boobs, then focused on my groin. I barely resisted the urge to knee him in the balls or punch him in the nose. “Go to hell, Pete.”

“Seriously,” he said. “Every time you sleep with me, I’ll knock fifteen hundred off Charlie’s debt.”

“Like I said, go to hell.” I started to walk off.

“Think about it, Dana,” he said, following. “That’s just thirty-three times! It won’t kill you, and you’d be doing your brother a favor.”

I spun on him, furious. “I’m not going to prostitute myself to you or anyone else, Pete, you got that? And I wouldn’t sleep with you if you paid me a million dollars! Now fuck off!” I rarely cussed, but I was spitting mad. Of all the gall! How dare he!

“You only have five days come up with fifty grand. How are you planning to do that?”

“What about the payment plan?” I demanded.

He stared. “What? What payment plan?”

Shaking his head, he gave me the once over again. My heart sank lower.

“I didn’t offer him a payment plan. The only payment option on the table is the one I just gave you. Sexual favors in return for repayment of Charlie’s debt.”

“You’re full of shit, Pete,” I said. I wanted to kill him. At that very moment, I also wanted to kill Charlie for putting us both into this situation. I couldn’t even come up with enough money to pay for school tuition and—

“Think about it, Dana.” He grinned and hitched up his pants hanging down around his hips. “I’m not so bad. I know how to please a woman.” He offered a slight shrug. “Five days. After that, you’re not going to like what happens.”

“What do you mean?” I couldn’t hide the fear from my voice. “Please don’t hurt Charlie, Pete. We’ll figure it out somehow.”

“You know how many times I’ve heard that? I’ve got a reputation to keep, you know. I let one guy slide, I gotta let them all slide.” He shook his head. “I’m warning you, Dana, like I warned Charlie. If I don’t have that money in five days, he’ll lose a finger for every day after that. Or worse. And if you think I’m kidding, try me.”

The image elicited a surge of disgust, and my stomach clenched. I wish I had the guts to smash my fist into those stupid looking veneers, but I simply turned and walked away from him.

“Think about it, Dana!”

I walked fast, mouth breathing, my heart pounding so hard I felt the throbbing in my forehead. *Dammit! Dammit!*

A sob erupted from my throat, but I choked it back and blinked tears away as I quickly walked the rest of the way home. My mind was spinning, my stomach a tight knot, and my legs threatening to give way beneath me with every step.

After I got to my apartment and closed the door behind me, I broke down. The tears spilled over my eyelids, and I began to cry. Sliding downward with my back pressed against the door, I sat hunched, knees pulled up to my chest, despair filling every part of me.

It was an impossible situation, one that I had no idea how to get away from. Charlie refused to leave town and go stay with Uncle Greg, and neither one of us had the money to set him up in a place anywhere else. I didn’t want my brother hurt. I didn’t want to see my brother on the streets. If he ended up on the streets, I would lose him. For good.

I felt sorry for Charlie, but I was infuriated with him at the same time. *Why? Why did he have to gamble? Why did he keep getting himself into trouble? Why couldn’t he just settle down, find a job, and be content with*

what he had?

I looked up and around my dingy apartment. This is not where I wanted to be at twenty-two years of age. This is not where I had seen myself, but I was working hard to get out of here, to do better. When I passed the boards and received my certification and license to practice as an R.N., I could finally get a good job somewhere, make better money, and get the hell out of this crap hole.

But no matter how hard I tried, it seemed as if I was forever being dragged backward. Two steps forward, one step back. I just couldn't...

I knew that tears did no good. They wouldn't bring my parents' back, wouldn't change any of that. Crying wasn't going to help Charlie either. I tried to tell myself that I didn't care, that I could turn my back on him and let him face the repercussions of his own actions.

But I couldn't.

He was all I had left.

Chapter Five

Brady

I was doing a slow burn by the time I got back to the states and picked up my Ferrari from the airport. On the freeway back to my dad's mansion I heard a vague rattling sound coming from the engine. Shit. Just what I needed. Spend three-hundred grand on a Ferrari and that's what you get these days? I shook my head and immediately regretted it as the renewed pounding inside my skull reminded me that I was suffering yet another hangover, this one because I pretty much drank the whole way home.

I wished I could just tell my dad to go fuck off and leave me alone, to let me live my life the way I wanted to live it, but I couldn't. Regardless of the hard feelings, the resentment, and even some of the blame for the way I felt at this moment, he was still my dad.

It was hot, the car seat vibrating slightly, the engine humming. I drove in a trance-like state, aware of the cars around me but still slightly on the day-dreaming side, at least until I glanced at the speedometer and realized I had just topped one-hundred miles an hour. Shit again. I started to slow down. Too late.

Glancing in my rearview mirror, my eyes caught the red and blue flashing lights of a motorcycle cop. Triple shit! Could things really get any worse? I gradually pulled over to the right side of the highway, my hands wrapped around the steering wheel where the cop could see them. The throbbing in my head got worse when I realized I could still be over the legal limit. If I got

arrested for DUI, Dad would be more than pissed. Especially after I had neglected to tell him I was overseas when he called, compounded by the fact that I hadn't showed up as he asked—demanded. Since my accounts were still frozen, I wouldn't even be able to bail my way out of jail.

With a heavy sigh, I leaned my head back against the headrest and watched through my side view mirror as the cop parked his bike, lights still flashing as he dismounted. He approached the driver side cautiously, one hand on his weapon, the other grasping the mic high on his left shoulder as he spoke into it. Hence another reason I kept my hands on the wheel without reaching for my glove compartment to retrieve the insurance and registration for my car. Cops had it bad enough these days. I didn't want any mistakes.

As he came closer, I recognized him. My day did get worse. It was Jamie Morrow.

God. I closed my eyes and squeezed them tightly for a moment, my heart thumping dully in my chest. Of all the cops in Dallas, why did it have to be Jamie? Jamie was the older brother of Elise... Elise Morrow, the only woman I've ever loved. I felt sick to my stomach. If one could literally feel the blood drain from their face, I felt the blood drain from my face. My head pounded even harder, my pulse trip-hammering now. Memories flashed in my mind, unbidden and unwanted.

I hadn't seen or heard from either Jamie or Elise since that night.

The night of the fire.

We'd been dating pretty hot and heavy about five years ago. Jamie and Elise had lived in a trailer park at the time. I swore that she was the girl I was going to marry, but as usual, Dad didn't approve. She lived in a trailer park. I lived in a mansion. Their family was poor. We were filthy rich. I had—and still do have— plenty of faults, no doubt about it, but I try not to be a snob. I hadn't cared that she was poor. She was beautiful, exciting, and filled a void in my life that has been missing for a long time.

I loved her.

Or thought I did. The night of the fire, the Morrow's double-wide trailer had burned to the ground. It was my fault. I knew it. Elise and I had spent that wild weekend alone in the trailer. I don't remember where her family was at that time, or Jamie. We partied pretty hard—drinking, smoking pot, having sex. After one particularly rambunctious fuck in her parents' bed, Elise had dropped off to sleep. I stayed awake for a while afterward, sitting

up in bed, my back against the headboard, smoking a cigarette. Just staring at her, reveling at how beautiful she was. Her beautiful blonde hair, cut short in a boyish style that most women eschewed at the time, but it looked absolutely adorable on her. Petite build, small but firm breasts, and a waist that I could span with both my hands. Long legs to die for, and oh so very passionate in bed...

And so had begun the cover-up, one that I was ashamed I had agreed to back then and the one regret... okay, so one of many regrets I carried on my shoulders today. I guess I'd fallen asleep without stubbing out the cigarette. It must've either dropped to the carpeting or the bedding. The next thing I knew, Elise was pounding on my shoulder, yelling, "*Fire! Fire!*"

I remember the shrill, ear-piercing squeal of the fire alarm attached to the ceiling in the hallway just outside of the master bedroom just seconds later, followed by heart-stopping fear; the orange red glow in the room, the flames trailing along the bottom of the bed, the carpeting on my side of the bed, the curtains curling and blackened with the hot flames. We both scrambled out of bed, barely enough time to snatch our clothes in our arms before the bed caught on fire. Elise was crying frantically. My heart was pounding when I heard the *whoosh* of flame behind me and turned to look over my shoulder. The bed was fully engulfed.

She couldn't remember if she'd put out the cigarette she'd smoked after we had sex that last time. I didn't say anything although I had seen her do so before falling asleep. I was a coward that night. I never told her about my own cigarette.

Long story short, we both got out and managed to get our clothes pulled on before the fire trucks arrived. A neighbor in the trailer park had smelled the smoke before flames licked at the windows. I knew the kind of trouble I'd be in if the fire marshal and arson investigators found that the cigarette that I'd dropped on my side of the bed had started the fire. Thinking he could help and swearing to myself that if he did I would owe him big time, I told my dad what happened and how.

Dad had ended up paying off the fire investigator. He *suggested* that the investigator's report state that an electrical malfunction had been the origin of the fire. The Morrrows didn't have any insurance on their trailer. In order to alleviate any finger-pointing in my direction, and because he claimed he felt bad that I was even involved, he told Elise's parents that he would buy them a brand-new double-wide trailer. Anyone else involved in the transaction was

told that the ‘deal’ was to agree that the manufacturer offered the replacement, no questions asked. He claimed that if the Morrow’s knew the truth, they would refuse such charity. That much was true.

But there was a catch. There was always a catch.

It was the first time that I really felt true, deep-down and resentful animosity toward my dad. In exchange for the *favor*, he told me that I had to stop seeing Elise. If I didn’t, he would tell the family that the fire was my fault. I could face charges. They could sue me—us. For the parents’, the stipulation wasn’t that big of a deal. Like my father didn’t approve of Elise’s family, her parents’ didn’t much approve of me either. I was rich, spoiled, and arrogant. Elise had already told me that her parents’ were threatening to ship her off to Boston to live with family, just to get her away from my influence. They believed I was the one that had addicted her to smoking, not just cigarettes, but pot, *and* drinking, although I really hadn’t. She’d been doing that when I met her. Not a lot, but some.

Anyway, I didn’t want Elise to have to pay for my mistakes, so I agreed. I complied with my dad’s wishes and broke up with the love of my life, never to see her again. It was at that time that I swore that I would never fall in love with another woman. Never go through that kind of heartbreak again. What was the point?

Ever since then, I had dated plenty... well, maybe not dated, more like one-night stands. And so it had continued.

A knock on my window jolted me from my not-so-pleasant memories. I looked up and saw Jamie standing next to the driver’s window, gesturing for me to roll it down. I did.

“Hey, Brady, thought I recognized that car.”

I hadn’t seen him in five years. He looked so mature, so grown up. So serious. He stared down at me, no expression on his face at all. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Did he know my secret? If he did, he didn’t give any indication. In fact, other than the brief acknowledgment of recognition, he went cop mode on me.

“License and registration please.”

Was that disappointment I felt? Why the hell should I feel anything? No one from the Morrow family had deigned to reach out over these years, not even Elise. Nor had I. Maybe it was just as well. I slowly reached for the glove compartment and pulled out the plastic sheet containing my

registration. I handed it to him. “My wallet’s in my back pocket. I’m reaching for it okay?”

He gave me the eye as I leaned forward and pulled my wallet from my back pocket, removing my driver’s license and handing that to him as well.

“Wait here.”

I said nothing as Jamie walked back to his bike, talking on this mic. I watched the traffic whizzing by, trying my best not to go back in time. I had put up quite a wall since the fire. Nothing had managed to budge it after all these years, but seeing Jamie was like opening the floodgates. I didn’t want to go there. Not now, not ever.

A few minutes passed before Jamie returned to my car and handed a small leather folder toward me.

“Sign that,” he said. “It’s your acknowledgment that you’re getting a ticket for exceeding the speed limit.”

I took the small folder and scribbled my signature on the bottom, then glanced up at him. He eyed me warily. I hoped to God he couldn’t smell booze on me. He took a good look at my mussed hair, my likely bloodshot eyes, maybe even dark circles smudging underneath from lack of sleep. That’s what twenty-four hours of sex followed by a transatlantic flight could do.

“You goin’ to your daddy’s?”

I nodded.

“Take the next exit and get off the freeway. Take the surface streets.”

So maybe he did smell booze. He started to walk away, and the words just came out of my mouth, unbidden. “Jamie, how’s Elise?”

Jamie stopped and turned, his expression still devoid of emotion. “She’s married, Brady, with two kids. She’s happy.”

With that, he turned around and got back on his motorcycle. I sat behind the wheel of my Ferrari as Jamie drove his bike past my car and disappeared down the highway. My heart thudded dully in my chest. I couldn’t quite define my reaction. Jealousy? Guilt? Regret?

“Stupid ass.” With a shrug of my shoulders, I brushed the emotion off, reaffirming my promise to myself. Never get attached or fall in love with a woman again.

By the time I got to the mansion and knocked on the door of Dad’s office just off the foyer, I was in a foul mood to say the least. No one answered. I

walked in and headed for the wet bar, knowing that he would, with his uncanny sixth sense, know that I was here. It's like his head sprouted radar any time I was around. Sure enough, just after I poured myself a Scotch and gulped it down, wincing at the burn as it slid down my throat and warmed my stomach, in walked Dad.

Standing just over six feet tall with dark hair graying at the forehead and temples, Clint Shaw was a formidable man. Broad shouldered, with skin weathered from years of exposure to the unrelenting Texas sun, he looked like he could've stepped out of one of the Westerns I used to watch as a kid. Always clean-shaven, back ramrod straight, a no-nonsense attitude that bordered on aggressive. Not physically. Just intimidating. He didn't waste any time getting down to brass tacks. Nope, not with my dad. No exchange of pleasantries. He got right to the point.

"Son, it's time you quit sowing wild oats. You spend my hard-earned money like there's no tomorrow. It's time to stop."

I bristled, a typical knee-jerk reaction to any hint of criticism from him. My blood pressure immediately rose. I felt my face flush with heat. Pissed. "Nice, Dad, canceling my debit and credit cards and forcing me to come home. Don't you wonder why that is? Why you have to force me home?"

While I hadn't really expected him to, I thought that comment might likely prompt him to take the bait. Did he have an answer for that? I had no way of knowing because he didn't take the bait.

"Brady, you're twenty-seven-years-old. It's time to grow up and stop acting like a good for nothing spoiled brat of a playboy. My God, you're the sole heir to a billion-dollar oil empire! When are you—"

"I told you, Dad. I don't want to take control of your *empire*." I stressed the last word as I held my father's stare, casually placing the empty Scotch glass back on the bar. My hand trembled slightly. Not from fear but anger. "Maybe if you got away from this damned mansion once in awhile and enjoyed life a little."

"There's more to life than women, booze, and God knows what else you've been up to. Frankly, I'm sick of it."

I saw him glance toward the bottle of Scotch on the bar. He strode toward it, lips pressed together, jaw muscles tight as he replaced the cap on the bottle and put it back on the shelf. The tinkle of bottles broke the thick silence. He waited several more seconds, getting his own temper under control? He

turned around. I blinked. I hadn't seen that expression on his face in a while. A long time.

That stony expression. That slight drooping of his shoulders before he stiffened them again. For the first time, I noticed that he'd lost some weight. Not a lot but some. Were those new wrinkles on his face, or had I just not noticed them before? He didn't shout. Didn't raise his voice. On the contrary, he spoke softly, as if...

"This is it," Clint said. "I didn't want it to come to this, but you've played your last hand."

I frowned. What the hell was he talking about? Last hand? I waited.

"Here's how it's going to be. You're going to marry—"

"Dad, how can you—"

"Shut up, Brady," he interrupted, pointing a thick, stubby finger at me. "I've given you more than enough leeway. Now I'm going to rein you in whether you like it or not. Free ride's over. I didn't work my ass off my entire life to leave something behind for my child, my grandchildren, only to have you fritter it away so wastefully—"

"Dad, what are you—"

"Shut up and listen, Brady, because I'm not going to repeat myself." He took a deep breath. "Here's how it's going to be. You're going to marry. You're going to produce a grandchild for me within a year's time."

"Dad—"

"Do not interrupt me one more time," Clint ground out, his voice rumbling up from his chest. "I've had enough. I'm not getting any younger, boy, and it's time you stepped up to the plate and started showing some maturity and responsibility. Now, you're going to get married and you're going to produce a grandchild within a year or—"

I couldn't believe it. This was absurd! "Or what?" Dad sighed. A defeated sigh, one I had never heard from him before.

"Or you're going to spend the remainder of your life like the rest of the world— poor as fuck."

At first I thought there was something wrong with him. What the hell? Was he sick? Was he getting dementia or something? But when I saw the look in his eyes, the firm set of his mouth, his jaw now tight with anger, and I realized that he was in his full faculties. He'd just given me an ultimatum. It took everything I had not to snatch the empty Scotch glass from the bar and

heave it in his direction. It took everything I had not to burst out laughing.

I took a step back, ignoring the leather couches, trying to maintain my composure, trying not to show my alarm. What had gotten into him? This had never—

“Consider Mary Von Brown,” Clint suggested. He leaned against the bar, thickly veined hands still strong and capable, fingers now interlaced, his posture casual, as if suggesting a business deal. “She’s very acceptable.”

Mary Von Brown? Maybe he *was* losing his marbles. Mary Von Brown was a spoiled, nasty-tempered woman a couple of years younger than me. Yes, she was rich. “Are you serious?”

Clint lifted an eyebrow. “Why not?”

Why not indeed. “You only want me to marry her because she’s your business partner’s daughter.”

“So? She’s suitable.”

Suitable my ass, immediately dismissing the idea. Before I could stop myself, I had already created a lie. “I already *have* a girlfriend, Dad, and it’s serious.” The look my father gave me had me nervously clearing my throat. He scratched his eyebrow, his frown evident.

“Who?” Clinton asked, tone heavy with doubt. “Why haven’t I ever met her?”

“The truth?”

“That would be a nice change of pace.”

Again the words rushed out before I thought twice. “Because I was sparing her from you.” I cringed. That was harsh. He didn’t react.

“What’s her name?”

“None of your business. We’re getting serious, and I’m thinking that we’ve made a good match. I might even ask her to marry me one of these days, but I’m not going to have you bullying me into it.”

“What’s her name?”

“Why? So you can have your goon squad digging into her past, her family, and her finances?” I shook my head. I was formulating the lie even as the words left my mouth. “I think you’ll find her acceptable.”

“Then marry her. Get this over with.”

I frowned. “Why the rush? Marriage *and* a baby within a year?” I shook my head again, not helping my still throbbing headache. “Too fast. My

girlfriend will never accept it. She'd get suspicious."

"And don't forget the prenup."

"Dad! You can't be serious!" My heart was thudding now, harder and faster. What the hell had happened since the last time I'd visited? When was the last time I'd been here? A month ago? I wondered again if he were sick. What if—

"This ultimatum is non-negotiable, Brady. I'm not getting any younger. Frankly, I'm tired of waiting around for you to grow up and act like the man I know you can be—if you tried. The sooner you give me a grandchild, and at this point I don't care if it's a girl or a boy, the sooner I can start grooming him or her to eventually take over the business."

Preposterous! "And if they don't want it any more than I do?"

He didn't answer. Until I could think of a way out, convince him that this was definitely *not* the way to grow a family, I decided it would be best just to mollify him. "Fine. I'll talk to my girlfriend about it."

"You'd better do more than talk, Brady. I expect a report very soon."

My head was spinning. I turned to leave, but as I reached the doorway, he gave me one last order.

"I'm having a reception here on Saturday. Bring your girlfriend. I'll introduce her to everyone in attendance as your fiancée."

Shit. I muttered under my breath as I left his office, slamming the door behind me.

Chapter Six

Brady

“I can’t fucking believe this,” I said, shaking my head and downing the last of my beer. Nick and I sat at one of my favorite hangouts in Dallas, the Red Dog Bar. Barely two o’clock in the afternoon and my day had been shot to smithereens. After my unfortunate visit with Dad, I had called Nick, full of bitterness and resentment. I asked him to meet me here.

For once he didn’t look strung out. For the first time in a while, his eyes were clear. Surprisingly clear, considering our transatlantic flight and the fact that he had been indulging in coke, booze, and God knows what else for days before that.

“What brought this on so suddenly?” Nick asked, sipping his own beer and nearly *tsking* with commiseration. “And he threatened to cut you off if you didn’t do what he said?”

“That he did,” I affirmed, still disbelieving. “He’s already cut off my access. Now I have to go beg and plead with Frederick to remove the block on my accounts and cards if—and only if—I agree to go along with his egregious plan. He’s serious, Nick. Dead serious.” Running my hands through my hair, I felt lightheaded. That could have been because I was on the edge of physical and emotional exhaustion at this point, but I had a deep-down feeling that this time, my dad was not throwing out an empty threat. I don’t know how many times I’d muttered my surprise, not only on my way to the bar, but sitting here with Nick.

Impossible!

Are you kidding me?

He can't be serious...

I knew that this time, he probably was. He hadn't prefaced the ultimatum with the usual lecture. Like he'd really reached his limit and didn't want to waste any more breath on me. I avoided the feelings pinging around in my brain. Didn't want to go there. I sighed.

"He even suggested Mary Von Brown! Can you believe it?"

"Which one is she?"

I grimaced, growing impatient with Nick's questions. "A daughter of one of my dad's business partners. A little younger than me."

"But she's rich, right?"

I looked up at Nick, the pulse now pounding in my forehead. I felt it, almost to the point it was making me nauseous. "What the hell difference does that make?"

For the briefest of seconds, he looked at me, eyes wide and confused. "I didn't... that came out wrong, Brady," he backpedaled. "What I mean is... well, if she's rich, that's good, isn't it? It can be a marriage in name only, you know? One of those marriages of convenience. It's not like you have to sleep with her."

"Oh but I do," I disagreed. "Did you forget the part where my dad insisted he have a grandchild within a year's time?" I grumbled. "You're missing the point, Nick. He just *suggested* Mary Von Brown. He didn't insist on it. In fact, he didn't insist that it had to be any specific woman. It's the point of the thing, don't you get it? My God, it's not like we live in the eighteenth century, where arranged marriages were the norm!"

Nick took the last gulp of his beer and then set the mug on the table with a resounding thud. "Well then, what about Tiffany? Or, maybe Desiree... yeah, either one of them would be good, wouldn't they?"

I scowled at him, deliberately making an attempt to relax the muscles in my face. My jaw was grinding so hard I thought I might crack teeth. "Are you *insane*, Nick? They were lays, and that's all!"

"But they were good lays, right?"

I sighed, striving to rein in my rising temper. Let it go. *Let it go!* "It would be better if it's somebody that nobody knows. Nobody in my circle, nobody in your circle, and especially nobody in Dad's circle. And no one

with a questionable past.” I eyed Nick. “You know Dad will run a background check on anybody I introduce. You know that, don’t you?”

Nick bit the corner of his lip and then nodded. “You’re right. It has to be somebody who doesn’t have a record.” He shrugged. “So what are you thinking?”

“Hell if I know.” I also shrugged. “It has to be a complete stranger. The whole fucking charade will only last a year. If I choose someone that I already know, it’ll only complicate things.”

“Complicate things how?”

I counted to ten. “This has to be strictly a business deal. An arrangement. Nothing more and nothing less. If the person I choose has a history with me, they could use it against me at the end of a year. You get it?”

“You mean with the baby and all?”

My head felt like it was going to split open. “Yes, Nick, with a baby and all. Dad wants me to present him with a grandchild within a year. Now how the hell am I supposed to do that?” I sat back in the booth. “How the hell am I supposed to convince a woman to have a baby with me? It’s not like you can just snap your fingers and have somebody get pregnant. Sometimes, those things take time.”

Nick chortled. “You’ve never complained about the process before.”

I gave him a dirty look. “That’s because I always made sure to either wear a cover or that my partner had some kind of birth control going.”

Nick nodded, lips pursed in thought. “What about Jessica?”

“Who the hell is Jessica?”

“Exactly!” Nick grinned. “You remember that old friend of mine from high school? Greg? It’s his sister.”

I slapped my hand against my forehead, glaring at Nick. “What about *complete stranger* don’t you get, Nick?”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Like I said, a business deal. One year. One baby. One payment.”

“So you want to pay someone to pretend they’re your wife, give birth to your baby, and then disappear after the baby’s born?”

It sounded awful when he put it like that, but I nodded.

“And what if the woman doesn’t want to give up her baby once it’s born?”

I didn't even want to think about that. "Maybe if the payment is right, she would. Hell, it's not like the baby is being... my dad wants a grandchild. He'll make sure it's taken care of. It'll have the best of everything." I felt like a schmuck even saying it. "Besides, she would have to sign a contract agreeing to exactly that."

Nick shook his head. "I don't know, Brady, it's tricky business."

"Not really," I said. "What about surrogates who agree to carry babies for other people? They do it all the time."

"Yeah, but they know what they're getting into from the very beginning. How many women do you know would sign a contract to marry, produce a baby, and then just leave? I don't know, man, it's like opening a Pandora's box."

Didn't I know it. The sarcasm heavy in my voice, I threw it out there. "What do you think about two hundred grand? Is that enough of an incentive?"

Nick whistled. "I think it's a fuckin' lot of money." He grinned. "I'd do it if I had the right parts."

I made a face. "Nick, this isn't funny, and it's not the time to be making jokes."

"Got it, bro." He nodded, leaning back in the booth. "So how exactly do you think you're going to approach a woman with this deal of yours? You gonna just pick someone off the streets?"

"I don't know. It's not like I have experience in this kind of thing."

We sat in silence for several moments until Nick slapped his hand down on the table. "What about Craigslist?"

I was about ready to throttle him. "That is stupidest idea I've ever heard. *Craigslist*? You know how many nut job skanks are going to crawl out of the woodwork if they see that?" I shook my head. "Besides, I'm not going to settle for just anyone."

"You said you have to present the girlfriend on Saturday. You don't have a lot of time to pick and choose. You said it was just a business deal. For one year. You don't have to get attached. Fuck her every night until she's pregnant, and then you're done."

I cringed again. God, that sounded awful. Crass. I was sinking to the depths of my depravity. Could I really go through with this? The thought of being written out of my father's will was sobering, but was I this shallow?

Was I really willing to find a woman, any woman, to have a baby to present to my father in order to hang onto the family fortune?

Hell yes.

I didn't like it, and I liked myself even less for it, but that was the plain and honest truth.

"Craigslist is perfect," Nick continued. "A perfect stranger. No attachments. Strictly business. Isn't that what you wanted?" He chuckled as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and began tapping.

"What are you doing?"

"Writing up an ad, what do you think?"

"No, Nick, I'm not ready."

He continued tapping. "We obviously can't type up an ad that says you're looking for a temporary wife, a baby, and then you're going to cut them loose. That would be just wrong, man."

"So on top of all this ridiculousness, I have to be deceitful?" My own words taunted me. Of course I was being deceitful. What was one more lie? I felt... not sure. Disgusted? Desperate? Ashamed?

"If you want a decent woman, yeah, you have to be deceitful." He kept tapping on the screen, then paused, nodding with satisfaction. "How about this? *Successful businessman looking for personal assistant. Duration: one year. Must be young and attractive. Live-in position. Salary: two hundred thousand. No experience necessary.*"

"I wouldn't answer that ad if you paid me a million bucks."

Nick glanced down at the screen, tapping some more. "Okay, how about *preferably young and attractive, intelligent, and self-motivated?*"

"Still sounds kind of creepy to me. Forget it, Nick."

"That's where the interview process will come in," Nick said. "When you start getting callbacks, we can explain that appearance is important, as she'll be involved in dealing with high powered business dealings."

I sighed, still not liking it, not one bit. There had to be a better way, but I didn't see it. Either go through with this or lose everything. Just meeting a woman—a woman different from the ilk I was used to anyway, that would be agreeable to such a deal seemed unlikely. Plus, it could take time. Time was something that I didn't have. Still, I felt like... like a sleaze-ball.

It wasn't right and I knew it, but I didn't feel I had much of a choice. One year. My God, that left about three months to find a woman, ensure that she

wasn't on contraceptives, and then fuck the hell out of her until she got pregnant. If I didn't explain that a baby was part of the deal from the get-go, the woman might very well choose to have an abortion if she got pregnant. That couldn't happen.

What a mess. I felt sick to my stomach.

"I gotta hit the head," Nick said.

I nodded, not really paying attention. My thoughts focused inward, feeling sorry for myself, resenting the hell out of my dad, and wondering what the hell I was supposed to do. How could he put me in such a position? Didn't he realize... but it was me who had blabbed that I had a girlfriend. A serious girlfriend. If I hadn't said that, I'm sure I would have had more time. But no, I'd shot off my mouth, and here I was.

And I was supposed to bring her to meet him on Saturday.

Forty-eight hours. I had forty-eight hours to present a woman to my dad. Forty-eight hours to convince that woman to pretend to be my fiancée. Forty-eight hours to convince a woman to convince my father that we had been dating for some time.

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. How had it come down to this? And why *now*? Why was my father all of a sudden so hell-bent on an heir? He wasn't *that* old; he was only fifty-seven-years-old. He had *decades* left to go. What was the rush?

But I had made it clear, hadn't I? More than once over the past few years, I had made it clear that I wanted nothing to do with his business, nor taking it over someday. Was I wrong? What if—

"Don't worry, Brady, things will work out okay."

I glanced at Nick as he slid into the booth and caught the attention of the bartender, indicating with two raised fingers that we needed two more beers over here.

I needed more than beer.

Chapter Seven

Dana

Sitting in front of the computer, staring at the blinking cursor on the screen, I tried to make myself focus. I was using one of the dozen computers set up in the computer room of the public library, working on a school project. Trying to work. I couldn't concentrate to save my life. Everything had come crashing down around me. I couldn't focus. Take your pick. The mental image of that sleazeball pervert, Slim Pete, kept popping into my head. Fifty thousand dollars.

Following on the heels of that disaster was my worry about Charlie. While the days of cement shoes, broken knee caps, and amputated fingers seemed like legends of the past, more associated with the Mafia than someone like Slim Pete, maybe I was just being naïve. It didn't matter though. How could bookies convince their clients to pay up if they were dead?

The thought of Charlie getting beat up again, or worse, by Slim Pete or any of his *business partners* caused a surge of bile to rise in my throat. My stomach felt like it was tied up in literal knots, and I didn't think my head had stopped pounding since I had rushed to the emergency room.

And then, of course, there was the issue of my schooling. I had lost my impetus and focus. Mid-terms right around the corner. What good would it do to take them when I was looking at losing my full scholarship and having to come up with another thirty thousand dollars to finish my education? It was

asinine. I leaned back in my chair with a sigh, closed my eyes, and tried to think happy thoughts.

Nothing came to mind. Finally, there was my frustration and growing impatience with Charlie. I'd been trying to get hold of him since yesterday afternoon. Somehow, if I could urge him... convince him to leave town, go stay with Uncle Greg until this blew over, maybe he'd be safe. But if he did leave, I knew that he would never be able to return to Dallas. Not with Slim Pete around. I didn't know how that would work, but I had a feeling that anywhere Charlie went, he would have to be careful. He couldn't gamble. That was a risky proposition in itself.

Charlie was avoiding me and my calls. Last night, just before dark, I had gotten so annoyed that I stopped by his apartment. If possible, it was even crappier than mine. Eric opened the door, his hair mussed, shirt hanging open, scratching at the two or three hairs on his chest. He stared at me with bloodshot eyes for several moments. As if he didn't recognize me. Stoned again?

"I need to speak to Charlie."

"Not here," he said, turning slowly, as if sleepwalking, the door closing.

I stuck my foot between the door and the jamb. "Where is he, Eric? It's serious. I need to speak to him."

"I have no idea where he is, Dana. If I knew, I'd tell you. He owes me half the rent."

With that, he nudged my foot away from the door and closed it. I heard the deadbolt click, followed by a loose, hacking cough from behind it. I grimaced and left the apartment building and headed back home, my head spinning. My headache had not eased, and I had a bad feeling that if something positive didn't happen soon, I'd end up with a migraine. Just what I needed. I didn't get migraines often, but when I did, boy, they knocked me out. One time I had retreated to my bedroom closet with the door shut for hours.

I stared at the computer screen, trying to focus on my report on the lymphatic and immune system, but even trying to concentrate was a joke. Deciding that I might try to find some work, I accessed the browser search bar and typed in my search parameters. I got the usual, plus Craigslist listings. I usually stayed away from Craigslist, but I was feeling desperate enough to go ahead and click on it anyway.

I scanned through the local job openings, almost laughing at myself for doing so. There would be nothing listed here that would offer me the money I needed to pay off Slim Pete as well as my remaining tuition. Duh. No way in hell would I be able to find a job that paid fifty grand in a few days. Even high-class escorts didn't make that much money. I cringed at the thought of having to whore myself out. Which immediately had me thinking about Slim Pete's proposition, which promptly caused another surge of bile to rise in my throat.

Besides, I had read a number of stories online about people getting ripped off, even killed when responding to Craigslist ads. I wasn't stupid. Of course, I knew that not all of them were scams. *Click out of the website. Now!* Or—

Wait a minute. My eyes focused on something interesting:

Successful businessman looking for personal assistant. Preferably young and attractive, intelligent, and self-motivated. Duration: one year. Live-in position. Salary: \$200,000. No experience necessary.

Wait a second. Two hundred grand? Paying someone two hundred thousand dollars a year—*no experience necessary*? I snorted. Nevertheless, I read it several more times even as the warning signals played pinball in my brain. Got to be a scam. What prompted me to call the number listed at the bottom of the ad I'll never know, but desperate people did desperate things, didn't they?

I jotted the phone number from the ad into my small wire-bound notebook, logged off the computer, and headed out of the library. *Stupid! You're being stupid!*

I walked around the corner toward the parking lot. Quieter there. *What do you think you're doing? Don't do it!*

I paused under the shade of an elm tree and pulled the cell phone from my back pocket. *You're really doing this? Seriously?*

I tapped out the number, took a deep breath, and closed my eyes. I wasn't promising anything, wasn't even really that serious. But the ad was intriguing. I'm sure I'd be able to tell if it was a scam—

“llo?”

My scam radar went into hyper drive. That wasn't the way any professional businessman would answer the phone. I abruptly disconnected the call. Paced several moments, chewing on a fingernail, debating with myself. The job was for a live-in personal assistant for a successful

businessman. It didn't mean that the businessman worked out of a high-rise office building, surrounded by board members or secretaries. Maybe he worked from home?

What the hell. It was just a phone call. I re-dialed the number. My foot impatiently tapped the sidewalk as the phone rang once, twice—

“Hello?”

Well, that was better. “Hello, I'm calling about the ad that was posted on Craigslist.”

“Yes.”

The man's voice sounded nice enough. I was blunt, my tone doubtful. “Is this for real?”

“It is,” the voice said. “My boss... well, let's just say that he's unconventional. I'd really like to talk to you more about the job, its... responsibilities, but I'm on my way to a meeting with him at the moment.”

“Oh,” I said, somewhat disappointed. “Has the job been filled already?”

“No, we're still interviewing. Let me check my calendar.” A short pause. “Can we meet for lunch tomorrow at one o'clock? The Four Seasons? At Los Colinas on North MacArthur Blvd. You know it?”

“I suppose so.”

“Thank you, sorry, gotta go. See you tomorrow.”

The call abruptly disconnected. I lowered the phone and stared at it, not sure what to think. It wasn't like I'd been asked to go to someone's house or meet in a back alley somewhere. The Four Seasons hotel, golf club, and restaurant resort was one of the nicest in town. At one o'clock in the afternoon, it would be busy with diners. The fact that the man had opted for such a public and populated place boded well, didn't it?

I pondered over the “young and attractive” part, but I guess when it came to business, it was to be expected. Always had been, always would be. How old was the guy? Did it matter? Maybe it would. Maybe if the guy was old enough to be my father or even my grandfather, I would probably feel more comfortable, but there were a lot of young entrepreneurs in Dallas these days.

I suppose I could ask questions of my own at the interview. If I didn't like anything about the job, the potential employer, or if it sounded even slightly underhanded, I'd turn and walk away. I wouldn't be involved in anything illegal.

My heart thudded with renewed anxiety—another thing on my mind for

the day. I stood for several moments under the shade of the elm, contemplating my own sense of desperation and how it had triggered such stupidity. I kept going around and around. I hadn't promised anything. I hadn't agreed. I was just looking into it. It was a public place. A public place... anybody bent on violence or underhanded business dealings certainly wouldn't have chosen the busiest time of day during the workweek at Four Seasons for crying out loud.

I slowly walked home, still so worried I wasn't able to appreciate the warm sunshine on my skin, the somewhat fresh air, carrying with it a hint of dust. Two hundred thousand dollars. For one year. Even as a registered nurse it would take me years to make that kind of money. And I needed money now. A lot of it.

Though filled with trepidation and uncertainty, and despite the fact that I honestly knew better, it was tempting. After all, what other options did I have? I kept trying to convince myself I was the one in control. The meeting was set in a public place. If I didn't like or get a good vibe from the person I had talked to on the phone offering the job, I could turn around and leave. No harm, no foul. It was just an interview.

What did I have to lose?

Chapter Eight

Brady

I peered at Nick. *Things will work out okay?* Since when was Nick a cheerleader? He had worn a self-satisfied grin as he walked down the short hallway back to the table on his return from the bathroom, talking on his phone. When his eyes met mine, he mumbled something and then abruptly disconnected the call.

I lifted an eyebrow. “What’s that all about?”

“Nothin’. Just a stupid ex bugging me.”

He avoided my eyes. I wasn’t sure I believed him. “Which one?”

He shrugged, sliding the phone into the pocket of his T-shirt. “Who the hell remembers?”

I shook my head and took a sip of beer from the nearly full mug in front of me that the bartender had brought while Nick was in the bathroom. “So what have you got planned this afternoon?”

His phone rang. Nick startled and glanced at the phone, still tucked into his pocket, then at me. I frowned at him, and he plucked the phone from his pocket and accepted the call. He turned his face slightly to the side as if he didn’t want me to hear. I barely caught the words.

“... position filled.” He hung up and placed the phone on the table.

Did he have something going on the side that I didn’t know about? That would be the day. “Nick, what are—”

The phone rang again. This time Nick glanced down at the screen and tapped the ignore button. That's when my Spidey sense went on alert. Something was up, and I had a feeling I knew what it was. Cursing under my breath, I snatched the phone from the table.

"Brady—"

He leaned back in his seat, out of reach as he stared at me with a look of resignation. I felt a niggling of worry. "What the hell did you do?" He said nothing as I accessed his texts and realized that in spite of the fact that I told him not to post an ad on Craigslist, it was obvious that he had. I looked up at him.

"What the hell, Nick? How many calls have you gotten?" I was pissed, even more so when the phone rang in my hand. I clicked the ignore button, just as Nick had a few seconds ago. "Delete the ad, Nick. Now."

I barely resisted the urge to toss the phone at him. He took it from my hand, swallowed, and after a few moments of tapping, looked up. "Okay, it's deleted."

"What the hell? You were only gone five minutes! Shit! Are these calls from the ad?" I didn't believe him when he said they were not. Putting an ad in the paper promising two-hundred grand was bound to bring everyone out of the woodwork. I shook my head. "Don't you think I have enough problems? Didn't you realize that you were going to be inundated with calls? Dammit, Nick, what were you thinking?"

He stared dumbly at me.

Annoyed, I rose from the bench seat. "Let's get the hell out of here." I led the way toward the door. The minute we were outside, away from the air-conditioning inside the bar and stepped into the bright, warm sunshine, I sighed.

"Sorry, Brady, I was just trying to help."

I didn't say anything as I turned to look at him. He was a good friend, but that was the kind of help I certainly didn't need.

"Hell, let me make it up to you. Tell you what. Let's have lunch at the Four Seasons tomorrow. Okay?"

"Where the hell are you going to get that kind of money?" Those were the first words out of my mouth. Then again, Nick sometimes surprised me.

"Gimme a break, bro. I'm not *that* poor."

I was going to decline, my mind occupied with too many things. Shit, I

didn't think I would even have time to eat. I had to find a way out of this mess I was in. How the hell was I going to do that? Come clean with my dad? Admit that I didn't have a girlfriend? Hell no.

"Come on, Brady, let me make it up to you."

I glanced at him. He looked serious so I shrugged. "Fine. Two o'clock?"

"Can we make it one o'clock? I've got something going on later."

"Whatever." I guess it didn't really matter.

*

I sat at a table across from Nick at the Four Seasons Resort on North MacArthur Boulevard. I had no idea why Nick had chosen this place, usually way beyond his pay grade, even when he was earning a paycheck. We sat at opposite ends of a square four seater table covered with a pristine and heavy linen tablecloth, spotless crystal, heavy white porcelain dishware, and silver plated eating utensils. I stared over the single stemmed purple orchid in the clear glass vase with small river stone pebbles in the bottom, my suspicions growing.

Since we'd arrived ten minutes ago, Nick had been anxiously peering around the room. He looked uncomfortable in a pair of khaki slacks and a button-down collared shirt. Highly unusual attire for Nick. Not for me, though, and my dark brown khakis, polo shirt, and loafers sans socks fit perfectly with the crowd, many of whom were golfers taking advantage of the gorgeous eighteen-hole course nearby.

"Who the hell are you looking for?" I finally asked.

"What?" he asked, eyes wide with feigned surprise.

I knew he was up to something. "Nick, spit it out."

Nick picked up his water glass, took a sip, and then set it down, slowly nodding. Stalling. He looked at me as if he were about to spill, but then his eyes latched onto someone beyond my shoulder and froze. The next thing I knew, he rose from the table.

I turned to look over my shoulder as he approached a young brunette. A very pretty young brunette with a trim yet curvy figure. I was slightly surprised. She didn't look like Nick's usual girlfriends. Nor had any of them ever had the means to dine here. Not that I was a snob or anything, but—

I stiffened as Nick gestured for the woman to sit down at our table. Nick led the way, giving me the eye. I knew that look. Shit.

"Brady, this is Dana Sommer." He nervously cleared his throat. "She's

here for the job interview.”

I stared at Nick in disbelief, then at the woman, who glanced between the two of us. Her hands trembled slightly, and her face looked flushed, the pulse in her neck an obvious indication of her nervousness.

I recovered from my startled dismay and remembered my manners enough to gesture for her to sit down. “Please, have a seat. I’ll be back in just a moment.” She nodded and proceeded to sit down as I gave Nick *my* look. “May I speak to you for a moment, over there at the bar?”

Nick swallowed hard but immediately headed for the far side of the bar, his shoulders stiff. My temper roiling, I tried to tamp it down, tried to relax the sudden tightness in my jaw, trying to breathe in slow, steady breaths. God, didn’t I have enough trouble as it was? I stood facing Nick, my back to the dining room.

“What the hell did you do?” I hissed.

“This is what you want it, isn’t it?” Nick replied, keeping his voice low as well.

I glanced around to make sure no one could hear us. Despite the urge to shout, I also kept my tone barely above a whisper, though it was filled with an intense sense of frustration and annoyance. “What the hell, Nick?”

“You said it, Brady. You said it had to be a stranger, no attachments. How else are you going to find someone suitable before Saturday?”

My head pounded anew. Oh God, when would this nightmare end?

“Besides, did you notice how hot she was?”

I had. But she also looked a bit young for my taste. “Nick—”

“She looks like a decent sort, Brady. Shit, she looks like the girl next door. Her eyes are clear, she has nice breath, and she smells nice to boot. That’s what you’re looking for, isn’t it? Someone presentable?”

All of a sudden, all the anger and frustration left my body. I just didn’t have the energy. I was exhausted. Maybe Nick was right. I did like how the young woman looked. Maybe with someone like that, Dad would believe that she was my girlfriend. I just couldn’t believe I was having to resort to such subterfuge, such deceit. If my father hadn’t been putting the pressure on, I could have eventually found a woman on my own.

But would I?

“Fine, let’s go talk to her.” I turned around, stared, and then swore, giving Nick one of my best glares.

She was gone.

Chapter Nine

Dana

I watched the interaction between the two men standing at the bar with more than a little trepidation. The guy who had stood and met me was of moderate height with longish blond hair with a slight curl. It looked like he had shaved recently, at least by what I could tell with the fresh nick on his jaw. His eyes shone, kind of glassy looking, but when I got closer it didn't look like his pupils were dilated. He didn't look stoned.

The guy he introduced me to was handsome. More than handsome, in fact. He was *hot*. Better than model hot... all man hot. He looked... powerful, not only physically, but when he turned to glance up at me, I was startled to feel a burgeoning of heat that swept through my body. Unwanted, more than slightly embarrassing, and emotionally frustrating.

The look on his face, the quick glance at his friend, that frown of confusion and startled surprise caused all those emotions to evaporate. The moment he asked to speak privately to his friend, I knew. The reaction acted like a cold splash of water on my face.

I should've known. I should've known! My suspicions were right all along. This was some kind of a weird scam. I glanced at the two men, the dark-haired one... Brady, I think his name was, standing with his back to me.

My heart pounding, my pride injured, and mentally kicking myself for my stupidity, I rose from my chair and quickly wove my way through tables

toward the entrance foyer. I exited the restaurant and walked through the reception area of the resort hotel when the phone in my pocket vibrated. I had turned off the ringer before I entered the building. Impatient, angry at myself, angry at the world, I pulled the phone out of my pocket, thinking it was either Charlie or that blond-haired guy, likely the one I had spoken to on the phone yesterday.

I didn't recognize the number. Breaking my own rule, I answered it, ready to give whoever it was a good piece of my mind.

"If this is who I think it is—"

"How did you know it was me?"

My stomach turned, and I froze just outside of the entrance of the hotel. I recognized that voice. It was Slim Pete. "How did you get my phone number?" I demanded. "What do you want?"

"Well hello to you too, Dana."

I heard a smile in his voice. I swallowed, striving to maintain calm, doing my best to prevent panic from rising inside me. "What do you want?"

"Where's your brother?"

My heart skipped a beat. "I don't know." That was the truth. I had no idea where Charlie was. I had yet to get hold of him.

"Well, I'll tell you what, Dana. You tell Charlie that he can't hide from me. I already know about your uncle in Arizona."

My stomach lurched. How did he know that?

Slim Pete chuckled, "I know people, Dana, and I promise you, I know people who can find Charlie if he tries to run, or if you're stupid enough to try to hide him from me."

I felt bile rising again and fought the urge to gag. Trembling, I said nothing.

"If I can't find him, and soon, I'll just have to take it out on you, if you know what I mean."

My head felt like it was in a vice, that someone relentlessly and mercilessly tightened the screws. This couldn't be happening! He couldn't mean that, could he? *Where the hell was Charlie?* Why had he put me—put us—in this awful situation? At the back of my mind, I wondered if he'd run. If he'd left town, leaving me to hold the bag. I wouldn't, couldn't believe it. Charlie wouldn't do that to me.

"You hear me, Dana?"

“I don’t know where he is, but I can tell you that he’s not going to run.” I paused, swallowed, and stiffened my back, my sense of bravado surprising even me. “You’ll have your damned money in three days.” With that, I disconnected the call.

I stood unmoving for several moments, breathing hard, nibbling on my lip, staring at the serene, well-manicured, fancy, and gorgeous landscaping of the resort around me. It was a different world. I didn’t belong here. Three days. Time was running out. I wasn’t sure if Slim Pete meant what he said or if it was merely an empty threat, but I didn’t want that slimy bastard in my life.

I looked back over my shoulder at the hotel. What other options did I have?

Heaving a heavy sigh and fighting back tears of despair, I turned around and walked back into the lobby. Maybe this was the lesser of two evils, I didn’t know. Maybe I should just listen to what those guys had to say. Could it be worse than what Slim Pete had suggested? I could always walk away. There were plenty of people around. They weren’t going to kidnap me, at least not here.

Cursing myself for a stupid fool every step of the way, I entered the lobby and made my way back to the table, where both guys still sat, not talking. Both looked up at me with surprise as I approached. I stared down at the dark-haired guy, Brady, thinking that he was too damned handsome to be some kind of pervert, but I knew better. I glanced at the other one, who nervously tapped his fingers on the tablecloth and avoided my gaze.

I pulled out a chair and sat down, arms crossed over my chest as I eyed the dark-haired one, Brady. “What’s going on?”

“It’s like I told you on the phone,” the blond said. “It’s a personal assistant position.”

I glanced at the blond, not sure what to believe.

“Shut up, Nick.”

I turned my gaze toward Brady and lifted an eyebrow, trying my best to maintain a calm expression while inside my head felt like it was going to explode, and I would start screaming in panic any moment. My mind spun. Charlie, broken and bleeding... me, forced to do things against my will with Slim Pete... my future hopes of getting my nursing license crashing down around me.

“Dana... Miss Sommers, my name is Brady Shaw.”

I stared, desperately trying not to acknowledge the instant sexual attraction tugging at me. Trying to tamp it down. *Think clearly! Dammit, Dana, you're in trouble here.* I lifted my chin slightly, silently inviting him to continue. He fidgeted with the silver-plated knife on the cloth napkin a moment, then reached for his water glass. He didn't pick it up but turned it around and around on the table before he finally looked at me, shoulders slightly slumped.

“Okay, here's the truth. My father is Clint Shaw. You know him?”

I shook my head.

He looked a bit startled. “He's an oil tycoon...”

I frowned as he spoke, wondering if it was the truth. Wait a minute, Shaw? *That* Shaw? If I was thinking of the right Shaw, he was one of the richest men in Dallas... in Texas. I focused on what Brady was saying.

“Anyway, I'm twenty-seven-years-old and he's getting tired of waiting. He gave me an ultimatum.”

I tried to pay attention. “Tired of waiting?”

“Yes. For an heir. Tired of waiting for me to marry and settle down. Like I said, he just gave me an ultimatum.”

I tried to tell myself I didn't really care, but this was interesting. Seems as if I wasn't the only one with troubles. “What kind of ultimatum?”

“He wants me to settle down and get married.”

“So?”

“Well, I don't really want to, but if I don't, he's going to disown me.”

“Seriously?” I almost laughed. Must be nice to have money and be concerned about the threat of being disowned. At least he had something to be disowned from. And here I was, just trying to get through school, protect my brother, ensure my future—

“It was Nick here who came up with the *brilliant* idea to put an ad on Craigslist... advertising for personal assistant even though what I really need is a girlfriend.”

I couldn't help it. I interrupted, my tone impatient. “Someone as good looking as you advertising for a *girlfriend*?” I wondered what was wrong with the guy. To my surprise, he grinned and offered a lame shrug. And oh, what a grin it was. A dimple appeared on his cheek. He was charming, handsome, and a bit on the arrogant side, but I understood. He was a player,

and Daddy was getting tired of his irresponsible ways.

“And what good is that going to do you?” I asked. “A girlfriend, I mean?”

“Here’s the thing.”

He slightly leaned forward. I caught a whiff of aftershave. Dammit, why did it have to be Old Spice? I was a sucker for that one.

“I told my dad that I already had a girlfriend, so as to avoid being... I don’t know how else to put it... *attached* to someone more of my dad’s liking, the daughter of a business partner, but she’s well, let’s just say she’s not my type.”

I shook my head. “Wait a minute. Am I to understand that unless you somehow produce a girlfriend, your dad’s going to insist you marry someone against your wishes, and if you don’t, he’s going to cut you off? Is that it?”

I couldn’t believe it. The guy was pushing thirty-years-old. He had money to blow, literally had everything in the world at his fingertips, but he was having too much fun doing whatever it is rich people did, and now he had to put on a show, pretend he had a girlfriend, so his father wouldn’t tighten the purse strings? I shook my head. Pathetic.

“The thing is, I’m supposed to introduce this serious girlfriend at a gathering in just a couple of days, on Saturday night.”

He looked at me in earnest, as if I was supposed to jump at this opportunity. He was looking at *me* to solve *his* problems? Then again, maybe he could solve mine.

“The offer still stands, Dana. I have to make a deal. I’m laying it on the line here.”

“And that is?”

“First, I have to introduce my girlfriend this Saturday to my dad. It has to look serious, and... and I have to... I have to announce my engagement at that gathering.”

“Go on,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. I couldn’t believe I was still sitting here.

“We have to stay married for at least one year. For pretending to be my girlfriend, my wife, you’ll get two hundred thousand dollars.”

I sat, dumbfounded, my heart thumping. Was I even *considering* this? As much as I hated to admit it though, the situation, the deal, would solve all my problems. I could pay off that bastard Slim Pete and still have enough money to finish my schooling, plus a solid foundation to start my future life.

I would have to wait a year, a whole year, to get back to my school, but I wouldn't have to worry about how I would pay for it. I couldn't even save the thirty thousand dollars I'd need to finish school in a year's time to finish my last two semesters at school anyway. I had already done the math. Even working two jobs it would be next to impossible. Not to mention the fifty grand that Charlie owed Slim Pete.

Should I accept? Could I trust him? I would insist on a contract, but what could I do if he didn't honor it? Was this a scam? A terrible joke? "Let me see your identification."

He didn't hesitate, but reached into his pocket, pulled out a wallet, and retrieved his driver's license. He placed it on the tablecloth in front of me. Sure enough, he was Brady Shaw. I glanced between the photo on the license and then at his face. He didn't blink.

"I can prove all of this, Dana... Miss Sommers. And everything will be perfectly legal— papers, signatures, everything."

Oh God, I was seriously contemplating this ridiculous idea. But again, what other options did I have? He was offering me two hundred thousand dollars to play a part. It was more money than I could make in years of hard work. I could pay off Slim Pete, remove the threat of bodily harm against Charlie, or even Charlie's life, or mine.

I nibbled at my lip for several moments, and then started to nod. I was taking a chance, no doubt about it. Probably stepping from the frying pan into the fire, but again—

"There's just one more thing you need to know," Brady said.

He cast a quick glance at his friend, who still refused to meet my gaze. What the hell?

"We have to have a baby."

Chapter Ten

Brady

At any other time, I might have been quite amused by the myriad of emotions that slithered over Dana's face. First, a blank stare, followed by lifted eyebrows, eyes wide with surprise, mouth dropped open. Her lips moved but no sound came out. And then, quite delightfully as far as I was concerned, her cheeks turned red. The emotions flickering over her face lasted only a couple of seconds.

My instinctive humor dissipated as her eyebrows lowered, and you know the saying, if looks could kill? That was exactly how she looked at me. My head began to pound again, and I glanced at Nick, watching Dana warily.

She moved so fast it was over in the blink of an eye. She stood and walked out. My gaze followed her for several seconds, my brain not really comprehending.

“Go after her, dude!”

Nick's words propelled me into action. He was right. The pretty brunette might be my only chance to get out of the mess that I had dug for myself. I bolted up and quickly made my way through the tables of diners, odd glances cast my way, barely missing a waiter bearing down on a table with tall glasses of tea and bowls of salad.

By the time I reached the lobby, she was just stepping over the threshold of the building and onto the sidewalk, heading for the parking lot. I trotted

after her.

“Dana, wait!”

She didn't stop. She quickened her pace as she headed down the sidewalk fronting the building, shoulder-length hair bouncing in rhythm with her steps and the warm afternoon breeze. Shoulders stiff, those tiny hands of hers balled into fists.

“Dana, please, wait.”

She stopped and turned around so fast I nearly barreled into her.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” she demanded, though keeping her voice low.

A golfer pushing his cart back to his car glanced over curiously and then purposely looked away. “Dana, let me explain—”

“What's to explain?” She shook her head, arms crossed, her tone sharp. A quick glance around. “I don't sleep with men for money!” she hissed. “How dare you! I'm not a—”

“That's not what this is about. Not at all,” I said, trying to soothe her, arms hanging loosely by my sides, afraid that if I made any move toward her, she'd run. “Actually, that's only part of it.” I paused, an idea popping into my head. “Actually, we don't have to sleep together. Artificial insemination—”

She gasped. “Are you *insane*?” She half turned, then swung around, a pointed finger poking into my chest. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you and your friend. Playing games like that with people.”

Her voice shook, but not with fury. Her eyes filled with tears. No, that shaking voice was filled with hurt and desperation.

“Dana, please, hear me out.”

She turned, slashing her hand through the air. “You're crazy,” she muttered and walked away.

If I wasn't mistaken, that was a moan of despair I had heard. I caught up with her. “What if I offer you five hundred thousand dollars?”

She stopped dead in her tracks and stiffly turned, eyes wide with incredulity. Her body tensed—the stiff posture, the lips pressed into a thin line, and her face pale in the hot afternoon sun displayed shock. And then, unbelievably, her eyes glistened with tears. What the hell? I just offered her a half million dollars and that's the response I get?

“How dare you play with people's emotions,” she choked out.

“I’m not playing, Dana. I’m completely serious.” She obviously didn’t believe me.

“You’re willing to pay me a half million dollars for marrying you and having your baby?” Arms once again crossed over her chest, her head tilted, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

I felt a burgeoning of hope. My heart thumped as I nodded. “Look, I know this sounds crazy. No, it *is* crazy. It’s the craziest, stupidest thing I’ve ever done in my life... I think... but I’m desperate. I’m out of ideas.”

She stared at me for several moments, as if trying to discern whether I was telling the truth. But the longer she stood there, the greater the chance that she was actually contemplating it. And why not? A half million dollars was a good chunk of change. She blinked rapidly, color returning to her face.

“This is for real?” Eyes still narrowed in doubt. “Seriously?”

I nodded. “Yes. I swear to you, on my dead mother’s grave, that I’m very serious. And I’m running out of time.”

She heaved a heavy sigh as she stared off into the parking lot, the breeze gently blowing that silky hair away from her shoulder. Such a gorgeous neck. Actually, she was beautiful, with a perfectly proportioned figure that caught my interest. She wore a flowy charcoal gray floral skirt, no idea what kind of fabric that was but I liked it and a sleeveless, V-necked blouse. Her trim arms displayed some muscle, and her hands... oh, such lovely hands. Short nails. I wondered what those fingers would feel like wrapped around my—Stop. Stop right there. The deal was in negotiation.

She stared and stared as if something out there was going to give her the answer she was looking for. I glanced over my shoulder toward the entrance to the lobby, grateful that for once Nick had shown a bit of restraint even though he must be inside dying of curiosity.

“This may be the craziest thing I’ve ever done in my life, and I think you’re certifiably nuts, but I’ll be blunt. I need the money, desperately.”

She looked up at me, again her expression changing from consideration to a threatening scowl. “You’d better not be jerking my chain, or you’re going to regret it,” she began. “And there’s going to be some conditions. For one, I’m not your sex toy. There won’t be any sex, you got that?”

I nodded again, although I doubted that the artificial insemination idea was practical. Took a long time for that, didn’t it? Wouldn’t it just be easier to— “I’ll have a contract drawn up. Everything we agree upon will be

stipulated in that contract.” I paused. “I’m not going to force you, Dana, I want that to be clear. But I do have to produce a child within a year. You understand that, don’t you?” She said nothing. “So, doing the math. That gives us, what... less than three months to do the deed and have it take?”

Her expression changed again to dismay. Her cheeks flushed. She closed her eyes and gave the slightest shake of her head, inhaling deeply before releasing the air in a gush. Disbelieving that she was even considering it? I was anxious to close the deal.

“You don’t have to stick around after that,” he said. “Until then, we’ll have to keep up appearances though, so we’ll have to live together in my apartment—” She opened her mouth to disagree, but I softly interrupted, “My father is a powerful man, Dana. He’ll perform his due diligence. You can bet that we’ll be watched to make sure that everything is on the up and up. But I promise, after the baby is born, you can go your way, do whatever you want to do.”

“That simple?” she said, voice tinged with sarcasm.

“It is. It’s that simple. My dad wants an heir. I want to keep my inheritance. You need money.” I shrugged. “Everyone gets what they want, right?”

She turned away from me again, muttering under her breath, “You’re such an idiot.”

She didn’t move to walk away and I stood quietly, my heart pounding now, anticipation and excitement surging through me. This is it! My problem soon to be solved. I couldn’t think beyond the immediate future. Just to see the look on my dad’s face...

She turned around and looked up at me, her eyes boring into mine. “I’m going to need a down payment, upfront.”

“What for?”

“None of your business,” she snapped. “Is it a deal or not?”

“How much do you need?”

“Fifty thousand.”

I didn’t blink. Okay, that wasn’t much, considering I had just offered her five hundred grand. I didn’t know why she needed the money and didn’t feel this was the time or the place to ask. I didn’t want to do or say anything that would cause her to change her mind. My credit cards were still blocked. So was my access to my bank account. Shit. I would have to see Frederick about

that.

“Agreed,” I nodded. “I’ll have the money by tomorrow. You’ll need to go with me to my dad’s estate for this get-together on Saturday.”

We both stood silently for several moments, as if we were both sizing each other up. I just thanked God that I didn’t have to resort to Mary Von Brown. Her head barely came up to my chest, but the look in her eyes gave me pause. She would not be a pushover. I felt better. What she was thinking right this moment, I had no idea. Probably as confused and anxious as me, but both of us were having a problem solved, weren’t we? Wasn’t that all that mattered?

“About the contract...” she said.

“Yes.” I nodded. “I’ll go see my lawyer first thing tomorrow morning. I’ll arrange for the contract and get the down payment.” I glanced at her with a lifted eyebrow. “Is a check okay or do you want cold, hard cash?”

Another flush reddened her cheeks as she looked up at me, nibbling on her lip.

“Cash please?”

That startled me, but only for a moment. At this point I didn’t give a crap why she needed the money, except for one thing. I hated to ask, but felt like I should throw it out there. “You don’t do drugs, do you?”

She stared at me for several moments, her lips firm again, pressed together with annoyance, or so I thought. While her expression remained blank, I saw the pulse throbbing in her neck. Quite emotional, wasn’t she?

“No, I don’t do drugs. I don’t drink and I don’t smoke.” Again, the narrowed eyes. “Do you?”

I shook my head. “No drugs, no smoking, although I do indulge in a Scotch now and then.”

“Put that in the contract,” she said firmly. “I have no intention of living with someone who does drugs or drinks to excess.” She shuddered. “And I mean that.”

I grinned. “What do you define as excessive?”

She gave it some thought, which surprised me. A woman her age against alcohol? My heart skipped a beat. This was crazy. For all I knew she could be a preacher’s daughter. We might be at each other’s throats within days. She might make my life a living hell. But at this moment, I supposed it didn’t matter. I also realized that in order for this farce to succeed, I would have to

sacrifice a thing or two.

“Well, I suppose a Scotch or two every evening is acceptable. But if I start smelling alcohol coming out of your pores or if you get near me with alcohol breath, or you make any untoward advances on me because you’re stinking drunk, this deal is off, you understand?”

No sense in scaring her off. I had to cut back on that for the time being anyway. If she was a teetotaler, being around someone who got drunk would be the fastest way to end this deal. I nodded.

“So what we do from here?”

“Let’s meet tomorrow for coffee. That’s safe enough, isn’t it?”

“Where?”

“What’s convenient for you?”

She thought about it a moment. “The coffee shop near the southwest corner of the university. On Remington. You know it?”

I shook my head. “I’ll find it.”

She nodded, then glanced around awkwardly. “We should exchange phone numbers.”

She pulled her phone from her back pocket, tapped the screen, and looked up at me, waiting. I gave her my phone number and then, because she appeared to expect it, I pulled my phone from my pocket and she gave me hers.

“Well then,” she said.

“Well then,” I repeated, offering my hand. “Thank you, Dana Sommers. You won’t regret this.”

She glanced at my hand but then reluctantly took it, offering an abbreviated shake.

“I already do.”

With that, she turned and walked off, and I let her. It could’ve gone worse. A lot worse. And fortune seemed to smile down on me. She was a looker, obviously intelligent, and even more obviously, someone who wasn’t about to be pushed around. She might be desperate for money, but I was more desperate, if that was possible.

I returned to the restaurant to fill Nick in on what had transpired. Before I got into the lobby I dialed Fredrick’s number. When he answered, I kept my message brief.

“I need to see you tomorrow morning. Eight o’clock, your office. And this is just between you and me. My dad doesn’t know, got it?”

“Brady, what’s this about?”

“I’ll explain in the morning. But I don’t want Dad to know I’m coming to see you. Okay?”

“Fine.”

The call disconnected, and I entered the lobby, my head spinning. I felt relief, but also a bit of anxiety. I had crossed the first hurdle, but I still had plenty more in front of me.

*

“I need fifty thousand dollars,” I said, sitting across the desk from Frederick. While he was my dad’s lawyer, he was also, by default, mine.

“What for?” Frederick asked, not impressed.

He sat stiffly in his chair, arms resting on the dark brown blotter, hands loosely clasped. As usual, his desk was spotless. Did he ever do anything? By the way he looked at me, I could tell he was suspicious. “It’s for some expenses.”

He lifted an eyebrow, and I knew that if I wanted him to unlock my accounts or at least give me access to some of my money, I would have to give him something. “My fiancée needs some new clothes, and I’m doing a few renovations on my apartment. She’s moving in, you know.”

The look he gave me was one of patient indulgence. He knew me. I’d known him my entire life, and he knew of my... well, let’s just say he knew the good, the bad, and the ugly. He knew I never dated, at least not anymore. He knew I never got serious about the women in my life. He knew that I never, *ever*, allowed the women I spent any time with into my apartment. I always slept at their place or got a hotel room. So I could leave anytime I wanted. So I didn’t have to deal with any emotional fallout from my—

“What’s going on, Brady? You don’t have girlfriends, and now you’re telling me you have a fiancée? Did you pick someone up in Spain?”

“No,” I said. I wasn’t about to get into details that he could use at a later time to trap me.

“I’m serious, Frederick. I’m engaged. Her name is Dana Sommers. She’s from here. Dallas. I need you to take the block off my credit cards, my ATM card, and give back my access to my bank accounts.”

He stared at me. “You need fifty thousand dollars. Today.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not for Nick?”

I sighed. He was also more than familiar with Nick. “No, Frederick, it’s not for Nick. I told you it’s for my fiancée.”

He did that thing with his mouth. Not quite a frown, not quite a smirk. I sighed. He didn’t believe me. Not surprising. I knew I would have to tell him what was going on. He also needed to draft the contract. Still, I hesitated.

“Brady, what’s going on?” He unfolded his hands and leaned back in his chair.

I hesitated. What if he refused to go along with my plan? What if he decided to tell my dad? What if—

“Brady, in this circumstance, you’re my client. Everything we discuss here is privileged information. It doesn’t go beyond this room. Do you understand?”

Frederick knew just about everything that went on with my family. I also knew that he was an honest man, extremely loyal to my dad, but there had been times when he tried to help me out. Sure, this was one of the worst, but I also knew that if he swore confidentiality, I could believe him.

So, I told him everything. Every last annoying detail. Oddly, I saw many of the same expressions appear on his face that I had seen on Dana’s. Finally, he leaned forward, his body posture stiff, a frown of concern tugging at his eyebrows.

“Well then, you’re in quite a pickle, aren’t you, Brady?”

One of Frederick’s odd ways of expressing a conundrum. “Yes, I am.”

He shook his head. “I understand that you feel you don’t have any other options,” he said. “And I have to admit, just between you and me and the fence post, that I think Clint has gone overboard with this demand.” He held up a hand to hold off any comments. “But I do understand his motivations, I do. And that’s all I’ll say on the matter.”

I said nothing, although I did feel comforted by the fact that at least, in this room, he appeared to be on my side.

“At the same time, I think we both know that there won’t be any changing your dad’s mind about this. He’s very serious about you settling down, getting married, and starting a family of your own.”

I opened my mouth to interrupt, but Frederick again lifted a hand.

“Brady, maybe it is time that you settled down and started acting your

age. You're not a teenager anymore. You're a man. An intelligent man who can do anything you set your mind to." He paused, his expression earnest. "Even if you don't want to take over your father's holdings, it is time to figure out what you want out of life besides partying. Don't you think so?"

I shrugged.

"You know what they say, don't you?"

I peered at him. "What do you mean?"

"That it's okay to behave this way in your twenties, but when you hit thirty, it's just lame."

I didn't want to admit it, but he was right. I did need to figure out what the hell I wanted to do with my life. I couldn't just—

"But before you sign on the dotted line, and before you have this woman sign the contract, I want you to understand, Brady, that this isn't a game. It's not just a means to an end to get back your access to your bank accounts."

I heard the somber tone and listened.

"This is not only affecting your life, but it's affecting hers. It's also going to affect friends and family. And then you bring a baby into the mix and... well, I think you understand that lives are not to be toyed with."

I did realize that. I'd been purposely avoiding it from the very moment that Nick introduced me to Dana. But as long as we both agreed to keep our emotions to ourselves, to not get personally involved, everything would work out okay. My dad would have his grandchild. Dana would have the freedom and financial means to move on with her life. As far as I was concerned, she was a surrogate, one that would serve my purposes and give my father what he wanted so he'd get off my back.

"Come back at one o'clock. I'll have a contract drawn up. I'll also have a check for you."

"Cash," I said.

He shook his head. "No cash. I'll draft a check."

"But—"

"No buts, Brady."

I realized I shouldn't push my luck. I nodded and he reached for a desk drawer, all business now. Summarily dismissed, I left his office, glanced at my watch, and realized with some dismay that I was actually looking forward to seeing Dana later on today.

Chapter Eleven

Dana

I sat nervously in the coffee shop, my hands tucked between my knees, my foot jiggling nervously on the floor, bouncing my knee. I still had time to back out. I still had the opportunity to change my mind. But it was Thursday. I had one more day to deliver the money to Slim Pete. I had yet to get a hold of Charlie. Where the hell was he? Was it possible that Slim Pete was holding him somewhere until the debt was paid off? No, he would have taunted me with that bit of news.

Still, I didn't know where Charlie was. I didn't know much of anything about the entire situation other than my own worry and increasing sense of anxiety. I didn't want to do this. *I didn't want to do this!* I didn't want to go through this farce of a marriage to a complete stranger. And a baby? A *baby*? Who did that?

I did.

I couldn't think beyond getting Charlie's debt paid off. In less than a week my life had spun out of control. I needed something to hang on to, something solid, but it was like grasping at a tornado. All I could do was hang on for dear life.

And this Brady. Brady Shaw. He was obviously rich, but I didn't trust him. What kind of guy paid a woman to pretend to be his girlfriend, his fiancée, and the potential mother of his child? When it came right down to it,

what kind of father gave his son such an ultimatum? It wasn't like we were living in the seventeenth century for crying out loud.

And why wasn't Brady married by now anyway? Why didn't he step up to the plate and take over his father's business? Why did his father need a grandchild to do it? On top of that, there were no guarantees that Brady and I would be able to produce a child in the required time frame. I didn't want to sleep with the guy. He was a stranger. And his stupid idea of artificial insemination? No guarantees that would immediately take either.

The whole thing was stupid. Deplorable. My stomach churned in disgust. And yet here I was, staring out the window, waiting for the undeniably handsome jerk to appear. Then again, he might not. I might find myself the butt of a very cruel joke on YouTube. He and his buddy, Nick, might have been jerking my chain all along, but if they were, they were both terribly good actors.

The thought of this being nothing more than a cruel joke left me feeling nauseated. Not that I was looking forward to going through with this preposterous deal, that was also nauseating, but the alternative was even worse. Charlie... if only he knew what I was doing for him. The sacrifices I was making. No, this went way beyond sacrifice.

I glanced down at the Formica table in front of me, off-white with speckles in it. Would he appreciate what I was doing? Of course he would. But I determined that he would never find out. Not if I had anything to say about it. Oh, he would probably ask how Slim Pete had been paid off, and after I met with Brady Shaw, had the money in hand, only then would I be able to start thinking up of a plausible—okay, maybe not so plausible—explanation. I could tell him that we had legitimately gotten engaged, that he was well off and that, as a favor to me, he had agreed to pay off Charlie's debt.

Charlie wasn't exactly the sharpest crayon in the box, but he wasn't stupid. He might not believe that. And even after the debt was paid off, I had to convince him that he couldn't gamble anymore. Never. I scowled. Where was Charlie? Hiding? Probably. I didn't blame him. I'd always been there for Charlie. Then again, Charlie had always been there for me. Just because I was the responsible one didn't mean that my brother was useless. It was Charlie and me against the world. Charlie and me. More than anything, I wanted Charlie to reach his potential.

Still, my heartbeat accelerated and my nerves nearly frayed. I longed more than anything to bolt from this diner, to run and keep on running. To let Charlie take care of his own problems. But I couldn't. I loved him too much. Maybe some would say I enabled him, which in some ways is probably true. But I couldn't turn my back on him. Not now, not ever. If at all possible, I would always be there to pick him up when he fell down, to give him the support, the love, and the guidance that I could. And in turn, in doing so, our bond would continue as we grew older.

Maybe someday, Charlie would find someone worth fighting for like I was fighting for him. And I knew without an iota of hesitance that if I got into trouble, he would be there for me. No doubt about it. But what if—

“Hello.”

I startled and glanced up to find Brady sliding into the booth seat across from me. The vinyl padding squeaked under him as he settled. My heart skipped a beat. I felt sick to my stomach and excited at the same time. Nervous excitement... more like dread. This was it. This was no joke. He was a little less flippant than he had been yesterday, a little less relaxed. He wasn't smiling, and his shoulders seemed tense, his jaw clenching and unclenching. I saw the throb of the pulse in his neck.

“You're as nervous as I am, aren't you?”

He eventually nodded. Then that grin tweaked the corner of his mouth, and he offered a shrug. “It's not every day you find someone willing to marry you within twenty-four hours.” He glanced down at the manila folder he'd placed on the table. “You still want to go through with this? No hard feelings if you don't.”

No, I didn't want to go through with this, and I yearned to change my mind, desperately so. But I couldn't. Shame on me, and shame on Charlie, but we needed the money. I needed the money to finish school. I slowly shook my head.

“I've brought the contract and a check—”

I stiffened. “But I told you I would need cash. It will take three days for a bank to clear a check, and that will be too late! I need it tomorrow!” I clamped my mouth shut, my heart pounding as a cold chill swept through my body. I couldn't stop the shiver that raced down my spine. Brady obviously saw my reaction and frowned.

“I'll go to the bank with you, right after the contract is signed, Dana.

They'll cash the check for me. Today.”

My relief was so intense, the chemical release of my hormones, the adrenaline; everything gave me an instant headache. This was crazy. Absolutely crazy, but I had to save Charlie. “Okay, thank you.”

Brady reached into the envelope and extracted a sheaf of papers. He turned them around and slid them across the table toward me. He pulled a pen from the manila folder as well.

I frowned as I stared at the stapled collection of papers, then slowly picked it up, riffling through them. My eyebrows lifted in surprise as I gazed at him. “You want me to read through all this legalese right now? It’s got to be fifteen pages or more of gobbledygook.”

Brady chuckled, “My lawyer’s very thorough. Not exactly gobbledygook, but I’ll break it down for you. You can read it ad infinitum later.”

I began to shake my head. No way was I going to sign anything before reading it, and I told him so.

He shrugged and leaned back in the booth. “Suit yourself.”

I returned my gaze to the first page. I barely managed to get through the first paragraph and let me tell you, I’m pretty darned smart. I quickly scanned the rest of the page, then flipped to the next, and the next one after that. I frowned again looking toward Brady carefully watching me.

“Is there some law that lawyers refer to that prevents them from writing out contracts in plain English?” I lifted my hand to interrupt his ensuing comment. “I’m not stupid, Brady. I’m just about done with nursing school, and let me tell you, if I can get through microbiology and pathophysiology, I can tackle this. But for the sake of time, can you summarize the contents for me please?”

“You’re a nursing student?” He seemed surprised. “That’s an admirable —”

“Mister Shaw—”

That grin again followed by the appearance of a dimple. My stomach did a somersault. Dammit!

“It’s Brady. Remember, you’re my fiancéé. The mister refers to my dad.”

“Fine,” I sighed. “What does all this say?” I felt mentally exhausted, and my head pounded anew.

“Basically, what we agreed to yesterday. In return for you marrying me and producing a child within a year, you get five-hundred-thousand dollars.

I've got the check for fifty thousand here." He pulled the check from the envelope and then tucked it back inside. "Allotments will be deposited into an account, in your name only, throughout the year." He paused. "It also states that a viable pregnancy comes as a result of our union."

I glanced up from the papers. "What if—"

"It also says that we will both undergo complete physical examinations and blood work to determine that we're both fertile and there's nothing wrong medically with either one of us that would prevent the manufacture of a child."

The manufacture of a child. What a sterile, noncommittal way of saying that. I frowned. "I thought you said yesterday that there would be no sex between us, that this was to be a marriage in name only."

"I made some phone calls yesterday. Most fertility clinics wouldn't even suggest artificial insemination or fertility drugs unless a couple is unable to procreate for some time." He shook his head. "We don't have the luxury of time. We're going to have to do this the old-fashioned way."

Dammit! I knew the AI angle was a long shot. I knew better. For God's sake, I was a nursing student. I understood the reproductive system and how babies were *manufactured*. I stared at him, shouting at myself to get up and walk away from this absurd plan, but I just sat there, my hands trembling slightly as I held that stupid contract.

"I know that neither of us are particularly thrilled with this, Dana, but I promise, I won't treat you badly. There's a clause in there about drinking, smoking, and drugs. On my part, I limit alcohol consumption. On your part, to ensure safety to the baby, you refrain from all drinking, smoking, or any kind of drugs."

"What happens..." I couldn't even believe I was discussing such a topic with such a great sense of detachment. "What if I have a miscarriage or something goes wrong? Does that void out the contract?" Shit, I sounded so cold.

He shook his head. "No, Dana. I know, and my lawyer knows, that as much of a jerk as my dad can be, he knows also that things go wrong in a pregnancy. Termination of a pregnancy is not an option, but an act of God, well, even my dad would have to accept that."

"What if it takes me..." I swallowed, couldn't even believe I was talking like this. "What if it takes more than three months for me... us, to get

pregnant? What if it takes five months?”

He shrugged. “Same thing, though I do have to warn you that my dad might be blunt about any delays, may even resort to asking if you’re trying hard enough, if you know what I mean.”

“And what about the marriage part?”

“We don’t have to get married right away. My dad won’t care if the baby announcement comes first, but we do have to marry within a year’s time. To keep everything legal with the inheritance and all.”

I felt hollow inside. I nodded, my mouth dry. I reached for the glass of water on the table and clasped my hand around it. I started to lift it to my mouth, but my hand shook so badly I was afraid I would drop it. I lowered the glass back down on the table. With a heavy sigh, I gestured with my hand. “Give me the pen.”

I sounded so strange, even to myself. My voice, defeated and surrendering. This wasn’t me. Never in my life would I have imagined myself in such a position—or agreeing to it. I was doing it for Charlie. But not just for my brother. I had to think of my schooling. I had to focus on that. Charlie’s safety and my career. The sacrifice had to be worth it. It had to!

I flipped to the last page of the contract and saw the line where I was supposed to sign. Taking a deep breath and holding back a guttural howl of disappointment and shame, I signed my name. The signature was shaky, no doubt about it, but I put pen to paper. I added the date, then shoved the stack of papers back toward Brady, followed by a toss of the pen.

“Your turn.”

His grin disappeared as he turned the papers around and reached for the pen. His hand didn’t shake. His signature was firm and sure. And why shouldn’t it be? He was getting everything he wanted. Then again, so was I, so why did I feel so sick right now? And then I realized. I had a conscience. Maybe Brady didn’t. My heart sank even lower.

The moment the contract was signed, he reached into his pocket and retrieved his cell phone and tapped out a number. “Frederick, we’re going to the bank. Make sure they’re aware of my arrival and that the check will be cleared and paid within the hour.”

I stared at him in dumb amazement. “Who’s Frederick?”

“My lawyer.”

“You can do that? You can wiggle your way through bank regulations?”

He grinned. “My daddy owns the bank. One of his many business ventures. Frederick will know what to say, maybe that I need some fun money to go to Vegas or something. They won’t be surprised. They know me there.”

How much money did this guy have? Then again, if he was throwing around five hundred grand on a complete stranger, he probably had a lot.

“Would you mind if I asked you a personal question?”

I looked at him. “Yes, actually I would.” That didn’t stop him.

“Why do you need fifty thousand dollars in cash by tomorrow?” He slid the signed contract back into the envelope. “I realize that it’s none of my business, but since we’re about to be married and all, it seems like a reasonable question, don’t you think?”

I wasn’t nearly ready to start exposing my personal history, nor my brother’s gambling debt to him. So I kept it simple. “It’s for my brother.”

*

At exactly one o’clock on Friday afternoon, I walked into a shabby looking bar a few blocks away from my apartment building, where I had arranged to meet Slim Pete. I carried an old backpack stuffed with fifty thousand dollars in cash. My heart pounded although I did my best to keep a bland expression on my face, as if I walked into this bar every day, which I didn’t, and that my backpack was only filled with books, like it usually was.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. I barely managed to disguise my expression of disgust as I smelled a combination of urine, pot, stale beer, and just... oldness... the place looked like it dated back to the 1950s and little, if any, renovations had been done. The paneling had started to split at the seams, the torn vinyl barstools exposing clumps of padding, the floors warped and strewn with crunchy stuff and God knows what else.

“Dana!”

I looked toward the corner and into the booth where Slim Pete sat, lounging, arms spread against the back of the booth, knees spread, a grin on his face. I quickly walked past the bar, ignoring the curious glances of the mid-day drinkers, wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible.

I swung the backpack off my shoulder and tossed it onto the seat next to Slim Pete.

“There’s your money.”

The look on his face expressed obvious surprise. He hadn’t been

expecting this. Regardless of how I'd gotten the money, I felt a twinge of satisfaction at besting him.

"Where'd you get it?" he asked, leaning over and unzipping a small section of the backpack, one eyebrow crooking slightly when he spied the bundles of cash inside. He quickly zipped it up.

"None of your business." Hands on my hips, I gave him my ultimatum. "The debt is paid off. You don't come near me or Charlie. You don't accept any more bets from Charlie."

He laughed, "Now you know very well that I can't promise that, Dana. After all, I'm a bookie! It's my business!"

I leaned down, but not far enough that I would have to place my hand on that disgusting, grimy table as I looked him straight in the eyes, trying to sound threatening. "If you take one bet from Charlie, I'm warning you, I'll go to the police."

Slim Pete was in my face so fast I nearly gasped. I told myself to hold my ground.

"No you won't, Dana," he snarled. "You know why?"

My stomach turned at the odor of his breath. My heart pounded. I wanted to turn and run, but I didn't. I said nothing.

"Because if you do, I'll hurt you," he warned, his voice low. "And then I'll hurt Charlie. You got it?"

"Pete!"

The anger in the voice startled me. I took a step back from Pete and looked over my shoulder at the bartender, glaring at Pete from behind the bar.

"Get the hell out of here!"

At first I thought he was talking to me, but then Pete chuckled and rose, lifting the backpack from the bench and sliding the strap over one shoulder. "Sure thing, Roger, sure thing."

Pete brushed past me, nearly knocking me into the booth. It took everything I had in me not to start crying.

"You all right, lady?"

Startled, I turned to the bartender and nodded. I took a deep breath and quickly left the bar, hovering in the doorway for a moment to make sure that Pete wasn't waiting out there for me. I glanced up and down the street, but I didn't see him. Squinting against the bright afternoon sun, I pulled my phone from my pocket and called for a taxi. Normally I would've just walked home

or waited for a bus, but at the bank yesterday, Brady had pulled out an extra thousand dollars for me. Spending cash, he said. To get myself a nice dress to wear to the gathering at this dad's estate tomorrow. A formal dress.

Normally, I would not have considered a taxi. The public bus system in Dallas was more than adequate for my needs. But my meeting with Slim Pete had jarred me to the core. I didn't want to be walking around by myself right now and risk the chance of bumping into him again.

It took only a few minutes for a taxi to round the corner and pull up in front of the bar. As I quickly stepped from beneath the tattered overhang of the bar and to the curb to open the door to the taxi, I glanced down the street. I paused and frowned. There, on the opposite side, near the far corner, someone sat in a car. Looking directly at me.

My stomach turned. Probably one of Pete's goons. I couldn't help it. My emotions in a turmoil, infuriated with my life at the moment, I raised my hand and flipped off whoever the hell it was.

Chapter Twelve

Brady

I woke late, startled when I glanced at the clock. Shit. I had called Dana late yesterday afternoon and told her to come by my apartment this afternoon at four o'clock so we could discuss some details over our feigned relationship before it was time to go to the reception. I had just a few minutes to throw on some clothes and quickly glance around my apartment to make sure it was in decent enough condition to receive company. Not that I had ever really cared before.

I had a penthouse suite on top of one of the older buildings in downtown, constructed in the early twentieth century. It kind of stood out like a sore thumb against the more modern steel and glass structures of Dallas, but when I had seen it for the first time, it pulled at something deep inside me. Maybe it was the old stone that looked like it had been exquisitely and carefully chosen, then sanded just so before placement into the edifice. Maybe it was the finely sculptured edgings carved into the stones that delineated each floor from the outside. Then again, maybe it was just the strength and longevity of the building and the fact that it had withstood the test of time and weather, even a tornado back in the thirties.

Stepping inside the foyer, I always felt like I was stepping back in time. The black-and-white marble floors were original, as were the old-fashioned brass-fronted mailboxes along the left wall of the entryway. All the molding was original, and the property owner had done a wonderful job at renovating

the formerly abandoned building to its former glory. Dark, highly polished banisters to hold onto if one was predisposed to take the stairs. Otherwise, the only other option from getting from floor to floor was one of those old-fashioned elevators that you had to pull the gate over. Entry into that elevator was always an adventure in itself, never knowing if today would be the day when the ancient contraption would decide to break down.

“Focus!”

My voice jarred me into action, and I quickly started a pot of coffee. Then I paused. I would be announcing Dana as my fiancée to my dad later this evening, and I didn’t know if she even drank coffee. Then again, who didn’t?

The coffee machine was gurgling away when I heard two loud knocks on the door. Oddly enough, I suddenly felt nervous. Not sure why, I headed for the door and opened it. Dana stood there, wearing a very nice cocktail dress; a sequined gold sheath dress, certainly appropriate for a get-together in most situations for sure, but not for the reception we were going to. She had pulled her shoulder-length hair into a bun. She wore little makeup but didn’t need any as far as I was concerned. Tiny faux diamond studs in her earlobes and a slim faux gold bracelet encircled her wrist to complete the ensemble. I stepped back and gestured for her to come inside.

She saw my expression and glanced down at the dress. “Not appropriate?”

I didn’t reply but gestured for her to sit down on the couch. I watched her face. While she did her best to maintain her expression, I couldn’t help notice her mouth dropped open slightly and the dismay in her eyes. For the first time, I wondered about *her*. Where she lived. How she lived.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” I said, gesturing again to the couch. “Make yourself at home.”

My penthouse suite took up half the upper floor of the old building. Two bedrooms, one and a half baths, a huge living room, and an open kitchen and dining area separated from the living room by a chest high dinette with stools. The entire length of the living room wall facing downtown was glass, offering a gorgeous view of not only the downtown district, but miles and miles into the distance.

Dana took the one step down into the living room area from the foyer and kitchen space and sat on the couch. Rather, on the edge of it, knees together, hands folded neatly on her thighs. She looked calm, expression bland again,

but I could tell by the whiteness in her knuckles how nervous she was.

“Feel free to look around,” I invited. “After all, you’re going to be living here too, at least for a while.” I gestured down the hall. “I have two bedrooms, the master bedroom and a smaller though quite comfortably sized bedroom. You can have the master. It has a full bath.”

She nodded and glanced at me and then quickly away to gaze around once more before she spoke. “I live in a studio near the university.”

Now I understood her reaction but with the time, I had to broach the topic of her clothing. I wasn’t sure how to discuss it without hurting her feelings. I suppose I should just blurt it out. “You look nice, Dana, but you can’t go to the event like that.”

She frowned and glanced down at her dress. “Why not? It cost me—you—a pretty penny.”

“Just trust me, okay?” She didn’t look offended, but stared while I reached for my phone. I needed help, so I called Cassie.

Cassie was the only female friend I had. Cassie Darren and I had known each other forever. Literally. I think the first class we shared was in first grade. It wasn’t until we got into junior high that she began to fill out and blossom into the lovely woman she was today, and, of course, with testosterone beginning to surge through my blood, everyone was fairly confident that we would morph from friends into perhaps friends with benefits.

We kissed once in awhile, but neither one of us seemed to want to endanger our friendship with tawdry sex. By the time we entered high school, we both discovered that her interests leaned more toward women than men. Not that I would’ve hesitated if it had been different, because she was drop-dead gorgeous by then. If we hadn’t been best friends, who knows? Our moms had been friends before Cassie and I were, and that’s how we had met. She had been there for me every day following my mom’s death and—

After two rings a throaty, sexy voice answered.

“Brady, I was wondering when you would get around to calling me. You back from Spain?”

“Cassie, I need your help.”

“What kind of help?”

“It’s a long story, but I need you to help a friend of mine with a makeover.” I glanced at Dana and saw her frown, waving her hand in a

negative gesture. I glanced away from her and pointedly stared out the window. “You know, dress, hair, and makeup.”

Dana softly protested.

“When?”

“Right now if possible. I’m taking her to a gathering at Dad’s this evening. You know what that means.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Thanks, Cassie.” I disconnected the call. The moment I did, Dana spoke up.

“If I need fancier clothes, I can go get them myself. I just didn’t want to spend too much money. The price of this thing was outrageous as it was. And as far as that goes, I can do my own hair and makeup too.”

“Please don’t be offended, Dana,” I said, walking toward the couch and sitting at the opposite end. “Honest, I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, you are lovely. Absolutely lovely.” I meant it. “But to fool my dad, you have to look the part.”

“The part?”

I cleared my throat, thinking there was just no other way to say it. “I have to admit that you’re not... well, you’re not the kind of woman I typically hook up with.” Her eyes widened, and I quickly rushed on. “Not in the looks department, that’s not what I mean. You’re beautiful, no doubt about that. I just mean... I mean—”

“You don’t need to explain, Brady, I get it,” she said.

“I don’t think you do.”

“Look, I don’t know anything about you or your family, and you don’t know anything about me. I’ll follow your lead, but I hope you don’t think the fancy hairdo or a dress is going to change who I really am.” She shook her head. “That I can’t do.”

“You don’t have to change who you are, at least not on the inside,” I assured her. “It’s just that this is a formal gathering. Very formal.” I shook my head. “They’re all formal gatherings, at least in my opinion. Hobnobbing with millionaires—most of them snobs, mind you—it’s not my favorite thing to do either, believe me.”

She nodded as if she understood, but I saw her fidgeting, her short nails idly tracing one of the sequined patterns on the dress. When she saw me watching her, she stopped and held out her hands.

“Let me be blunt. I’m a nursing student. I grew up poor, and I still am poor,” she said simply. “Or I was. I don’t like to waste money on frivolous things like this.” She swept her hand down the dress. “I don’t spend my hard-earned money on makeup and I do my hair myself. School and work.” She glanced down at her fingers and offered a shrug. “Long fingernails get in the way.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Cassie will fix you up with some of those French nails or something. You can take them off after tonight.”

“Who’s Cassie?”

“A friend of mine. We’ve known each other forever.” I glanced at the clock. Barely ten minutes had passed since I called Cassie. She didn’t live far, but the sooner she got here, the better.

“So what’s the story I’m supposed to stick to tonight when we meet your dad?”

I gave her some basic background information about how we supposedly met and where. We’d been dating on and off for the past six months or so, but only during the past couple of months had we grown more serious.

“That’s it?”

I nodded. “The simpler we keep the story, the easier it will be to stick to it.”

Just then a knock sounded on my door, and I quickly rose from the couch, opened it, and smiled as Cassie brushed past me with barely a wave and focused on Dana. She paused at the step, glanced at me, and nodded in approval.

“My name’s Cassie,” she said, quickly heading for Dana, hand extended. “Come on, girlfriend, we’ve got some shopping to do!”

*

I arrived at my dad’s estate sans Dana, hoping that she and Cassie wouldn’t be much longer. I had called Cassie an hour ago to get a status update. She told me that they were running late and she would bring Dana to meet me at my dad’s. Since I’d arrived, I’d studiously avoided him, hovering near the edge of the wet bar as I watched the guests mingle. Typical for one of my dad’s “get-togethers” with about fifty or more people in attendance, everyone dressed to the nines.

I reached up to loosen the shirt collar beneath my formal tux jacket, feeling like a fraud. Which I was. I nodded greetings and offered pleasantries

to many of the guests who acknowledged me, people I had known my entire life. Most of them business friends and associates of my dad's, but some just old friends not involved in any business dealings.

The catering staff moved among the guests wearing black pants, long-sleeved white button-down shirts and maroon vests, bearing trays of hors d'oeuvres, wine, and flutes golden with champagne. I turned to the wet bar, glanced at the bartender my dad had hired, and ordered a Scotch. I had promised Dana that I wouldn't overindulge, and I meant to keep my word, but if anything called for a Scotch, it was now.

I had to—

“Brady.”

I turned to find my dad standing behind me, features somber, a slight frown marring his brow. “Hey, Dad.”

He made an overt gesture of peering through the crowd. “So where's this fiancée of yours?”

“She's on her way with Cassie.” He nodded, but I could tell he didn't believe me. I tried to anticipate the look of surprise on his face—

She entered the room then. Dana. And it was I who had to struggle to maintain my expression. She looked absolutely radiant, transformed even. Not that she hadn't been beautiful to begin with; she had great bone structure, gorgeous eyes, and perfect lips. But now? My heart trip hammered, and I felt arousal heat my groin. Oh my God. Though I longed to gulp it down, I placed the glass of Scotch down and smiled when she found me. I held out my hand. A perfectly normal reaction, drawing her toward me.

She stepped toward me with a sensual smile, her body encased in a form fitting yet tasteful one-shouldered gown. She played the part well, a smile softening her face as she quickly made her way through the crowd, Cassie giving me a look that I understood. I gave her a wink and a nod as Dana's hand met mine. I glanced down and saw the sparkling diamond ring, the long fingernails painted in a tasteful subdued pink. And the dress. I couldn't help the top-to-toe gaze, or stare rather, that I gave her. The long, charcoal black sleeveless dress was more than tasteful for the event, hugging her figure closely. Cassie must've encouraged her to wear a push up bra because her cleavage, though not overly exposed, had my thoughts running wild. My dick wiggled again, but I forced myself to turn toward my dad.

“Dad, I'd like you to meet my fiancée, Dana Sommers.” I could see he

was impressed. “Dana, this is my dad, Clint Shaw.”

Dana offered her hand, palm down, and my father took her hand between both of his.

“Very pleased to meet you, Dana.”

He glanced at me with a raised eyebrow then turned back to Dana. “So when’s the wedding?”

Dana didn’t even hesitate. She smiled warmly as she glanced at me.

“We haven’t set a date yet,” she said. “But we’ll be working out the details very soon.”

“That’s wonderful, wonderful to hear.” He nodded.

I watched my dad. For the first time, he appeared a bit flustered. I wanted to hug Dana right then and there for playing her part so well. My dad excused himself and made his way toward the other side of the room, schmoozing with his guests along the way. Still holding Dana’s hand, I guided her toward the far wall near the window.

“You look absolutely gorgeous,” I said, meaning it. “And the ring... I didn’t even think of that.”

“I didn’t either,” Dana said. “Cassie’s got very good taste.”

“That she does,” I agreed. “Actually—”

Dana’s arms suddenly wrapped around my waist, pulling me close. The movement startled me, even more so when she lifted herself upward, body pressed close to mine, and kissed me on the lips. My surprise lasted only a second. The feel of her lips on mine caused my dick to wiggle again. I’m sure she felt it, but I lost myself in the kiss until it was abruptly cut off.

I gazed down at her in confusion, but she offered an explanation before I could even ask.

“Your dad is looking at us,” she said, a smile pasted on her face as her fingers plucked at an imaginary piece of fuzz on the tuxedo jacket.

Before I could even respond to that comment, she wrapped her hands around the back of my neck and pulled my head down, whispering into my ear.

“I think your dad bought it.”

My lips still tingled from her caress. Believe me, I’ve probably kissed hundreds of women, but none of them ever felt like that. It took me a bit off guard and left me more than slightly confused.

Chapter Thirteen

Dana

I was exhausted, emotionally and mentally anyway. My eyes felt dry and scratchy. I wasn't usually up this late. It was just after midnight, and we had left the reception or the get-together, whatever the hell it was, just a little while ago. We had returned to Brady's penthouse suite in his Jeep Renegade—not at all what I expected—and he had just given me the official tour of his suite. I'd be sleeping in the master bedroom and he took the guest room, figuring that I would appreciate being able to use the bathtub in the master.

I nodded, so tired that I didn't really care where I slept.

“Let me change the sheets on the bed—”

“Not necessary,” I said, so tired I could hardly think straight. “I can do it in the morning. Right now, all I want to do is sleep.”

He nodded. “You can stock the fridge with any food you like, and tomorrow I'll give you a credit card that you can use for anything you need...”

In addition to my overwhelming weariness, more than likely caused by the emotional distress of the evening, I couldn't get that damned kiss out of my mind. I had done it spur of the moment because I noticed that his father was eyeing us from across the room. But I had to admit that, that kiss had been wonderful. He'd been surprised for a second, but then... his lips were soft, and he kissed with assurance, not too hard, but enough to let me know

he was genuinely responding. Maybe not to me, but I had felt his response in his dick as well, my leg so close to his, the pressure of his hard-on against my thigh unmistakable. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. He smelled good, damn that Old Spice, and he had a great body. Beneath the tux everything was solid muscle.

Regardless of how I felt about the kiss, I resolved that on his part that he hadn't been particularly impressed. He hadn't said anything about it. A guy like him probably got kissed all the time. Earlier today when Cassie and I had gone shopping, she had given me a bit of background about Brady. How he never did relationships. How he was a playboy, or used to be anyway. She didn't know anything about our deal, I gathered that. Was she trying to give me a head's up? A warning not to allow myself to get too close? She didn't have to worry about that. I had no intention of allowing myself to become emotionally vulnerable to a guy like Brady Shaw.

I glanced around his suite again, thinking that I should have insisted he take me back to my studio. I wasn't ready for this. In the car, he told me that from now on, we had to play the part. He would cancel the lease on my studio and have my things brought over. It wasn't that I wanted to live in my crappy studio, but everything was moving so fast now.

I would have to leave a message with Charlie so he wouldn't be surprised if he came over and discovered that I had moved out. I would have to tell him that I was engaged. Living in a penthouse suite in downtown Dallas. What would he say?

"You okay?"

While he seemed fully awake and alert, I needed to crash, and I told him so. He nodded and bid me goodnight. I turned down the hallway, only now realizing that I didn't have anything to sleep in. I sighed as I entered the master bedroom and closed the door. I flipped the light switch and leaned my back against the door. What a crazy turn my life had taken. I just hoped that I wasn't making one of the biggest mistakes I had ever made.

I glanced around the master bedroom, thinking I probably could've fit four of my studio apartments into the place, including the walk-in closet and the full bath. A huge four-poster bed with an expensive looking bedspread. At least six pillows, all neat and wrinkle-free, plumped even. A large oak dresser stood against one wall, and I stepped toward it, hesitated briefly, then opened the drawers until I found a stack of T-shirts. I had to sleep in

something, didn't I?

I quickly disrobed, laying the dress carefully over the back of a chair in the corner of the room, my fingers lingering on the fabric. That dress cost more than I could make in five months.

Still, it wasn't really me. In fact, I was quite relieved to don the T-shirt which smelled like Downey. I quickly stepped into the bathroom, took care of business, and without showering, moved in a daze to the bed and pulled back the bedspread. The bed was higher off the floor than the one in my studio apartment, so I actually had to climb into it, but the moment I did I nearly moaned with pleasure at the exquisite softness of the sheets. I wiggled my way into the center of the bed and lowered my head on the pillow, a hint of Old Spice reminding me of Brady. This was heaven. Absolute heaven...

*

I'm not sure when I fell asleep, but the next thing I knew I was kissing Brady again, and his hand was between my thighs, rubbing against my mound. I throbbed with desire, wet with anticipation. His other hand cupped my breast, his thumb teasing my nipple into a hard nub. I groaned, felt my hips move of their own accord, heading toward an orgasm—

The noise startled me.

I opened my eyes, at first not sure where I was. Then I remembered. Brady's room. My groin throbbed from the dream I'd been enjoying, the sensations still so strong I lowered my hand to bring myself some relief.

Until my brain recognized the wonderful aroma sifting into the room. Bacon.

I quickly rose, brushed my hair back with my fingers, and opened the door. I was appropriately covered, his T-shirt so large that the sleeves hung down nearly to my elbows and the bottom of the shirt just about touched my knees. I saw him in the kitchen, his back to me. Cooking. I heard the sizzling bacon, smelled the eggs, and heard the toaster as it popped up two perfectly browned pieces of toast. Wearing a tight fitted T-shirt and boxer shorts. Once again, my groin started to throb. Crap. Maybe this wasn't going to be as easy as I had thought.

“And he cooks too!”

He glanced over his shoulder at me, smiling, his eyes skimming every part of me, from my mussed hair, lingering on my breasts, apparently offering less covering than I had imagined, and down to my toes, before

skimming back up again.

He laughed, “Don’t get too used to it, because breakfast is the only meal I can cook.” He gestured with his chin. “Sit down. We can talk while we eat.”

I sat down, and as we ate a breakfast of perfectly scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast, he asked me some personal questions. About school, what I planned to do with my life, about my brother. I hesitated to answer many of them other than two or three-word answers. Superficial. I wasn’t sure how much to say. After all, this was our first real conversation.

I had plenty of questions for him too, but not yet. I tried to focus on his questions, but I was finding it difficult to concentrate. My gaze kept skimming over his bulging biceps, and the way those veins traveled down his forearms to his hands. Strong fingers. Capable hands. Every time he lifted his fork to his mouth, those biceps bunched and strands of muscle in his forearm twitched. He had such a nice profile and—

“So what are you going to do?” he asked, popping the last bite of bacon into his mouth as he gazed down at me.

His question jarred me back to awareness. I had been telling him about my schooling. “Well, I have to transfer to another college after this semester is over in a couple of weeks. The school lost funding so I lost my scholarship...” I glanced at him, embarrassed. “That’s another of the reasons why I accepted your offer.”

“I can help pay for your tuition,” he said.

I glanced at him in surprise. “You’ve already offered to pay me, Brady. You don’t have to—”

“I want to.”

I stared at him a moment, thinking that it was a nice gesture. When Cassie had told me he was a playboy and wasn’t into relationships, I figured he was shallow, arrogant, and more than a little spoiled. Then again, look at this crazy deal we had made.

But maybe there was more to Brady Shaw than that. He hadn’t even asked me why my brother needed the fifty thousand dollars. He just wanted to know more about me. But then I put the brakes on my imagination. Brady had his own motives for this crazy plan of his. So did I, I realized, my appetite suddenly gone. Just because I had accepted the terms of our agreement didn’t mean that the agreement itself was noble. *Don’t even think about getting attached to him.*

Yes, he was handsome. Yes, he was filthy rich, so much so that apparently he could throw money around as if there was no tomorrow. That didn't make him a good person.

Chapter Fourteen

Brady

A week passed. An interesting week; a week that I got to know Dana a little better, not that we were with each other twenty-four hours a day. Enough to realize I enjoyed her company. She was a great conversationalist — when I wanted conversation. She wasn't overly chatty, like some women constantly trying to impress me. She gave me my space, and I gave the same in return. Dana Sommers was a private person, I realized, a thinker.

She was heading into the end of her semester and insisted on keeping her job at the diner, at least for now. I respected her for that, but worried that my dad would find out and blow a gasket. Well, let him. She was driven, had goals, and pride. That thought made me cringe— involuntarily. How much had it cost her dignity to take on my deal? And what had compelled her to do so?

Desperation. Nothing else made sense. She wasn't a gold-digger. She wasn't into the glamorous lifestyle of the rich and famous. She didn't go out and buy expensive clothes or jewelry or even a car. She seemed quite comfortable in her jeans and t-shirts and tennis shoes. She was confident and focused on finishing nursing school.

I often found her on the sofa with an open textbook on her lap, others beside her, but staring out the window. At such times, I wanted to ask her what she was thinking about. Me? Our deal? Memorizing stuff from her texts? She had a brother, but that's about all I knew of her background and

personal life. Though I certainly felt curious, I didn't want to pry. Too early in the relationship.

Relationship. Is that what we had? I sighed.

It'd also been a week since we kissed. It didn't matter to me that the kiss had been faked to impress my dad. It didn't matter that the kiss had been brief. It didn't even matter to me much that she had displayed no real emotion behind that kiss, but I couldn't say the same about me.

That brief kiss had startled me. I hadn't seen it coming, nor had I anticipated how it would affect me. I'd been kissed millions of times before. Unlike those, however, Dana's kiss had left me feeling a myriad of sensations, most of which was frustration. I couldn't stop thinking about her. Those lips, so soft and warm, and the moment they touched mine, sending a wave of desire through me. Her kiss wasn't desperate or needy, or one that intended to impress. No. That kiss had been so simple, so casual, so... nice, that it had nearly taken my breath away.

Mine. The guy who slept with women, then used them as guilt-free as they used me, and then left in the darkness, most of the time, never to see again. But Dana and her simple, gentle kiss had left me... curious. I wanted to know more. See more. That kiss represented only a hint of the passion that I sensed burned deep within her, a passion that I doubted she even realized.

I shook my head. I couldn't allow myself to become attracted to her. This was a business deal. Nothing more, nothing less. I reminded myself that the only reason she had kissed me in the first place was to play her role, especially with my dad watching. Nevertheless, she had sparked interest, and I couldn't deny it.

For that reason, I tried not to be around too much. Not that I avoided her, but when I was around her, all I wanted to do was take her into my arms and kiss the living daylights out of her to prove that I was right. That beneath that seemingly naïve and pure persona was a woman who could be as passionate in bed as I thought she could.

So what did I do? Much to my dad's surprise, I went to work, in my little, used office in his building downtown. At first it was amusing, the looks of surprise I got from people when I started showing up on an almost daily basis. Then it just got annoying. Did they think I would soon grow tired of the monotony? Were some of the ladies surprised that I didn't try to flirt with them? That I didn't leave at noon because I didn't have what it took to focus

on business? Everyone knew that I was technically one of my dad's silent partners, but on the rare occasions that I showed up at the office, it was usually only to check on something one, maybe two days a month. Rarely did I remain more than an hour, if that.

Could I blame them? They knew me, at least superficially. My reputation was no secret. I was in the paper a lot; a different woman on my arm every time, taking exorbitant vacations, drinking. I popped into the office once in a while, but not enough to encourage any of them to think I could be serious for long. It wasn't that I was dumb. I wasn't. I had an MBA in business administration.

I was just lazy. Pause for thought. Is that how I wanted people to view me? Unmotivated? Unable to make something of myself? Turning my back on a business that my dad had built through hard work and determination?

Shit.

Like Dana, I had a role to play. Dana was at school anyway, and I wasn't about to go chasing after her like a lost little puppy. I had to keep this relationship impersonal. I had to force myself to keep my distance from her. At least for now. What better place than the office? I'd kill two birds with one stone. Of course, we still had the baby part of the deal to deal with, but first things first.

So, I went to work. Forced myself to focus on the numbers, the mergers, the deals. Even so, the stack of paperwork on my desk wasn't completely successful in keeping me distracted from thoughts and visions of Dana; what she looked like with her tousled hair and sleepy eyes when she got up in the morning, wandering around my apartment in that old T-shirt of mine that she now used as her nightgown. The image of that didn't do much to quell the surge of tension in my groin when I thought of her sleeping in my bed in the middle of the night. My dick had more than a few things to say about that too.

I forced my attention back to the proposal I was reviewing when my personal phone rang. Frowning at the distraction, I pulled the phone from my pocket and glanced at the screen. Nick.

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

"Nothing much on my end. What have you been up to this past week?"

I chuckled, "Paperwork. I'm at the office... spending a lot of time at the office."

Nick grunted a response. “How are things going with Dana?”

I glanced toward the door, closed of course, but nevertheless lowered my voice so no one could hear me—just in case. “It’s torture. I can’t stand being so close to her and not being able to touch.”

“You want to? Touch, I mean?”

“Hell yes,” I sighed. “But I don’t want to scare her away. She’s not a sex slave. She’s supposed to be my fiancée. But I have to admit, I’m not sure that I can keep playing this farce for a whole year.”

Nick chuckled, “Hang in there, buddy. Maybe you just need to get some action.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said, then disconnected the call. Instead of returning to the paperwork, I started scrolling through my contact list. Maybe Nick was right. Maybe I just needed a good lay, and then I wouldn’t feel so anxious and frustrated. I scanned through the contacts and found the number of a woman I’d seen a few times, a woman who liked to be spanked. Not exactly into S&M, but maybe just what I needed to ease my growing sexual frustration. I couldn’t remember the last time I went an entire week without. I pressed dial and listened as the phone rang twice.

“Hello?”

My thumb immediately disconnected the call. What the hell? I stared down at the phone screen, wondering what the hell was wrong with me. But I knew. Call me a jerk, but I had a feeling that the only way I was going to satisfy my curiosity about Dana was to sleep with *her* and not someone else. Sure, I could get my rocks off with anyone, but I didn’t want just anyone. I wanted to do it with Dana.

Besides, we did have to deal with this baby thing. At the same time, I knew she would be hesitant. We were still pretty much walking on eggshells around each other, both of us testing the boundaries. I had no idea what she was thinking. Was she even attracted to me? Did I care?

Ultimately, I decided that the only solution to my immediate problem was to seduce her. Still, that might be tricky. She was no pushover, I had already learned that. I’d seen glimpses of her temper, especially the day we met. If I was too obvious, she’d see right through me. Nevertheless, I had to give it a go. I found her name among my contacts and dialed. I got her voicemail.

I waited for the beep, then spoke. “Let’s go out to dinner tonight, a nice place. Fazio’s. I’ll meet you there after work. The reservation is for five-

thirty.”

I disconnected that call and then called the restaurant to make the reservation. My invitation hadn't sounded exactly like an invitation, more like an order, but I wasn't about to start giving her control of where or how fast—or slow—our supposed relationship was going to go. Besides, I had to be seen in public with her, especially since I knew without a doubt that my dad was likely watching both of us.

Still, as the hours passed slowly and I continued to force myself to concentrate on the paperwork, all I could think about was Dana.

*

By the time I got to the restaurant, I had a raging headache. I had dealt with more paperwork today than I had in years. I hadn't seen my dad once, but that didn't mean he didn't have eyes and ears all over the building. I had no doubt that he was aware that I'd been around, actually working, most of the week. I just wondered how long it would take before his curiosity overcame his reluctance to check up on me in person.

He knew I could do the work that landed on my desk. I had just never really cared before. I didn't want to do anything that would make his life easier, but should I keep cutting off my nose to spite my own face? It's not that I didn't want a good relationship with my dad. But it seemed impossible. Not with our history.

I pushed thoughts of my past and my dad from my mind as the cab pulled up to the restaurant, looking forward to spending some time with Dana outside the walls of my penthouse. So, I was already smiling as I entered the cozy, semi-dark atmosphere of the restaurant, ready for some good food and even better company. I approached the hostess station, prepared to ask if Dana had arrived, but then, scanning among the early diners, I saw her. Kind of hard to miss. She was so very lovely, her hair pulled back from her face, held in place by delicate looking faux jewel butterflies.

She wore a light blue sleeveless dress with a plunging neckline, but not too plunging, just enough to show the upper mounds of her breasts and some cleavage. Tasteful. Her slender arms rested on the table, her fingers fidgeting with the cloth napkin. Her eyes met mine, and I felt the tightening in my balls and the momentary acceleration of my heartbeat. I did my best to maintain a bland expression, to not give away my true desire for her—sexually. At the same time, I wondered if she felt any bit of attraction for me.

I sat down, prepared for an easy seduction. Unfortunately, it was anything but. Throughout dinner, I tried to flirt with her, but quite surprisingly, I failed. Miserably. I was as tongue-tied as a teenager asking a girl to the prom. Everything that came out of my mouth seemed trite and amateurish. I, who had slept with dozens of women, was trying too hard. I felt like a jerk.

She graciously accepted my compliments and though I turned on the charm, I still sensed a wall of reserve between us, more on her part than mine. She held herself to one glass of wine with her pasta while I limited myself to two, though more than anything I wanted a good stiff shot of Scotch or bourbon. Hell, even a beer. But I was on my best behavior. Unfortunately, my best behavior was getting me absolutely nowhere.

After the main course of linguini with clams, I asked her if she wanted dessert. She shook her head, and so we sipped coffee. In awkward silence. I excused myself on the pretense of the bathroom, but the moment I left the table I walked toward the restrooms scowling and muttering under my breath. I had never experienced such insecurity with women, not since my first fumbling attempts as a teenager. I entered the men's room and headed for the sink, slapping my palm against the water faucet. I cupped my hands and splashed water on my face and looked up to stare at my reflection in the mirror.

“What the hell is the matter with you?”

The reflection didn't respond. This was stupid. This whole plan was stupid. I should have known better. But desperate people did desperate things. I should just cancel the whole thing; the pretend engagement, the pretend marriage, and the baby thing. Oh, don't get any ideas that I was being a gentleman—I wasn't sure if I even knew how to be a gentleman. If I were to be honest with myself, I had to admit that I didn't want to *soil* Dana, and that's the most appropriate word I could come up with at the moment. Because honestly, all I wanted to do was fuck her. I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the ceiling, slowly shaking my head. And that was the problem. I was the one who was screwed.

I was the one who—

I felt arms around my waist and startled, staring into the mirror. Dana stood behind me, her arms wrapped around my waist. I gaped at her in dismay. But only for an instant. My dick responded to what I could only describe as electrical pulses surging through my body.

I watched those hands in the mirror, stroking my chest, then urging me to turn around and face her.

“Dana..?”

“Don’t talk. Don’t say a word.”

I looked down into her beautiful eyes, pupils now dilated with desire.

Unabashed and certainly not at all hesitant, she splayed her hands on my chest, skimmed along my abdomen, and then, one arm wrapping around my lower back, her other hand ventured downward toward my groin. I was already hard. Her palm skimmed the length of my cock, trapped inside my pants. Instinctively, my hips pushed against her as she stroked.

I wanted to ask her what had happened, why she was so suddenly hot for me, but at the same time I didn’t care. This is what I wanted, wasn’t it? Her hands still groping my erection, she lifted herself up on tiptoes while her arm brushed up my back until her hand grasped my neck and gently pulled my head down. Our lips touched, and once again I felt that same sense of... content? Hell, I don’t even know how to describe it. I’d never experienced it before. Of all the kisses I’d given and received, what made this one so different?

I knew that it was Dana who made it different, but I couldn’t fathom why. I responded to her kiss, my lips pressing firmly against hers, my tongue slowly urging her lips apart and then seeking the warmth of her mouth. Our tongues played tag for several seconds, our excited breath the only sound in the room.

Grasping my shoulders, she propelled me toward one of the stalls. We crowded inside, the back of my knee making contact with the porcelain toilet bowl. I’m not sure which one of us closed the door, but seconds later she stood, her back to it, one hand still stroking my dick, prompting the steady throb that increased to the point I thought I would shoot my wad then and there.

I broke off the kiss only briefly, wanting to look into her face, but then her hand left my groin, and I felt her fingers tugging my shirt upward. Frenzied movements almost, one second tugging at my shirt, and then reaching for my belt buckle. Reluctantly, I broke off the kiss and cupped her face in my hands. I smiled.

“No, Dana, not here.”

Her hand stopped moving on my buckle, and her fingers once again

strayed toward my fly. She squeezed against my erection, eyes shining with desire, one eyebrow lifted.

“I want you, obviously, but not here, not like this.... let’s go to back to my place, all right?”

My heart pounded, my skin felt flushed, and I wanted more than anything to slip my hand inside the V-neck of her dress, to squeeze those luscious mounds. I wanted to unzip my zipper and thrust my hard dick deep inside her. I wanted to lift her in my arms, her legs wrapped around my waist, as I plunged into her wetness, but not here. I meant that. Not like this.

Our first time would not be in a men’s bathroom stall. She deserved more than that. She pulled slightly away, her eyes wide and her chest heaving with her own sexual excitement. I wanted to feel her pussy at that moment, to see if it was as wet as I imagined it would be.

“All right.” She looked up at me with a smile. “You pay the bill. I’ll go outside and hail a cab.”

Chapter Fifteen

Dana

Without a shred of guilt, I slipped out of the toilet stall and exited the men's restroom, only then realizing how lucky we were that no one had come in. I'd never done anything like this before, but I wasn't about to apologize. Not to myself nor anyone else. Throughout dinner, I knew without a doubt that he was trying to turn on the charm—trying too hard.

The realization had triggered something in my emotions. I realized that I had held myself back from relationships, from friendships, from everything for so long. I focused only on my studies, on Charlie, on my goals. I was missing out on life. Sure, this situation was weird to say the least, but I was no prude. I'd been around the block a time or two.

Ever since we had kissed at the party, I had felt something tugging at me. Curiosity. Desire. As hard as I tried to fight it, I couldn't. I knew what I was getting into. Brady wasn't making a commitment to *me*. We were committed to this deal, but that's as far as it went. So, for once, I decided to throw caution to the wind. I needed a break, even a short one. I needed a break from the tension and the stress of my studies, of worrying about Charlie, of kicking myself for accepting this deal.

I needed a break, and I was going to take it, come hell or high water.

I quickly made my way through the restaurant to the front door, a half-smile of satisfaction tugging at my lips. Did anyone who happened to look

my way notice my flushed face? Could they see my hard nipples through my dress? Did I care?

I walked into the balmy air of downtown Dallas, an odd combination of aromas hitting me all at once: pasta and sauce from inside, car exhaust, that funky smell that hot asphalt gave off at the end of the day. My body tingled inside and out. I've never been so brazen in my life, but it felt... exhilarating. I chalked up my behavior to stress, all of it building up for the past week. I needed to vent that stress, and Brady was certainly not hard to look at.

Seriously, Brady was one good looking guy. He made my pulse race, though I tried so hard not to show it. Every time I saw him my heart jumped a little, not my doing at all. I wanted to maintain a distance, but how could I when all I wanted to do was stare at him? Sure he had flaws. Didn't we all? This wasn't going to be a long-term relationship, so why shouldn't I enjoy some of the fringe benefits while I could?

Every morning he was in the kitchen, mostly naked, wearing only boxer shorts as he made breakfast. Every ripple of muscle, every glimpse of that hard ass, and those ripped abs tugged at the very core of my womanhood. Oh, to be held in such strong arms... but that's as far as it went, and I knew it. Brady was built for sex. I wasn't sure about affection or commitment, nor loyalty. He wasn't the type to commit to one woman.

The night air, the people passing by on the sidewalk and their subdued conversations, and my effort to attract the attention of a cabbie managed to slightly dampen my sexual urges, but we were going to finish this. I had to know what it was like to sleep with Brady Shaw. Maybe if I just got it out of my system I would stop feeling this way. This pull toward him.

I didn't *want* to be attracted to him. I didn't want to develop feelings for him because I knew that ultimately, I would be the one who ended up hurt. Over the past week, Brady had maintained an aloof mien toward me. Still, I caught him staring at me more than once. When he thought I wasn't looking. Without being stuck up, I could say that I was pretty. Maybe not as beautiful and elegant or rich as some of the other women he had experiences with, but I wasn't chopped liver.

At any rate, I sensed his attraction to me, so why not just let it happen? What difference would it make? Maybe if I took care of this itch, and he scratched it good and well, I could settle into my new life as his pretend girlfriend, his pretend fiancée, and his pretend wife. I stopped there. The

other part of the deal was not to be broached just yet.

A cabbie pulled up and I walked toward it, opened the door, and slid in. “Wait here a moment, my—”

Brady appeared then, sliding into the back seat next to me, his gaze riveted to mine. I nibbled on my bottom lip as he closed the door and gave the cabbie his address. Before the cabbie even pulled away from the curb I was enveloped in his embrace and once again, his lips were on mine. Although slightly embarrassed that we were lip-locked in the back of a cab, I didn’t put a stop to it. Not even when his hand groped my breast through my dress. Feeling daring, I slid my hand between his legs and felt his cock burgeoning to life again.

My chest hitched with my intake of breath as I returned his caress, giving him as good as he gave. Our tongues swirled round and round as my hand stroked the length of his penis, thrilling that I had the power to provoke such a response in him. He wasn’t being aloof now. He was—

“Okay, you two, we’re here.”

I pulled abruptly away from Brady when I realized the cabbie looked at us over his shoulder and saw the grin on his lips. Brady nodded and reached into his back pocket. Pulling out his wallet, he offered the cabbie twice the fare and then opened the door. He stepped out, offered me his hand and I took it, not giving the cab driver a second thought as he shut the door and stepped to the entrance to the building. He tapped his security code, and the heavy glass doors made a clicking sound. He pushed one open, and we stepped through the small foyer toward the elevator.

I didn’t like that elevator, but at the moment, it sure beat the hell out of clambering up the stairs. As hot, wet, and ready as I was, I didn’t know I’d be able to stop Brady from mounting me—if he were so inclined—on one of the landings between the lobby and his penthouse.

We entered the elevator, and Brady closed the gate and then push the button for the penthouse suite. As it slowly rose, creaking and thumping, he pulled me against him, my back to his chest. I lifted my arms and wrapped them around his neck, leaning my head against his solid pecs as he fumbled with his zipper and positioned himself behind me. I felt nasty, but in a good, excited way. Brazen. I rubbed my ass against his groin, and he groaned, the sound rumbling from deep inside his chest.

I felt the draft of chilled air as he lifted the back of my dress, his cock

probing for my opening. I shifted my stance, giving him more room. His head found its target without much difficulty. I wore a thong, and his cock slid easily underneath the loose-fitting lacy hem. My legs slightly apart, he clasped me tightly against his waist and then, as his hand drifted downward to cup my mound and mold my body to his, he entered. He filled me completely in one long, sure stroke. I gasped, my grip around his neck tightening as he rubbed his palm against my clitoris, his dick slowly sliding out and then surging upward again in a rhythm that matched the movement of his hand.

I groaned, ears buzzing, pussy throbbing, already at the point where I was about to explode when the elevator suddenly stopped. That jolted me into awareness. I glanced up at the old-fashioned dial, realizing the journey to the penthouse would be short-lived. The elevator had stopped halfway up. I quickly tried to reach for the stop button. Too late. Frozen, Brady's palm still cupping my mound through my dress, his cock deep inside me, the iron grate door was pulled open. I found myself staring at an older couple, who stared back, eyes wide with shock, mouths open in dismay.

"Good evening," Brady rumbled, then reached forward to close the gate. "Sorry, we're going up."

Stunned, I smiled awkwardly at the older couple as the elevator continued its upward momentum. Brady chuckled. I couldn't help it and began to laugh as well. But the moment had passed. He pulled himself out of me, tucked his engorged cock back into his pants, and zippered up as the elevator finished its journey and disgorge us at the top floor.

Burning with desire, I reached for the gate myself and gave it a tug, then grabbed for Brady's hand. Both of us laughing now, we stumbled toward his apartment. Once inside, nothing was going to stop me. I hurried toward the master bedroom, lifting my dress over my shoulders and dropping it in a heap by the bed. I turned around and saw Brady already tugging his shirt from his pants, his erection obvious, pressing against the fabric of his dress slacks.

I stood in front of him, naked except for my dainty thong, resisting the urge to cover myself from his breathtaking gaze. His eyes lingered on my breasts, prompting my nipples to instinctively harden, as if reaching for him, inviting the feel of his tongue. He stepped forward, slid his arms around me, and lifted me upward as if I weighed nothing at all. His lips encompassed my right nipple and suckled. I felt the jolt all the way down to my toes. Slowly, he released his grip on that nipple and then turned his attention to the other. I

squirmed, my fingers digging into the thick muscles of his shoulders.

Finally, every area of my body on fire, he allowed me to slowly slide downward. I felt every rock-hard muscle of his chest, his abdomen, and his thighs as I did. Lacking the patience and rather ashamed of my lack of the same, I grasped both sides of his button-down shirt and pulled. Buttons popped. He laughed as I shoved the shirt down his shoulders as he shrugged out of the sleeves and waited, arms extended slightly to the side. Waiting?

I reached for his belt buckle, unclasped it, and then unbuttoned and unzipped the pants, shoving them down along his hips, my gaze following the descent of his trousers. His cock was thick, engorged, and pulsating, at full attention now. I sat down abruptly on the side of the bed and he took a step toward me, his dick aimed directly at my face. I took him into my mouth and closed my eyes, one hand reaching for the base of his shaft while the other cupped his balls.

My forehead leaned against his abdomen. I felt his abdominal muscles clench as my lips formed a tight, wet seal around his head. My hand slid over the musculature of his cock, so velvety smooth on its surface, the skin sliding easily over the incredibly hard muscle beneath. My tongue swirled around his head as my hand stroked, and my other hand gently squeezed his balls. His hands rested on my shoulders, a soft groan burgeoning upward from his throat.

He didn't move as I suckled him for several moments. Then, and quite abruptly, I was swept into his arms and the next second we fell backward onto the bed, his body nestled between my legs. We lay like that for several seconds, our eyes meeting, our skin flushed with sexual passion. Did he feel the same thing I did? This strange and compelling pull? This was more than just sex. I felt it, but did he?

He closed his eyes and dipped his head, worshiping my breasts with his mouth, first one, then the other. He nestled himself comfortably in between my thighs. His chest rubbed against my clitoris, and I couldn't help but respond.

His mouth left my breast and his tongue traced a line of liquid heat down along my own abdomen, his hands cupping my breasts, his thumbs slowly circling my nipples as his mouth ventured ever lower. I instinctively spread my legs further apart, inviting his exquisite exploration. My pussy already thrummed with anticipation, and then his mouth settled over my clitoris, his

tongue gentle and warm as it swirled in circles, causing ever-increasing waves of heat to surge upward inside me.

I couldn't hold back. His fingers, his tongue, and his skill had me responding in a matter of seconds. My hips gyrated and lifted upward, seeking more contact. The waves encompassed me and compelled me to writhe against him, my head thrust back into the pillow, relishing in the glorious ecstasy of my orgasm. My pussy throbbed in strong, rhythmic pulses. Before I caught my breath, I felt his head once again pressing against my wetness. I grabbed his shoulders, wrapped my legs around the back of his thighs, and invited him inside.

He obliged and slid easily into my wetness. Once fully engulfed, he paused for several moments, eyes closed, face tight with passionate attention, and then slowly, he began to move. Sliding easily out, almost disengaging before surging forward again in long, sensuous strokes. My hips lifted to meet every stroke, my hands reaching down to clasp that sculpted ass of his, trying to compel him deeper inside. His hips moved faster, the strokes growing harder. His balls slapped against my skin. Grunts, moans, and gasps accompanied the sound. The bed bounced with our enthusiasm. I completely let go of everything, all my worries and concerns about the future. What the hell. I was in the moment, living only for this moment, this contact, this incredible sex, this connection between two people.

His thrusts came faster, every surge causing his ass muscles to tighten beneath my fingers. He lifted the weight of his upper torso onto his hands, every muscle delineated as he sought greater momentum. My internal muscles contracted firmly around his cock, wishing to hold him inside me forever, at least several more moments. My hips rose faster, and my breasts jiggled as my breath came in short gasps. I felt another wave of ecstasy surging upward from the burning heat in my pussy.

I climaxed again, my inner muscles grasping him tightly with contractions. Seconds later, he froze. I felt the hot surge of semen, the pulsing rhythmic release of his own orgasm. I looked at his face then, head thrown back, jaw tightly clenched, eyes closed, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

His chest glistened with sweat as my eyes admired every feature of his face, the expression, relaxing now as he briefly sank down on top of me and then rolled over onto his back. I thought that would be it, but I was mistaken. He tugged at my arm until I rolled over on top of him. We lay like that, my

head nestled into the crook of his neck, our breathing slowly returning to normal.

I'd never felt so comfortable, so satiated... so... wishful.

Chapter Sixteen

Brady

I woke up in the master bedroom, temporarily confused. I had given the master bedroom to Dana. And then everything came back in a rush. Just a memory of it caused arousal. I turned my head on the pillow and watched Dana sleep. She lay on her back, her hair splayed around her head on the pillow, her chest rising slowly in deep slumber. The sheet was pulled up over most of her breasts moving slightly with each breath.

I took my time studying her—the long eyelashes settled against her skin, her nose, rising just slightly near the tip, the delicate jawline and those lips... those soft, pink, very gifted lips... I felt an odd catch in my chest and frowned. I didn't want to admit it; didn't want to admit my attraction or growing fondness of her. No, more than fondness.

I was falling for her.

Definitely out of character for me, and actually quite surprising. I had suggested this deal as a strict business arrangement with a specific goal in mind, but I hadn't taken into consideration the possibility that I might grow emotionally attached to her or her presence in my home. Actually, I had never lived with a woman and had no idea what to expect, but this wasn't it. Still, with Dana, I felt so comfortable, so much so that I felt like I could be myself around her. No bluster, no arrogance, no pretending I was something that I wasn't. She was easy to talk to, so very easy.

While I was comfortable confiding some of my innermost feelings with Cassie, I never completely let it all go. Not that I didn't trust Cassie, it wasn't that. She was the only woman I'd ever been able to trust since Elise. It was just that I had grown so used to keeping my thoughts to myself and pretending that nothing mattered more than partying and sex that laying here next to Dana in my bed jolted me with the fallacy of my self-absorbed lies.

I liked waking up and finding her next to me, sleeping comfortably, not just a warm body or a receptacle for my amorous intentions, but as a companion, a friend, maybe something even more—

No, don't go there. I refused to think that this scheme of mine would really work, or that I wanted it to. In a year's time, she would go her way, and I would go mine. I don't know what the hell had gotten into me thinking such thoughts, but I stomped them down firmly. No way could I allow myself to become emotionally attached to this woman; this private, kind, yet mysterious woman who had agreed to my ludicrous plan for reasons of her own.

With the mental shrug, I pushed all such thoughts from my mind and leaned up on my elbow, facing her. The bed shifted beneath me, but still not enough to wake her. I leaned closer and kissed her softly on her cheekbone. Her skin twitched, but she still slept. She must be exhausted from our lovemaking last night, and that was another thought that surprised me. It wasn't just sex. We had made love, several times and in several different ways. She was somewhat inexperienced, but she was game. Passionate game.

I grinned and began to softly kiss her, her jaw, then that soft spot on her neck just under her ear, and then, crooking my finger and tugging the covers back, I made my way slowly down her shoulder, then the mound of her breast, and then, her abdomen.

I wondered how far I would get before she—

"...mornin'," she muttered sleepily.

I looked up and saw her smile. "I was trying to think of a good way to wake you up."

She offered a soft moan and shifted her legs. "You found a good one. Feel free to continue."

And continue I did, until both of us lay side by side, chests heaving, skin shiny with sweat, both of us exhausted from our endeavors. Sex with her was different. It wasn't just getting my rocks off, it was... I hate to sound lame,

but we made a connection. And because of that connection the sex was even better and more fulfilling than I'd felt in a long time. I knew that from this day forward, it would be difficult for me to keep my hands off her. I had awakened a place deep inside me that I had buried for a very long time.

Finally, I rose and playfully slapped her ass. "I'll jump in the shower real quick and then you can climb in while I'm making breakfast. Work for you?"

She nodded. I quickly stepped into the bathroom and showered, taking care to not use much hot water, saving it for her. With a towel wrapped around my waist, I left the bathroom and glanced at her, still lying in bed, arms crossed behind her head as she watched me. It took every ounce of willpower for me not to drop my towel and pounce on her again. With a chuckle and a shake of my head, I left the master bedroom, softly closing the door behind me. I stepped into the smaller bedroom, where I quickly dressed.

By the time I finished making breakfast, French toast and bacon this morning, she emerged, freshly scrubbed, hair wet, her jeans fitting her like a glove. She wore an oversized linen shirt, the cuffs rolled nearly to her elbow. She looked adorable and sexy at the same time.

"What's on your agenda today?" I asked as I set her plate of French toast with a pad of butter melting on each piece in front of her, nudging the bowl of powdered sugar and the small jug of syrup toward her.

"One class, and then I'm meeting my brother afterward."

I wanted to ask, really I did, because I was downright curious, but I didn't want to ruin the easy camaraderie we had enjoyed the past few days. I kept it simple. "Did you work the thing out with your brother? The fifty grand?"

She cast a quick glance at me and then focused on her French toast.

"Yes, thank you."

I could tell she wasn't going to talk about it any further, and I didn't want to pry, but again, I couldn't help but wonder. Why did her brother need fifty grand? And how many sisters would do what she was doing to help her brother? I knew that she had her own financial concerns what with school, but the trigger had been her brother. That and because of her insistence that I give her the down payment as soon as our deal was signed caused me to assume that her brother was, or at least had been, in trouble. Who had she paid off? A blackmailer? A drug dealer?

Eventually, she might tell me, but then again, she might not. And since our deal was only for a year, I had a feeling that she would figure it was none

of my business, which it wasn't, really.

Still. After all, I didn't want to leave myself open for any legal trouble, especially with the wrong crowd. Living in Dallas, I knew that all kinds of troubles came from south of the border. Maybe it would be a good idea after all if I did some checking on my own.

Chapter Seventeen

Dana

I was on my way to meet Charlie at the coffee shop near the campus, my emotions hovering somewhere between anxiety and anticipation. He had finally returned my calls. It was the first time I'd seen Charlie for a week, maybe even longer—I'd lost track of the days—ever since the night he'd been admitted to the emergency room. Where he disappeared to during that time I still didn't know, but I was anxious to see him and to make sure that he was okay. At the same time, I was afraid that once he learned that his debt had been paid off, and that I had paid it, he would have questions. Plenty of questions.

I knew what Charlie would think if he knew the truth. I would've thought the very same thing not long ago. How could someone do that? How could someone be tempted to agree to such an outrageous proposition? But I guess that unless you found yourself in such a position, literally between a rock and a hard place, we could never be certain, not absolutely certain, of what we would or would not do.

I knew Charlie would have questions. Questions that I knew I couldn't answer. I didn't want Charlie to be disappointed in me, to feel beholden or guilty, and those were exactly the emotions that he would feel. If the shoe were on the other foot, I'd feel the same way. If I wanted to be blunt about it, I had to admit to myself that I had literally sold myself to a man for a year. Neither my reasoning nor my rationale for doing so mattered. Thinking of it

that way was appalling even to me, and I couldn't ever tell Charlie the truth.

Nevertheless, I had to at least try to be honest with myself. It wasn't just the thought of Charlie's guilt that I dealt with. It was Charlie's opinion of me. While Charlie had no right to call any kettle black, I never ever wanted to lose his respect. We fought and argued just like any other siblings, but I had always been the one to set the example. I was always the one who walked the tight and narrow, took the high road, did the right thing.

What I was doing was definitely, absolutely, positively not the right thing, but how could I ever explain my reasoning to Charlie? Would he ever understand? If he knew the truth, would he ever forgive me?

I pushed such thoughts out of my mind and refused to allow the self-doubt to creep in. Believe me, I had enough of that when I was by myself. I had done it and that was that. No going back. Water under the bridge. No use crying over spilt milk, no matter who had spilled it.

What was done was done.

I would tell him that I had met someone... someone with money, and he had graciously offered to pay off his debt. That's all I would say. Now that I had a story firmly fixed in my mind, I approached the coffee shop. As I passed in front of one of the large glass windows toward the front door, I glanced inside and saw Charlie sitting in a booth. Just the sight of him brightened my spirits. He looked okay. I quickly entered and made my way toward his booth where he sat clasping a heavy porcelain cup half filled with coffee.

"Hey, Charlie," I said, smiling as I sat down. "You don't know how relieved I am to see you."

"Sorry," he mumbled, pausing to lift the coffee mug to his lips. "I've been trying to lay low."

"Where? I looked for you everywhere. Called you at least a hundred times."

He grinned. "Twenty-three to be exact, and that's not counting the text messages, but who's counting? I kept my phone off most of the time because I left my charger at my apartment, and I figured that bastard would be keeping an eye on it."

It was a lame excuse, and I told him so. "You couldn't find any other way to contact me, to let me know that you were okay? You have no idea how worried I was, Charlie."

“Like I said, I’m sorry. I just didn’t want Slim Pete or his goons getting their hands on me again.”

Neither one of us said anything as I studied him. He looked tired and thinner, even though it had only been a week or so, but his eyes weren’t bloodshot, nor were his pupils dilated. He wasn’t drunk or high.

“I heard that my debt’s been settled.”

I said nothing.

“Where did you come up with that kind of money, Dana?”

He asked the question quietly, though his gaze didn’t waver. Now that the moment of reckoning had come, I chickened out. “I didn’t do anything illegal, Charlie,” I said. “I’d rather you not know, but—”

To my surprise, tears glistened in his eyes, and he reached a hand across the table to clasp mine. The gesture triggered a surge of emotion, and I quickly blinked back my own tears. “I’d do anything for you, Charlie, and you know that. But I didn’t do anything horrible, okay? And nothing illegal. But you have to promise me that you’ll never make a bet with Slim Pete or anyone else again.”

“I promise,” he said, turning toward the window.

“I mean it, Charlie,” I said, my heart heavy. “This is the last time that I can cover for you. It’s not just the money. It’s the... it’s hard, you know?”

He gently pulled his hand from my grasp and turned toward me, once again toying with the coffee cup, wrapping his palms around it as if warding off an imaginary chill.

“I know I’m a screw-up, Dana, but I’m really going to try now. Really.”

“You’re not a screw-up, Charlie, you’re just lost. And I wish I could help you find your way, but that’s something you have to do on your own.” I paused, then remarked on his appearance. “You look like you’ve lost a few pounds. Have you been eating?”

“No, I’ve been hiding.”

“Let’s get something to eat.” Before he could stop me, I turned and gained the attention of the waitress and ordered each of us a turkey club sandwich, an order of fries, and two sodas. I turned back to him, but once again he looked out the window, his jaw firm. Not for the first time, I wondered what was going on in that mind of his.

“Charlie?” He turned toward me. “Charlie, are you using drugs again?” I was afraid for him to answer and afraid for him not to.

He shook his head and spoke softly. “No, Dana, I’m not. I’ve just been worried and haven’t been getting much sleep.”

“That’s it?”

He offered a small humorless laugh. “Yeah, that’s it.”

Our lunch arrived and we ate, me slowly, him wolfing it all down so quickly that I asked if he wanted another serving. Wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he shook his head and then snatched a few French fries off my own plate. I didn’t mind. My heart broke for him. Poor Charlie. Always struggling, always on the wrong side of luck, always looking for something that I don’t even think he recognized.

“Where did you get the money, Dana?”

The question came out of the blue and surprised me. “It’s not important.”

“Yeah, it is. To me.”

And so I told the lie. “I met someone, Charlie, a while back.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

And the lie grew. “I didn’t want to say anything about it until... well, until we got a little more serious.”

“How serious?”

I glanced at him, surprised at the suspicion in his voice. Was little brother now playing big brother? Protective brother? It was a little late for that. “I’m planning to move in with him serious.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “And he gave you the money? Just like that?”

I nodded and tried to keep my voice cheerful. “Just like that.”

I glanced down at my watch, as if I had someplace I had to be. Which I did. I was supposed to meet Brady in his office in a little while. I dug into my purse and open my wallet, extracting some cash. “There’s about \$200 here, Charlie.” I spoke quickly so that he wouldn’t have a chance to ask more questions. “Please, buy yourself some food. Don’t spend it on drugs, not alcohol, and definitely not on gambling. Food.”

He acted like he didn’t want to take it, but I shoved it into his hand. “Don’t be a stranger, Charlie,” I said, rising from the booth. “I have an appointment I need to get to, but we’ll talk in a day or two, okay?”

He nodded but said nothing, tucking the money into his front jeans pocket. He watched me leave. I felt his eyes on my back until I left the coffee shop. I turned left, not wanting to walk in front of the window where Charlie

sat. He might see my face crumple with the weight of the lie I'd just told him. Might see my guilt, and yes, even some shame that I had agreed to Brady's outrageous plan in the first place.

At the corner, I prepared to cross, but then noticed the car. The same car that had been sitting across the street the day I paid Slim Pete his fifty grand. My nerves already a bit on the shaky side from my meeting with Charlie, and perturbed that that slime ball Slim Pete would still be watching Charlie, or me, I marched across the street to confront the driver. Before I could get his car, though, the car started and pulled away from the curb. I had no doubt that the car belonged to one of Pete's minions.

He was up to something. Something no good.

*

By the time the taxi pulled up in front of the Shaw Properties & Investments building in downtown, I felt unsettled. A man was following Charlie, or maybe me, maybe even both of us. I didn't like it, not one bit. I had hoped that once he got paid off, Slim Pete would disappear, but it was obvious that he was shadowing Charlie. Hoping for a misstep? Hoping to entice him into another deal, another bet? I hoped not, but people like Slim Pete were not people that I wanted anywhere near Charlie, or me.

I decided that perhaps it was time to come clean to Brady about the reason I had asked for the fifty-grand up front. One of the two main reasons I had agreed to this ludicrous deal in the first place. Charlie's debt and my schooling. Both very important, but I had to face the truth. If Charlie hadn't been in trouble, would I have agreed to Brady's proposition just for myself? I pondered, and had been pondering that question for days now. To what point was my acceptance of this deal justified?

The cabbie pulled up along the curb in front of the imposing glass and steel structure, one of the more recent developments on this side of town. I reached into my purse and paid the cabbie and then stepped out. I stood on the sidewalk for several moments, looking upward at the structure, a myriad of thoughts racing through my brain.

I still found it hard to believe that all of this was real. That just last week I had been living in my studio apartment, struggling to get through school, focused only on completing my education so that I could get a job that would pay a decent wage. And now here I was, living with a billionaire, making deals that a week ago I would have vigorously protested and condemned.

Not to mention the fact that I felt myself growing increasingly attracted to Brady. I had told him no sex, but we had been going at it like rabbits over the past few days. And you know what? I didn't mind. He was exquisitely gifted in that department, and I couldn't deny the pleasure he gave me. But it was more than that. In the beginning, when I had first met him at that golf resort, I figured he was nothing but a stuck-up, arrogant, self-important jerk.

And now? Now that I had spent more time with him, I realized that everyone had their own motivations for taking drastic measures. In my mind, I had taken on this proposition to save Charlie and my future education. But what motivated Brady to offer it? Was it merely because he didn't want to take over his dad's business and his dad had threatened him with one of the most abhorrent ultimatums, a jaw-dropping threat I had never heard of before. What kind of father did that to his son? While I couldn't relate to Brady's reasoning for this bet, I knew that for him, it was just as serious as mine, at least personally. I had no room to judge his reasoning any more than he had a right to judge mine.

I stepped into the foyer of the office building, more than a little self-conscious wearing my jeans, linen shirt, and tennis shoes. Women in tailored outfits and men with their business suits made their way across the foyer, entering or exiting, some waiting at the elevator banks. I got more than a few curious looks. While my first thought was to look for the stairway, thinking to take the stairs up to avoid those looks, I resisted the urge. As if I couldn't care less what they thought, and I didn't, not really. I straighten my shoulders and lifted my chin, not quite to the point where I was sticking my nose in the air, but close to it. What a bunch of snobs.

How dare they look down their noses at me, judging me, making me feel little. Someday, one of those people could very well be lying on a gurney in an emergency department while I desperately tried to save their lives. Maybe they wouldn't be so stuck-up then, would they?

I stepped into the elevator with two gentlemen and a woman, me standing on one side of the car, they on the other as if an invisible barrier separated us. I snickered softly as I pressed the button for the twelfth floor and then ignored them as the elevator moved and slowly rose. The woman got off on the fifth floor, one of the gentlemen on the seventh, but then it stopped on the twelfth. I stepped out and stood a moment in the hallway while the elevator doors swished closed behind me.

I wasn't sure which office belong to Brady. I hadn't been here before. He

simply told me to go up to the twelfth floor, where he had an office. I saw a reception desk just around the corner from the bank of elevators and stepped up to it. The woman behind it, about my age, did a double-take, and then smiled politely.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m here to see Brady Shaw. My name is Dana Sommer.”

“You have an appointment?”

“Do I need one?” She seemed slightly taken aback, but my gaze never left hers.

“Actually, you do—”

“Call his office and tell him his fiancée is here,” I said. I barely held back a grin as her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open, all the while giving me one of those ‘looks’ that said it all. Looking down her nose at me too. She frowned slightly and then turned to her phone, pressed a button, and paused, glancing at me once with an awkward smile.

“Mister Shaw, you have a visitor... yes, a Miss Dana Sommer... yes, thank you.”

The receptionist gestured with her hand. “His office is at the end of the hall, the last door on the right.”

“Thank you.” I turned and headed down the hallway. By the time I got to the last door on the right, I saw it open and Brady peeked his head out, a grin on his face as he looked at me, and then past me toward the receptionist desk. He chuckled.

“You’re being stared at.”

“I know.” I smiled. “Could it be my clothes?” I said, not really tongue-in-cheek. He laughed as I stepped into his office. He closed the door behind him, and before I could get another word out, he had me against his office door, his chest pressed against mine, his mouth aiming for mine. I heard the doorknob click as he locked it, and then... well, let’s just say that in a matter of seconds, my linen shirt lay in a puddle on the floor, his hands groped my breasts, and my own hands quite anxiously unzipped his pants.

Before I knew it, we were both stark naked. Once again, I found myself fascinated with his physique. I had never thought of myself as shallow, but those muscles, those broad shoulders, narrow waist and perfect ass were hard to ignore. My baser instincts took over any time I even got a glimpse of his body. So did my previous self-control. He was forbidden fruit, and boy was I

indulging! I glanced down, marveling at the contrast of his tanned, strong fingers cupping my white breasts, relishing the sensations that his touch evoked in me.

So much for refusing sex, I thought as we both sank down to the floor, as if on cue—as if both of us were unsteady on our own feet. Before I knew it, he was on his back and I was on my hands and knees straddling him, our tongues playing tag, his hands skimming along my back, down my ass, and then meandering their way up between my thighs. Teasing, until, much to my surprise and delight, he slid downward, my breasts hanging down, my nipples within easy access of his mouth.

Once again, he took advantage and I moaned, reveling in the sensations that gifted tongue of his created within me, igniting every cell in my body and leaving me inflamed with desire. My hips responded to my urges, and he left off with his suckling and scooted further down, his hands still cupping my breasts while he maneuvered himself until his mouth was directly below my pussy. His tongue flicked and swirled around my clitoris. I felt myself grow increasingly wet as my hips slowly gyrated and circled over him. I wanted him to bury himself within me, but when I moved he grunted, urging me to remain on my hands and knees.

That I did manage to do, but I couldn't stop my hips from slowly rocking, encouraged by the movements of his tongue, the way his lips kissed me down there, and then once again, swirled, flicked, and suckled. I tried to quell my moans, but it grew increasingly difficult. My hips rocked faster, the pressure of his tongue deepened, and he suckled, hard. And then his tongue slid inside. My heart pounding, my ears ringing, my body alive with pleasure, I felt my climax building. He retreated, his mouth once again latching onto my clitoris. Everything exploded in a flash of white sensation. Every muscle in my body contracted with the force of my orgasm. My back arched, my thighs tightened around his head, and I hissed an intake of breath. His movements gentle, his tongue slowly and sensuously nibbling along my wetness as my hips slowed, and my orgasm had me breaking out in goose bumps. I rocked until the waves ebbed, and then my hips slowed and my arms began to shake. He kissed me gently. The gesture tipped me over the edge.

I quickly rolled onto my back, knees spread, pulling him with me, reaching for his engorged cock, and guiding him toward entrance. He smiled down at me, but I couldn't wait. His head against my opening, I lifted my hips upward and reached for his ass, pulling him deep inside. He paused,

frozen for a moment, smiling down at me, and then slowly began to move, his weight braced on his forearms. I lifted my legs and wrapped them around his waist, my heels pressed against his buttocks. Urging him deeper.

He didn't kiss me, but simply stared down at me, and not feeling the least bit self-conscious, I grinned back, lifting my hips upward, gyrating slightly at the top, and then relaxing, meeting him thrust for thrust. In a matter of seconds, he too climaxed. I felt the undulating surge of hot liquid release inside me, and despite the sensations rushing once again through my body, I couldn't help but feel an instant of deep-seated fear. Fear of getting pregnant. I knew that getting pregnant was part of the deal, but having sex with Brady, making love to him like this, knowing what the result might be—I couldn't quell my sudden uncertainty.

And then Brady smiled down at me, and for the moment, at least, my fear dissipated. Everything would work out all right. I forgot everything at that moment except for the look on Brady's face. I wasn't thinking of Charlie. I wasn't thinking of the goons watching him or me. I didn't want to worry about tomorrow. I just wanted to revel in the moment.

And so I did.

Chapter Eighteen

Brady

I sat back in my chair in my office, staring at the photograph of Dana and me at the zoo. The photo had been taken three months ago. Three months. Time went by fast when you were... when you were content. Happy. And that's exactly how I felt. Dana and I had settled into what I could only term a routine. Like a typical married couple. She had finished her exams at school, of course with flying colors despite her anxiety, and we had celebrated with dinner, some dancing at one of my favorite clubs in Dallas afterward, and of course, lots of sex after we got back home.

At the club, I'd realized I spent most of my time staring at Dana, not at the other women in the place, despite their somewhat desperate attempts to get me to notice them. I guess that was the moment that I realized that the 'old Brady' was gone. Sure, I displayed my former self on occasion, and yes, I did flirt from time to time, but that's as far as it went. I thought I'd get bored real fast, sleeping with one woman, but that assumption didn't last long. I found I rather liked monogamy. Dana made it easy.

Incredibly, the thought of sleeping with someone else after sleeping with Dana was a turn off. Sure, there were gorgeous women out there with huge tits and more than suggestive body language that not long ago would have resulted in a passionate sexual romp, but that didn't interest me anymore. I'd never felt anything close to this with a woman. Sex was just sex, but with Dana, it became more than that.

In the past few months, we'd spent a lot of time together and learned a lot about each other. Sometimes through conversation, sometimes by merely being around each other. I got to know her mannerisms, her likes and dislikes, and I'm sure it was the same for her. I could tell when she was upset or when something bothered her. At such times, she got a special look—her left eyebrow slightly furled, but not angry looking. She wasn't one for emotional outbursts. When nervous or uncertain, she tended to nibble on her bottom lip. If she were perturbed about something, she would anxiously tap her fingers against whatever was nearby—her leg, a table, whatever.

She had also become quite adept at reading my own moods. She knew when I felt irritable or literally brain dead after a long day at the office. In an attempt to placate my dad, and to give him the impression I was serious about this relationship with Dana and was turning over a new leaf, I'd been coming to my office every day. No more figurative dust was settling on the furniture. Oddly enough, I discovered something new about myself. I was enjoying the challenge of my work. Still... I sometimes missed 'the good old days', partying with Nick, the women, the easy lifestyle...

One time, after an especially trying day, she had greeted me at the door in a sexy outfit— meaning a halter top and Daisy Duke short shorts, barefoot, looking all fresh and happy. Before I could even say a word, she took my hand and guided me to the bathroom.

There, she had a tub full of steaming water waiting, candles lit and placed strategically around the bathroom, the scent of lavender heavy in the air.

"It's aromatherapy," she announced, gesturing for me to undress and climb into the tub.

Her thoughtfulness touched me, and I did as she requested. I slid into the tub and found the heat, the steam, and the aroma incredibly relaxing. I looked up at her, expecting her to disrobe and join me in the tub, but she merely smiled and told me to relax. She turned and left the room. Okay, so she'd come back in naked. Even better.

When she did return, she wasn't naked, but she did enter bearing a Scotch glass filled with two fingers worth of Scotch on the rocks. It was a considerate and touching gesture that prompted my heart to skip a beat, to realize that this farce was becoming all too real. Was it really possible? Had she 'tamed the beast'?

I shifted in my chair to distract myself from the arousal in my dick at

thoughts of Dana and turned to stare out the window. My nearly daily presence in the building—obviously reported to him by his army of minions—had prompted curiosity on his part. He had come to my office on numerous occasions over the past couple of months, ostensibly to check up on some paperwork or filings, but I knew his true motive. He wanted to see for himself. He likely wondered how long this would continue; when I would just chuck it all in and disappear again.

I sat, gazing idly out a large plate glass window at the buildings across the street and the brilliant blue sky above. I glanced around the office, taking in the traditional furniture, heavy on the wood and southwest motif designs, and the bookcase against the side wall near my desk, wondering what the hell had happened to me.

I hadn't been out of the country since I'd returned from Spain, nor did it bother me. I hadn't missed the travel, the clubs, the fancy hotels, nor the women. I couldn't explain it. Was this the end? Was I... and I truly gulped when the word came into my head... *domesticated*?

When had it happened? More importantly, how had I allowed it to happen? This deal with Dana was not supposed to change my lifestyle, not one bit, which was one of the main reasons why Nick and I came up with the plan in the first place. But now—

My phone rang. I pulled it from my pocket and glanced at the screen. Nick. I accepted the call.

“Hey, Nick. How's it hanging?”

“Good, Brady, real good. I thought, if you have time and can pull yourself away from Dana long enough, that we can get together tonight. I'm flying out tomorrow.”

“Flying out where?”

“I'll tell you about it over a couple of beers. What d'ya say? It's been awhile since we had a guys' night out, you know, the kind we used to have in the good old days when you were single?”

“I still am single.”

His chuckle interrupted me, and for some reason that chuckle irritated me. I wasn't domesticated! I was still the same Brady. I was. I could do what I wanted, when I wanted, and how I wanted. No one would hold me back. Dana and I were living an agreement. Nothing more, nothing less. If I wanted to go out and have a good time, maybe fuck a woman or two, she couldn't

say a thing about it.

“All right, let’s do it,” I said, my voice harsher than I intended. It wouldn’t hurt to have a bit of fun anyway. I’d been working hard the last couple of months.

“Good to hear it, Brady. How about Johnny Bravos at seven o’clock?”

“I’ll be there,” I said, then disconnected the call.

Johnny Bravos was a well-known nightclub in the northeast section of Dallas. Raucous, but with a decent clientele. Not particularly known for a lot of drugs, but definitely a lot of beautiful women.

I called Dana to leave her a voicemail, just to let her know I wouldn’t be showing up any time soon. Only after I dialed did I realize what I’d done. I almost hung up. I didn’t owe her any explanations, no head’s up. Just before I could, though, I heard her voice.

“Hey, Brady, what’s up?”

She always sounded so cheerful. “Hey, just wanted to let you know that I’m going to hang out with Nick for a while tonight.”

I was appalled by the fact that I said the words almost hesitantly, as if expecting her to complain. Why the hell should she? We weren’t attached at the hip. We had a good time together, no denying it, but to date, neither one of us had placed any limitations on much of what we did in our personal time.

“That’s nice,” she said. “You haven’t seen Nick in a while, have you?” She offered a soft laugh. “Try not to stay out all night, though, because I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” I found myself grinning. “I’ll tell you what. If it involves any kind of sexy lingerie, I can cancel with Nick.”

She giggled, a surprisingly childish sound coming from such a put-together adult. I loved it when she giggled like that—exuberant, joyful. It made me feel happy.

“You go have fun with Nick,” she said. “However, if you don’t come home *too* late, the surprise could involve a tiny bit of lingerie.”

“Just a tiny bit?” I laughed. I decided I wouldn’t stay out too late with Nick. As I disconnected the call, I stared at the closed door of my office. That clinched it. That very moment, I came to the very somber realization that I would rather spend time with Dana than out partying, drinking, or even socializing with my best friend.

“What the *hell* is happening to you?” I asked the room at large. I got no answer.

I reflected on Nick’s call. He had sounded somewhat vague and mysterious. While he was no stranger to partying with me, I hadn’t heard too much from him in the past month or so. I figured he was just doing ‘Nick things’ but then again, why hadn’t he been calling me, begging me to go out, his main reason being that I would foot the bill? Not that I minded that, not in the least. Nick was fun to hang out with.

At any rate, I finished up the day and was preparing to leave the office to go meet him at Johnny Bravos when I heard the knock on the door. I looked up as it opened. Dad’s secretary popped in.

“Hey, Stella,” I said. “How are you doing?” She seemed slightly taken aback by the question, but smiled pleasantly. Either that or she was truly surprised that I was still here.

“I’m fine, Brady, thank you. I just wanted to remind you about the meeting your father scheduled at the estate tonight.”

Before I could respond, she backed out the door and softly closed it behind her.

Shit. I had forgotten about it, on purpose, pushing it to the back of my mind. I didn’t want to see my dad. Seeing him only reminded me of this deal I had gotten myself into with Dana. Actually, I had studiously avoided him as much as possible over the past few months, and when we *were* together, it felt... I felt an incredible surge of resentment toward him, that he had backed me into this corner. Seeing him only made me remember the ulterior motive I’d had for entering into this deal with Dana in the first place.

Not that I wasn’t enjoying it. In fact, maybe it was time to confront my own feelings about it all. We hadn’t known each other that long, but Dana was different from any other woman I had ever known, even Elise. But that had been so long ago. Teenage love, even if was a first love, couldn’t compare with adult love—

It hit me all at once. I swallowed. I had allowed myself to fall in love with her. The acknowledgment prompted a surge of emotion to well up inside me. I had fallen in love with Dana. How did she feel about me? Karma was a bitch. So, I had fallen for her, but what if she hadn’t fallen for me?

It was a strange feeling—a welcome one, no doubt about it—but with that realization came a ton of responsibility. Frederick had been right. This deal

was not a game. It involved real people with real emotions, as well as the possibility of crushing disappointment. And while I acknowledge that I very much enjoyed spending time with Dana, I also resented the fact that this entire plan, this scam, was the drastic result of me trying to beat my father at his own game.

And the irony of it all. In pretending to settle down, I had.

I hadn't planned to fall in love with Dana, actually had no intention of doing so in the beginning, but it had happened gradually. I hadn't planned on coming to the office nearly every day nor to actually take my position in the company seriously. Oddly enough, I found it challenging in a way that partying, traveling around the world, and conquering women never could be.

No, I hadn't planned on falling in love, but now that I had and acknowledged it, I relished it and reveled in the moment. Whoa. I repeated my new mantra. *What in the hell happened to you?*

The thought of the meeting tonight with my dad spoiled my mood. When I thought of my dad, the origin of my affection for Dana was pushed to the forefront. Along with that knowledge came resentment. And to be completely honest with myself, I didn't want resentment *or* my original motivations for making this damned agreement with Dana to soil what we had managed to grow together.

Maybe that was something I needed to talk to Dana about. Maybe it was time for me to ascertain her feelings for me. Had this cosmic joke turned on its tail and affected both of us? I just—

I jolted back to awareness. I wasn't going to see my dad tonight. I didn't care how much I upset him. He deserved it. I would hang out with Nick for a while and then go home. Where my resentment disappeared. Where I felt good, and contentment overrode feelings of resentment against my father.

I stood and left the office, not caring in the least about my appointment with my dad and looked forward to a night out. Or was I just pretending? I felt curious. Would I change my mind the minute I walked into the club, heard the pounding music, saw the half-naked women flaunting themselves, and the free-flowing booze?

*

The club was packed, even in the middle of the week. Not long ago, I would've enjoyed to see so many beautiful bodies gyrating and jiggling on the dance floor, but tonight I just found the atmosphere stifling. I shook my

head, amazed at how much I had changed over the past few months. The view of big-breasted women—even if most of those tits were fake—the steady throb of the party mix, and the Scotch in front of me did nothing to tickle the fancy of the ‘old Brady’. I mourned his passing, but only for a while. The annoying and constant dialogue of the DJ interrupted the heavy bass thrum of the music pounding the shit out of the walls and making me grimace. The air in here was stifling, made worse by the heat of the flashing strobe lights and the aroma of alcohol. It gave me a headache. I almost laughed—almost—listing my complaints about the place that I had frequented in the past and thoroughly enjoyed.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Nick shouted over the din.

I looked at him. “I’ve been asking myself that!” I shouted back. I sat across from him at a table against the side of the building. I gestured to the farthest corner of the room and stood. Maybe we could talk without shouting at each other over there, away from the center of the room.

Soon we settled in a slightly more private table, away from the large overhead speakers. I set my empty glass of Scotch down on the table. Nick still nursed a large mug of beer. I thought of asking for another but changed my mind. Nick was paying tonight.

“What’s up?”

We had to speak loudly to be heard over the music, but at least I didn’t have to shout. Nick’s gaze repeatedly swept over the crowd, commenting on that one’s ass, that one’s tits, that one’s hair. He finally turned to me.

“I’m moving, Brady.”

At first I didn’t understand. “You need my help? You got a new apartment? I hope it’s bigger than that last crap hole you lived in.”

“Hey! Not fair!” He laughed and shook his head. “Actually, I’m moving to Los Angeles.”

That got my attention real fast. My problems and my love life forgotten, at least for the moment. Nick, moving? Why hadn’t he said anything before now? Before I could even begin my barrage of questions, he launched into an explanation.

“I got a real job, Brady, a real job!”

He practically bounced up and down on the bench seat. I’d not seen him so animated in a long time. “What kind of job?”

“A promoter for a nightclub in L.A. I’ll be in charge of booking bands.”

“That’s great, Nick!” I was happy for my friend. He was finally showing some initiative. Still, moving away? He’d been my best friend for years. My sidekick. My wing man. “When did this happen? Why didn’t you tell me before now?”

Nick shook his head. “You’ve been a little busy, Brady. Playing husband and businessman.”

“Nick, I—”

Nick raised a hand. “No worries, buddy. Honest.”

“You need help with moving expenses or anything?”

He shook his head. “They’re paying for my move, and I’ve already paid the security deposit and first month’s rent on a place out in Studio City.”

I was impressed.

“I figured that maybe it’s time that I moved on too. Tried something new. Looked to see if the grass is really greener on the other side. It sounds like a fun job anyway, with lots of pussy potential.”

I nodded, trying to be happy for my friend. Life was changing for both of us. Drastically. Nick, getting a real job, moving halfway across the country... that indicated he was taking it seriously.

And me. Settling down—or at least pretending to. It kind of made me sad. Not maudlin, but more like the end of an era. Maybe a bit dramatic, but it suited my emotions at the moment.

“Hey, look over there!”

I turned to find Nick pointing at two gorgeous women pressing their way through the dancing crowd toward the bar. Huge tits, dresses so short that I thought I saw part of the ass of one of them.

“Too bad you can’t hit that anymore!” Nick guffawed.

I laughed and pulled my gaze away from the women, prepared to tell Nick that my life was a lot less complicated with only one woman in it. Besides, Dana didn’t have to try so hard to be sexy or alluring. She—

By the time I turned around Nick had already left the table, heading for the two buxom women with a grin on his face, one hand rearranging his junk, the other sweeping back his hair. His traditional ‘I’m on the hunt’ modus operandi.

I shook my head and dipped my hand into my pocket, pulled out a twenty. I left the tip on the table and stood to leave. If I knew Nick, he wouldn’t even realize that I was gone.

Chapter Nineteen

Dana

I nervously paced the penthouse suite, nibbling on the fingernail of my thumb, not really sure how I felt about all this. Not totally *unexpected*, since Brady and I had pretty much been going at it like rabbits, but I just hadn't expected it to happen so quickly. And that was so... odd in itself. He was irresistible. I couldn't deny his charm, his skill, his selflessness when we made love. He had quickly grown attuned to my body and knew how to give pleasure, and that was the understatement of the year. Despite my earlier feelings about it, I had to admit that I loved making love to Brady.

I knew he'd probably be out late. What Brady was doing, or who he was doing, which might be more appropriate. The thought elicited a surge of jealousy, which also surprised me. I think we needed to talk. Sooner rather than later. Despite my best intentions, despite my determination to just endure this deal for a year, I was failing, and failing miserably. The more time I spent with Brady, the more I liked being with him.

"Just admit it," I said to the empty room, pausing to stand in front of the plate glass windows that looked out over the city. Gorgeous view. The moon big and round in the sky, the sparkling lights of office buildings, the red and white headlights of cars moving swiftly along the interstate in the distance... everything around me a world away from where I had been just months ago.

As far as I knew, Charlie was staying out of trouble, or at least I hoped so. He called me every week or so to let me know that things were going okay

and that he had found a part-time job working as a mechanic at a Jiffy Lube or something like that. Maybe his close call with Slim Pete had finally sunk in.

I felt relieved. Maybe he had turned a corner. He didn't ask too many questions about Brady, which suited me just fine. He had yet to visit me here at the penthouse, and to be honest, I felt hesitant to invite him here. I still felt uncomfortable surrounded by such opulence. I could only imagine what Charlie would think.

Money is great, don't get me wrong. It had helped get Charlie out of trouble and insured the continuance of my education, not to mention a nice nest egg that would serve me well in the future. But money didn't solve every problem. In fact, in some cases, money could cause problems. I didn't want to cause problems between Charlie and me.

As the hours passed, I grew increasingly tired and sleepy. I lounged on the couch, watching television, some comedy that I didn't find particularly funny. I turned down the sound and closed my eyes. All the lights were off except for the one next to the couch, but it was on low. The bluish television screen cast the room with a dull glow. Soon, my eyelids grew heavy, and I allowed myself to doze.

I was startled awake by the sound of a key sliding into the lock of the front door. Still half asleep, I lay still while Brady entered the suite, closing the door softly behind him. Would he smell of liquor or women, or both? I wasn't sure. He set his keys down on the kitchen counter and then moved toward the couch, leaning down over the back of it.

I opened my eyes and saw him hovering above me, silently staring at me. He wore an odd expression. Or was it just the dull lighting in the room? Still, it looked as if he were trying to solve an impossible math question; somewhere between confusion and curiosity. "Something wrong?" I finally asked.

He smiled and shook his head as he rounded the end of the couch and moved to sit down beside me. I bent my legs and slowly sat up, brushing the hair from my face. "I fell asleep."

"Sorry I'm so late."

"What time is it?"

"Around two o'clock."

To my surprise, he didn't smell of alcohol, perfume, or anything unusual.

“Did you have fun?”

He offered a shrug. “Nick’s moving to Los Angeles.”

I knew that Nick and Brady were best friends and had been for years. I wasn’t that sorry to hear the news. Nick had been the one to place the ad on Craigslist. While he wasn’t one of my favorite people in the world, I kept that to myself, knowing that he and Brady had known each other for years.

“It’s funny, really,” Brady said, his voice soft, his tone reflective.

“What is?” I don’t think I’d ever seen Brady in such a quiet mood before. Was he upset that his best friend was moving? When he looked at me I felt my heart skip a beat.

“Everything is changing,” he shrugged. “Seemingly overnight.”

“What do you mean?” He didn’t hesitate an instant, but grasped my hand and looked at me, his gaze serious.

“I think I’m falling in love with you, Dana.”

To say that I was stunned was not even close to adequately describing how those words made me feel. Still, I held back my emotions because I could tell he had more to say.

“You don’t have to respond to that statement. I know we had a deal, and to be quite honest with you, I’m still exploring these... these feelings I have. I’m not even sure what they are, but I do want you to know that I feel... that I’m extremely fond of you.” He offered a short-lived laugh. “I wasn’t expecting this.”

Well. That announcement kind of changed things, didn’t it? But do I want this change? I knew that what I needed to tell him would be a bit of a surprise for him, but maybe not, and it wasn’t anything to be taken lightly. Not only that, but the news would potentially change both our lives forever. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. We both had some big decisions to make, but looking at Brady’s face at this moment, I knew very well that our so-far-relatively-comfortable-living arrangement might end, here and now.

“You said you had a surprise for me,” he said, a grin lifting his lips.

He glanced down at my T-shirt and gym shorts that I usually wore to bed, then back at my face. I nodded. “That I do.” Now that the moment of reckoning had come, I was tongue-tied, my emotions all over the map. To be completely honest, I was scared, appalled, strangely excited, and shaken to the core.

“I was thinking of gift-wrapping it, but then it seemed kind of... of...

considering the arrangement we had. I mean, it's not like we're..." I paused. I didn't know how to say it. Brady put his arm around my shoulder.

"What is it? Is it about your brother? School?"

"No," I sighed. Finally, I reached for my purse. It sat on the floor at the base of the end table beside the couch. I fumbled around in it for a moment and then extracted the white, oblong object no bigger than an ordinary tongue dispenser, narrow at one hand, wider on the other. I watched his face as I handed it to him. He knew immediately.

"I'm pregnant, Brady."

"You are?" He glanced down at the stick, saw the positive result, and then looked back up at me. Other than surprise, I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Did I want to know? What would happen to me... to us, now? Tears flooded my eyes. I tried to blink them back but was unsuccessful. I didn't know where it came from, but a silent sob caused my shoulders to heave. The next instant he pulled me into his embrace.

"It's going to be all right, Dana. Really."

I wept for several moments, my emotions warring between amazement and horror, all of them founded on fear of the unknown. He held me close, one hand gently patting my back, trying to calm me. The same gesture a mother used to soothe a baby... I swallowed and gathered myself. I pulled back, wiping my eyes as I looked up into his face, calmly watching me while I studied his. He looked pleased, his smile wide, body relaxed, no hint of fear or... and why shouldn't he be calm? This was what he wanted all along, wasn't it? But the reality of it all left an entirely different impression on me.

I was going to have a baby.

My baby. Brady's baby. And according to the deal, I was supposed to deliver that baby and then walk away.

"I don't think I can do it, Brady."

"Do what?"

I swallowed thickly. "Grow a baby inside me, deliver it, and then walk away."

He continued to smile at me, leaning back—at ease, in control. He brushed the hair from my face, his thumb tracing the outline of my jaw as he gazed at me with a look of... I had never seen that look before. He spoke softly.

"I may have entered this deal, this arrangement of ours, with a certain

endgame in mind, I admit that. But I need you to know, Dana, that over the past few months, I learned something.”

He paused, his thumb wiping a stray tear from my cheek.

“Dana, I love you. I want you to know that, right now. To hell with this agreement. I understand if you can’t or won’t reciprocate my feelings, but I want you to know that I won’t turn my back on you. This is your baby... *our* baby, and I will support you, no matter what you decide.”

Speechless. I felt speechless. The entire purpose for this... for this arrangement, was to produce a grandchild for his father. When had that suddenly changed? I think he saw my confusion because he smiled again and pulled me close, his chin resting against the top of my head as I leaned against his chest. I listened to the steady thudding of his heart.

“I love you, Dana. Agreement or not, I love you.”

The rumble of his voice issuing from his chest was so comforting, so warm, but in spite of my growing feelings and affection for Brady, I was afraid to say anything, afraid to admit it. But I knew, deep down inside, that I was torn. More than a little confused.

That blue line on the pregnancy stick had changed everything.

Chapter Twenty

Brady

I hadn't slept very well the night before. Dana's sleep had been restless. Her restlessness was not the only thing that had kept me awake until the wee hours of the morning. As I laid in bed next to her, listening to her soft breathing, I struggled between pure, unadulterated panic, processing the news of a baby and the possibility that Dana would leave me when this was all over. Walk right out that door as if we had never... well, I had fallen for her, but did she feel the same? She hadn't responded to my declaration of love, but I didn't fault her for that. She was already obviously overwhelmed at the pregnancy and all it entailed. And while I know that producing a baby for my dad was the ultimate point of all of this, until the moment I saw that pregnancy stick, the thought was still untenable, ethereal, and difficult to truly imagine.

That pregnancy stick had brought everything crashing down into three-dimensional, concrete reality. What the hell *had* I been thinking? Now that the pregnancy was verified, I didn't know what to do. I had meant everything I said to Dana, but that didn't make me less afraid. For the first time in my life, I had to take responsibility. I had to do the right thing. And if that meant letting Dana go, I would do it, as much as I was loathed to.

The sun peeked through the windows, bathing the bedroom in a soft glow. Careful not to wake her, I rose, showered, and reached into the open closet door to grab a pair of chinos from the hanger, then stepped to my

dresser for a clean t-shirt. I left the room to dress in the living room. I decided that I would go to my office, where I could think in private. I couldn't get the look on Dana's face last night out of my head. The myriad of emotion. Surprise, anxiety, and yes, fear. I had a feeling that both of us now realized the true ramifications of this agreement we had made.

A mistake? Certainly, and I realized that now, although I would never regret meeting her, regardless of the circumstances that brought us together; she might very well come to hate me for putting her through this. Yes, she had signed the agreement, but a baby changed everything. What made either one of us think that a baby wouldn't change us, or our feelings toward bringing a new life into the world? What had made either of us think that once a baby was born, we could hand it over to my dad and go on with our merry lives?

"You're such a fucking idiot," I muttered to myself as I left the apartment and headed for the elevators.

And yet, without that damned agreement, I never would have met Dana. I never would have imagined that a woman could change me so completely in such a short time, that I would fall in love with her.

I took the elevator downstairs, not sure what to think. To be completely honest with myself, I acknowledged the sudden surge of nausea that rose in my throat. Damn right I was scared. It wasn't every day that you learned you were going to be a father. I swallowed and stiffened my shoulders. Shame on me. How many times I had fucked a woman and not given a thought to what might happen? I always wore a condom, made it clear that I wasn't interested in long-term relationships. I engaged in responsible sex.

I realized how stupid that sounded now. I hadn't been responsible. I hadn't cared about any of the women I'd slept with in the past, except Elise, of course, and Dana. What kind of a track record was that? Over the past decade and the dozens of women I had slept with in between, maybe even hundreds... what did that say about me?

I had called Stella, Dad's secretary, before I met with Nick at the club, rescheduling our meeting for later this morning. I would hang out in the office and then meet with Dad. I'd give Dana time to herself before returning to the apartment. I think both of us could do with some space to process the news.

Maybe Dana and I would go do something later today. I'd suggest

something fun, something to take our minds off the baby for a little while. We needed to adjust, and it wouldn't happen overnight. My plans made, I reached my building and took the elevator up to my office feeling a little better.

I got to my office at about eight o'clock, but kept glancing at the clock. My appointment with my father was scheduled for ten o'clock. I didn't want to deal with him right now, but I'd put him off too many times. If I didn't see him today, I knew that he would either show up at my office or, God forbid, my apartment.

To say that I was distracted was putting it lightly. I needed to talk to Cassie, to get her advice. I knew what Nick would say, and I didn't want to hear that. He wouldn't understand. We had put the seal on the deal, and that's all that mattered. That's what Nick would say. Yet my emotions had gotten in the way of this ludicrous deal, this plan to... oh God, I felt so ashamed. And angry. As far as I was concerned, half of this was my dad's fault for giving me such a ridiculous ultimatum in the first place.

But mainly I faulted myself. I'm the one who had come up with the plan, with Nick of course, but if I had been a man, I would've told my father to go to hell. I would've been willing to turn my back on my inheritance.

So now what did that make me? A greedy, spoiled, self-involved bastard, a bastard who only cared about himself.

Until now.

By the time I left the office and drove to my dad's estate, I had regained my composure. Well, most of it anyway. I had decided to just lay it all out. But when I crossed the threshold into his office, that changed. This didn't look normal. I found him sitting behind his massive desk, which was not unusual at all. What was unusual was that his normally messy desk was surprisingly neat, folders and paperwork stacked on one side, maybe three inches thick, the rest of the desk orderly. In front of them on the dark green blotter lay a single folder. He sat rigid in his chair, hands folded on top of that folder. As if he'd been waiting.

"Brady, nice of you to grace me with your presence."

I said nothing, though I had to bite my tongue. What was this? I felt my blood pressure rise, as it usually did in my dad's presence, but I also tensed. Something was up. His desk, his posture, the calmness in his tone...

I didn't need this. Today of all days, I needed time to think, but with my

dad breathing down my neck that was just about impossible. I played it cool. “What did you do need to see me about?”

“Sit down.”

At first I wasn’t going to, but I changed my mind. I had enough emotional baggage on my shoulders today. Picking a fight with my dad was not high on my list of important things to do at the moment.

Dad unfolded his hands, picked up the folder, and leaning over his desk, handed it to me. I gazed curiously at him and then reached forward, took the folder, and opened it. My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach when I saw the first eight-by-ten photograph. Dana at school. The next one, Dana at work. The next one of Dana and I sitting at the diner when we signed the contract.

Behind the photographs, I found several pages of typed information. A report by a private investigator. A background check. Biographical information on Dana and a brother named Charlie. I glanced at my father, who stared implacably back at me. My head pounded anew.

“I know about your scam, Brady.” He leaned back in his chair, hands folded over his slightly protruding stomach. “The moment you left that day, I had my guy following you. And of course, Nick. I should’ve known you would come up with something like this, paying a woman off to pretend to be your girlfriend, your fiancée... to have a baby?”

My mouth had gone dry, my mind spinning.

He leaned forward, nostrils flared, features tight with tension. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

I lost it. “What the hell is wrong with *you*, giving me an ultimatum like that? Backing me into a corner. What the hell did you think I was going to do?” He didn’t answer that question but asked another.

“Did you even bother checking into her background? Did you know that, that fifty grand you pulled out of your account—and no, I didn’t find out from Frederick—went to pay off her brother’s *gambling* debt? He’s been in and out of trouble most of his life! He’s into drugs, or has his history of it, and an addiction to gambling, and God knows what else. Did you know that her parents’ are dead, and she lived years with an uncle with a felony in his past?” He leaned back in his chair, shaking his head. “Do you know what kind of family of you’ve gotten yourself involved with? Did you even think of that?”

Resentment bubbled up inside me. That and a surge of emotion, seeking to protect Dana from my father's prejudice. "She's not like her brother. She's a hard worker. She's kind and compassionate. She's trying to finish up nursing school to make a better life for herself and—"

He cut me off with a slash of his hand.

"While I applaud her going to nursing school, she comes from a questionable background, Brady. She's—"

I knew what he was going to say, but if he called Dana white trash, I swear, I was going to—"Don't say it, Dad. Don't."

He paused, mouth open, and then shook his head. "You're playing games with people's lives, for the sake of *money*? I thought I raised—"

Now it was my turn to interrupt. "You do it every day, don't you? You buy and sell, wheel and deal, and because it's *business*—" I emphasized the word with air quotes—"you figure it's okay, that no one's going to get hurt? Believe me, I learned from the best."

I leaned forward, tamping down the desire to reach across the desk and... I sat back, one hand grasping the side of the chair. "Just because a person doesn't have money doesn't mean they're less than worthy." I grew irate. To imply that Dana was less desirable or less acceptable as a partner, just because of her background... "I don't care about her background. Do you understand that? She shouldn't be blamed for the faults of others. And I don't give a shit what she did with that fifty grand. My God, doesn't it say something to you about her character that she's... that she was willing to go through with this deal, not only to help her brother but—"

I had to stop, my voice choked with unfamiliar emotion. I wasn't going to deal with this. I rose from my chair, prepared to leave. I didn't want to listen to him anymore.

"Sit down!"

The tone of my father's voice prompted me to pause. I froze. His face had turned beet red. I saw the pulse pounding in his temple. His harsh breathing. His hands trembled. Was he going to have a heart attack? I had never seen him so angry. I sat down.

"You've done a lot of things that have disappointed me, Brady, but this takes the cake. Honestly, bribing that girl to pretend to be your fiancée? You didn't even bother to check her background, did you? Did you even bother to ask why she wanted fifty thousand dollars? *Fifty thousand?*"

No. I hadn't, not because I felt it was none of my business, nor that I wasn't curious. I didn't ask because I was afraid if I did, she would call off the deal then and there. But I wasn't going to admit that to him. "That's none of your business," I said quietly. "You insisted I had a year to get married and produce a grandchild. This is what *you* wanted, remember?" I shook my head. "What difference does it make how I did it? You don't care about me or Dana. All you want is a grandchild; a grandchild that you can mold into what *you* want, and to hell with what anyone else wants."

We glared at each other for several seconds. When I spoke again, my voice sounded eerily calm. "You forced me into this corner. You're the one who—"

"Oh, shut up, Brady," he interrupted. "For the first time in your life, take responsibility! You're so afraid that you'll lose out on your playboy lifestyle, that you can't go around fucking women left and right, and playing the big shot. You want everything handed to you on a silver platter. I earned all of it, Brady, do you get that? All of it! You want the money, you just don't want to work for it!"

"I've been sitting at my desk in my office every day for the past three months!"

"Yes, I know," he nodded. "And you're doing a fine job, but how long is that going to last? The minute you get what you want, you're going to disappear again? Is that it?"

Of course, that had originally been my intention. Now? I wasn't too sure.

"I'm done with this, Brady. I'm done with your games, your lies, your laziness! This is about the worst thing you've ever done. And I'm telling you right now, if you go through with this farce and marry that woman, you're still not going to get your inheritance. It's all a lie!"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I started to protest, then decided he wouldn't believe me anyway. Why waste my breath. So, I said the first thing that came into my head. "What difference does it make to you who I marry as long as that woman produces a precious grandchild for you? You didn't care about that before!"

"The only way you're getting any more money, now or in the future, is if you marry Mary Von Brown!"

I sputtered, speechless for several long seconds before I found my voice. "You can't be serious!" I shook my head. "An arranged marriage? To suit

your purposes? And you're sitting there berating me for what I've done? I won't do it!"

He leaned back in his chair, hands once again crossed over his stomach. "And isn't that what you just did with Dana? An arrangement for financial gain?"

I was so angry I wasn't about to admit that he was right.

"The Von Browns' are an influential family, as you know. Our businesses would benefit tremendously through such a union."

My mouth dropped open and stood. "You're a hypocrite, Dad. A hypocrite!"

He offered a slight shrug. "You can still sleep with Dana on the side," he said. "What difference does it make to you? All you're interested in is money anyway."

I couldn't believe this. While my dad and I hadn't seen eye to eye in years, this was beyond... fury erupted inside me. My hands tightened into fists as I stared at my father. He couldn't be serious. But I knew he was. My heart pounding, the blood roaring in my ears, I glared at him for several moments before I turned and headed for the door.

"Brady!"

I turned, one hand on the door as I looked over my shoulder at him. "To hell with it, Dad. All of it. I'm not marrying Mary Von Brown. And I don't give a shit what you do about it!" I stepped halfway through the door, but just before I slammed it shut I shot my parting words back at him. "Oh, and by the way, Dana is pregnant. Have a nice day, *Grandpa!*"

The door slammed shut behind me.

My mind spinning, my breath harsh in my chest, I took the stairs down rather than use the elevator. The adrenaline pounded through my body so angrily that I wanted to shout at the walls, to punch something. As I took the stairs, my footsteps echoed dully in the stairwell, filled with disbelief.

I meant every word I said. I wasn't going to marry Mary Von Brown, no matter what carrot Dad dangled in front of my nose. At that moment, I knew what I wanted, and it wasn't money. I wanted Dana. I'd be able to find a job, I had no doubt about it. Sure, I hated to lose out on my inheritance, but over the past couple of months, I had found something more important. Something that meant more to me than all the money in the world.

I pulled the cell phone from my pocket, thinking to call Dana. I needed to

hear her voice. No cell reception. By the time I pushed open the door on the ground floor and stalked through the foyer to the sidewalk outside, I had calmed down, but only slightly. Once outside, I looked at my phone again and saw that I had bars. Taking a deep breath, lifting my face to the warm mid-morning sunshine, I took a deep breath, calmed my thoughts, and dialed Dana's number.

It rang four times before the call went to voicemail. I just started to leave a message when I heard the beep notifying me of an incoming call. I looked at the screen. Cassie. I switched over and accepted her call. "Hey, Cassie, I need to talk to you. Do you have—"

"Brady."

Her voice was somber, tinged with a hint of urgency. I knew Cassie well enough to translate it. "Cassie, what's wrong?"

"Brady, you better get to the ER at Mercy General."

"Mercy General? Are you all right? What's happened—"

"It's Dana."

Chapter Twenty-one

Dana

I woke up feeling lethargic so I lay in bed several minutes, my eyes closed, listening. I didn't hear sounds of movement in the apartment so extended my arm to reach for Brady, but he was no longer in bed. His spot was no longer warm, so I figured he'd gone to the office. I shifted to roll over, my sense of contentment and pleasure of dreamless sleep immediately overridden by the return of reality.

I was pregnant. Truly pregnant. What was I going to do? I should have expected it, but expecting something and having it become reality are two different things. I recalled Brady's words to me last night. He'd told me that he loved me. Was it true? Could somebody really fall in love in a matter of three months? I smiled. Of course they could. Because I felt that way about Brady.

I hadn't said anything to him last night, hadn't responded to his proclamation of love. I wanted to, but something held me back. Fear? Uncertainty? I wasn't sure, but I resolved that by the end of the day, I would tell Brady how I felt about him as well.

Go figure. I had entered into this arrangement with completely different expectations and yet... and yet.

I snuggled deeper into bed, pulling the sheet up to my chin. It smelled like Brady. And sex. After we had gone to bed last night, we'd had sex.

Gentle, tender, slow sex. Like Brady had been worshiping me with his body. No words necessary. I had clung to him, close to desperation, seeking some solace from his words and the sensations and comfort his arms, mouth, and body had given me. Had he meant those words, or had he been fooling himself?

And what about me? I knew how I felt about Brady, but I also knew that we came from two different worlds. Would it be possible for me to live in his world or him in mine? I doubted that; those worlds were so different. But perhaps, in time, we could meet somewhere in the middle. Still—

My cell phone rang. I sighed and turned to the bedside table, where I usually left it. It wasn't there. I realized that the ringing came from the living room. Thinking it was probably Brady and he might want to talk about last night, I quickly scrambled out of bed. I threw the covers off me and headed into the living room in my T-shirt and underwear, where I spied my phone on the coffee table, the screen lit with a soft whitish-blue.

I quickly snatched it up lest Brady hang up before I answered. I wasn't in time. The call had not come from Brady, but Charlie. Just as I began to dial him back, I heard the ding that notified me of an incoming text message. I glanced at the clock. Nine-thirty. Pretty early for Charlie to be up and about. Still, I was pleased. More often than not of late, I had been the one to reach out to him, not the other way around.

Then again, my pleasure dissipated as I accessed my messages. Did he need something? Had he gotten into trouble? Sad way to acknowledge the communication, but fairly typical.

Need to talk.

Meet me at the coffee shop on the corner across from your apartment.

One hour.

What was that about? It sounded important, and I tried to call him back, but the call went to voicemail. I then texted him back, asking what was up, but I didn't get a response. With a sigh, I headed back into the bedroom to get dressed. I would have to take a taxi. He didn't know I was living with Brady full time. He thought I still had my old studio near the campus. I had to get to the coffee shop before Charlie. If I did, maybe I'd have some coffee and a Danish while I waited. The thought brought a rumble in my stomach. If he was already sitting there, watching the apartment building where I used to live, I would have to come up with some excuse why I had arrived in a taxi.

So many secrets. They were wearing on me. Then again, why should I lie? I had already told Charlie that I was moving in with Brady, and maybe it was time to tell him about our ‘engagement’. I wouldn’t tell him everything, of course, not what had brought us together. That I would definitely have to lie about. How had I met Brady? Maybe I could say I met him at school, or at the hospital. He would believe that.

Soon, I would also have to tell him that I was pregnant.

I quickly dressed and left the apartment. I was lucky this morning and hailed a taxi within a minute or two. I had the driver drop me off down the street from the coffee shop and walked the rest of the way. I entered and swept my gaze over diners at the counter and then in the booths lining the windows. I didn’t see Charlie. The waitress came to my table, and I started to order an espresso and a Danish. Then remembered. “I’ll just take a cup of decaf coffee, please,” I said.

Starting now, I had plenty of adjustments to make in my nutritional choices, that was for sure. With a sigh, I sipped the coffee, declining a refill. Growing impatient, I glanced up at the clock on the wall. Just about an hour had passed since he texted me. He should be here by now. He didn’t live that far away. I texted him.

Where are you?

Less than a minute later I received a text message.

I’m in the dark green sedan out front.

I frowned and looked out the window. Sure enough, a few parking spaces down from the coffee shop entrance, I saw a dark green sedan. What was Charlie doing? He didn’t have a car, and certainly not a new car like that. Frowning, I left my seat, placed a few singles on the table to pay for the coffee and the tip, and exited the coffee shop.

Though only mid-morning, the temperature had risen sharply, the air warm and humid. It was going to be hot today. Good thing I had decided on a sundress and sandals. I walked up the sidewalk toward the car, approaching it from the passenger side. The window was rolled down. Frowning, confused, and wondering what Charlie was up to now, I bent down to peer inside.

A myriad of emotions struck me at once—anger, fear, frustration. Charlie wasn’t in the car, but Slim Pete was. I immediately turned to walk away when Pete called after me.

“You want to see Charlie again, Dana, you might want to get in the car.”

I froze, then slowly turned, staring at Pete staring back at me through the windshield. He lifted his hands in a questioning gesture. Slowly, I moved back to the passenger door. “What did you say?”

“I said that if you want to see Charlie... alive... you’d better get into the car.”

My heart in my throat, I stared at him, my stomach churning with disgust. Did I dare get into that car? Should I believe him? What the hell was going on now?

“You got five seconds, Dana.”

For four of those seconds I stood on the sidewalk, trying to run pros and cons of doing what he said through my head. Maybe I should just go to the police. But if I did—the engine turned over.

“Suit yourself,” Slim Pete muttered. He put the car in drive and started to pull away from the curb.

“Wait!” Damning Slim Pete, Charlie, and myself for being so stupid, I reached for the car door, opened it, and slid inside. I crunched my back against the passenger door, my left hand reaching over my shoulder to make sure that the door lock didn’t engage. Pete merely laughed.

“You don’t trust me, do you, Dana?”

I shook my head. “No further than I can spit.” Pete pulled away from the curb, slowly picking up speed as he merged into street traffic. “Where are we going? Where’s Charlie? What’s going on?”

Slim Pete smiled. “Charlie owes me money again.”

To say that my disappointment was great was an understatement. I shook my head and closed my eyes for a second. Why did Charlie keep doing this to me? I glanced at Pete, whose eyes remained focused on the street and side traffic as we pulled up to a stoplight. “I told you I didn’t want you to accept any more bets from him.” That did prompt a glance.

“And I recall telling you that I’m a bookie. You seriously expect me to turn down the means of my livelihood?”

That pissed me off. “You prey on vulnerable people, you bastard. You take advantage of them. You—”

“I might admit to the first, but not the second. No one twisted Charlie’s arm.”

As reluctant as I was to acknowledge that, I knew it was true. While I certainly didn’t like the fact that Slim Pete made his living this way, it was

Charlie's doing. I sighed and asked the dreaded question, my voice soft with hesitance. "How much does he owe you this time?"

"One-hundred-fifty grand."

I couldn't stop the startled exclamation that erupted from my throat. "*One-hundred-fifty thousand dollars?*" I stared at Slim Pete with wide eyes, my stomach roiling with nausea as a cold sensation swept through my body. "How is that possible? Why would you let him—"

"What do you care, Dana? I know you can get your hands on the money. Just ask your rich boyfriend."

I sputtered for several moments. "He's not a fucking bank, Pete!" I shook my head. "And what makes you think he's got that kind of money anyway?"

Again, Pete merely grinned. "I know who he is, Dana. He's Brady Shaw. He's worth millions. A hundred-fifty grand for him is a drop in the bucket."

"And what makes you think he's going to give me that kind of money?" I couldn't believe this. *Dammit, Charlie! Why are you doing this to me? To us?*

"I'll give you the same time as I did last time to come up with the money. Five days..."

I had already stopped listening, stunned to my core. I turned to stare out the window, swallowing the nausea and the fear rising inside me. I was so angry, so infuriated with Charlie, with Pete, with the way life turned out that I could hardly... I turned to him, my voice rough with anger. "Where the hell is Charlie?"

Pete glanced at me then winked. "He couldn't hide from me this time. He's in a safe place... for now."

"Where is he, Pete?" I repeated, wishing I had the power and the guts to rip his eyes out.

"I'll tell you where he is once I have the money in hand, Dana, and not before."

Pete pulled up to another stoplight. Frustrated, my heart pounding, I glanced in the side view mirror. I frowned when I thought I recognized that car. I shifted my position slightly to turn and look through the back window. It was the same car that I'd seen several times over the past few months, the first time when I signed the contract with Brady. I turned to glare at Pete.

"There's no reason for you to be following me around day and night," I growled. Pete looked at me, an eyebrow lifted in surprise.

"What?"

I gestured to the car behind us. “Why is one of your crew following us, following me?”

Pete glanced in the rearview mirror, his side mirror, and then like me, over the back seat and through the rearview window. He frowned.

“I don’t have anyone following you, Dana. No reason to. Charlie has been coming to me. I don’t have to go chasing after him.”

I processed that for a few seconds and glanced back at the car again. The driver had his head down so I couldn’t get a good look at him. “Then who is it?”

“The hell should I know? Maybe a cop.”

As soon as the light turned green, Pete accelerated and took the first side street he came to. Sure enough, the car followed. He muttered under his breath and sped up even more, blowing through a stop sign before hanging another sharp left. I reached for the dashboard and the door handle to brace myself. “Slow down!”

He ignored me. After a few more turns, Pete got onto a frontage road that headed through the factory district. The road would eventually provide access to the interstate. The area was relatively quiet, mostly trafficked by workers at the factories and supply trucks heading to and from.

Pete swore. “He’s still following us!”

The car sped faster. I glanced at Pete, my heart thumping now, more from fear at the moment than Charlie’s gambling. “Pete, slow down!” He was going nearly eighty miles an hour, and the speedometer kept increasing until he zoomed down the frontage road at nearly one hundred miles an hour, dust billowing behind the car as he occasionally left the asphalt and drove on the dirt shoulder to hamper the car following them.

“Pete! Slow down!”

An intersection was coming up, just before the onramp to the Interstate. A yellow sign flashed by, warning of trucks turning onto the highway. My grip on the door handle so tight I couldn’t feel the blood in my fingers, I stared wide-eyed ahead. The landscape swept past in a blur. The engine roared. I risked a glance in the side view mirror, saw the car pursuing, maybe fifty yards behind. Who the hell *was* that?

“Pete—”

Everything happened at once. The deep, blasting horn of a semi. Screeching brakes. Pete sped through the intersection, not slowing down. A

blur of movement on the driver's side caught my attention, and I screamed. A semi-barreled toward us, tires spewing smoke, brakes grinding. Pete swore, tried to swerve, but he was going too fast. Then the gut-wrenching sound of metal. A forceful impact. The car jolted. I tried desperately to find something to hold onto, my heart leaping into my throat.

Brady! My baby!

Everything went topsy-turvy. I flew out of my seat and hit the dashboard. My pained cry was halted as I was then flung sideways into Pete. Then I felt myself flying, the sky above me one second, the scrub brush of the Texas landscape below me the next. I'd been ejected from the car as it rolled. Then... blackness.

Chapter Twenty-two

Brady

I lay my head on the bed next to Dana's fingers, a cast extending from her hand up to her elbow. I couldn't bear to look at her bruised and battered face any longer. Cassie had left a little while ago, told that the only visitors allowed in the ICU were family members. As Dana's fiancée, I qualified, but I had to admit that the first time I saw her lying in a bed I felt gut-punched, so much so that I physically reacted, hunching forward, mouth open in dismay.

"She's lucky," the nurse reviewing Dana's chart and medication drips said softly.

I turned toward her, speechless. Two broken ribs, a broken collarbone, numerous cuts and contusions, her forehead and cheekbone swollen and bruised, as were her forearms. She had a broken radius. Glass had shattered and several small though, thankfully not deep, cuts marred the surface of her face, her neck, and her hands. She'd been flung from the car. She could have been killed.

The man who'd been driving the car was okay, but I didn't give a fuck about him. A guy named Pete Masansky, aka Slim Pete according to the cops. When I arrived in the emergency room, the cops were already there. When I told them who I was, they told me what happened, or least what the officers at the accident scene told them had happened. They knew about Slim Pete. The guy was a bookie and con man, and a rather notorious one at that. He'd been wearing a seatbelt. Dana had not. Why? What business did she

have with a bookie?

The cops had found drugs in the car, and he was now at the county jail, arrested for possession, reckless driving, and, God forbid if Dana didn't pull through, vehicular manslaughter. After that, the pieces came together, slowly, one of the officers providing some of the information, a detective with the Robbery-Homicide squad filling in the rest. I got more details about the bastard as I waited to see Dana, at the moment undergoing an MRI, a CT scan, and a myriad of other tests.

And about Charlie, who police were bringing to the hospital after they interviewed him at the local substation. All I knew at the moment was that Dana had paid the fifty grand at the signing of our "contract" to Slim Pete, to pay off a gambling debt Charlie owed him. And then Charlie had dug himself an even deeper hole, or so I thought at first. Apparently, Slim Pete had told him to disappear while he arranged for Dana to pay off the new debt.

When asked by the cops how Dana had managed to pay off his first debt, Charlie apparently told them about me and my relationship with his sister. He didn't have much information, not even my last name. He just told them that his sister was going out with a rich guy and that I had generously offered to pay off his debt.

From what the detective was able to tell me, Slim Pete had figured that Charlie and his sister were easy marks, easy targets to extort money. When interviewed, Pete had admitted everything and told them where Charlie was hiding. As soon as they picked up Charlie, he told them everything.

I couldn't think of all that. All I could focus on was Dana. She looked so small and vulnerable lying in that bed in the ICU, an IV inserted into the vein on the back of her left hand, the clothes-pin like gadget clipped over her index finger monitoring her oxygen level and pulse. The machines around her recorded every breath, every heartbeat. An oxygen cannula was in her nose, the tubing tucked behind her ears providing her with pure oxygen. The doctors told me she had a concussion, but no serious damage to her internal organs.

The cuts on her hand and forearms suggested to me that she had covered her head as best she could during the accident, which was fortunate. The doctor also told me that after they'd performed all the necessary scans, that other than a few broken bones and contusions, she had lost the baby. I was still dealing with that, testing my emotions about the news. They would

watch her overnight to ensure she didn't develop any internal bleeding in her brain or organs.

My heart thudded dully as I waited for her to wake up. I'd been sitting next to her bed most of the day, and as yet she hadn't opened her eyes. I could only pray that the doctors were right, that she didn't have any brain injuries that just hadn't shown up on the images they had taken earlier.

The moment I saw her lying on the bed in the ICU, I knew for a certainty that my feelings for her were real and that she was the most important person in my life. I didn't care about my inheritance, pleasing my dad, or anything else but praying that Dana would be okay. That she would come out of this.

A soft sigh prompted me to lift my head and look at her face. Her eyes were still closed, but I could see her pupils moving slightly beneath her eyelids. My heart leapt with relief.

"Dana? Dana, you're all right. You're in the hospital."

Ever so slowly, her eyelids opened and her eyes focused overhead on the ceiling. She blinked, ever so slowly, and then caught her breath. The movement caused her to wince.

"Try not to move around too much," I cautioned. "You have a couple of broken ribs, and you broke your collarbone and your arm."

Without moving her head, she glanced at me. I half-stood and leaned over her, kissing her softly on the lips. "You're going to be all right."

She tried to speak, but only a harsh noise escaped her throat. She swallowed and then tried again.

"Brady?"

"I'm here, Dana. You were in a car accident. Do you remember being in a car?"

She nodded, and her eyes immediately filled with tears. She tried to move her hand toward her stomach. I knew what she wanted to know and gently shook my head. "You miscarried, Dana. I'm so sorry."

Tears spilled over her eyelids, and she choked in a sob, obviously in pain but unable to stop the flood of emotions that caused her shoulders to shake with silent weeping. She reached the hand with the IV toward mine, tightly clutching my fingers. I couldn't do anything to ease her pain other than to gently stroke her head, tracing my thumb along her jawline, wishing that I could pick her up and cradle her in my arms to ease her pain, but I didn't want to move her.

Her pained expression matched my own. At that moment, I realized how disappointed I was about the baby. Her pain caused me pain. Her sorrow caused me sorrow.

“Dana, you’re safe. You’re alive, and that’s all that matters. I know you’re upset, but we can try for another baby... if you want... later, after you’re better.”

She took several shallow breaths as I continued to wipe the tears from her cheeks. She pressed her lips together and then looked at me.

“What about... What are you going to do about your father, now that there’s no baby. Will he—”

I shook my head, smiling softly down at her. “None of that matters anymore. I don’t care about my inheritance or my father’s ultimatum. All I care about is you. When I heard you were in the hospital, I...” I clasped her hand in mine and pressed it against my chest. “I love you, Dana. I love *you*.”

“The accident... when it happened, all I could think about was you,” she said. “I love you too, Brady.”

I leaned down and gently kissed her lips. “After you’re out of here, we’ll start our new life together. For real this time. I don’t care about my inheritance. It doesn’t matter anymore. I realize that now. All that matters to me is that you get through this. Okay?”

She nodded, then her eyes widened in fear. “Oh my God, my brother... Charlie!”

“He’s all right, Dana, he’s all right. He’ll be here soon. The police are interviewing him now.”

“The police?”

Her voice rose in panic, and I quickly sought to soothe her. “It’s all right, Dana, he’s not in any trouble.”

“Pete said...”

She choked back tears as she looked up at me.

“I was going to tell you about Charlie, and now he’s in debt again.”

“No, Dana, he’s not. Slim Pete was lying. He was trying to get money out of you, that’s all.” She stared at me for several moments in disbelief.

“Charlie isn’t gambling?”

I shook my head. “Not from what the detective told me. He feels Charlie is being honest. Charlie said that if he didn’t give Pete his phone, didn’t stay

hidden until he called, that Slim Pete would hurt you, and hurt you bad.”

Dana’s eyes filled with tears again. “Poor Charlie... he tries too hard, but...” she sighed. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Charlie sooner, but it’s just—”

“It’s all right, Dana. Everything is going to be all right.”

A nurse brushed aside the curtain separating Dana’s bed from others in the ICU. “She needs to rest,” she said, then turned to Dana. “Your brother just arrived downstairs. Would you like to see him for a few minutes?”

I saw the look on Dana’s face—the love and relief. Genuine and all encompassing. It touched me to see her love for her brother. I stood. “You visit with your brother for a few minutes, Dana. Tell him everything. Tell him I want to talk to him, but not today. I’ll come back in a little while and sit with you, all right?”

“All right,” she said. “But what happened to the other car?”

“What other car?”

“None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for that car following us.” She frowned.

“I thought it was one of Pete’s goons, but he said it wasn’t. He figured it was the police.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, albeit gingerly. “I saw it for the first time that day I signed...” She glanced at the nurse and then back at me. “I saw it outside of the diner that day, and several times since then. Quite often, actually... it was following us. Pete tried to get away, but he was going so fast...”

I knew instantly what had happened, and it took every ounce of willpower for me not to display my emotions. I forced a smile and leaned down to gently kiss her on the forehead. “You visit with your brother for a few minutes, and then get some rest, okay?”

She offered a wan smile, and I left the ICU, taking the stairs down rather than the elevator because I didn’t want to bump into Charlie. Not yet anyway. He and I would be having a talk soon, but not today.

As I headed down the stairs, I recalled the file folder that my dad had given me. The photos of Dana. The man that had been following her wasn’t one of Slim Pete’s men, but I had a pretty good idea who it was. Probably the PI that my father had hired to gather information on Dana and our so-called relationship; the information that he had tried to throw back in my face.

By the time I left the hospital, my anger had transitioned from simmering to boiling. I had nearly lost her. And all because of my dad's... no, I couldn't place all the blame on my dad. My own behavior had contributed to this entire mess, this mess that almost ended in heartbreaking tragedy.

I've had enough.

I hailed a taxi and sat in the back, too shaken up to drive. With my hands balled into fists, I tried to calm my emotions as the driver took me to Dad's estate. One minute I felt overwhelming relief and gratitude that Dana was alive and that we would have a second chance at building a true, honest relationship. Immediately on the heels of that relief came fury. Fury directed at my dad, but also directed at me.

As soon as the taxi pulled into the driveway and rounded the curving pathway to the front door, I had grown quite irate, my emotions in a turmoil. "Wait here, please. This will only take a few minutes. Leave the meter running."

I quickly took the steps up to the front door. I tried the door, found it locked, and growled with impatience as I rang the doorbell, not letting my finger off the button the entire time. It took only a few seconds for a harried maid to open the door, her eyes widening in surprise when she saw me. Without a word, she stepped back, opening the door and allowing entrance. I said nothing as I brushed past her and headed for my dad's office. Without knocking, I opened the door and entered, slamming it shut behind me.

My dad looked up, eyes wide with surprise.

"Brady—"

"She could've been killed!"

He frowned. "What?"

My chest heaving with emotion, I could barely get the words out. I was surprised when I felt the warmth in my eyes and heard my voice crack. "Dana! Car accident..." was all I managed to get out before I had to stop, close my eyes, and take a deep, shaky breath.

"Brady, what are you talking about? What's happened?"

I opened my eyes and saw him standing, his gaze concerned and confused. "No more bullshit! This time you went too far!"

"Brady, I don't understand."

"You hired a PI, didn't you? To take those photos of Dana? To follow her?"

“I... I did,” he said. “But what’s happened?”

“Your fucking PI was chasing a car she was in. They crashed!” My voice broke again. “She’s in the hospital, in the ICU.” I swallowed. “She lost the baby.”

I saw the blood drain from his face.

“Brady, I...”

I cut him off, my voice trembling. “You went too far, Dad. I don’t care about the money anymore. You can disown me if you want to, but I’m marrying Dana. For real. I can’t...” I could hardly get the words out. “She almost died!”

He quickly stepped from behind his desk and approached, placed his shaking hands on my shoulders, his expression displaying shock. I tensed. And then, his voice soft, he spoke.

“My God, you really love her. You love her, don’t you, Brady?”

For several moments, I said nothing, but then I took a step back, shrugging his hands off my shoulders. “I do, Dad. I don’t care if you disown me. I’m going to marry her, and that’s all there is to it. You can come to the wedding or not. Right now, I just don’t give a shit.”

With that, I turned and left his office and stalked through the foyer, anxious to get back to the hospital and to Dana.

Epilogue

Dana

Seven months later

For the first time in my life, everything came together with the two people I loved most in the world: Brady and Charlie. My wedding day. I stood in the alcove of the church, waiting for the music to start, trying to tamp down my excitement, my heart racing with anticipation. Not fear, not anxiety, no regrets.

I loved Brady with everything I had. The accident had, for me at least, been a blessing in disguise. The truth to come out, all of it. Charlie knew everything, as did Brady's dad. While both had been naturally upset at first, the incident and the revelations had proved cathartic for Charlie and served as a bridge for Brady and his dad to come together.

I think we all learned valuable lessons from that singular incident. Brady and I realized the depth of our affection for one another, and that the thought of life without Brady seemed empty for me. The accident and my ensuing recovery, as well as loss of the baby had also prompted Charlie to make several positive changes in his life. Over the past months, he had returned to school. He was attending Gamblers Anonymous meetings and making positive strides in battling his inner demons. He had moved out of Eric's apartment, and with Brady's help, had found a small apartment in a better area of town, close to the university.

Brady's dad had come to visit me in the hospital, without Brady's knowledge, to personally apologize to me for his role in my accident. I saw with my own eyes his genuine regret and pain when he told me he would never forgive himself for being involved in any way in the accident that had taken my baby's life.

He gave his blessing to our relationship, and over the past few months, we had grown closer. He became the father I never had. He and Brady were mending their relationship, and Clint was so pleased with Brady's continued performance at work that he had promoted Brady to CFO of one of the Shaw's largest holdings just last month.

As for myself, I was entering my final year of nursing school and had Brady's full support. A month after the accident, he had come home with surprise. He told me he had sold the penthouse suite and then had driven me into a residential neighborhood northeast of downtown Dallas. He pulled up in front of a moderately-sized ranch dwelling and grinning, turned to me as he dangled the key on the keychain in front of me.

"Welcome home, Dana."

I couldn't help it. I had burst into tears right then and there. It was everything I had ever dreamed of as a little girl. It even had a waist-high picket fence surrounding the property.

I heard the organ in the church nave begin to play the traditional wedding march, and I glanced down at myself one more time to make sure my dress was just perfect.

"You're absolutely gorgeous," Cassie said, smiling, her own lavender gown beautifully draping her perfect figure.

As my maid of honor, she stood in front of me, giving me a top-to-toe nod of approval. I smiled warmly at her. She had helped me choose my wedding gown—a close-fitted V-neck, sweetheart neckline bodice with sheer shoulder straps flowing into a gentle ballgown skirt with a chapel train.

"I'm ready," I said, glancing at my brother standing beside me, so very handsome in his tux. He grinned and offered me his elbow. He was giving me away, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.

The doors opened, the music louder as Cassie led the way down the aisle. The moment I passed over the threshold, I only had eyes for Brady, standing so tall and proud at the altar. His father stood next to him as his best man. Everyone stood, but the faces, the gowns, the suits all passed in a blur as I

only had eyes for Brady.

The ceremony was simple and before I knew it, we were announced as man and wife. The groom had kissed the bride, and we turned to the audience, both of us beaming with happiness. We quickly made our way hand-in-hand down the aisle as well-wishers and guests followed.

The reception was held at the Shaw estate. After the wedding, I changed into my reception gown, the purchase insisted upon by Cassie, also white, with a fitted bodice and Basque waistline, spaghetti straps, and soft knitted skirt. I felt like a Greek goddess in that gown, and the way Brady looked at me made my blood surge with anticipation to leave for our honeymoon.

I wasn't sure where we were going, but Brady told me I would love it, and I believed him. At the reception, I received well wishes by so many guests and friends of the Shaw family I couldn't possibly keep track of them all. Flutes of champagne, hors d'oeuvres, and a gorgeous wedding cake filled a table against the far wall of the room, where guests happily mingled.

I was pleased to see Charlie conversing with Clint, who had sort of taken him under his wing, and I had no doubt that Brady might have had something to do with that. The two got along well, and for the first time in many years, my little brother seemed truly happy.

“Can I sneak you away for a few minutes?”

I turned and smiled at Brady with a grateful nod. We quickly left the room where everyone was having such a good time, so much so that I don't think anybody noticed that we had slipped away and dashed up the stairs to Brady's former bedroom. Our suitcases were packed, and all I needed to do before we left for the airport was to change out of this gown and into my honeymoon outfit, another one that Cassie had insisted upon. Much more casual and appropriate for what Brady only hinted as a several-hour-long plane trip.

The moment we reached his bedroom, he closed the door and swept me into his arms, his lips meeting mine in a passionate kiss, which I returned just as vigorously. Our tongues played tag as my arms wrapped around his waist and his around my shoulders. I reveled in his strength and his love.

He suddenly broke off the kiss, grinning down at me with a lifted eyebrow. “Would you ever have envisioned this a year ago?”

I laughed. “No, but it all turned out rather nicely, didn't it?”

“It did,” he nodded. “You want to know where we're going on our

honeymoon?”

“I do, but I have a feeling you’re not going to tell me, are you?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Not just yet. When we get on the plane. You okay with that?”

“I am,” I said, and then turned toward my suitcase on the bed. “I have a surprise for you too.”

I sat down on the bed and unzipped the pocket on the outside of the suitcase, retrieving an eight-by-ten white envelope. I patted the bed beside me and he sat down, eyebrows lifted in question.

“What is it?”

I opened the clasp on the envelope and extracted a photographic image. “It’s a wedding present for you,” I whispered. “A very special wedding present.”

Brady looked at me, smiling with curiosity, and then took the photograph. He stared at it for several moments. I watched his expression carefully and knew the instant that he realized what it was. I’d had it taken after I guessed and went for a checkup, where it was confirmed that I was approximately twelve weeks pregnant.

The ultrasound showed an image of two sacs. Two babies. Brady stared at it for several moments, then turned to me with a look of wonder.

“Twins?”

I nodded, touched by the emotion on his face.

“We’re going to have twins?”

His excitement was catching and as he swept me into his arms, nuzzling his face in my neck as he hugged me, we both laughed. I held him close, so happy I could hardly contain my joy.

Yes, everything was right with the world.

So right.



VIP: Taken By the Billionaire

Chapter One

Daniela

Another day, another dollar.

That's what I tell myself as I clean a glass and place it carefully underneath the bar at Trinity, a local dive in Chicago. I wash another one, doing my best to ignore the creep who continues to edge toward me from his side of the bar.

"Hey, baby, come on," he says, cocking his head, his hands straying closer to me. "When do you finish your shift? We could get a drink."

"I'm good," I respond calmly, but I'm starting to get pissed. He's been at this for the last half hour, and since I'm the only bartender on duty right now, I'm an easy target. At this time of day, there's only a handful of other people scattered around the room. The odd couple having a conversation in hushed tones next to the window, and a woman drinking alone at the other end of the bar.

"What can I do to convince you?" he whines, sounding like a toddler

denied his favorite toy.

Okay, now I'm getting seriously pissed.

I slam down the wine glass I'm cleaning on the bar between us. "I'm not interested. Okay, buddy?" I lower my eyebrows, giving him my best glower. "Either cut it out or go to another bar."

Of course, the universe immediately punishes me for standing up for myself.

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, he raises his hands in a defensive gesture and knocks the glass off the edge of the bar. Even as I reach for it, I know that I should just let it smash, clean it up, and use it as an excuse to kick his ass out. But instead, on instinct, I try to catch it. As I lunge forward, it hits one of the shelves beneath the bar, cracks into several pieces, and a large fragment spins off, landing a deep cut between my thumb and forefinger.

"Motherfucker!" I yell, too annoyed with myself to register the pain as blood begins to drip steadily from the gash in my hand. My eyes shoot up, and the guy's face goes white. He quickly looks away, pretending he doesn't see the chaos he created.

"Asshole," I mutter to myself as I grab a towel and head toward the employee bathroom to clean up.

As I run the water, I'm so focused on my hand that I barely notice Tina enter the room. She must have just gotten in to join me for the evening rush. She's been mixing drinks here at Trinity Sports Bar for as long as I've known her and is actually the one who recommended me to the manager.

"Shit, Daniela!" She takes my wrist and pulls it towards her. "What happened?"

"Nothing," I mumble, but she's already leading me through to the staffroom.

"I'm getting you bandaged up," she says firmly and reaches for the first aid kit. I feel my head start to swim as I watch her try to fix me up. The blood doesn't seem to want to stop.

"What's going on in here?" Dennis, the manager, appears at the door. He sounds even more pissed off than usual.

"Uh, there was a guest out there." I nod toward the bar. "He was hassling me, and—"

"He says you went crazy on him." Dennis raises his eyebrows and crosses

his arms. “Says you threw a glass at his head.”

“Jesus Christ, Dennis. Can’t you see how badly hurt she is?” Tina snaps. Dennis shoots her a look, and she quiets down. She needs this job as much as the rest of us, no matter how much of an asshole our boss is.

“Is that true? Did you throw a glass at him? Is that how you got that cut?”

“Bullshit!” An unfamiliar voice enters the equation. “That’s so not what happened.”

We all turn, and Dennis steps aside to reveal the only other woman in the bar standing behind him. She’s taller than she looked sitting down.

“I saw everything,” she continues. “That asshole was the one who shoved the glass off the counter. She went to catch it, and that’s when she got hurt.”

She shoots me a conciliatory look, and I nod back with a grateful smile. With only a few words, my ass is officially saved.

The woman steps into the room. “He’s really drunk. I don’t even think he should be in here, but yeah...it was totally that guy’s fault.”

“Thanks for your help.” Dennis plasters on his prime customer-pleasing grin. He turns to me with a rare look of apology on his face. “I’ll get him chucked out,” he mumbles and then gestures to my hand. “You should get that looked at. Take the rest of the day off.”

After the nurse practitioner at the urgent care center dumped a glob of what looked like superglue in my cut and steri-stripped it together, I’m on my way with a warning to keep the wound dry for a couple of days and watch out for signs of infection. A nice tetanus shot rounds out the visit, and I know I’ll feel that muscle for a while.

“Thanks, Mom,” I mutter, feeling petulant and childish, but unable to help myself. I love my mom, but she checked out of this world a couple years ago, overtaken by bouts of depression so deep she’s been hospitalized several times. I have great sympathy for her illness, but sometimes, I just need my mother to answer the phone. I miss talking to her and asking things as simple as when my last vaccinations were.

Guilt immediately follows these negative thoughts, and I cross the street, heading to the nursing home located down the block. Outside its doors, I take a deep breath and plaster a smile on my face.

“Hi, Judy,” I say to the receptionist as I sign in.

The older lady gives me a motherly grin. “Hi, Daniela. You’re here awfully early today.”

I hold up my bandaged hand, and her smile fades away. “It’s no big deal. Just got me out of work earlier than usual.”

She gives me the same *watch out for infection* lecture I’d just endured, then buzzes me through the security door. I walk the familiar hallway, then bounce up the stairs until I’m on the third-floor residence hall. Here, the living accommodations are more like apartments and couples can live together in the space with minimal assistance from the staff. When we moved to Chicago a couple years ago, finding this place was like a miracle for both of my parents.

Outside of their room, I take another deep breath and gently push open the door. Mom is lying on her bed, curled up in a tight ball while Dad watches TV from his, the dialysis machine churning its blood cleansing wheels beside him.

“Hey, Dani-bean,” Dad calls out when he sees me. I frown at how pale he is. I plaster on the smile again and walk over to his bed. He clicks off the television and pats the mattress for me to take a seat next to him. I do and am soon enfolded next to his warmth – the safest place I’ve ever known.

“How are you feeling?” I ask him after a few minutes, but already know what his answer will be.

“Fine and dandy,” we say together and laugh. It’s the same response I get every day.

Diagnosed as a teenager with what was then called juvenile diabetes, his disease has been progressively working on his kidneys until it became clear that a transplant was his only option. I hug him tighter, willing his name to miraculously jump up higher on the donor list before his body is too weak for the operation. Normal wait time is four to six years, and he’s already been on the list for nearly three.

I stay until he grows tired, then kiss him on the forehead and say my goodbyes. I step over to Mom’s bed and give her a kiss too, wishing there was an operation that could fix the progressive deterioration of her mind and

spirit.

Minutes later, I'm sitting in a cab on the way back to my apartment. Well, *our* apartment – it still feels weird to think of it that way. Pete and I have been dating almost two years and have lived together for one. We met at a club where he was DJing. I was tending the bar and we bumped into each other when we both headed outside for a break. The rest is history.

Before we met, I was living in a cramped apartment with three roommates, so moving in with him saved my sanity. I look at my watch and smile. Pete should still be home, and I could use a little sanity saving right now.

Pete is a self-diagnosed sex addict, and he never stops going at it. If I just hint that I'm in the mood, he'll be rubbing up on me in a nanosecond. Even though he's twenty-four now, he still has the libido of a fifteen-year-old who's just seen his first pair of tits.

I squirm in my seat just thinking about being with him. He's by far the hottest guy I've ever slept with, although that's not saying much. There wasn't exactly a wide choice of sex gods back in my little hometown of Pella, Iowa. So when Pete entered my life, all muscles and cropped hair and cheekbones, I felt as though I'd hit some crazy lottery. Yeah, he's not the smartest, and he flirts too much with other women, but hey, with that body and face, I can't complain.

I'm ready for something wild...maybe anal? Pete always asks, but we've never actually done it because I'm nervous it might hurt. But today, a little pain, followed by a delightful orgasm, might just be what the doctor ordered to make me forget this entire day. I run my fingers through my hair and pull out my phone, inspecting myself using the selfie camera. I look a mess, but a dab of makeup will cover up the worst.

I pay the driver and hop out of the cab, fumbling awkwardly with my opposite hand in my pocket to find my keys. I unlock the door and sashay my way up the stairs, doing my best to feel sexy as I open the door to the apartment. That's when I hear it.

The unmistakable sound of sex coming from our bedroom.

Bedsprings are creaking rhythmically, and Pete's small moans of pleasure echo throughout the house. I close the door quietly, not sure how to react, and make my way across the hall. I press my ear to the bedroom door, and I could swear that...

Before I can finish my thought, the door flies open, and I tumble into the room. I gape at the display before me. Pete is standing in front of me, stark naked, and in our bed is a...*guy*. The covers are pulled haphazardly around him so I can't see if he's naked too, but I'm not stupid enough to place money against that one.

My face feels numb as all the blood drains into my toes. I open my mouth to say something—

“I'm sorry,” he blurts out before I can utter a sound. “I thought you were at work.”

“S-so?” I manage to say, clutching my hand, which has started to emit a low dull throbbing in rhythm to my pounding heart.

“So...” He gestures to the guy behind him. “I know I should have told you sooner—”

I begin to snap back into reality. “Wait, how long has this been going on?”

“Uh, a couple weeks?” Pete flashes me a smile as if I'm just going to roll over and take this.

“And is he the first...?” I trail off, not sure whether I should specify gender. I'm too shell-shocked to really know what I need to find out.

“Uh, yeah,” Pete runs a hand through his hair, and I can see that he's lying.

“Hey, you want to join us or not?” The guy in the bed props up on his elbows and raises his eyebrows at me.

My mouth opens in disbelief, but nothing comes out. Again, I'm speechless.

Pete scratches the stubble on his chin. “Could be fun.”

“Fuck you!” I snap, finding my anger at last. “I'm leaving.”

“When will you be back?” Pete asks casually as if this is nothing more than a mild disagreement.

“I won't,” I snarl. “We're done.”

“Dani, wait!” he calls as I storm out of the room. I ignore him and slam the door so hard I hear the bed shake. I'll come back later to pick up my stuff, but right now, I need to get the hell away from here.

I make it down to the street before it hits me. Just like that, I'm single again. And homeless. I don't cry, which surprises me. After my last breakup,

I bawled my eyes out for a full week, and we'd only been together six months. I guess somewhere in the back of my mind, I always suspected that Pete wasn't entirely faithful, but his bisexuality, well, that was a surprise.

It's a hot and humid Chicago day, and the sweat is pouring off me as I walk fast, barely noticing my surroundings. I'm trying to put as much space as I possibly can between my cheating ex-boyfriend and me.

I look up and realize that I'm outside of work. The faded Trinity Bar sign sits a few feet over my head, and I sigh when I think about what this says about me. My safe place is my job? That's shitty. Since I'm here, I might as well find out if I can make up the hours I missed earlier. My hand feels better, and I could sure use the extra tips.

Inside, it's even more humid than on the streets. The crowds are gathering for the Friday night drinking marathon. I squeeze through the reams of people, exchanging a few loaded looks with a couple of cute guys who give me the up and down. I can't imagine I'm looking my best, but I appreciate the attention.

Dennis has left, replaced by Sheila, the night manager. Everyone prefers her to the asshole because she's a lot easier to get along with.

"Hey, Sheila." I stick my head into her office, and she jolts slightly at my appearance.

"Surprised to see you here," she says and leans back in her seat. "Dennis told me you had a pretty nasty accident earlier today. He sent you to the ER, right?"

"Yeah." I fight the urge to roll my eyes at the mere mention of Dennis's name. "But I'm all put together again, and I've got the evening off, so I thought—?"

"If you think I'm going to let you out there on a Friday night with your hand sliced and diced, you've got another thing coming." Sheila gets to her feet and steps toward me. "Come on. Go home, get some rest. Get that cute and sexy boyfriend of yours to look after you."

I try to hide the look of disappointment on my face. "Sure," I mumble, not ready to share the news of our break-up with anyone. I sidle back into the bar, scanning the place. Time to change my luck. I've had a creep coming on to me, an accident that sent me to the emergency room, and a break-up with my boyfriend of two years, all in one day. As my old daddy always says — *when life hands you lemons, make whiskey sour.*

I push my way through to the bar and lean on the counter, catching Tina's eye. She quickly heads my way and deftly pours a shot into a small glass, shoving it toward me.

"This will help. How's your hand?" She frowns sympathetically.

"They just dumped some of that glue stuff in it. It's nothing, really." I offer her my best fake smile and reach for the drink with my bad hand – wincing. I withdraw it and use the other to toss back the shot.

"Be careful. You'll tear it open. I've got to serve that group over there," Tina nods to a table at the other side of the bar, "but I'll catch you soon, yeah?"

"Sure thing."

I watch her leave and fight the urge to reach over the bar and pour myself another shot. One thing is certain, after this long fucked-up day, all I want to do is get wasted.

"Are you okay?"

I jump as a soft hand lands on my shoulder. I turn and see the woman who defended me earlier. I give her a smile. "Yeah, thanks. I really appreciate you stepping up for me."

She holds out a hand. "I'm Aria," she says as she takes a seat beside me.

I'm grateful that my wound is on my left hand as we shake. "Daniela."

"Are you sure you're okay," she asks, eyeing me closely. "You seem... upset."

I'm not sure why, but I feel tears prick the back of my eyes. I blink hard, willing them away.

Aria squeezes my fingers. "Oh, honey, want to talk about it?"

I look into her eyes and realize I do. Maybe talking to a stranger will be easier than with a friend.

As I spill my story, Aria orders us both a straight whiskey.

"I didn't even know he was bi," I complain and take a sip.

She winks at me. "Nothing wrong with that," she says with a laugh.

I laugh too and the stress of the day seems to float away. Maybe it's the effects of the whiskey, but I think it's more that I'm able to get all this burden off my chest.

"Thanks for listening to all that," I tell her and raise my glass in a silent toast.

She clinks her glass to mine. “Anytime. And speaking of anytime, how about this weekend?”

I look at her curiously. “What do you mean?”

She leans closer. “My aunt has this amazing house down in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I’m heading down there this weekend for a party but I hate traveling alone. You should come with me. Plenty of hot and sexy guys. Nothing like getting your mind off a guy than a quick fling with another guy.”

I smile. “That sounds incredible, but right now, I can’t even afford a McDonalds happy meal, much less a plane ticket.”

“Oh, honey.” Aria laughs. “You’ll be so glad you met me. I’ve got like two million flying miles saved up. We’ll get you a ticket.”

I look up from the amber liquid I’d been staring at and meet Aria’s eyes. “Seriously?”

Aria nods. “Seriously.”

It’s tempting. Florida does sound better than Chicago any day of the week.

“Come on,” Aria says as I hesitate. “The ocean. Hot guys. Free getaway with a new friend. How can you say no to all that?”

How indeed?

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About the Author

Tasha Fawkes

I'm originally from a small southern town where everyone knew everyone and their business. I was so happy to leave and move to California for college where I was originally going to be a veterinarian. Well, I met a guy (yeah it's that kind of story) and dropped out of school to have my oldest daughter. We soon divorced, and as therapy, I started to write.

I never did go back to college, and have been writing ever since. I love to write about sex. Lots of sex. Taboo sex, kinky sex, anything but missionary sex (unless the heroine is tied up tight!) It's probably something to do with my southern upbringing.

I hope you enjoy my stories and if you have any kinky stories, I'd love to hear about them.

XXX,

Tasha

Please visit me at:

<http://tashafawkes.com/>

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