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Lynnette Bernard

Lover

of My
Dreams

Mates of Destiny, Angel Chosen 1

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Lover of My Dreams

Childhood friends, Sam, Rachel, and Roy, were inseparable—three lost souls who protected each other. When Sam's father threatened their futures, Rachel did what she had to do in order to protect them all. She left. Ten years later, Rachel Williams retreats to the quiet of the Colorado mountains. She needs isolation from the outside world to heal from a brutal date attack.

Sam McCoy has had it with socially elite women—especially his ex-fiancée. He needs to go back to the mountains and create a home, complete with a baby or two. When Rachel is injured, Sam is there to take care of her. He loves the way she defies him, makes him laugh, and makes him need. A future with her would be filled with love and babies.

Angelic dreams help Sam and Rachel know they're fated to be together, despite the interference of others. It will be up to Roy and his wife Paulette to help nudge fate along.

Genre: Contemporary

Length: 158,932 words

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the wonderful people of Colorado. Your kindness and welcoming friendship made me know that it's possible to be part of a family who may not be blood, but who are as close as blood.

I would have never had the opportunity to spend my summer there if it hadn't been for my cousins Paul and Laurine. They invited me, welcomed me, gave me wonderful memories, and introduced me to the beauty of the mountains and the people who lived there.

All of you helped a young woman realize that there are good people in this world. Your welcoming love inspired this novel and helped me make my dream a reality.

* * * *

A very special thanks to my two childhood friends Joanne and Anne who gave me so much laughter, understanding, kindness, and unconditional love and acceptance. We were definitely quite the trio. You are good people who gave me so many good memories. When we see each other now that we are older, it's like no time has

passed despite how our lives have taken their own paths. I guess that's the way of true friendship. I love you both.

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LOVER OF MY DREAMS

*Mates of Destiny, Angel
Chosen 1*

LYNNETTE BERNARD

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Prologue

A View from Heaven

“The angel Bernadette would like to speak with You,” Peter said quietly, looking into the soft, loving eyes of the heavenly Father.

“Sweet Bernadette,” He answered, smiling. “She has another baby she wants to watch over. Come to me, my child.” His voice was soft as He spoke to the angel.

The warm scent of cinnamon and sugar accompanied the petite angel as she gracefully soared toward the welcoming presence of God. Soft white and pink

lights radiated from her, creating an aura that was both comforting and beautiful.

“Dear Father, a child has been born that will suffer great sorrow in the loss of her mother and father,” Bernadette spoke sadly, unshed tears making the soft brown of her gentle eyes glisten brightly. She was drawn to the tenderness emanating from her Father as He sat before her. His radiant, white, voluminous robes stretched out before her, giving her a sense of comfort and peace as she sought His guidance and gifts. “She will face a man of great evil in her young life, and I would ask to watch over her and give her the gift of dreams to help her through the difficult road that lies ahead of her.”

“You have a kind and caring heart, Bernadette,” the heavenly Father told her with great love in His voice. “Go and watch over the child. Help ease her sorrows and worries with the gift of her dreams.”

“Thank you, dear Father,” Bernadette squealed with delight, making God smile broadly at her joy. She climbed up onto His lap and hugged Him tightly.

She kissed His cheek soundly before leaning back to smile up at His kind face, her adorable dimples and loose, light brown, bouncing curls capturing His heart once again. He valued the beautiful treasure of her kindness and caring. Her soothing scent surrounded

Him, allowing Him to breathe in the gentleness of her goodness and love.

“Have I made you happy, dear one?” He asked her quietly, cradling her head against Him, already knowing the answer.

“Yes, Father, thank you,” Bernadette whispered against His shoulder, her little arms hugging Him tightly as her soft, pink wings gently surrounded them both.

“You are very welcome, my child,” He whispered. “Go to her now, she needs your blessings.”

Bernadette nodded eagerly and scrambled down from her Father’s lap. The warm scent followed her as she soared happily from His presence and

made her way to the hospital where the innocent child slept, peacefully unaware of the sorrow that would soon surround her.

As Bernadette looked down into the clear plastic cradle that held the newborn, the angel's eyes filled with tears at the fragile beauty of this new life. Very slowly, she floated toward the child, leaning forward to gently place a kiss at the corner of her right eye. Bernadette smiled and her heart filled with love as the child turned her face toward her to lean in to the warmth of her kiss.

“You are very loved, Rachel,” Bernadette whispered. “My blessing of

dreams will help ease your burdens as you grow, sweet child.”

With that, the little angel withdrew gracefully, gazing down at the beautiful new baby with open love on her face. She needed to return to her place in heaven where she could watch over the many babies God had given her permission to bless and guide.

The tiny baby turned her head and snuggled against the soft bunting within the cradle. As she slept peacefully, a small sparkle of light appeared where she had been kissed by her guardian angel. A tiny, crescent moon birthmark appeared to mark her as chosen.

Chapter 1

Ten Years Ago

“Don’t let go, Sam!”

Her soft brown eyes were wide with fear and pain. A single tear escaped her right eye, glistening past the tiny, crescent moon birthmark to fall unheeded down her pale cheek that was muddied with streaks of dirt. She hung precariously from the edge of the high cliff that she had moments before been hiking with her cousin Roy and their friend Sam McCoy. She knew that her left leg was broken. The pain radiated from the tips of her toes to the joint of

her hip. Sam's tanned hand was all that was keeping her from cascading down the remainder of the one-hundred-foot drop to the green canopy of trees below.

"Rachel, don't you dare look down," Sam's voice called to her with obvious effort as he strained to pull her up toward him with his right hand.

Every muscle in his body convulsed with the fear that had wrapped itself around him. He had to concentrate to make the panic subside so he could pull Rachel up to safety. He looked down at her and focused on her eyes—pleading eyes that were staring up at him with fear.

"Roy, pull harder!" Sam yelled to his friend who held his legs.

“I’ve got you, Sam,” Roy said with effort, grunting as he dug into the rich earth with his sneaker-clad feet. He was afraid to talk and lose any degree of strength for fear of losing his grip on Sam’s legs. He pulled with all his might, straining all the muscles in his shoulders but not feeling any of the pain as adrenaline rushed through his body. The open gash above his forehead that was just inside his hairline dripped blood down his face, and he whipped his head to the side to clear his eyes of the annoying liquid.

Sam strained with every ounce of strength he had to pull his best friend’s cousin up to the safety of the ledge and

out of danger. His left arm was useless at this point, his shoulder separated in the tumble down the steep slope that he and Rachel had taken when the soft earth had given way under their feet as they had rounded the difficult corner of the mountain path.

“Rachel, I will *not* let you fall,” he promised calmly, trying to reassure them both as he strained to pull her up with his right arm.

Rachel held on to his wrist and forearm with both of her hands, knowing that their combined strength would determine her fate on this day. She could feel Sam’s muscles straining under her hands, his own grip on her wrist strong and unfailing. She looked up and saw the

ice blue of his eyes that normally shone with mischief and humor now betraying the fear he was feeling even as he tried to conceal it.

“I trust you, Sam,” Rachel whispered so that only he heard. “I know you can pull me up.”

She nodded up at him in affirmation, and saw the flash of caring that transformed his face for just a split second. The moment of softness was quickly replaced with cold determination, and she found herself being lifted upward slowly but continuously. She helped as much as she could with her good leg once she was able to obtain footing on the unstable

ruts of earth and grass that protruded from the side of the mountain.

She couldn't help but scream out in pain as her left leg was dragged the remaining distance across the ledge as Sam and Roy pulled her to safety. She found herself crying at the relief of her deliverance from sure death. Her chest was heaving with the effort to catch her breath as she lay on her back and stared up at the beautiful Colorado sky. The calmness and beauty of the blue sky and cottony white clouds betrayed the truth of the situation. They had just cheated death.

As she lay on her back, looking up at the serenity of her surroundings, she breathed heavily, trying to control her

emotions. Sam's right hand still held her wrist and her shoulders rested against his face. She could feel his warm breath as he breathed raggedly against her neck, and she couldn't help but revel in the feel of his closeness. Despite the pain she was in and the fear that nearly consumed her, she truly felt that his touch and nearness to her was the most beautiful thing she had ever experienced. There was a constriction in her chest at his closeness, and she wanted to lie against his broad, muscular chest forever.

Being this close to him and touching him made it difficult for her to breathe. She actually felt pain in her chest at the

raw need she felt. Sam McCoy was the one man that she had loved forever. She wished that he felt the same way, but she knew it would never happen. He didn't see her as anything but Roy's cousin. She wasn't even a blip on his radar in the grand scheme of things.

*Date her? Want her? Yeah right.
Never gonna happen.*

She wiped at her eyes with her left hand and saw that it was shaking slightly. She knew it was because of her brush with death, but she also knew it was because of the man who held her so fiercely against his body. She wanted to rip his clothes off and make love to him. She wanted him to want her as much as she wanted him. She just plain wanted

Sam McCoy to be hers.

Sam turned his face to look at her. Even upside down, he could see the relief and gratitude that was evident on her face. For a brief moment, he recognized something else, too, and he couldn't help but smile at the obvious caring that he saw displayed there. He had to admit that it was pretty nice to feel warmth and happiness at the way Rachel looked at him with something very close to adoration. It was flattering and nice to have someone feel that sincere emotion about him. It would only be a matter of time before she would mature and grow out of her infatuation, but it was nice to be the recipient of it

for now.

He pushed his thoughts aside and concentrated on righting them both and seeing to their safety. He had to get all three of them down the mountain to medical care.

Roy reached down and pulled Rachel up even higher to the safety of the rich earth that had served to anchor him. His strength would have surprised anyone but Rachel. She knew that his tall, lanky body hid the strength he was capable of. She knew that the daily routine of the many hours both he and Sam worked every day after school at her aunt's ranch had made both of them muscled, strong, and disciplined. She would bet her life on Sam and her cousin. She just

had.

“Roy, you’re bleeding,” she told him weakly, reaching up to touch his forehead gently.

“That’s the least of our worries, Rache,” he told her, setting her back gently and releasing her to rest against the cool dirt before crawling forward to check on his friend.

“Don’t touch my shoulder,” Sam told him sternly as Roy reached forward to pull him up.

“Broken?” Roy asked him, his hands freezing in place at Sam’s command.

“Don’t think so. Probably just separated.”

Sam’s voice was tight and clipped.

His face was covered in dirt and sweat. It was obvious that he was in pain.

As carefully as he could, Roy wrapped his arms around Sam's waist and hoisted him back toward the safety of the mountain. He was able to settle Sam beside Rachel without causing his friend too much additional pain.

"We're a mess," Roy stated matter-of-factly.

"No kidding." Rachel spoke up, smirking at the understatement. "I think my leg is broken," she said quietly.

Sam sat up quickly, regretting his sudden movement immediately. He grabbed his shoulder and leaned forward to hide the pain on his face from his friends. He felt Rachel's hand on his

back and wished he could enjoy her kindness more, but the pain in his shoulder was overshadowing the comfort he felt from her concern and her touch.

“Roy, I need you to help me,” Sam told his friend calmly.

“What do you want me to do?” Roy asked, kneeling before him.

Sam looked at him weakly. His friend’s jeans were covered with dirt, and his blue flannel shirt was ripped and bloodied. He had blood dripping down his forehead and along his temple, yet the concern that Roy had for him was obvious. Roy’s own injuries were forgotten as he looked down at him and

Rachel. Sam smiled up at him and nodded in acknowledgment of the friendship and caring.

It was natural for each of them to have no concern for their own pain. It was the way it had always been for the three of them since they had been children. Sam looked at the two people beside him and counted his blessings that he had found such great friends. They were two of the five people who were the most important to him in his life.

“Roy, take my left hand and extend it out so that my arm is perpendicular to my body but a little higher than my shoulder. Then pull hard and quick. That should put the arm back in its socket.”

“Crap, Sam!” Roy stammered. “I can’t

do that!”

Sam looked up at his friend’s face. “You have to, Roy. We have to carry Rachel down the mountain. I can’t help her if my arm is useless.”

Roy looked at Rachel for guidance. She could see the panic in his eyes. She recognized that he was scared, but she also saw the determination that flashed across his face before he nodded his agreement.

“Rachel, can you do your best to anchor me so Roy only has to try this once?” Sam asked her without looking at her.

Without a word, Rachel pushed her body closer to Sam’s, sitting slightly to

his right so that her hip rested against his. She wrapped her arms around his chest and locked her hands together, leaning her head against his back, and pulling him tightly toward her body.

“Is this good?” she asked nervously.

Sam nodded, breathing in deeply, trying to concentrate on controlling his pain. “Don’t let go.”

Rachel mumbled something that he couldn’t quite hear or understand. He felt her hold on him tighten. He looked up at Roy.

“Now or never, buddy,” he said strongly.

Roy nodded and took a deep breath. He reached for Sam’s left wrist, held it the way Sam had instructed him to, and

pulled the arm sharply and quickly with all his strength. Sam moaned in pain then slumped against Rachel, sliding onto her lap as blackness threatened to surround him.

He struggled to fight through the haze of instant pain and was relieved when it eased almost immediately. He opened his eyes slowly and found that he was still in Rachel's arms. She was looking down at him and she was crying silently. He looked over at Roy and saw that his eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Am I dead?" Sam whispered weakly.

Roy laughed and Rachel couldn't help but smile. She wiped her tears away with the back of her hand then reached

down and placed her hand on Sam's chest, rubbing it absentmindedly as she smiled down at him.

"*I am* dead. And I've gone to heaven," Sam teased, reaching up to hold her hand.

Rachel's breath caught in her throat. She squeezed Sam's hand tightly, not wanting to let go as her arm rested across his body. She could feel the muscles of his chest below her arm and knew that only the thin layer of his shirt hid the sculptured strength beneath it. The tight cords of muscles of his forearm flexed under her touch as she gently stroked his arm. She wanted to run her hand across his body, gently squeezing the golden muscles and tweaking at the

dark nipples that she longed to kiss and tug with her mouth. His body was a work of strength and she wanted to touch him, kiss him, lay beneath him, and feel him deep inside of her body. She knew his gentleness and kindness. She longed to spark and experience his passion.

“Okay, Romeo,” Roy said disgustedly, his voice pulling her from her erotic fantasies. “You’re just fine. Now get up and help me get us down this mountain. My mom is going to kill us all.”

Sam smiled as he looked up at Rachel, hesitating slightly when he saw the look of pure desire that crossed her face as she gazed down at him. In that split second his body reacted, tightening

painfully, his cock hardening despite that dull ache in his shoulder. He had to mentally shake himself.

This was his best friend's cousin. She had been their companion and partner in crime since they had been kids. The thoughts he was having about her were *not* acceptable. Despite the fact that she was nearly twenty years old and absolutely gorgeous, with sensual curves in all the right places, it was *not* okay to think about her in that way. He closed his eyes and took a steadying breath, willing his body back under control before he slowly sat up beside the object of his brief lack of control and desire.

“Kay has done it before, and I’m sure she’ll do it again,” he said, laughing.

“Your mom has every right to be mad at us. My mom, too.” He knew that Kay Monroe would be furious that the three of them had hiked a trail that she had told them was off limits to them. He also knew that she would be more concerned that they were all right and would postpone any punishment until they were all safely mended. By then, the edge would be off her anger and the punishment would be easily avoided.

His own mother would be furious if she had not been so sick. Joanna McCoy was fighting an illness that she wasn't going to beat. Sam's heart broke just thinking about losing her.

“I'll tell my mom if I think she's up to

hearing about our stupidity,” he said finally, smiling at Rachel and Roy when they both looked at him with understanding. “We can talk to Kay when we get back. I’m sure we’ll be able to calm her down.”

“Don’t think Mom will cave in to your smooth talk this time, Sam,” Roy warned his friend, almost reading his mind. “This time she’ll be pissed.”

Sam nodded, knowing Roy was right. “We’ll have to deal with that when it happens,” he told him calmly. “Tear off the material from the bottom of your flannel shirt and mine, and we’ll use it to stabilize Rachel’s leg.” He stood up slowly, accepting Roy’s outstretched hand to help steady himself.

As he stood before his friend, facing him eye to eye, he finally saw the gash on Roy's head. "Get your water bottle so I can rinse this," he told Roy with a firm voice.

Roy left him briefly to grab for his backpack, rooting through it quickly to pull out an unopened water bottle. Reaching into his back pocket, Sam pulled out his clean handkerchief with his right hand. Roy quickly twisted the cap off the bottle and handed it to Sam, allowing him to pour it carefully over the top of his head, pushing aside his hair gently as he examined the cut. He dabbed at the gash with the white cloth, wincing as Roy hissed in pain. The

white of the handkerchief soon took on a crimson shade as it was saturated with Roy's blood. Sam folded it in half then folded it in half again and pressed it to the wound. Roy stood quietly, knowing better than to protest. When *Dr. Sam* was working, there was no interrupting.

“You’re going to need a few stitches,” he told Roy seriously. “We’d better hurry and get you to the hospital before it’s too late to stitch you up.”

Sam reached forward slowly with his left hand, wincing slightly at the pain it caused. He took Roy's hand in his to place it over the already bloodied white cloth.

“Press,” he said firmly.

Roy did as he was told, waiting while

Sam slowly ripped another piece of material from the bottom of his flannel shirt. You could tell that the use of his just dislocated shoulder was causing him no small amount of pain. He stood patiently while Sam tied the frayed piece of cloth around his head, securing it with a knot directly over the wound. Roy's face contorted with pain at the pressure on his wound, but he said nothing. He saw the way Sam watched him silently to gauge his pain level.

“Thanks,” Roy said, nodding slightly to his friend. “Don’t worry about me. Let’s take care of Rachel.”

Sam barely acknowledged his appreciation, turning to look around the

area. He cradled his left arm against his chest, holding it still to ease the throbbing pain.

“Look for some short branches so we can secure Rachel’s leg. Try to get some that are as straight as possible.”

Roy nodded and turned to seek out the needed branches. Sam turned toward Rachel, walked toward her slowly then stopped and knelt down beside her. She was leaning back on her hands, looking comfortable as she watched him, but he knew that she had to be in some serious pain.

“Which leg?” he asked quietly, holding his left arm securely against his chest as he moved toward her.

“The left,” she told him, gritting her

teeth in preparation for his touch.

He reached forward with his good hand and, as gently as he could, placed his hand on her leg. Beginning at her hip joint, he carefully felt the muscle and bone all the way down to her ankle. When he looked up at Rachel, he saw that she was covered in perspiration and her complexion was pale. He watched her eyes carefully, worrying that she would lose consciousness.

“Are you going to pass out on me?” he asked her, his voice rough as he tried to control his own pain.

“Well, you almost did! Why can’t I?” she told him defiantly.

“No reason,” he told her, smiling. He

reached forward quickly to hold her as she lost her tenuous grasp of awareness and fell backward. He did the best he could to steady her, but without the use of his left arm, it was impossible. He found himself being pulled toward her as she fell backward. His right arm protected her from injuring herself as she fell, but it also prevented him from doing anything but lay on top of her.

He couldn't move. He closed his eyes and swallowed then took a steadying breath. There was no way that he could pull himself away from the softness of her curves. Instead, he could only rest against her body, his chest against hers and his face touching her cheek. He smiled as he breathed in the fresh scent

of her hair. For those brief moments their cheeks touched. He turned to look at her, smiling as his attention was drawn to the unique birthmark at the corner of Rachel's right eye. He closed his eyes, feeling a sense of comfort seeing the mark that had captured his interest ever since he could remember.

As she lay beneath him, wrapped in his embrace, his body reacted without concern of what should or shouldn't be. Her breasts pushed against his chest and with each breath that she took, he was reminded of their fullness. He wanted to explore their beautiful softness with his hands.

He had the sudden flash of a picture of

him taking each soft mound into his mouth and teasing her peaked nipples with his tongue. It made his breathing quicken and his body tense with arousal. He was so hard, the confines of his jeans were nearly strangling him. He tried to think of anything to get his mind off the desire that was shooting straight through him at the incredible feeling of her body beneath him.

After the third time of reciting the five times table, he was finally able to control his body and felt the tightness in his chest and groin easing. With one last brush of his face against her temple, he breathed in the alluring scent of her soft hair then rested his cheek against hers to wait patiently and, if he were to be

honest with himself, with a great deal of contentment, until Roy returned.

“Sam, get off my cousin,” Roy told him with humor in his voice.

Sam smiled and found his cheek making contact with Rachel’s one more time. “I can’t,” he told Roy in a muffled voice, his mouth against the collar of her shirt.

Roy put down the two relatively straight pieces of branches that he was carrying and reached forward to grab Sam by the waist and gently pull him off his cousin. He saw that Rachel was unconscious and knew that this was no time to give Sam a hard time about his close proximity to his cousin.

“What happened?” Roy asked him worriedly.

“She passed out when I was examining her leg,” Sam explained. “Come on. Let’s get it splinted before she comes to. The less she has to feel the better.”

Roy nodded and bent to retrieve the branches. They worked together, with Sam guiding him and Roy doing most of the work, and splinted Rachel’s leg quickly.

Rachel slowly became aware of the reality of the hard ground beneath her and the tugging at her left leg. She opened her eyes slowly, gradually becoming aware of Roy tying the last piece of cloth in place to stabilize the

branch that was supporting her ankle. She watched as Sam slowly took a length of his shredded shirt and looped it around his neck. She tried to reach up to help him but was too weak. Roy stepped between them and made a loop at the end of the material for him then carefully reached down to lift Sam's left hand into the makeshift sling. He saw his friend grimace in pain and mirrored his expression.

“Sorry,” he told him quietly.

Sam nodded and reached up to rest his good hand on Roy's shoulder. The two stood slowly then turned to face Rachel.

“Roy, do you have any aspirin in your backpack?” Sam asked quietly, knowing the three of them needed some kind of

help to get through the pain while they traveled back down the mountain.

“Yeah, I do,” Roy said, bending down and grabbing for his bag. “The next time either one of you even thinks about busting my ass for being prepared for any emergency, remember today.”

Rachel laughed softly then turned serious in an instant when Roy’s angry attention snapped at her. She raised her hands in surrender.

“I promise. I will never bust your ass for being an overprotective mother,” she told him seriously.

“Rachel,” Roy warned her.

“Okay, okay,” Rachel said quickly, doing her best not to upset her cousin.

Sam couldn't help but laugh softly. Roy was such a caring guy. He definitely looked out for the both of them. It was in his nature to be that way. It was a good thing, too. Today's emergency was perfect proof that Roy's tendency to always be prepared for any disaster was valued by all of them.

Roy opened the small bottle of aspirin and shook two pills into each of their open hands as well as his own then handed them his water bottle to wash down the medicine. He drank from it last, making sure Sam and Rachel were taken care of before he saw to his own needs. Capping the bottle, he placed it into his backpack and shrugged it back

onto his shoulders.

“Let’s get moving,” Sam said once he was sure everyone was ready to move. His voice was strong despite the pain he was in or the worry he was experiencing.

He and Roy reached forward to help Rachel up. When she was relatively stable, they stood on either side of her, Sam to the left of her and Roy to her right. They waited for Rachel to put her arms across their shoulders. Sam was grateful that Rachel held on to him by gently placing her hand behind his neck and resting her arm against the middle of his back to grip his shirt tightly. He was thankful that she made sure that she put no pressure on the joint of his injured

shoulder.

Once she was settled, Rachel nodded. They reached around her back and took hold of her waist by the belt loops of her jeans then lifted her and began to walk down the mountain, careful not to let her feet touch the ground. She did her best to keep her left leg bent so she could use her right foot to help in the journey.

“Looks like you’re going to be going back to college with a cast on,” Roy told his cousin laughing.

“Shut up, Roy,” Rachel told him with only a little bit of annoyance. It was her own fault that he was teasing her. She had done the same to him when he had broken his arm just before he had left for

college four years before.

“Make me,” Roy challenged her.

“You’re annoying. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. Deal with it.”

“Sam, what makes you want to be friends with him?” she asked with a huff.

“He’s such a pain.”

Sam could only laugh. He knew that Rachel didn’t mean any of the words that she spoke.

“Rachel, you know you love him,” he said finally. “And he loves you, right, Roy?”

“Maybe,” Roy muttered.

I love you, too, Sam, Rachel whispered within her mind.

She smiled at Sam, blushing slightly as

he caught her eye. Trying very hard to push aside her erotic thoughts of him, she held on to him tightly, reveling in the fact that she was able to touch his body and hold him close to her as they made their way down the mountain. She knew it would end way too soon and she would have to let him go. She was determined to enjoy every single second of it while she could.

Her stomach seized and she felt a rush of heat settle deep inside her at being so close to him. She stole a glance at him out of the corner of her eye and saw his determination as he helped to carry her to safety. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, wishing that he would feel

for her even a fraction of what she felt for him.

Sam smiled at the teasing banter between Roy and Rachel, glad that the comfort of it helped to ease their worries as they made their way down the mountain. They had a long way to travel to get back to Roy's old, beat up truck. He concentrated on taking one step at a time. The two cousins seemed to be doing the same. It was a quiet journey, each wrapped in their own thoughts, but Sam felt a familiar peacefulness as the three supported each other down the steep path.

* * * *

Rachel rang the bell of the front door of the estate that belonged to the McCoy family. The family butler Jarod opened it slowly within seconds and faced Rachel in silence. Rachel smiled up at the elderly gentleman, noting that his appearance hadn't changed much in the last fifteen years. He stood straight and tall and, as always, was dressed impeccably. His face showed lines of age and his hair was sprinkled with white, but he still possessed a strength and youthfulness that Rachel, Sam, and Roy knew to be a part of his character. His eyes held warmth for her as he gazed down at her. He stepped back silently to allow her entrance.

“Master Samuel is not in right now, Miss Rachel, but Mrs. McCoy has asked to see you when you arrived,” he told her, bowing slightly as Rachel entered slowly, maneuvering her crutches to carefully stand inside the foyer.

“Thank you, Jarod,” Rachel said quietly. She was always intimidated whenever she entered the McCoy home, but Jarod always welcomed her sincerely. He was such a good guy.

“Elegant cast,” Jarod told her quietly, smiling slightly.

Rachel looked down at the neon pink cast that ran from just below her knee to her toes. “Pretty jazzy, huh?” she asked, laughing. “How’s Mrs. McCoy?” Her

smile slowly disappeared as she asked the last question. She was really worried about Sam's mother. She had been sick for a very long time.

"The same," Jarod answered sadly. "She's looking forward to visiting with you though."

He led the way to the master bedroom, walking slowly so that Rachel could keep up. Rachel observed the ramrod straightness of his back as he led the way through the beautifully furnished estate. Jarod never seemed to age. Her memories of him from the time she had been a child were nothing but warm and loving. The familiarity of him was comforting. He was always sharply attired in his formal black suit, white

shirt and black tie. She never really knew his age but she did know his kindness ever since she had been a dirty, knee-scraped kid of five who padded along after her cousin Roy and his friend Sam. The three of them had been the recipients of Jarod's guidance and caring for many years.

She was brought out of her reminiscing as Jarod stopped before the closed door of Mrs. McCoy's suite. Rachel saw that he took a calming breath before he reached forward to place his hand on the doorknob. He opened the door and announced her arrival then left Rachel to visit with Joanna McCoy and closed the door behind her.

Rachel hobbled over to the massive, ornate bed and smiled down at the slight woman who lay almost lost in the mounds of white satin fabric within. Dark hair framed the petite woman's face, and she smiled warmly up at Rachel as she approached. Rachel smiled and leaned forward to gently kiss the woman's frail cheek.

Joanna McCoy hugged Rachel to her strongly despite her weakness, and patted the bed beside her for Rachel to take a seat. Rachel leaned her crutches against the wall then sat and held Mrs. McCoy's tiny hand. She looked down into her ice blue eyes and smiled. How alike she and Sam were.

“You’ll be going back to school next week,” Joanna said smiling.

Rachel nodded, unsure what to say. “Yes. I’ll be leaving a week from Tuesday. Classes start on Thursday,” she finally told her, glad that her voice remained strong.

“You be sure to work hard and do your best. Make sure you finish school. No one can ever take your education away from you. Make sure you can take care of yourself. Make sure you don’t allow anyone to treat you with anything but respect.”

Rachel could tell that Sam’s mother was very weak and that it took all of her energy to speak to her in short bursts.

Her voice was wispy. There were hesitant pauses between her sentences as she fought for her breath. She wished that she could make all of Joanna McCoy's suffering disappear. This woman was so kind and so caring. She deserved a long and healthy life. Tears stung Rachel's eyes as she looked down at her.

"I will, I promise," Rachel told her softly.

"Rachel," Joanna said quietly. "You are a wonderful young lady. I'm very proud of you. You and Roy have always been true friends to my son. Please watch out for him after I'm gone. Remind him to have fun."

"I will," Rachel promised. She smiled

down at Joanna McCoy, glad to see her visibly relax as she looked up at her. “Sam’s not here but I have something for him. Will you give it to him for me?”

Joanna nodded and watched as Rachel shrugged the denim backpack off her shoulders, unzipped it, and pulled a box wrapped in shiny blue paper. She handed it to Sam’s mother and watched as she folded back the satin sheets, placed it beside her on the bed, and covered it carefully so that no part of it could be seen. Rachel looked at her in confusion.

“I’ll surprise him with it when he comes home. I have some other things to give him, too,” Joanna promised, almost

talking to herself. “But there’s something I want you to have.”

Rachel looked down at her in surprise. “I don’t want anything, Mrs. McCoy,” she said quickly. “I just want you to get better.”

“Well, that’s just not going to happen,” Joanna McCoy stated strongly. “There’s no use pretending that it will. When I’m gone I don’t want you to leave school to come back for my funeral. Edwin will be sure to make it a tasteless social opportunity for the rich and famous. I don’t want you to be anywhere near it. I want you to say a prayer for me, remember me with fondness, and love my son.”

Rachel looked at her with tears in her

eyes. Joanna's own crystal blue eyes were bright with tears that threatened to spill forward. Joanna had no idea how easy it was for Rachel to promise to love Sam. She made a conscious effort to steady her breathing and take control of the pounding of her heart.

“Rachel, you are the daughter that I never had. I know you care about my son even though you try to hide it. You will love him and take care of him. You will show him that a marriage could be more than social opportunity and a means of control. You will give him a home, not a house, that is filled with laughter, love and, God willing, children.”

Rachel leaned forward to hug Sam's

mother. "I would love to promise that, Mrs. McCoy," she whispered against her neck. "But Sam doesn't think of me in that way. I'm just Roy's cousin who is a pest and has hung around with them both for years."

"Give it time," Joanna whispered, kissing her cheek lightly. "He'll realize someday just what a jewel you are."

Rachel sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes. She looked down at Joanna McCoy and watched as the woman reached up to unfasten the long gold chain from around her neck. It was a chain that she had always worn.

"I want you to have this," Joanna told her. She unclasped it with some difficulty then pulled the chain from her

body, shaking with the effort. Rachel saw that at the bottom of the beautiful gold chain hung a single, ice blue stone. “My father gave this to me when I turned sixteen years old. He said it matched my eyes.” She took a tired breath and closed her eyes briefly, smiling to herself at the happy memory. “He also told me that it held his love and all the luck that he wished for me.”

Rachel watched as Joanna slowly opened her eyes, clasped the chain closed, and reached up to loop it over Rachel’s head. She took the pendant and dropped it into the neck of Rachel’s shirt. When it was safely tucked inside, she held Rachel’s hand in hers.

“Now it’s yours. And it holds my love for you and all the luck I wish for you. This is between you and me. I don’t want Edwin to know that you have it. It’s my blessing to give to you and no one else has a right to take it away.” She held Rachel’s hand tightly then released her grip as exhaustion overcame her. “I’ll tell Sam that I gave it to you.”

“Mrs. McCoy, I don’t know what to say,” Rachel began.

“Don’t say anything,” Joanna stopped her. “Someday my son will see what’s been in front of him since he was eleven years old. Don’t give up on him, Rachel. He needs your support and your love. His father doesn’t have it in him to

provide that for him. I thought he did at one time, but I was wrong.” She smiled up at Rachel but the sadness in her eyes was evident.

“I’d better let you get some rest,” Rachel told her with concern. “I’ll come by again tomorrow.” She began to stand up when Joanna McCoy reached out to grab her hand with surprising strength.

“Rachel, wait,” she pleaded quietly.

Rachel sat down slowly and waited patiently while Mrs. McCoy struggled to regain her breath. “Take your time, Mrs. McCoy,” she told her quietly, placing her hand over the older woman’s as it gripped hers tightly. “I won’t leave until you’re ready.”

Joanna nodded, closing her eyes

tiredly. When she opened them again, her eyes were clear and they looked directly into Rachel's eyes.

“Rachel, I've been sick for a very long time,” she began quietly. “I have no doubt in my mind that there is only one way that this will end.” She gripped Rachel's hand tightly. “I know that my husband is looking forward to my death. It will be much easier to run his company without me being the majority shareholder. I've made sure that all of my shares will be put in Sam's name. He won't have to be a part of the business if he doesn't want to be, but he will be able to profit from it.”

“I'm sure Sam will do whatever you

want him to do, Mrs. McCoy,” Rachel said quietly.

“I want Sam to stay as far away from Edwin and his business as possible,” Joanna said firmly. “He needs to go back and finish school. He needs to do what will make him happy.”

“You should probably tell him that,” Rachel suggested. “If I know Sam, he’ll try to look out for your interests and not go back to school.”

“I think so, too,” Joanna said quietly. “But you can’t let that happen, honey. With me gone, there will be no one to watch out for Sam. Please make sure that Sam gets away from his father’s control. Tell Sam he mustn’t get caught up in Edwin’s life. He has to be strong for me.

He can't let his sadness paralyze him. He has to finish school. He has to achieve his dreams. You must help him. Tell Roy and Kay Monroe that I need them to look out for my boy. Jarod will always be there for him, too. Please, Rachel. Help Sam. Tell him not to give up his dreams."

Rachel nodded, her eyes filling with tears as she looked down at the frail woman. "I'll tell him, I promise." She waited for Joanna's nod and was glad to see her smile and lean back into the softness of the bed, relaxing visibly.

"Thank you."

Rachel smiled then leaned forward to kiss her cheek lightly. "I love you," she

whispered to the woman who had been so kind and loving to her.

“I love you, Rachel,” Joanna McCoy whispered against Rachel’s cheek. “Remember what I told you. Don’t give up on my son. You keep on loving him.”

“I will,” Rachel promised, standing and retrieving her crutches. She watched as Joanna McCoy sunk tiredly into her pillow and closed her eyes. She had a smile on her face, and she finally looked peaceful and happy.

Rachel made her way out of the room and slowly walked through the house. Jarod met her at the main door and smiled at her.

“Good luck in college, Miss Rachel,” he told her formally.

Rachel reached out and hugged him, kissing his cheek lightly before letting him go. “You take care, Jarod,” she told him through her tears. She couldn’t resist. She had to hug him good-bye. Reaching up, she wrapped her right arm around Jarod’s waist and hugged him tightly. She felt the return of her hug and smiled at Jarod’s honest affection. She loved him dearly.

Jarod cleared his throat awkwardly as Rachel released him then smiled down at her. “You, too, Miss Rachel,” he told her, bowing slightly and holding the door open for her departure.

Rachel made her way to her car, tossed her crutches into the back seat of

the old heap that had seen better days, and carefully eased herself inside it. After she was settled behind the steering wheel, she took one last look at the McCoy estate. Although it was a beautiful house, it was cold and offsetting. Jarod, Joanna McCoy, and Sam didn't really belong in that house. But it did match Edwin McCoy perfectly. She started the car and carefully eased it down the long driveway entrance of the estate toward the main road. As she drove the twenty minutes home, she thought about Joanna McCoy. What a wonderful woman she was. How kind she was. How loving. And how sad.

Sam drove up the long driveway to his father's home two hours later. The sun was already setting and the Colorado sky had turned shades of lavender and pink. He knew his mother would love the sunset. He parked his car and carefully eased himself out of it, reaching in to retrieve the small bouquet of pink and red carnations that he knew was his mother's favorite flower. He tucked them into the safety of his sling, shut the car door, and made his way to the entrance of the house.

Jarod opened the door to greet him before he even reached it. The look on

his face showed the fatigue that the older man was feeling.

“Jarod, please get some rest,” he told him gently. “I’ll be with my mother for the rest of the evening.”

Jarod nodded, pleased that Joanna’s son was home. “Miss Rachel visited with Miss Joanna this afternoon, Master Samuel,” he told him quietly.

Sam stopped walking toward his mother’s room and faced Jarod smiling. “I’m glad,” he said finally.

“Good night, sir,” Jarod told him, bowing formally.

“Good night, Jarod,” Sam said quietly. “Thank you for everything.”

Jarod’s nod of his head was almost undetectable but Sam saw it. He

watched as the man who had given him fatherly guidance and love throughout his life walked away slowly and headed toward his room. Sam was concerned that Jarod's steps seemed to be slower these days.

Sadly, Sam turned to walk toward his mother's bedroom. He opened the door slowly in case she was resting. Stepping inside quietly, he carefully closed the door behind him. As he made his way toward her bed he saw that she was awake and looking out the windows that graced the wall to the left of her bed.

"What a beautiful sky," she barely whispered, almost to herself.

"I knew you would like it," he told her

as he sat down beside her on the bed. "These are for you." He took the small bouquet of carnations and placed them in the filled water glass that sat on the bedside table.

Joanna turned to look at the flowers and then returned her gaze to her son. How kind and caring he was. He had always been that way. Despite him being only twenty-five years old, he was more mature than most men she knew. Her face radiated with love as she gazed up at him. She smiled and reached out to touch his hand gently.

"Thank you, honey," she told him, her voice a little stronger from her recent nap. "You always knew that I liked carnations better than roses."

“How’re you feeling, Mom?” he asked her, running the pad of his thumb across her knuckles as he held her hand gently.

“A little tired,” she admitted. “But I had such a nice day. I had a business meeting early this morning. Jarod had lunch with me and stayed with me until Rachel came to visit this afternoon. Now you’re here and the sky is beautiful. What more can I ask for?”

As she smiled up at him, Sam felt a squeeze around his heart. “Mom,” he began hesitantly.

“Don’t worry, Sam,” she stopped him. “You and I both know how we feel about each other. We will never regret not having said something to each other.

I am so proud of you, and I love you more than life itself. You always knew that. Always remember it.”

Sam looked at her and smiled. She was right. Nothing had to be said.

“I love you, Mom,” he said finally.

She smiled and squeezed his hand. He saw her reach under her sheets and pull out a wrapped box with effort. He reached out to help her and she let go of it thankfully as his strength took the burden of the weight of the package.

“This is for you from Rachel,” she told him. “Open it. I want to be nosy.”

She smiled up at him as he tore the paper off the box. Inside it was an envelope attached to another wrapped box. He opened the envelope and read

the note quickly. He smiled and looked at his mother.

“Dear Sam, I’m giving this action figure to you so you’ll never forget to do what you’re meant to do. Stay strong and go for your dreams. Love, Rachel.” His voice was clear and strong as he read the note to his mother. He put the note aside then lifted the package, smiling with excitement at the unexpected gift.

He opened the package and grinned as he looked down at the action figure. He felt a rush of emotion and his grip tightened on the item as he looked through the clear plastic cover to the character encased within. He got a little choked up when he realized who it was.

When he looked up at his mother, he could see that she was confused.

“It’s an action figure from *Star Trek*,” he explained, smiling. “The character’s name is Dr. McCoy.”

Joanna smiled and touched his hand gently. “You listen to her, honey. She’s a smart girl.” She squeezed Sam’s hand and closed her eyes for a moment. She was so incredibly tired.

“Mom, are you okay?” he asked her quietly.

She nodded but didn’t open her eyes. She needed to rest for a minute. Sam sat patiently beside her, holding her hand and allowing her to take as much time as she needed to rest. She fell asleep briefly, and he realized with alarm how

quickly her strength was waning. He watched her silently for a moment then stood with as little noise as possible. He was about to leave when she awoke with a start.

“Sam!” she called out to him quickly.

“I’m here,” he said, taking her hand in his once again and sitting down beside her carefully.

“Sam, get the large manila envelope from the drawer,” she told him, pointing to the deep cherry end table where he had just placed the bouquet of carnations.

Sam did as she told him and reached out to open the drawer. He saw the large envelope, pulled it from its resting

place, and handed it to her.

“Sam, this is very important,” she told him, almost crazed with concern. “Inside this envelope are legal documents that are important for you to have. When the time is right, bring them to Frank Niemen. He’ll know what to do.”

“Mom, don’t worry about this,” Sam said calmly, trying to ease her worries.

“No, Sam,” she told him sternly, grabbing his wrist to force him to face her. “This *is* important. I need you to do this. Frank and Jarod will help you. Roy and Rachel and Kay will be there for you, too. Never forget that. They’re good friends, Sam. Don’t ever lose any of them.”

“I won’t, Mom,” Sam promised her

quietly, covering her hand with his own.

“I gave Rachel my pendant,” she told him after a moment, searching his face to see if he really realized the importance of that gift.

“I’m glad,” Sam told his mom sincerely. “I would have given it to her, too.”

“Don’t let Edwin take it from her. It was mine to give, and I want her to keep it.”

Sam nodded, realizing with a sick feeling that his mother was passing on one of her most precious possessions. There was a deep sadness in the way she was looking up at him. He didn’t want to think about why.

“I’ll make sure that it stays with her,” Sam promised.

“Sam, go to your room and put those documents in your wall safe. Then come back here and we’ll talk some more,” she told him quietly.

“I’ll put them away later,” Sam said, putting the envelope beside him on the bed.

“No, Sam,” she insisted. “Do it now. It’s important that they’re in your safe.” Her voice was urgent, almost pleading as the panic rose within her.

Sam reached forward to touch her hand gently, concerned that their conversation was too much for her. “Okay, Mom,” he agreed calmly. “I’ll

put them away right now. Rest while I'm gone, and we'll talk when I get back."

He leaned forward and kissed his mother's cheek. She reached up to hug him to her.

"I love you, baby boy," she told him quietly.

"I love you, Mom," he told her, smiling down at her. "I'll be right back."

She let go of him and he stood, leaning forward to pick up the present and envelope that Rachel had given him then turned to leave his mother's room. He carried them and the large manila envelope that his mother had given him to his room. He didn't know why his mother was so concerned that he have it and insisted that he tuck it safely away in

his safe, but he would do as she asked. He left the door to his mother's suite open and walked down the hallway toward his bedroom.

He opened the door to his room and saw that Jarod had already turned down the covers of his bed. He walked to the far left wall and swung back the painting of the lavender and pink sunset that his mother had painted as a child to reveal the wall safe behind it. He spun the dial quickly to the combination that only he possessed and turned the handle to open it smoothly. He placed the manila envelope inside of it and, for some reason, placed Rachel's gift and note in it as well. He closed the heavy safe

door, spun the combination, and swung the painting back in place. He felt better somehow now that both the envelope and the present were protected.

Turning, he walked out of his room and headed back to his mother's room. When he entered, her face was once again turned toward her windows. As he stepped closer he could see that the sky had morphed into a beautiful pink and blue swirl.

“Nice night isn’t it, Mom?” he asked, smiling as he stepped closer to his mother and sat down on her bed. “I bet you could paint that sky. You’d do a good job, too.”

He froze in his spot as he saw that her eyes were closed and she wasn’t

moving.

“Mom?” he whispered, the breath catching in his throat as he looked down at her still form.

He reached up to feel for the pulse in her neck. There was none. She was gone. He remained still for the briefest of moments as the realization of her passing settled deep within his heart. As he looked down at her delicate beauty, he sadly realized that she finally looked at peace. He was glad her life had slipped away as she had been looking at the beautiful Colorado sky. He couldn't ask for a better way for her to pass.

Everything in him broke at that moment. He leaned forward, wrapped

his arms around his mother and pulled her up into his tender embrace. He hugged her tightly to him, rocking back and forth as the tears came. He did not, could not, stop the heart-wrenching sobs that escaped him as he held her.

He didn't know how long he cried. The twilight had turned to night when he became aware again. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. He turned to find Jarod standing beside him.

"She's gone, Jarod," he told him in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

"I know," Jarod answered. His own eyes were filled with tears as he stood beside the bed. He looked down at the woman before him and a part of him died with her passing. There was no

beauty in this house any longer.

Very slowly, Sam lowered his mother's body back against the stark white satin bedding, smoothing her graying hair back from her forehead and gently wiping the tears from her delicate face, not sure if they were hers or his.

He reached out to hold Jarod's hand, relieved to feel the gentle pressure of the elder man's hand as he squeezed it to let Sam know that he shared in his pain and supported him in his loss. He was thankful for the man who had given both him and his mother such gentle friendship and love over the years.

They remained at Joanna's bedside for a very long time—each dealing with

their own grief and remembering the gentle and kind woman who had shown both of them nothing but acceptance and love.

* * * *

The funeral was just as Joanna McCoy had predicted. Ostentatious. A tasteless social opportunity for the rich and famous. Edwin McCoy reveled in the attention. Rachel watched from a discreet distance, standing beside her cousin and her aunt. Her heart broke for Sam as he stood stoically beside the grave site.

The marble white coffin was covered by a blanket of white roses. It was

difficult for Sam to see anything but the antiseptic sterility of the whiteness, causing his heart to pain him at the thought of the lack of comfort and love his mother had lived with. The one splash of color that invaded the bleakness was the single arrangement of pink carnations that he had placed at the head of the coffin.

Rachel struggled to hold herself together as she saw the raw pain on Sam's face despite his efforts to hide it. The white sling holding his arm to prevent further injury to his shoulder was a stark contrast to the formal black suit that he wore. He looked like he wanted to bolt. She couldn't blame him.

It felt as if the time at the grave site was endless. She knew it was a test of control and stamina for Sam. Rachel wanted to take him in her arms and hold him tightly within the blanket of her love.

When everyone left the burial site, Rachel, Roy, and Roy's mother Kay Monroe were the last to leave. The three of them ached to surround Sam with their caring, but they knew that Sam's father would not appreciate what he would consider to be their interference in his plans for the day. Instead, they followed quietly, joining the procession of cars back to the McCoy estate.

Inside the McCoy home there were at least one hundred people waiting to have

their two minutes with Edwin McCoy. Rachel was disgusted by the lack of compassion that the people around her showed. She stayed in the sitting room, tucked away from the rest of the crowd, sitting quietly in the middle of an elegant settee that was placed at the right corner of the room. Roy sat on one side of her and her Aunt Kay sat on the other. Jarod stood silently behind them, often stepping closer to the group when he saw any member of the socially elite group gathered there looking at the trio with contempt. It was only when they spotted Sam walking toward them that the three of them felt like they should be there. They stood to face him, their

hearts aching at the blank expression on his face.

Sam hugged each one of them and thanked them for coming. It was as if he was on autopilot. Rachel knew it was the only way he could get through the day, but it felt wrong on so many levels.

Sam led the way out to the front veranda and the four who were his real family followed silently. Kay reached out to hold his hand as she stood by his right side, Jarod at her side as always. Rachel stood before him, and Roy stood to his left. They were a shield around him. He felt it. He was comforted by it.

“My father wants me to stay here to take over some of the business responsibilities,” he told them quietly,

looking out toward the many expensive cars and limousines that lined the driveway.

“Sam, don’t,” Roy told him, concerned. “What about school?”

Kay squeezed his hand tightly, drawing his attention back to her. Sam looked down at the petite woman, smiling sadly into the gentle warmth of her brown eyes. The dark brown hair lightly streaked with gray framed her beautiful face, her gentle smile gifting him with the love and the peace that he always felt whenever he was around her.

“You have to finish school,” Kay told him sternly. She let go of his hand reluctantly to search for the tissue she

had tucked up her sleeve and angrily wiped at her eyes.

“Sam,” Rachel said quietly, drawing his attention. “Your mother told me to tell you to never give up your dream. She knew that you wanted to finish medical school. She also knew your father would try to influence you to stay. She made me promise to tell you not to let him prevent you from doing what you were meant to do.”

Sam looked directly at Rachel and smiled. He couldn't help the tear that escaped his right eye and did nothing to hide it or brush it away. He reached out instead to gently wipe away the tears that soaked Rachel's cheeks with his right hand, gently caressing the tiny

crescent moon at the corner of her eye before straightening and closing his eyes briefly as he took a cleansing breath.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” Sam said finally so that only they heard him. His voice was void of emotion, but Rachel could feel the pain that engulfed him.

“Where’re you going?” Kay asked the young man who was her second son. She reached out to hold his hand briefly.

Sam squeezed it quickly then let go, unable to accept her gentle kindness and break his resolve to stay in control during the rest of this painful day. He was determined to remain strong.

Kay understood and stepped back to stand beside Jarod. Instinct made her

lean closer toward her lifelong friend, and she found herself taking the butler's hand within her own. She couldn't help but seek out the support he was always willing to give her. She felt as if they were the two who had raised this outstanding young man and were feeling his pain as any parent would.

Jarod held her hand gently, standing closer to her so that their arms touched. Their gentle friendship over the past twenty years had helped Sam as he had grown up, and Jarod knew they would help him get through this difficult time, too.

"I'm leaving in the morning to go back to medical school," Sam told them finally. "I can't be here with him."

No one questioned or commented. There was nothing to say. Rachel breathed a sigh of relief that Joanna McCoy's last request was being honored. She had wanted her son to go for his dream. She had wanted Sam to be happy. Only being away from his father would allow either of those things to happen. Rachel was going to honor her promise to Joanna to help Sam with those dreams. She had no choice. It was what she had to do for the man that she loved.

Joanna McCoy had said that Sam would someday realize Rachel's worth. She had said that Rachel was a jewel that Sam would recognize and cherish.

Rachel didn't know if that would ever happen, but she was determined that Sam had every opportunity to find his own happiness.

She looked at the man who was her friend and had to push back her tears. Her heart broke for him. Her heart ached for him. She knew she would never find a better person or a better friend. Maybe someday it would turn into something more. She could only hope.

* * * *

Rachel found herself heading toward the McCoy estate before the sun was even up the next morning. If Sam was going to leave, she was going to say

good-bye and wish him well. She had promised Joanna McCoy that she would be there for her son, and she was determined that she would keep her promise.

She wasn't lying to herself. She knew she was there because she loved Sam. Joanna McCoy's wish for their future together was her secret wish as well. But it would have to remain just that—a secret. Sam needed her as a friend, not a burden to have to figure out how to fit into his life. Besides, she was the younger cousin of his best friend. That's as far as the relationship would ever go. She wasn't kidding herself that it was any more than that despite her secret

fantasies that it would be more.

The light of an overhead chandelier in the alcove above the front door went on, flooding the darkness with light and drawing Rachel out of her thoughts. The door opened and she saw a tall figure standing before her. Her heart did a flip as she thought she saw Sam looking out at her, but her joy turned to coldness when she realized that it was Sam's father. He was similar to Sam in stature but that's where the similarity ended.

"Come here, Ms. Williams," he called out to her with his deep, commanding voice.

She did as he demanded, as everyone did when they had any dealings with Edwin McCoy. He stepped back to

allow her entrance into his house. She had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach, but she maneuvered herself with effort until she was standing in the hallway.

“Follow me,” he said gruffly, leading the way to his study.

Rachel followed, glad that her crutches made the trip a slow one. The feeling in her gut worsened with each awkward step that she made, but she followed anyway. When they walked into the study, he stood aside until she entered then closed the door firmly behind them. He turned to face her, causing her to back up a step out of pure instinct for self-preservation.

“Ms. Williams, I am only going to say this to you once,” he told her quietly, the tone of his voice deceptively calm. “You are to break off all future dealings with my son. If you try to influence my son in any way, it will be Sam who will suffer. I will cut him off without a penny. He will not work for me. He will not continue medical school on my dime. Even if he is able to secure financial loans and aid, I will see to it that no school in this country will take him in. He will not become a doctor.”

“Why?” Rachel asked in horror. “How can you destroy your son’s future?” Her words were spoken in a voice that was barely a whisper. She was disgusted at

his total lack of concern for his own child.

“My son’s future is what I determine it will be,” Edwin McCoy told her evenly, his cold eyes leveling her with his stare. “He will work within my business for the year. At the end of that year I will decide if he will be allowed to continue with medical school. If I decide to allow him to do so, he will work at the hospital of my choosing upon completion of his schooling. He will marry a girl that I deem fit for his place in society. He will not end up a country doctor working for chickens, married to a girl like you who does not befit my son’s station in life.”

Rachel stared up at him, her disgust

making her unable to form any words. Edwin McCoy just looked at her silently. There was no emotion in him as he faced Rachel. Rachel felt all the anger rushing to her chest, nearly making her explode. She knew her face had to be mirroring her anger.

“Mr. McCoy,” she finally said quietly, facing him squarely, “I have always tried to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I was wrong. I have to say, you’ve shocked me with how much you’re willing to hurt Sam.” She stood facing him with contempt and loathing evident in her eyes. “You won’t be able to use me to destroy your son.”

Edwin McCoy looked at her with

something very close to boredom. That irritated Rachel more than anything. She turned to leave, determined not to give this man any more of her time or attention. He watched her silently, not moving to stop her.

“Ms. Williams,” he said quietly. “You’d be surprised just how much I am willing to do to have my son follow the path in life that I have chosen for him.”

Rachel stopped and turned to look back at him. He hadn’t moved and was looking at her calmly with his hands casually placed inside the pockets of the black silk robe that he was wearing.

“Are you really willing to risk Sam’s future, and the future of Roy Monroe and the Monroe Ranch?” he asked her

evenly.

“You keep my family out of this,” she warned him, her voice strong and under control despite her fear.

“That’s entirely up to you, Ms. Williams,” he told her calmly. “Just understand that I only need to make one phone call to purchase the mortgage to the Monroe Ranch. Your aunt will be tied up in financial difficulties immediately since I plan to call for the full payment of the loan. That would sufficiently prevent your cousin from finishing college. Even if he is able to procure loans to finish his last year of schooling, he won’t be able to find work anywhere in this state.”

Rachel just stared at him, unable to speak. She wanted to scream at him that Sam had his own choices to make. She wanted to hit him. She wanted to tell him what a poor excuse of a father he was. But a sudden realization overcame her. Edwin McCoy had money. That meant he had power. He had the control in this situation. She did not.

The decision she made right then would determine the fate of two families. She would not be the reason for the ruination of Sam's career and the certain destruction of her cousin and aunt. She knew of the power that Edwin McCoy uncaringly wielded. She knew how far his influence stretched.

Rachel faced him directly, trying desperately to hide what she was feeling. Her heart was pounding. She was sure that he was able to hear it in the deafening silence of the room. There was no doubt in her mind that Edwin McCoy would follow through on his threats against her family and Sam. Rachel looked at the man before her, knowing there was only one choice open to her in order to keep everyone that she loved safe.

“I’ll keep clear of your son,” she told him calmly. “You keep clear of my family and Sam’s dream.”

She reached forward and pulled open the study door. She was glad that she

hadn't cried. As much as she wanted to, her anger and disgust toward this man made her more determined not to let him see any weakness. She made her way to the front door as fast as her crutches would take her.

She had made a promise to Joanna McCoy to be there for Sam. But she also knew that the only way to protect Sam and be there for him as she had promised, was to never see him again. As she walked slowly toward her car, her heart ached for the love that she would never know with the only man she could ever love.

Chapter 2

Present Day

Rachel Williams walked confidently out of Grand Central Station and headed out to join the throng of people that walked the busy streets of New York City. She wore denim shorts and a red T-shirt that showed off her feminine figure. She carried herself with confidence as she hailed a cab and reached forward to open the rear door as it cruised to a stop beside her.

“Plaza Hotel,” she told the cab driver quickly, settling her garment bag, briefcase, and overnight suitcase beside

her. She leaned back against the seat and looked out into the busy traffic.

It was a quick ride to the elegant hotel. The doorman opened the cab door and stood back to allow her to exit the cab, quickly beckoning to the staff that waited behind him. The bellhop reached out to take the luggage from her and stood aside so the door could be opened for her. The efficient staff ushered her inside to register with an ease that spoke of years of outstanding service. The front desk clerk smiled in recognition as she approached the white marble counter of the front desk.

“Good afternoon, Miss Williams,” she welcomed her warmly, always glad to see the friendly woman before her.

“Hello, Carol,” Rachel greeted her.
“Nice to see you again.”

“Hope your stay is a pleasant one,” Carol told her sincerely as Rachel signed the papers before her.

“Thanks, Carol,” she said happily, taking the card key from her. “Have a good one.”

Rachel passed through the hotel lobby, feeling at once spoiled and unused to the luxury of the exquisitely beautiful marble surroundings and crystal chandeliers. Despite her successful writing career and financial situation, she was still the basic country girl that had spent her childhood in the mountains of Colorado with her cousin and aunt.

By the time she made her way to her room on the fifteenth floor, her mind was already filling with memories of her time spent with her Aunt Kay, Roy, Jarod, and Sam. She swiped her card key and opened the door, closing it behind her and flipping the extra security lock into place. She threw her purse and card key onto the rich cherry credenza then sat down on the elegant rose brocade coverlet on the decadent bed. She lay down on the softness and sighed, tired from her trip from Connecticut.

After allowing herself the luxury of doing absolutely nothing for a few minutes, she stood up and reached for her bags that had already been placed in

her room. She unzipped the garment bag and carefully removed the delicate dress that was inside it. She hung it up quickly and turned to open her overnight bag. She looked at her watch and saw that it was still early enough for her to take some time to rest before she had to get ready for her night out. Setting the alarm on her phone, she placed it on the bedside table to make sure she wouldn't oversleep and miss her date.

Settling beneath the soft covers, she turned onto her side and cuddled into the warmth of the sheets. It was cool in the room with the air conditioning unit on, but she liked to sleep with the room cooler. Closing her eyes, she sighed tiredly. She concentrated on the sound of

her breathing and willed herself to relax. When she scented the cinnamon and sugar fragrance, she smiled at its familiarity. That scent always made her happy. It also always preceded a really nice dream.

She calmed immediately and settled. It wasn't long before she drifted off into a restful sleep. The scent intensified and she breathed deeply to inhale the comforting presence that wrapped her in warmth.

The sweet angel Bernadette smiled down at the kind woman who had been close to her heart since she had been born. Rachel was a wonderful person. Bernadette ached for the loneliness and

the cruelty that her sweet baby had experienced. Well, it was time to make things better for her little girl.

She laughed softly as Rachel took a deep breath and sighed contentedly. She loved that she had such an effect on her. Over the years, Bernadette had visited Rachel often as she slept. She sent her beautiful dreams that helped her when she was sad, but sometimes her dreams weren't enough. Rachel ached with the loss of the one man she had sacrificed so much for in order to protect both him and her family.

Sam McCoy was her destined mate. Bernadette knew the goodness of the man. She also knew how he had suffered without Rachel by his side over the

years. This had to be remedied. Her little baby girl was all grown up. Her beautiful Rachel needed to find the love and the happiness that she was destined to experience with Sam.

Leaning forward, she kissed the crescent moon birthmark that graced the corner of Rachel's right eye. She giggled sweetly as Rachel smiled and released a sigh of contentment.

"Sleep, my sweet Rachel," Bernadette whispered to her. "Dream about the man who awaits you to give you the life of love that you deserve. It is your destiny."

Rachel smiled as Bernadette's words settled deep within her soul. She sighed, drawing in the comforting scent once

again and allowing it to release her worries and tensions. It was only a matter of moments before she was dreaming.

She was lying in her bed. She could feel the hard body of a man behind her as he held her against his chest. The gentle way he held her told her that he was asleep. She turned carefully to face him and smiled at the way his black hair curled over his forehead and his face was rough with scruff. He was sexy, gorgeous, and all hers.

“Are you staring at me again, baby?” he asked as he smiled, his eyes still closed.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Can’t help it.

I love looking at you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I love looking at you, too, baby,” he whispered, opening his eyes slowly and blinking to clear his vision.

Rachel laughed softly as she leaned forward and kissed his lips lightly.

“Love you,” she whispered against his mouth.

His responding growl made her laugh. When he tightened his hold on her and pulled her up onto his body so that she lay draped across him, she gasped and tried to push out of his arms.

“No, Sam. I’ll crush you,” she

protested.

He laughed as he held her firmly against his chest. "Baby, there's no way you could crush me," he told her. "You have a really skewed perception of your body."

"I do not," Rachel protested. "I know exactly what I look like and how heavy I am."

Sam reached up and framed her face with his hands to hold her steady. "Rachel, you look beautiful. You're not heavy. You're perfect."

"My belly is getting big," Rachel said quietly.

"Yeah. It is," Sam admitted, grinning up at her. "I couldn't be happier about it."

Their baby took that moment to move within her, making both of them smile. It was the merest of flutters, but it was there and they had both felt it. The fluttering stopped and Sam's smile couldn't get any wider.

"Do you know how happy I am that our baby is growing inside of you, Rachel?" he asked quietly.

"I think I do," Rachel whispered, leaning forward and cuddling against his neck, kissing it lightly. "You did a good job making our baby."

"Did I?" he asked, laughing softly.

"Yup. And I think you should show me again and again how you did that."

Sam growled softly as Rachel

reached between them and took firm hold of his hard cock to pull up on it carefully. He moved his hips slightly to give her more room to play.

“I think someone needs to be loved,” he whispered, running his hands down her back and palming her behind to press her closer against his hard shaft.

Rachel moaned softly, spreading her legs as she straddled his waist. Easing herself up just slightly, she tipped the head of his cock toward her welcoming channel and held him securely as she lowered herself down onto him. His responding moan of pleasure made her smile.

When she was fully seated, she passed her fingertips around his shaft

to feel how snugly he filled her body. She loved to touch the hardness of him as he stretched her. Passing her fingers across her clit, she gasped at the zing of pleasure that raced through her.

“Touching your sweet button, honey?” he asked her, smiling up at her, his beautiful blue eyes sparkling with enjoyment.

“Yes,” she hissed, gathering more of her wetness to ease her strokes across her engorged clit.

He watched her touch herself, his cock jerking within her at the erotic sight of it. His hand joined hers, his thumb gathering her cream and pressing against her bud in tandem

with her fingers. In a matter of seconds, she opened her mouth on a silent scream as her orgasm burst through her. He groaned as her sweet body clenched down around his cock.

Sitting up quickly, he wrapped his arms around her back and flipped them so that she lay open and panting below him. He pulled out of her and looked down at the slick pinkness of her.

“Who do you belong to?” he asked, his voice deep and demanding.

“You, Sam,” she said softly.

“Who does this sweet pussy belong to?” he demanded, slipping his first two fingers deep inside of her and pressing in at just the right angle to graze her G-spot repeatedly.

Rachel gasped, her hips lifting up as a second orgasm shot through her. "Sam," she moaned.

"Who does this sweet pussy belong to, Rachel?" he repeated, removing his hand and taking hold of his shaft to hold it at her entrance.

"You, Sam," Rachel said gently as she fought for breath. "I love you."

Sam slid deep inside of her in one smooth thrust, holding himself still as her vaginal walls pulsed around him. Leaning forward, he covered her body with his and began a gentle rhythm of thrust and retreat as he kissed her shoulders and her neck.

"I love you, Rachel," he whispered

against her ear before he kissed her temple lightly. "You belong to me."

"We belong to each other," Rachel corrected him, smiling when she heard him chuckle.

"Yeah, baby. We do."

Rachel moaned as her orgasm raced through her body. She opened her eyes and fought to make sense of her dream. After all these years, she still dreamed about Sam. She dreamed about him constantly. It was really starting to make her crazy. What frustrated her the most was that she knew that nothing she ever dreamed was even remotely possible.

Even though every dream was gentle, loving, and fun, she wished she wouldn't

dream them anymore. No matter who she dated, no matter how she tried to begin serious relationships with men, nothing ever came close to how she felt about Sam McCoy.

“I don’t want to dream about him,” she said out loud.

Climbing out of bed, she walked toward the bathroom on shaky legs. Geez! If Sam could make her come that hard in her dreams, he would be lethal if he did it for real. She laughed at the absurdity of her thoughts. She looked at her watch and saw that she had better get ready for her date.

When she left the hotel one hour later, she had transformed herself from the

casual country girl to the sophisticated woman that turned heads as she walked through the front doors of the hotel and waited for a cab to be hailed for her. She thanked the doorman and stepped forward to enter the cab and settled back with her purse on her lap as the door was shut behind her.

She leaned forward to tell the driver the address of Richard Damian, her date for the night, then sat back to enjoy the ride to his apartment. She was looking forward to spending time with Richard and having dinner with him at the exclusive restaurant *River Cafe*.

She had met Richard at a corner bagel shop during one of her trips into New York City to meet with her agent Nancy

who had become a good friend over the years. The smell of the freshly baked bagels must have relaxed her and lowered her guard because she had found herself being swept away by his charm and enthusiasm. Before she knew it, she was meeting him for dinners and taking rides through Central Park in handsome cabs. During the past few months they had met often, and she had found that she had become quite fond of him. His promises to give her the earth, the moon, and the stars had certainly set her head spinning and her heart fluttering.

Despite the ten years that had passed since she had left Colorado, the memory

of a certain man still haunted her. Her time away at college and her determination to create a new life for herself had done little to erase her memories of the choices she had been forced to make. Every man she met was measured against Sam's kindness, his humor, his strength, and his caring. And each man fell miles short in comparison.

Being alone so much to write her novels had distanced her from the single social scene. Richard Damian's presence reminded her that she really did long for the enjoyment of a man paying attention to her and giving her warmth and affection. Hiding away in her home in Connecticut didn't disguise the fact that she really did long to be a

part of a supportive relationship that would confirm that she was a woman that a man could like and enjoy.

Richard's handsome face lit up with a smile when he spotted her as the cab pulled up to his apartment building. He opened the door and climbed in to sit beside her with an ease of motion and strength of body that spoke of years of physical training. He leaned forward to kiss her lips quickly.

"Right on time as always," he told her, reaching for her hand and grasping it tightly.

Rachel only smiled at his comment. "You look nice," she told him finally.

"Thanks," he answered, looking out

the window at the tangle of traffic. “Let’s hope we can get there in time. You probably should have come earlier so we wouldn’t be cutting it so close.”

His words were mumbled to himself, but Rachel was able to hear them. She knew a moment of annoyance at his chastisement and had to take a calming breath. She was determined not to allow her tiredness to spark her anger and ruin their night. Richard was probably right. She should have left earlier to go to his apartment.

The night was warm and a cool breeze was blowing across the river. The lights of the Brooklyn Bridge twinkled against the soft blues and pinks of the summer night sky. It was a beautiful evening. The

weather and the location made the evening perfect for the romantic night she hoped was in store for her. She looked across the seat of the taxi and smiled as she faced the silent man beside her.

Richard Damian was handsome and smart. He had a casualness about him that had helped to draw her to him. She felt special to be a part of his small circle of friends. He was so self-assured and so motivated that she couldn't help but admire him.

She had been somewhat surprised that he had shown any interest in her when they had met. She was not exactly the city type that he usually went for. She

was quiet, intelligent, usually a homebody, and extremely strong-willed. She was not at all the sophisticated, blasé type that he seemed to like to date. They were total opposites. Where he was glib and had street savvy, she was sensitive and family oriented. They were the last two people in the world that would make an obvious couple, but he made her feel as if she were the most important woman in the world and that he wanted only her. The very things that were so different about them were the precise reasons he told her that he enjoyed being with her so much.

Her years away at college and the time she had spent honing her writing skills had made her independent and very

much a loner. Her days of carefree exploring had disappeared the day she had left the McCoy estate so many years before. She had made choices for the good of her family and friends, and she had stuck by them over the years. She would do anything to protect her Aunt Kay and her cousin Roy.

They had been her family from the time she had been five years old. After her father had died there was no one but his sister Kay to raise Rachel since her mother had died shortly after her birth. She knew no other mother, and no other brother, even though they were aunt and cousin. They were her lifeline. They were her heart. They deserved the best,

and she could never, would never, jeopardize their lives, their safety, or their happiness in any way.

She had gone home to visit her cousin and aunt at their ranch during summer breaks from college but was always careful that her weeks there did not coincide with Sam's breaks from medical school. Her letters and phone calls to her cousin and aunt were as frequent as her schedule allowed, but she always made sure to keep them brief, with only a casual mention that she hoped that all was well with Sam. She was sure never to ask them to mention her to him, and had kept her distance from him. Sam had written to her at college a few times over the years and

Rachel had answered only sporadically, always telling him how her life was busy and that she was glad for the time away from her aunt's ranch.

Eventually, the letters from Sam grew fewer and with longer gaps between them. Now only Roy was the common ground that kept each of them up to date with the other's lives. It was through Roy that she knew how well he did in medical school and how exhausted he was through his residency. She also knew that Sam often spent a few weeks each summer at the Monroe Ranch. Now that he had completed his residency and was working at Denver Memorial Hospital, she was relieved that at least

one of the threats that Edwin McCoy had made could not be wielded. She willingly gave up her dreams to be with Sam in order to protect his future, but the time she had lost in having a deep friendship with him over the years was what she regretted the most.

Roy had told her that Sam had become engaged to a woman who belonged to the elite society of Denver. Rachel was glad for him. She wished him only happiness, but she was honest enough to admit to herself that she also felt an overwhelming sense of sadness and loss. As much as she wished things could have turned out differently, they hadn't. Agonizing over what could have been was useless and would only cause her

more unnecessary pain. If only the damned dreams would stop. They served no purpose except to make her constantly aware of the man she would never have, and the love she would never realize. Even though Roy had told her that Sam had recently broken up with his fiancée, Rachel still had to keep her distance. Her Aunt Kay was still in jeopardy of being hurt by Edwin McCoy's threat.

"We're almost there," Richard's sensuous voice interrupted her thoughts. "I hope you like the restaurant. I want you to have a nice time."

Rachel smiled as she looked into his hazel eyes. "I'm sure everything will be great," she told him quietly, unable to

keep the warmth from her eyes as she looked at him. Despite her lapse into the past and the sad memories it provoked, she was happy to be with Richard right now.

“I want it to be better than great,” he insisted, reaching out to cover her hand with his own and squeezing it tightly. “I have a special night planned for you.”

“It’s already special,” Rachel told him quietly, pushing away the sadness that had clouded her mood.

Richard smiled at her and leaned toward her to place a gentle kiss on her forehead. When she looked up at him, he kissed her lips slowly, moving his mouth across hers seductively as his hand reached up to cover her left breast and

fondle it boldly. Rachel reached up quickly and pulled his hand away with some effort then looked up to see if the cab driver had seen Richard's indiscretion. She couldn't help but get flustered at his boldness and was a little uncomfortable with how much he took for granted when he touched her.

"Please, Richard," she whispered as quietly as she could as she held on to his hand to keep it from roaming further.

Richard looked down at her and smiled. "Always the shy one," he teased. "All right, I promise. No more touching until we get back to my apartment."

He leaned forward to kiss her lips quickly then sat back in the seat, his left

hand resting on her knee and stroking the length of her thigh. As the taxi made its way to the cobblestone road leading to the barge that housed the *River Cafe*, Rachel found herself unable to truly enjoy the breathtaking sight before her. The taxi entered the semi-circled driveway and stopped before the gangplank that led to the popular restaurant.

Richard paid the cabby and opened the cab door. Stepping out and turning to reach for Rachel's hand, he pulled her from the taxi. She stepped out carefully and removed her hand from his to straighten her dress and adjust her purse. The feeling of claustrophobia left her as she exited the cab, and she was glad to

feel the cool night breeze against her face as she looked around to take in the romantic surroundings. She smiled as she looked up at the lit archways in front of her. She felt as if she were entering a magical place—a place that promised its patrons a night of enchantment.

Richard took her hand in his and led the way up the gangplank. Rachel followed, tucking her purse under her arm and looking out across the East River to the Manhattan skyline as she walked. It was beautiful. It was a view that she could never forget or take for granted because it meant so much to her. New York City had changed her from an aspiring writer to a successful novelist

with endless potential.

Tonight she felt special and pretty. She looked both seductive and elegant in the peach chiffon dress that bared one shoulder. She loved the softness of the dress as it swirled around her knees. She especially loved how feminine it made her feel. The gold chain that she wore sparkled under the twinkling lights, and she touched it absentmindedly as she often did to ensure that the treasure was safely tucked away inside the angled neckline of her dress. She never removed the gift that Joanna McCoy had given her.

Delicate, gold high-heeled sandals and a petite gold purse completed her outfit, making her feel beautiful and special.

She took a deep breath and sighed with happiness at the excitement of their night out and couldn't help but smile as Richard tugged at her hand with impatience to lead the way up the gangplank.

She watched him silently as he held himself so proudly and announced his name to the maître d'. She admired his tailored black suit. It perfectly complemented his slender physique, accented his tanned blondness, and exemplified his attention to style.

Once their reservations were confirmed, she followed him into the dining room and sat facing the wall of windows that displayed the South Street

Seaport. She sat in the wicker chair offered to her and waited silently as Richard ordered a bottle of *Cristal* in a no-nonsense tone of voice.

“Sounds like you’re ready to celebrate,” Rachel teased him. “Can you afford a bottle of *Cristal*?”

Richard smiled across at her and reached out to take her hand in his. “No, but you can,” he told her quietly, smiling slightly and winking playfully as he spoke.

Rachel hesitated briefly then smiled back at him. She didn’t know what to say. She supposed she shouldn’t say anything. She removed her hand from his, picked up her menu and looked down at it to avert her eyes from his.

Her throat had suddenly turned very dry, and she couldn't quite focus on the menu before her.

"I'll order for us," Richard told her, smiling, unaware of the turmoil that he was causing.

Rachel nodded slightly, all previous excitement for the evening dampened by the sudden feeling of suffocation that she felt. She sat back in her seat and viewed Richard coolly. Other memories of previous evenings out suddenly came to mind. He always seemed to be short on cash or would often remind her that she had plenty of money and should be helping him out.

Joanna McCoy's advice echoed in her

head, reminding her to keep her dignity and demand respect. Those strong memories of a time not so long ago with people who cared about her made her straighten her spine and gain her composure. Once again, her thoughts turned to her memories of Joanna McCoy, her Aunt Kay, Roy, and Sam. As always, the memories were bittersweet.

She had to mentally shake herself. With effort, she put aside her thoughts so that she could try to get through the evening and be realistic about her relationship with Richard. She sadly admitted to herself that it had been a relationship that was based purely on her own fantasy—her fantasy of finding someone to share her life with.

She watched Richard silently as he took great joy in ordering their meal from appetizer and salad to entrée and dessert. It was a beautiful and exclusive restaurant, and she knew from experience that the food was going to be cooked to perfection and cost a small fortune.

“To your writing success,” he told her, holding up his fluted glass of sparkling *Cristal*. “And to mine.” Those added words were spoken low and were accompanied by a tight smile.

Rachel raised her glass to him and sipped the champagne carefully. For an intelligent woman it certainly took her long enough to realize the truth about

what Richard felt for her. At least now she knew what Richard really wanted. And it wasn't her.

"Have some more," Richard told her, picking up the flat bottle with the gold label and filling her glass. He reached forward to tip the end of her glass up as she brought it to her lips.

"No, Richard," Rachel protested, barely able to stop him from tipping the glass too far and spilling the expensive drink all over her. "I don't really want any more, thank you."

She looked across at him and saw the irritation that immediately crossed his face as he replaced the bottle in the elegant bucket beside their table. She saw his eyes flash with anger and found

that she was becoming more than impatient with him. It had taken her long enough, but she was now able to step back from the situation and assess it for what it was worth. She knew he was trying to make her feel guilty and find some reason to blame her for ruining his happy mood on this special night. He wasn't going to be successful.

She watched him silently for a moment. Richard's strikingly handsome face was consumed with anger. The chiseled, almost delicate features were attractive to every woman who looked at them. His complexion was perfectly tanned, his hair cropped short with lighter streaks to complement his own

blond hair. It was obvious that the tan and the highlights were from artificial enhancement, not the natural result of someone who spent his time outside to allow the sunshine to affect his coloring. Why didn't she realize that the man before her was the making of calculated determination?

The situation was awkward, but she was determined to evaluate it objectively. She knew that she would not be able to exit the restaurant without making a scene. She would have to make the best of it. She concentrated on the glass before her and took a cleansing breath. Any romantic thoughts she once had were unrealistic and would have to remain where they belonged—within her

own mind.

She finally realized and accepted that she and Richard could never have any permanent relationship. She really didn't know him very well. Until tonight she was content to be with him and enjoy the fantasy life that he had offered her. Now, as she thought back, she remembered dates that were romantic and fun, yet showed an anger and immaturity within him despite the fact that he was seven years her senior. She shook her head slowly and placed her glass before her on the table, silently wondering if any man ever truly reached full maturity.

Memories of Richard's past childish antics were suddenly racing forth in her

mind. She wondered why she had never realized it before. Could she have been that blind to the truth? Had she been so enamored with the thought of falling in love that she couldn't see the real man before her? Obviously so. How pathetic that she was so delusional. Goodness, she was thirty years old! What the hell was wrong with her? She had the sudden urge to slap herself for her stupidity.

Richard looked at her silently, anger still very obvious on his face. His eyes were deadly cold for a moment then softened slightly. He reached out to hold her hand, squeezing it tightly and leaning forward to whisper against the side of her face.

“You can make me feel better later,”

he told her seductively, licking her earlobe before leaning back and winking at her. He drank down the *Cristal* and once again reached out to lift the chilled bottle out of its bucket of ice to refill his glass.

The waiter came back with their appetizers, preventing Rachel from saying anything. She wanted to tell him off but decorum and good manners prevailed. She sat quietly, placed her napkin across her lap, and lifted her fork to her plate. The ravioli stuffed with lobster tasted like sawdust in her mouth, but she ate it mechanically.

She dined silently, watching as Richard drained one glass after another

of the expensive champagne. One bottle was replenished with another. With each glass, his attention toward her was becoming more amorous. It was becoming very difficult for her to even sit silently with him.

Despite the elegance of the meal, it felt like an eternity before it was over. Rachel wasn't quite sure how everything tasted. The food passed by her in a blur of plates. She could tell that Richard was thoroughly enjoying himself. As she watched him eat and drink, she finally admitted the truth to herself that she had always known but had kept at bay. Richard's own enjoyment was all that ever mattered to him. She was glad that she was able to accept it without any

emotional attachment.

“Sir,” the waiter said discreetly as he placed the bill contained in a leather wallet next to Richard’s right hand.

“The lady is treating tonight,” Richard said, smiling as he pushed the bill toward Rachel.

Rachel’s smile wavered slightly as she reached forward to open her purse and remove one of her bank cards. She placed it inside the leather wallet before her and looked up at the silent waiter.

“Thank you,” she said, nodding as he removed the bill.

Richard reached out and held her hand before she could put it back on her lap. He tugged at it slightly, drawing her

attention to his face.

“Thanks, Madame Author,” he whispered. “Now back to my place to continue the evening. I’m looking forward to it.”

Rachel smiled stiffly. She had to tell him that she was not going to his apartment, but she couldn’t do it in the restaurant. She took the pen from the returning waiter and signed the charge slip, writing in a generous tip, not really caring about the final dollar amount of it. It didn’t matter to her anyway. The money spent tonight was the least of her concerns. She looked at the man across from her and swore a silent vow to herself. It was a hard and expensive lesson learned. The value she had for

herself was more important than anything. She would not settle for Richard just to assure herself that she would not be alone.

Chapter 3

As they left the restaurant and waited for a cab, Richard put his arm around her and rubbed her shoulder, casually lowering his hand and touching the side of her breast as he held her. He looked down at her and smiled, his eyes glistening at the anticipation of the evening ahead of them. Rachel stepped back to remove herself from his embrace and turned away from him.

“I’m going to take my own cab back to my hotel,” Rachel told him quietly, gazing across the water to avoid looking at him. “I’m leaving early tomorrow morning to go home.”

Richard stared at her silently for a moment. “You can’t leave without saying good-bye,” he told her brightly. He reached out to embrace her once again and pulled her toward him roughly. “Just stay a little while longer. I promise I’ll make it worth your time.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Rachel insisted, stepping aside to wait for another cab.

He smiled at her, but said nothing. When he looked at her, Rachel felt the coldness of his stare and shivered despite the heat of the early July night. A cab pulled up alongside them. Richard leaned forward to open the door then took her arm and pushed her into the cab before she could stop him.

The shock of the sudden movement caught Rachel by surprise, and she stumbled to keep her balance as he propelled her into the waiting cab. She was stunned into a silence that Richard took full advantage of. He told the cabby his address and settled back in the seat to hold Rachel tightly against his side.

Panic was beginning to well up within Rachel's body. She felt as if her chest was covered with a weight of cement. She didn't want to go to Richard's apartment. She didn't want him touch her. She wished she could push away the sudden fear that was paralyzing her. She wanted to tell him to go to hell. But it was too late. He had firm hold of her

and the cab was already on its way. Her grip on her purse intensified as her panic and anger escalated.

“Richard, I told you, I’m not going to your apartment,” she told him angrily, trying not to cause a scene as she pushed him away from her in the back seat of the cab. She decided that she would just stay in the cab and tell the cabbie to take her back to her hotel after they dropped Richard off at his apartment. She was glad now that she hadn’t told him where she was staying in the City.

Anger boiled within her as they rode toward Richard’s apartment. It seemed as if they had barely climbed into the taxi when it pulled up before his apartment building. He opened the cab

door and turned toward her, smiling.

“We’re home,” he whispered, reaching into his breast pocket to take out his wallet to remove some cash before replacing it in his jacket.

“You’re home,” Rachel corrected him. “I’m going back to my hotel.” Her voice was firm as she spoke. She was determined that he would not get away with his caveman attitude.

Richard hesitated a moment then stepped out of the cab, handing the cabby a folded bill as he did so. He turned around to face her then reached into the cab, grabbed both her arms and pulled her out of the cab, slamming the door closed behind them before she could

react. She found herself being ushered along the sidewalk to the front of the tall apartment building where he lived, unable to stop herself.

“No, Richard. I’m not going with you!”

Her words were ignored. She found herself being carried along the street by his sheer determination. She tried to wrench her arm from his grip but her strength was no match for his. The grip on her was such that she knew she would be covered in bruises by the morning.

Panic took hold and she found that she was having trouble breathing. She felt as if she was going to faint. She was powerless to stop him from hauling her up the front steps of the apartment house

and up the two flights to his apartment. She was frustrated that she couldn't stop the ascent. She was barely able to keep her footing as Richard roughly dragged her behind him.

She fought to catch her breath as he stood before his apartment door and was searching his pocket for his keys. He still had an iron grip on her right wrist, and despite her continued struggling, she was unable to remove herself from his hold. She tried to kick his shin but he just laughed and held her tighter against his side.

"I like it when you're feisty, Rachel," he told her. "I'm going to enjoy fucking you."

“Like hell,” Rachel yelled, wrenching her hand free and turning to leave. “Go jerk off, Richard. You’re not fucking me.”

She got as far as the stairway railing when she felt his arm wrap around her waist and she was dragged back to his apartment door that was already open. She kicked and struggled but his hold was like iron around her waist. In just seconds, she was inside his apartment and the door was slammed shut behind them.

She felt suffocated immediately. When he turned the dead bolt lock and fastened the many security chains, her heart was beating at a furious pace. She had to

control her panic and do something.

“At last,” Richard told her, releasing his hold on her to take his beautifully tailored jacket off and throw it heedlessly on the only chair in the apartment.

Rachel turned and began unlocking the chains. “I’m leaving, Richard,” she told him without turning to look at him, finally finding her voice. She nearly had the last chain unlatched when she felt his hand on her shoulder and she was being spun around and slammed back against the door.

“You’ll leave when I say you leave,” he told her, his words slightly slurred. There was no anger in his tone, just a sure arrogance that spoke of years of

getting who and what he wanted.

He had her pinned against the door. Her arms were held above her head, and he pushed his body roughly against hers. She tried to move but couldn't. The pressure of his body against hers was making it difficult to breath. Even her legs were trapped by his, preventing her from being able to kick out at him.

He leaned in toward her face and she could smell the alcohol on his breath. She tried to turn her face away from his but his lips captured hers before she was able to avoid them. The kiss was bruising and rough, and she knew there was no romantic feeling behind it. It was brutal and spoke only of power and

control.

She felt his hands loosen their hold on her wrists. She used the reprieve to put them between their bodies and shove at him with all her strength. He stumbled back in surprise, hitting his hip on the waist-high table that he had thrown his keys onto when they had entered the apartment.

When he looked at her, Rachel's heart thudded within her chest as she saw the primal anger in his eyes. Before she could react, he lifted his hand and hit her hard against the left side of her face. She stumbled from the force of it and had to hold on to the doorknob to keep herself from falling all the way to the floor. She shook her head slightly, regretting it

immediately as pain shot through her jaw and into her skull. She covered her cheek with both hands and struggled to stand up straight to face him.

He had her by the left wrist before she realized he was coming for her. He pulled her toward his bedroom, ignoring the protests that escaped her. She tried to claw at him, hit him, punch him, but her strength was nothing compared to his and her struggle against him made absolutely no impact. He spun her around and threw her backward onto the bed, covering her body with his before she was able to move away. He held both of her hands above her head with his left hand, preventing her from

swinging out at him again.

His lips were wet and demanding as they covered hers roughly, and she felt as if she couldn't get in enough air to breathe. The taste of alcohol in his mouth made her gag as he forced her lips open and shoved his tongue inside to sweep her mouth. His free hand was on her breast, squeezing cruelly. The pain was intense and the panic in her was increasing alarmingly. She could feel the bile rising up in her throat.

“Richard, stop!” she was finally able to croak out between his urgent, brutal kisses.

“Come on, Rachel,” he told her, continuing his onslaught of kisses and groping of her body.

With one fluid movement, he pulled at the shoulder of her dress and smiled in triumph as he bared her to her waist. Only her strapless bra hindered his movement. He pushed down at it roughly to expose her breasts to his gaze. His mouth covered her left breast and she screamed in pain as he bit into the soft mound. He lifted his head and looked down at her, a wicked smile curling the edge of his mouth.

“I always leave my mark,” he whispered against the side of her face, laughing at the whimper of fear that escaped her.

He reached down and lifted the hem of her dress to hook his fingers in the top of

her pantyhose, pulling them and her underwear down to her knees in one quick movement.

“I’ve been waiting months for this. You can’t keep me waiting forever, right?” He leaned back and looked down at her then, smiling seductively before kissing her right breast and biting down on it.

“No, Richard, stop!” she demanded. She was firm and strong despite the fear that was nearly choking her.

She saw the anger flash across his face as he leaned back to look down at her before he smiled again. “Don’t worry. You’ll like it,” he whispered before his mouth covered hers again.

In one final attempt to get away from

him she managed to pull her wrists free from his hold and wedge her hands between their bodies. She pushed out at him with all her strength. He was surprised momentarily at her surge of strength and rolled back on the bed, still holding on to her arm.

“Rachel, grow up,” he told her, impatiently. “Come here and kiss me and all will be forgiven.”

It was obvious to her that his impatience was quickly turning to rage. He tried to pull her toward him but she pulled her arm free and stood up to back away from the bed. The room was beginning to close in on her. She willed her panic under control. Richard didn't

look charming and handsome to her right then. He looked dark and threatening. What she saw in his face was frightening. The raw anger that looked back at her scared her more than anything had ever scared her in her entire life. She knew she was in a very dangerous situation.

She turned to run, feeling as if she were moving in slow motion. Before she could move away he reached up, grabbed her arm and pulled her back down onto the bed. In one quick movement he pinned her down with his body once again. The gold chain that she wore became a weapon as he twisted it in his hand until it squeezed her throat tightly, making it difficult for her to

breath. Rachel cried out silently at the pain and struggled furiously against the continuing pressure. She realized that there was only one possible outcome of this struggle. She was going to lose.

She pushed at his chest in a futile attempt to stop him. He was so strong. She couldn't get him away from her. The gold chain cut into her neck, drawing blood. He was holding her body tightly, enjoying her struggling and fear, smiling down at her as if waiting patiently for her to stop her temper tantrum and finally submit to him.

When her strength all but left her, she sagged in his arms. He released his hold on her, letting the gold chain fall from

his hand to cascade down the side of her throat to the bed beneath her. He knew that she couldn't fight him anymore. He leaned down and traced the outline of her lips with his tongue then covered her mouth with his and plunged inside it savagely.

Rachel's mind raced frantically. She had to do something. She reached up with her right hand and rested it lightly against his cheek. Her tenderness confused him for a moment then he smiled against her mouth in triumph and relaxed his hold on her.

She took advantage of the reprieve and raked her nails across his face, relieved momentarily when he pulled back in shock and pain. He stood then, furious,

and pulled her roughly to her feet, slapping her face with the back of his hand. Rachel staggered back from the force of the blow and reached up to hold her right cheek. When she looked back at him she could not contain the disgust and revulsion that she had for him.

She lowered her hand and stood straight to look at him calmly. She couldn't believe that she had ever thought that he might be a part of her future. She couldn't stand the sight of him. Any fear that she had of him had been beaten down by this final act of violence and control. Now she was just seriously pissed off. That would serve her well.

“Get back into that bed and don’t be such a baby,” he told her angrily. “Do you think you’re so far above me that you can’t give me what I want? You’re lucky I ever gave you the time of day. You’re thirty years old and you’re a hick from some obscure town. Do you really think anyone would want you?”

Rachel looked at him silently. Her head was still pounding from the blow to her cheek but it was surprisingly clear to her what she had to do. She knew what kind of a person she was dealing with, and she had only one option. She rather enjoyed the option too.

“It’s okay, Rachel,” he whispered as he fondled her exposed right breast.

“Even you will be desirable in the dark.”

He reached out and grabbed her shoulders, pushing her toward the bed. She pulled away from him just enough to give herself some space despite the way he still held her left wrist. Her hand reached back to the small table beside his bed. It was then that Rachel's hand touched his clock radio. She gripped it tightly and lifted it quickly, the momentum carrying through and connecting with the left side of Richard's head. He fell like a sack of bricks back onto the bed, pulling Rachel down with him as he fell. Rachel stood slowly and looked down at the unconscious figure before her.

“Now who’s in the dark, Richard?” she whispered, her breathing labored.

She looked at him and tried to calm her hatred for him. The anger in her wanted to hit him again, but some small voice in her brain cautioned her to get out before he came to. She hesitated for a minute and watched as his chest rose and fell with each breath that he took. She knew that she hadn’t killed him, as much as she wanted to.

In the minutes that followed, she found that she was quite calm. She waited for the tears to come but they never did. She was unable to really feel anything at the moment. Thoughts of self-recrimination flooded her. She could only wonder

what she had ever done to deserve this. She must have done something wrong. She must have sent out the wrong signals.

No. She hadn't done anything wrong. She would not accept responsibility for the violence that this man had inflicted upon her. She adjusted her bra and lifted the bodice of her dress to cover her exposed body. She walked slowly out of the bedroom and made her way toward the apartment door then bent down slowly to retrieve her purse and shawl that had been thrown to the floor beside the door during their struggle. As she unlocked the dead bolt and removed the chains from the three remaining locks, she saw that her hands were shaking

violently. She closed the door behind her quietly, robotically made her way down the two flights of stairs, and walked out to the sidewalk to the nearly deserted street.

She took a deep, cleansing breath and closed her eyes with relief as she stood out in the freedom of the warm night air. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out her cell phone and connected to 911. She looked back at the apartment building nervously, expecting Richard to come out at any moment.

“You think you can get away with this, you piece of shit?” she asked of no one as the call went through and she listened to the ringing on the other end. “Wrong.”

“911 Emergency,” a man’s voice answered briskly.

“My name is Rachel Williams. My date just tried to rape me.”

Chapter 4

Rachel stood silently outside the busy Manhattan hospital with the female police officer that had been at her side throughout her ordeal. It had been a long night that had started off as a blur then dragged on to endless questions, pictures, and physical examinations. Despite her embarrassment, she knew that she had done the right thing in calling the police. If she hadn't, she couldn't have lived with herself knowing that Richard would be free to do the same thing to someone else in the future.

“Rachel, I wish you would allow us to

take you back to your hotel. Are you sure you don't want me to go back with you?" Louise Ward asked her, her concern sincere.

"No, thanks," Rachel told her quietly. "I'll be all right. I just want to get home."

Officer Ward nodded in understanding. "The department will be in touch."

Rachel looked at the young officer and couldn't help but be filled with gratitude for her presence and help. "Thanks for staying with me, Louise."

Louise Ward smiled slightly. "You take care, Rachel," she said quietly. "Get some rest."

"Thanks," Rachel answered, her voice

shaking slightly.

“You did the right thing,” Officer Ward told her seriously.

Rachel nodded and took a deep breath. “I know,” she said finally.

She turned and stepped off the curb, raised her right hand and hailed an approaching cab, pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders. A taxi pulled over, and she pulled open the back door to climb in quickly. She slammed the door behind her, waving to Louise as she stepped back away from the cab.

“Plaza Hotel,” she told the cab driver firmly, her voice stronger than she thought she was capable of at the

moment.

As the cab pulled away from the curb she looked straight ahead, not wanting to look back. Each look back would be a memory of her night, and she didn't want to think about it. The very thought of Richard sent a shiver of panic and hatred through her. She looked at her watch and closed her eyes as she said a silent prayer of thanks. She would go back to the hotel and check out then she would make her way back to Grand Central Station. If she hurried she would be able to make the last train to New Haven. From there she would drive to her apartment in Crystal Springs, Connecticut and lock herself away from the world. Once she was home she

would be safe. No one would be able to find her or bother her there. No one in New York City knew her home address except her agent, and Nancy would never give that information to anyone.

In the short time it took the cab to make its way through the busy streets to the hotel, Rachel checked that the safety pins holding her dress together were secure. She moved her hand to her neck to be sure that the gold chain with the stunning blue stone that looked like ice was safely tucked away inside the bodice of her dress. She took out her brush and brushed her long brown hair quickly. She removed her small compact mirror from her purse and checked the

damage done to her face, touching it gently as she viewed her reflection. It was swollen and she could see a purple hue beginning to form across her right cheek. Her left cheek didn't look much better. She closed the compact and replaced it in her purse. There was no point in trying to hide it with makeup. She didn't really care. She hurt too much, both physically and emotionally, to care about anything just then. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and gasped softly as the muscles in her back radiated pain throughout her abused body.

She looked out at the people that they passed and sighed tiredly. She was so glad she was on her way home. A

coldness settled within her body as she realized how lucky she was to have gotten away from Richard when she had. The more she thought about it the more anxious she became. She hoped she would be able to get home before she fell apart. She couldn't wait to take a long, hot shower and scrub the filth of Richard's act from her body.

She kept her head down as the doorman opened the cab door for her. She made her way into the hotel and headed toward the elevator, grateful that the lobby wasn't very busy. She entered the elevator and nearly plastered herself against the left wall, as far away from the three other people in the elevator as

she could. She reached forward and pushed the button for her floor then leaned back against the wall to avoid contact with anyone. She looked at the floor, then up at the control panel and found her vision blurring as she looked up at the lights that flashed each floor number. If she could just get to her room before she lost control of her emotions.

The elevator door finally opened to her floor and she stepped out and made her way through the hallway. Her hands were shaking as she opened her purse to remove her key card. It took three swipes of the card before she was able to open the door. She pushed the door shut behind her, flipped the extra security lock, and walked directly to the

bed to pull open her suitcase that she had left there.

Unpinning the dress, she pulled it and the strapless bra from her body. She reached into the suitcase to grab a regular bra and her maroon sweatshirt. She was careful as she put on her bra, gasping in pain as it rubbed against the bite marks on her breasts. She pulled the soft sweatshirt over her head, making sure that the precious gold chain was safely tucked inside of it.

Her body ached but she forced herself to continue changing. She pulled off her delicate high-heeled gold sandals then carefully peeled off her nylons and underwear. She threw everything into the

suitcase without regard and pulled out a fresh pair of underwear and her comfortable pair of jeans. Dressing quickly, her mind was set only on getting out of the hotel as quickly as possible. She grabbed her socks and sneakers and hurriedly put them on, finding some sense of calm as she performed the ritualistic routine of getting dressed in the clothes that matched her true nature.

She walked into the bathroom and retrieved all of her makeup and personal items. Grabbing her empty garment bag as she walked toward the bed, she dropped everything beside her suitcase. Folding the garment bag into a small square, she laid it on the bottom of the small suitcase, then tossed her toiletries

in beside the clothes she had every intention of throwing away once she got home. Taking out her casual denim shoulder bag from the suitcase, she transferred all the items from her gold purse into it. Pulling out her hairbrush and hair tie, she brushed her hair carefully and pulled it back into a ponytail at the crown of her head. Pushing the brush back into her casual purse, she zipped it closed and set it aside then zipped her overnight bag closed and set it down on the floor.

She checked out via the video checkout, picked up her briefcase and suitcase, and settled the strap of the purse across her chest. She left the room

without a backward glance, made her way to the elevator, down to the lobby, out the front door of the hotel, and out into the busy street. She was glad the doorman hailed a cab for her quickly and she didn't have to speak to him. She didn't want to have to speak to anyone.

The ride to Grand Central was a nerve-wracking one for her. She just wanted to board the train and go home. Once at the station, she paid the cabby, pulled herself out of the cab as best she could considering how much she was hurting, and efficiently melded into the throng of people that always populated the bustling train station.

Despite the heat of the summer night, she was chilled to the depths of her

bones. She was glad she that had packed her warm sweatshirt. She felt a sense of comfort in the casual clothes that she wore and was able to put aside the events of the evening as she concentrated on walking quickly toward the platform to board the train home. She sat in the last seat of the last car, placed her bag between the wall of the train and her left leg, leaned her left cheek against the window, and closed her eyes for a moment at the pure pleasure of it. The coolness of the glass eased the sting of her injury somewhat.

Her breathing slowed and she calmed considerably as the train moved away from the City. She opened her eyes and

looked out into the blackness of the tunnel. She felt numb. Her mind was racing, but she found that she was pretty calm. She should be upset that she couldn't feel anything, but she wasn't.

The memory of Richard's words was seared in her brain, but she couldn't bring up any emotions to react to them. It was better that way. She couldn't deal with the thought of him or what he had just done to her any more tonight anyway. What she concentrated on instead was the fact that he couldn't hurt her anymore. She was in control of her life and her future. She had always been in control in the past and Richard's abuse was not going to change that.

She closed her eyes once again and

settled back in her seat, letting the motion of the train soothe her. She knew it was impossible but she prayed that the motion would rock her to sleep.

The two hour trip to New Haven seemed endless. The viciousness of the attack was clear in her mind, and her body was feeling the effects of it. Not only was she physically suffering, but mentally she was running the events over and over in her mind, unable to rest, trying to think through what she might have done to avoid the whole thing.

When the train finally pulled into the New Haven terminal she was experiencing a full-fledged panic attack. She tried to breathe slowly to will away

the tightness in her chest and was only mildly successful. Pushing herself to get through it, she exited the train as quickly as she could, walked quickly through the silver tunnel walkway, and made her way to the parking garage down the street from the terminal. She walked up to the second level, found her car, and settled herself quickly behind the wheel, quickly locking the car doors. The ride home would be nearly forty-five minutes. She prayed that she could hold it together for the duration of the trip.

She paid the parking attendant as if by rote then pulled out of the garage and headed toward the highway to go home. She drove safely and methodically, finding herself outside her home before

she realized it. She pushed the button on her garage door opener, pulled the car into its place, and closed the door behind it. She made her way into her home through the connecting doorway and punched the code into the security system after shutting the door behind herself. She was so glad to be home.

She dropped her bag onto the floor of her kitchen and went to the refrigerator to get a bottle of water. She held the cold bottle to her right cheek briefly, then her left, and leaned forward on the counter to steady herself. Reaching forward, she picked up the bottle of ibuprofen on the counter, took off the cap with some difficulty, damning the

children's safety cap in frustration. She popped two pills and drank the cold water quickly. Everything about her, body and soul, ached. She hoped the medicine would help.

She turned to head toward her bedroom when the blinking light on her answering machine caught her eye. There were two messages. She reached forward to push the play button, noticing that her hand was still shaking. The machine beeped and her cousin Roy's voice filled her kitchen.

"Okay, Rache, I got your message. You don't want to stay with me and Paulette, and you don't want to stay with my mom." His voice sounded as if he were smiling. "The campground you

wanted to know about is pretty filled up right now. I think you should try the San Isabel National Forest Campground near Twin Lakes. The name of it is Parry Peak. It's not as fancy as the other campgrounds, but you'll be able to get some peace and quiet there. I'll be looking for you on my morning rounds. I'll expect you in about a week. You have my cell and home number if you need me in the meantime. Paulette said to call her while you're driving. She wants to catch up with you without me being there to interrupt—as if I would interrupt you two when you start gabbing. Where do you think she got that idea? Be careful, cousin. Love you.”

Rachel smiled weakly and reached forward to pick up the water bottle. Her hand froze as her machine beeped and she heard the voice on the second message. It was Richard's.

“The next time I see you, I'm going to finish what I started, bitch,” his angry voice echoed across her empty kitchen.

Rachel felt her heart pounding against her chest. She wanted nothing more than to erase the message and erase the night from her life, but she had to stay strong and stop Richard's continued abuse of her. Very slowly, she reached forward and pushed the button to save the message. She would give it to the police.

She wanted to wait to call them in the

morning. It was late and she needed to clean up and get some rest. She rubbed her temple tiredly. Her head was really beginning to pound. She was exhausted, but she knew that she should report Richard's threat. Picking up the phone, she rested it on the counter as she searched her purse for the card that Officer Louise Ward had given her.

The phone call was short and to the point. She was glad that she was able to talk directly to Louise. Louise filled out the report as she talked to her and told Rachel to save the message for evidence. After one more word of caution and encouragement, Louise told her to take care of herself and thanked her for calling to inform them of

Richard's threat. It would serve to strengthen their case against him.

"Take care of yourself, Rachel," Louise said gently.

"I will," Rachel said tiredly. "Thank you for all of your help today, Louise." At Louise's mumbled acceptance and soft words of good night, Rachel smiled and disconnected the call.

She leaned against the counter and reached out to unplug the phone. She would call to change her number in the morning. Thankfully, Richard didn't have her address. He had never even asked what city she lived in. He only knew that she lived in Connecticut.

She walked through the kitchen and the

living room to go to her bedroom. The soft pink walls and burgundy coverlet on her bed helped to soothe her nerves. Her bedroom always made her feel comforted. It was soft and feminine and satisfied her basic need to be pampered. She turned on the overhead chandelier and the soft light sparkled against its hanging glass teardrops.

She made her way into her bathroom and began to peel off her clothes, careful to remove Joanna McCoy's gold chain and place it gently on top of the counter. She stood naked before the mirror that ran the width of the left wall. It was hard to believe that she was the woman who stared back at her. The right side of her face was swollen and purple. The left

side wasn't much better. Teeth marks marred her breasts. Although the skin wasn't broken, it was bruised, already a purple color, and sore to the touch.

“Oh, God,” she whispered out loud.

Sickness overcame her and she ran to the toilet, barely making it in time. Her body was wracked with spasms as she heaved time after time until she was totally devoid of strength and her stomach muscles screamed in protest. Silent tears mixed with moans consumed her as her emotions were finally allowed to be released.

It was a while before she could move. When she did, she was weak and completely spent. She used the counter

to steady herself as she stood on shaky legs and made her way to the sink. She brushed her teeth methodically, determined to remove the taste of bile and fear from her mouth. Turning off the cold water, she grabbed for the hand towel and wiped at her mouth weakly.

She turned and slid open the delicately etched glass panel to her shower, stepped inside, and turned on the water. When it was warm enough, she turned on the overhead spray and stepped forward into the hot cascading water. She stood there silently, letting the heat run over her and through her.

The warmth of the water slid down across her shoulders and onto her back as she leaned against the side of the

shower stall and cried. The tears came slowly at first then rushed forward, coming out in great gasps accompanied by great sobs that were ripped from deep within her. She didn't know how long she cried. By the time the tears stopped flowing, her throat hurt and she felt such incredible weakness she could barely remain standing.

She picked up her shampoo and began to wash her hair. Someone once told her that completing routine tasks helped get you through tough times. She scrubbed her hair and rinsed it, not really thinking about anything. She poured a blob of conditioner into her hand and rubbed it thoroughly through her hair. Reaching

forward, she picked up the washcloth and the bar of soap from the ledge and lathered the cloth until it was foaming. Putting the soap back in the dish, she started at her arms and scrubbed her body thoroughly. She wanted to wash Richard's touch from every inch of her skin. Although she was gentle, the pain of her abused body screamed out at her.

She leaned back into the warmth of the shower, trying to relax under the steady spray as it washed away the soap and the conditioner. She was thankful that Richard hadn't completed what he had intended to do. She was proud of the strength that she had displayed to defend herself. But she questioned herself as well.

Maybe she shouldn't have gone to the police. Maybe she shouldn't have gone to the hospital. She was filled with conflicting thoughts. Even though she knew she had done the right thing by reporting the attack, she wondered if she should have just left without calling the police. Everything played over and over in her mind. The thoughts pounded in her head until she was sure she would vomit again. Her head ached worse than her body, if that were even possible.

She reached forward and turned off the shower. Squeezing her hair to get rid of the excess water, she found herself taking deep breaths to calm herself. She stepped out of the shower and wrapped

her hair and her body in the plush pink towels that she had left out.

She found that she was shaking again. She slid weakly down the bathroom wall to sit on the cold tile floor. She sat on the floor with her head leaning back against the soft pink tiles on the wall. It was a while before she could move. She didn't really know how many minutes had passed before she had the strength to stand.

She used the counter to steady herself as she pulled herself up and made her way to the sink. She once again brushed her teeth methodically, then reached forward with a shaking hand and filled the small cup on the counter with cold water, drinking it slowly. Turning off the

cold water, she grabbed for the hand towel and wiped her face and her mouth weakly. She looked at her reflection in the partially misted mirror and found empty, cold eyes staring back at herself.

She left the bathroom as it was. She would clean it in the morning. She took her brush and hair dryer from the drawer and walked out into her bedroom. It was cool in the house and she was grateful. She could hear the humming of the central air conditioning unit. It soothed her to hear the familiar sound.

She brushed her hair quickly then tossed the dryer and brush onto her bed and reached out to pull open two drawers of her bureau. Taking out a

clean pair of underwear and pajamas, she got dressed quickly then sat down on her bed, plugged in her hair dryer and turned it on. She was lost in thought as she felt the heat on her face and her hair. It helped to lull her almost to sleep.

After brushing her hair, she made her way back to the kitchen. She took out two ice trays and put some ice cubes into four separate freezer bags. Taking kitchen towels from the drawer beside the sink, she wrapped the contained ice in each one and carried them back to her bedroom.

She turned off the lights and settled herself in bed, placing the covered ice on each of her cheeks and on her breasts. The coolness of the ice helped

somewhat. Considering what she had been through, she doubted she would really sleep, but she was determined to get some rest. The house was quiet and cool. Rachel tried to concentrate on her even breathing to try to lull herself to sleep but it was of no use. She couldn't sleep despite her exhaustion.

The events of the evening inundated her thoughts and she found herself moaning in fear. She kept seeing Richard's face and hearing his cruel words. Her skin crawled as his attack replayed in her mind. It was nearly noon when sleep finally claimed her, but even that was fitful and unsettling. After what seemed an eternity of disturbing flashes

of Richard, the haunting scenes abated.

She settled into a deep sleep and began to dream, finding herself calming as she scented the comforting cinnamon and sugar fragrance once again. She felt the warmth that surrounded her and gave in to the feeling of love and protection that she always felt when she experienced that delicious smell. It was one that she often felt as a child. It didn't matter that the scent hadn't really been a part of her adult life very much. Now that it was back, she was glad for it. The dream that came to her was unbidden, but she found herself opening herself up to the experience of it.

The figure was in shadow. He was

tall and broad but she couldn't see his face. Something about him was familiar, and she found that she wasn't afraid as she stepped forward to stand before him. She watched as his hand took hers and she noticed that he wore a red flannel shirt.

"Rachel, I'm waiting for you," his deep voice spoke to her soothingly.

"Who are you?" she asked the shadow.

"I'll hold you and protect you," he answered her.

"No!" she cried out to him. "I don't want to be touched."

"Don't worry, honey," his soothing voice assured her. "No one will ever

hurt you again.”

“Yes they will,” Rachel called out to him. “You can’t stop him.”

“I will,” he told her with conviction. “I will love you, and hold you, and touch you.”

He leaned forward and reached up to hold her face gently within his large hands. Her eyes closed as his lips covered hers, kissing her sweetly once, then again, humming against her lips with happiness.

“I could kiss you forever, honey,” he told her softly.

Rachel tried to look through the shadows that surrounded the man who spoke so gently to her, but she couldn’t see his face.

*“This isn’t real,” she whimpered.
“You aren’t real for me.”*

*“I’ll see you soon,” he answered,
stepping back into the fog of her
dream.*

*“Wait! Don’t leave,” she called out
to him.*

*“I won’t,” he promised. “I’ll be
here.”*

Rachel turned over in bed and
snuggled deeply into her blankets, finally
settling into a deep sleep. She somehow
felt that everything would be okay.

Chapter 5

“What a bastard!” Paulette said, horrified. “Did you call the police, Rachel?”

“Yes. I spent the rest of the night at the hospital being examined and giving my statement to the police,” Rachel said, smiling at the concern of her cousin Roy’s wife. Paulette had to be one of the nicest people she had ever met. To hear her swear was actually kind of funny.

When she had called Roy, she hadn’t been able to hold it together. Once she had heard his gentle voice, she had fallen apart. She knew she upset him, but she couldn’t help it. He stayed on the

phone with her for a while, listening to how she had been attacked before he gave the phone to Paulette. He was angry, but he was more concerned for her. That made her calm somewhat. Roy had always been her protector. So had Sam.

“Don’t get all worked up, Paulette. It’s not good for the baby,” Rachel said calmly, worried for her.

“The baby is fine,” Paulette told her quickly, her patience nearly gone. “You and Roy really need to lighten up. I swear, it must be a family trait. You both drive me crazy with the way you worry.”

“I could say the same about you, Paulette,” Rachel told her, laughing softly.

“Hey! I’m not the one who was nearly raped by a sadistic asshole!” Paulette yelled. “I have just cause to worry about you!”

“Okay, Paulette,” Rachel said quickly, trying to calm down her cousin-in-law. “I love you, too.”

There was silence on the phone. Rachel knew that Paulette was trying to calm down. She didn’t want to upset her. Roy was worried enough about his wife’s health.

“Honey, try to calm down,” she could hear Roy’s voice in the background.

Rachel heard the distinct sound of a kiss and knew that Roy was loving Paulette into calmness. Or maybe he

wasn't.

“Hey! Tell Roy to stop hitting on you,” Rachel said, teasing Paulette. “I need to talk to you, and if he keeps distracting you with his kisses, I won't be able to.”

“Good point,” Paulette said quickly. “Roy, keep your hands to yourself. Let me talk to Rachel. We can make love after.”

“Geez, Paulette! Too much information!” Rachel groused, laughing softly when she heard Roy kissing his wife one more time before there was relative quiet.

“Okay, Rachel,” Paulette said, laughing softly. “Mr. Grabby Hands is giving me a break so we can talk.”

Rachel couldn't contain the bark of

laughter that escaped her. As tired as she was from driving continuously for the last three days from Connecticut on her journey to Colorado, she couldn't help but feel lighter from talking with Paulette.

“So, tell me what else,” Paulette urged her quietly.

“There's nothing else,” Rachel protested softly.

“Rachel, I know you. Something else happened. What, honey?”

Rachel hesitated, her throat constricting as she fought to keep her emotions under control. “Please don't tell Roy,” she finally whispered.

“You know I won't,” Paulette

promised.

“I know.” Rachel hesitated, trying to remember the hateful words that Richard had spoken to her.

“Tell me, Rache,” Paulette urged her.

“He said that no one would ever want me,” Rachel said quietly, embarrassed by the words. “He said that even I would be attractive in the dark.”

“Shit!”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

“You know he’s wrong, right, honey?”

Rachel remained silent. Even though she logically knew that Richard spoke those words to hurt her, emotionally she couldn’t help but be affected by them. She had lived a lifetime of isolation. She often questioned her worth as a woman.

She ached to feel the love of a man who cherished her and desired her. She hadn't ever felt that in her life, and Richard's words had hit a nerve.

"I don't really know that, Paulette," she finally admitted, her voice only a whisper.

"Oh, Rachel," Paulette said softly, her heart breaking for her husband's cousin. "You should know that. Please don't allow him to mess with your mind. Don't give him that power over you. He's a jerk. He's a pig. He's worse than that. He's the mud that a pig rolls in. No. He's the bugs in the mud that a pig rolls in."

Rachel laughed out loud at that one.

“Paulette, you’re the best. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Paulette said softly.
“Come home to us. We need you to stay with us.”

“No. I’m going to the campground that Roy recommended,” Rachel said firmly.
“Please don’t be offended, Paulette. I just need some time alone. I need the fresh air of the mountains. I don’t want to have to make conversation. I just want to relax and write. I have tons of edits to finish. I really need the peace of the campground.”

Paulette sighed heavily. “Okay. I understand. I’ll give you your space. Roy will, too. But I need to see you. Promise me that you’ll come and spend some time with us.”

“I promise. You’ll have to let me know when you feel up to me visiting. If you’re too tired, you need to tell me.”

“Okay, honey. You drive carefully,” Paulette said softly. “Call me whenever you want. I’m pretty much stuck at home for the duration of my pregnancy, so I’ll be here whenever you need to talk.”

“Are you okay, Paulette? Is the baby okay?”

“Yes. Don’t you start, too! Roy is driving me crazy with his constant questions.”

“That’s because he loves you so much,” Rachel whispered, smiling at the thought of the two of them. She was so happy that Roy had found someone so

wonderful to love who absolutely adored him. She couldn't have picked a better wife for him.

“Yeah, well, the feeling is mutual,” Paulette whispered.

“I know,” Rachel whispered back. “Go on and be with your husband. You promised him that you would make love to him when you got off the phone with me.”

Paulette laughed softly. “Talk to you tomorrow, honey.”

“Tomorrow,” Rachel said quickly, ending the call and concentrating on the road ahead of her.

She liked driving at night. The traffic was much lighter. She planned on driving for another couple of hours

before stopping for the night. She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep, but she would get a room at one of the hotels on the way and do her best to get some rest before continuing her trip in the morning.

She wondered if she would have more dreams tonight. She had dreamed about her mystery lover every night since she had arrived home from New York City. At first, the dreams were frustrating and she didn't want to experience them. But now, she looked forward to each one of them. Each dream made her feel protected and loved.

She continued to drive with a smile on her face, thinking about her cousin, his wife Paulette, and the place where she

had grown up surrounded by friends and family. It wouldn't be long before she was safely home deep within the mountains—the one place she had always felt protected and loved.

* * * *

Paulette placed her cell phone on the bedside table, turning over slowly so she could face her husband. She smiled when Roy's arms surrounded her immediately, and he drew her close against his chest.

“So, how's Rache?” he asked softly.

“Not bad considering what happened to her,” Paulette said honestly.

Roy nodded, his jaw clenching as he

thought about the attack on his younger cousin. “She told you about it?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Was it bad?”

“Yes.”

“I could kill that guy.”

“Me, too.”

Roy concentrated on calming himself. Just thinking about Rachel going through her attack made him sick to his stomach. He never understood how any man could hurt a woman.

“What else did she say?”

“She told me about some of the things he said to her during the attack,” Paulette answered honestly. “Rachel doesn’t

want me to tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s humiliating to her.”

“She needs to come here and live,” he said firmly.

“She needs to fall in love,” Paulette whispered, leaning forward and kissing the underside of Roy’s jaw. She smiled at the soft growl that escaped him at her touch.

“She’s already in love,” Roy said, trying really hard to concentrate.

“I know, honey,” Paulette agreed. “We’re going to make sure that she finally gets her man.”

Roy laughed softly, easing back and looking down at his sweet wife with obvious love in his eyes. He reached up

and brushed back her soft hair from her face, smiling at the richness of her brunette hair. When he looked into her gentle brown eyes, he melted with the love that shone there for him. He was truly a lucky man.

“Sweetheart,” he whispered, leaning forward and kissing her lips lightly.

“I love you, Roy Monroe,” she whispered against his lips.

Their baby took that moment to move within her body, drawing both of their attention. Roy smiled broadly as he slid his hand across Paulette’s belly, loving the feel of his son moving so strongly within her womb.

“You need to take your clothes off,

Roy,” Paulette whispered, reaching up to tug at his T-shirt.

“Paulette, it’s not safe, honey,” he protested. “I don’t want to hurt you or the baby.”

“You won’t,” she told him, tugging his shirt over his head and throwing it behind him before reaching down to pull at his sleep pants. When he tried to stop her hand, she cupped his groin and traced the hard length of his cock. “I want you, Roy.”

Roy moaned as her fingers traced his hardness. “Baby, this isn’t a good idea,” he told her, knowing he was putty in her hands. He could never deny her anything.

“This is a terrific idea,” she told him. “You need to love me. The doctor said

it's safe. Honest, Roy.”

Roy eased back to look down at her, seeing the way she looked at him with open desire. “I love you, Paulette,” he whispered, leaning forward to kiss her tenderly.

As he pulled her nightgown over her head, he groaned softly at the beauty of his naked woman. He loved everything about her. Her body called to his. Her heart matched its rhythm to his. Her soul was entwined with his. They were truly one.

He pushed off his pajama pants and carefully maneuvered her so that she straddled his hips. He held her steady as she reached down and took firm hold of

his shaft, placing it at her already dripping folds. When she pressed down and took him deep within her body, he closed his eyes and said a prayer of thanks for this beautiful woman that he loved with all of his heart.

* * * *

Rachel slowly unfolded and sat down on the lounge chair she had taken with her from home, leaned her head back tiredly, and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and relaxed for the first time in a week. It was a wonderful feeling.

The Colorado night air was cold but refreshing. It certainly didn't feel like the hot and humid July nights that she

was used to in Connecticut. Even though it was nearly midnight, she didn't want to move from her chair just yet. She had driven a long way, and she just wanted to do nothing for a few more minutes.

Her last day in Connecticut had been a busy one. She had sent the tape of Richard's threatening message to the police, glad that she had never replaced her old answering machine. If she had, she couldn't have sent the tiny tape that contained the threat. She had also called the phone company to change her phone number to a new number and made the choice to keep it unlisted. After calling the security company to inform them that she would be gone for the rest of the

summer, she had called Roy and had talked for nearly an hour, telling him what had happened. He was upset, angry, and scared for her, but his understanding and support was exactly what she needed.

Speaking to Roy and Paulette had given her the strength she had needed to get through the final preparations for her trip and the long, lonely hours on the road to the mountains of Colorado. The daily talks to Paulette on her journey to the mountains had helped her considerably. She wasn't nearly as jumpy. She actually was laughing again. Paulette had that effect on her. Roy also played an important part in her gradual healing. Her cousin's friendship had

never wavered over the years. She had always been close to him, and he made her understand that there were kind and loving men out there. She had just been unlucky enough to find real idiots.

Roy had wanted her to fly out to Colorado, but she had felt she needed the time alone to relax and think things through. She really believed she would be in a better mindset if she saw Roy in one week rather than in a few hours. That's how the car trip had been born.

Rachel opened her eyes and surveyed the quiet campground. She was totally alone in the peacefulness of the mountains. The area was totally devoid of movement and only the occasional

sounds of the night interrupted the silence. Her soft brown eyes gazed silently across the softly lit campsite and settled on a point somewhere in the darkness beyond. The faint glow of the lantern she had placed on the ground beside her threw shadows across her face, revealing circles of strain and fatigue under eyes that usually shone big and bright with enthusiasm. Her dark brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail that curled softly at the middle of her back. The soft tresses framed a face that mirrored a deep sadness. She knew she still carried the bruises from her attack, but she was thankful that they had lightened considerably.

She looked around the campground,

glad to be in the peaceful area. Her campsite was secluded from the rest of the campsites, separated by tall pines that stood like soldiers ready to protect her.

“Always the writer,” she said out loud to herself, smiling sadly at her own active imagination.

Her smile slowly faded as her eyes fixed on the lantern flame before her. She was lost in thoughts of recent memories. As she leaned in toward the light she hugged her body as if to squeeze away the pain. A faint purplish-yellow discoloration just above her left cheekbone and right jawline could barely be discerned in the dimness of the

light. She touched her face lightly, wincing slightly, partly because of actual pain and partly because of the awful memories that were flooding forth.

She had had a long drive to think over what had happened and evaluate what Richard had really meant to her. She realized now that she had loved the thought of being in love and being loved by someone. Richard certainly had fallen short of the kind of man that she would have wished for. Rachel closed her eyes and lowered her head in defeat. The date that night had been yet another chance for her to move on. It should have been a beautiful evening. She had hoped it would have been a wonderful romance.

She knew that it was the writer in her

that had romanticized the entire relationship. Her long drive had given her plenty of time to think everything through, and she realized now that she had only felt those things because Richard was handsome, he was charming, and he was there. She had relived that night countless times since then and even though she was angry about what had happened, she couldn't help but feel disgusted, used and incompetent as both a person and a woman.

She was disgusted with herself for allowing herself to be pulled along to his apartment and wished she had made more of a scene to stop it from ever

occurring, but what was done was done. Yes, she had learned a powerful lesson, but it was a lesson that had made her stronger.

She had been raised to be kind, to be nice. She had always done what she should—this time to her own detriment. Being kind and nice was important, but being safe and smart and learning to be more assertive would have been the better way to be in her situation with Richard. It was her own fault that she had allowed her upbringing to prevent her from taking a hard stand for her own protection. If she ever had any daughters she would be sure to teach them to be both kind and protective of themselves. Rachel laughed cynically at the thought

of her having children or being a part of any loving relationship.

“Yeah, like that’s ever gonna happen,” she said sarcastically.

She rubbed her eyes tiredly, bringing herself back to the present. She slowly eased herself out of the folding chair. She was in the mountains of Colorado now. She wanted to forget all of those painful memories and let the quiet beauty of the mountains soothe and heal her.

She had to make sure that everything was settled inside her tent before she got too comfortable. Reaching forward, she picked up the lantern and stood up to stretch, lifting the lantern high above her shoulder as she moved. The lantern cast

a soft light across her body and illuminated the area a few feet beyond her. Her fleece-lined jacket was baggy and warm and partially concealed her shape but her jeans hugged her hips and made her feel feminine despite the strong muscles that graced her legs. Her life had been active, always filled with activities outside, just as she had enjoyed as a child. Just as she had shared with Roy and Sam.

She held the lantern out before her and walked carefully to her car. She opened the passenger door then hesitated to look up at the night sky. The air was crisp and cool, and the sky was filled with stars. It was beautiful. She stood there for a moment, enjoying the silence. This trip

was going to be the best thing for her. Calm and peaceful. Just what she needed.

Pulling up the heavy hood of the jacket, she tugged at the strings slightly to secure the hood in place. The hood shielded her face, and she could feel the warmth against her cheeks immediately. Taking the chest cooler from the floor behind the front passenger seat, she placed it on the ground beside her then closed the door and locked it securely. She turned, picked up the cooler by its handles, and started to walk back toward her tent with the lantern balanced on top of the chest.

She carried everything to the tent that

would be her makeshift home for the summer. She stopped, put down the cooler, and looked over the large blue tent one last time, raising her lantern to make sure that it was secured and steady. When she was satisfied, she reached forward to unzip the netting flap. Picking up and placing the cooler and lantern inside the tent, she quickly climbed in and zipped the netting closed behind her. One final zip of the remaining solid flap and she was shut off from life's craziness. She was now in her own world and no one could bother her.

She found herself breathing a sigh of relief. It had been a long trip from her home in Connecticut, but now that she

was here she knew that she had made the right decision. Here, in the mountains of Colorado, she could rest. It was here that she had always enjoyed writing the most. She needed some quiet time away from everyone and everything to sort things out and finish the edits on her latest book. Her yearly trek to the mountains always refreshed her and allowed her imagination to flourish.

She was at peace here. She was home. She found that she could dream dreams that gave life to her stories and hope to her life. She needed renewed hope—especially now.

Shaking herself mentally, she refused to think about Richard, the attack, or the

cruel words he had spoken. She was determined to let all of that go. She knew it would take time, but she had to start moving forward. Only in doing that would she be able to start to heal. She could not allow him to have any more control over her mind or her future.

Focusing on her tasks at hand, she concentrated on setting up her tent so that she would have a comfortable home for the duration of her stay. She carried the cooler to the back half of the tent and set it down carefully. She tied back the flaps that separated the two sections of the inside of the large tent and surveyed the area before her.

“And here we have the bedroom not far from the living room,” she spoke out

loud, smiling as she passed into the area that she had already set up with a portable cot and sleeping bag. At least she still had her sense of humor, as lame as her jokes were anyway. She reached out to arrange the pillow and the extra blankets over the sleeping bag then turned to neatly stack her books on top of the laptop case that she had brought along with her to her mountain sanctuary. Once she was satisfied that everything was in its place, she turned back toward the tent entrance, unzipped the two flaps and stepped out of the tent, carrying the lantern with her. Quickly zipping just the netting of the tent, she turned and headed away from her site.

She started toward the bathrooms but stopped when she realized that she had left her rubber mallet near the lounge chair. She walked over to it quickly and was reaching down to pick it up when she heard a twig snap. A cold shiver of fear raced through her, and she clenched the mallet tighter in her hand. She turned and faced the direction that the noise had come from. She waited silently, tense with anticipation.

“A little late to be setting up camp, don’t you think?” a man’s deep voice called to her from the darkness.

Rachel jumped at the sound of his voice but stood to face him squarely. She was ready to defend herself if she

had to. No man was ever going to get the upper hand over her again.

“That’s not any of your business,” she told him calmly and with more composure than she was sure she had at that moment.

He stood just outside the circle of light, making it impossible to make out anything but darkness and shadows. Only silence answered her and, for a moment, she could hear only the beating of her own heart in her ears. He stepped forward then, his face still in shadow under the brim of his cowboy hat, but his entire body was now bathed in the radiance of the lantern.

Rachel found herself unable to breathe at the sight of him. He was tall. Very

tall. More than six feet she would guess. And he was big. His chest was broad and powerful under the navy down vest that he wore. His legs were long and muscular and his whole body screamed strength, from the top of his tan cowboy hat to the bottom of his jeans and boots—jeans that hugged his body to perfection, she might add.

He stepped forward just slightly, allowing her lantern light to shine on his face. His black hair curled slightly over his ears and fell forward just enough to cover part of his forehead to frame the most incredibly handsome faces she had ever seen. His eyes were blue, drop-dead-gorgeous blue, and he had the most

sensuous lips she could ever remember seeing. For a moment, Rachel forgot to breathe. It was Sam McCoy. And he didn't recognize her.

"You shouldn't be out here alone," he spoke harshly, breaking the silence and the spell that Rachel had found herself in. "No one here is going to take care of you."

Rachel blinked in surprise and shook her head slowly in disgust. "Listen buster," she shot back at him tiredly, anger lacing her voice. "I can take care of myself just fine, thank you very much. If you care to find out just how well I can take care of myself then by all means please take another step forward." She challenged him calmly, her eyes flashing

hotly, ready for a fight. She lifted the mallet just slightly and squared off to face him.

The limited light from her lantern allowed him to see only a part of her face but there was no mistaking the anger that was flashing in her eyes. His eyebrows shot up in surprise. This late night camper might prove to be a very interesting addition to the campground after all. He stood in silence for a moment. His eyes raked her over from top to bottom and back again. His jaw was set and his mouth was drawn into a tight, cynical smile.

“I think it’s a little late to be doing any fighting,” he said finally. “Get yourself

settled and I'll look in on you in the morning."

"Don't bother," Rachel flashed back at him angrily. "Save it for someone who needs babysitting."

He chuckled slightly as he turned away from her. "We'll see," he called over his shoulder as he walked away from her.

Rachel clutched the mallet tighter in anger. His arrogance annoyed her. His attitude enraged her. The last thing she needed was to be treated like a child by Sam McCoy.

"We'll see, indeed!" she muttered angrily, turning to walk quickly toward the bathrooms. "Arrogant shit!"

She used the facilities quickly, hating

the pit toilets but knowing she had to deal with the archaic things. The walk back to her tent didn't help to calm her down, and she found herself swearing under her breath as she zipped the tent closed behind her. She placed the lantern on the chest cooler and tugged off her coat as she walked to the back of the tent. Kneeling down next to her cot, she opened her suitcase and pulled out a pair of black sweatpants, some sweat socks and a navy sweatshirt that had a thermal hood. It was comfortable, warm, and huge on her—but she loved it.

She pulled off her shirt, bra, jeans, and socks, glad that she was too fired up to feel the coldness of the night air. She had

to admit that she was stunned to see Sam. She was also surprised by the way he spoke. He had changed. He had become arrogant. And obnoxious. As she pulled on her thermal socks and then her sweatpants, her mind replayed the scene.

She didn't care if it *was* Sam McCoy. She was through playing the meek and defensive mouse who apologized for living. She had given up her friendship with Sam and her time with her family because of Sam's father. She had learned the hard way what kindness got her. She would not let it happen again.

"I can't believe that guy!" she muttered as she pulled the sweatshirt over her head and smoothed it down over her thighs. Pulling her long hair

free of its elastic, she reached for the brush that sat in her open suitcase and began to brush her hair vigorously. After a moment, she pulled the hood up to protect her head from the coldness of the mountain air at night. She threw the brush into the suitcase and rubbed her eyes tiredly. She had to get some sleep. She knew that she would feel better once she was rested.

She retrieved the lantern, set it beside her cot and climbed between the layers of her sleeping bag and blankets. She punched the pillow a few times and turned it over once in an effort to get comfortable.

“Come to Colorado, Rachel,” she

muttered angrily, mimicking her cousin Roy. "Stay at Parry Peak Campground near Twin Lakes." She repeated the words that she now realized were a calculated attempt at putting her in the direct path of Sam McCoy. She was going to kill Roy when she saw him.

Finally, she turned onto her right side and rubbed her left temple gingerly, wincing slightly at the tenderness in her left cheek. She leaned forward and slowly extinguished the light then lay back and tried to breathe slowly and evenly in an attempt to soothe herself.

"God, you have to give me a break here," she muttered angrily.

She punched her pillow once more then closed her eyes determinedly and

concentrated on the noises of the night. The darkness in the tent surrounded her with a sense of quiet. Before long, she could feel herself beginning to calm down.

Nature's night sounds enveloped her, and she could feel the peacefulness soothing her nerves. It was as if the mountains were singing to her and calming her heart. She knew that this was where her healing would take place and her creativity would blossom. The mountains would revive her, and no one was going to ruin it for her.

"No more complications in my life. No more men," she whispered to herself calmly, sure of her quiet vow as she

drifted off into an exhausted sleep. She had made enough decisions during the past seven days to last her a lifetime, and she was determined to keep them all—especially the last one.

* * * *

Sam McCoy continued his late-night walk around the campground. All the sites were quiet and no campfires were smoldering. He zipped his vest higher and pulled the brow of his hat lower over his face, trying to protect himself from the bitter coldness of the night. He circled around the inner section of the campground and headed toward his site, glad when he passed the wooden sign

that identified his spot as the one designated for the campground host.

It had been a long time since a woman had lost her temper with him. More than ten years. He had enjoyed it.

The women who were members of the social circle that he found himself a part of back in Denver were reserved and aloof, very rarely showing emotions. Not like this woman at all. He smiled as he remembered the fire that flashed in her brown eyes and the words she spoke with such genuine anger. It was refreshing to find a woman with a backbone.

He walked back to his camper, opened the door and stepped up inside, securely

locking the door behind him. Taking off his vest, he threw it onto the bed that extended to the left of the camper then removed his boots, shirt, and jeans. He reached forward to retrieve his gray sweatpants and sweatshirt from the bed. He pulled them on quickly, the coolness of the night air making him shiver slightly. Turning, he reached for the lantern on the table to turn it down then climbed up onto the bed on the right side of the camper. He settled under the many blankets, leaned back against the pillows, and rested his hands beneath his head as he looked out the mesh window that faced the campsites. His eyes followed the distant lantern light that moved across the campground and

disappeared into the tent at the farthest campsite. He knew it had to be her. He watched until the light went out. His mind began to drift, and he found himself thinking and analyzing his life yet again.

He closed his eyes and sighed tiredly. He rubbed his forehead to ease the ache that was beginning. He knew it came from his inability to stop thinking about the events of the last few years and his relationship with Allison.

Allison had been the one woman that he had chosen to share his life and dreams with. They had made plans together for their future. They had planned a life that they would have and the children that they would create. They

had been engaged for only six months when he had realized that she didn't really want those things. Saying that she did was only a means to an end. He knew now that she dreamed of a life as the wife of a prominent doctor at Denver Memorial Hospital who was the son of one of Denver's wealthiest citizens. She had wanted a home the size of his father's to impress the rest of society. She had wanted to attend the society functions that made him sick at the waste of money that served to encourage the decadence of the elite social class.

What Allison didn't want was Sam as he really wanted to live his life. She didn't want to have the children that Sam ached to hold and help grow. She didn't

want anything that was even remotely what Sam hoped that his future would hold.

He had called off the engagement despite Allison's protests. Sam already knew that it was the best thing for the both of them. He would not have been happy in Denver no matter how well he did at the hospital, and Allison would never have been happy here in the mountains.

When he had spoken to her about leaving the hospital and setting up a practice in the mountain towns, her cool reserve had disappeared and her delicately beautiful face had contorted in anger, demanding that he not be selfish.

When she had used the argument that his father would not stand for it, Sam had stopped trying to explain what he was feeling or what he wanted for their future. It didn't matter. His father had interfered in his life for the last time.

He turned onto his left side and tried to take his mind off the events that had led to his decision to stay at the campground for the summer. He had contacted Roy for help, and they had come up with the plan to find a peaceful haven for him while he thought things through.

Allison's blue eyes invaded his thoughts. He kept seeing the way she walked and the way she talked. He remembered the way she touched him,

kissed him, and made love with him. He wondered now just how much of her actions were a calculated plan to set her place in society and a part of the McCoy fortune, and how much of it was genuine. It didn't really matter now. He needed to put those memories behind him. He needed to rest, and he especially needed to move on with his life.

He had already made the decision that he would join a medical practice in the mountains once the summer was through. By then he would be well rested and ready to begin his life without Allison, and far away from his father and his father's influence. It really was all for the best. He just wished the

disappointment and sadness would go away. He knew that his sadness was not because of Allison. He was sad that there was no special woman in his life. He was completely honest with himself when he admitted that Allison was certainly not the woman he would ever want to have a future with. He was disappointed because he knew that there was very little chance that he would ever find a kind woman who was loving and gentle, who wanted a family, and who valued a simple life.

He lay there quietly for a few minutes when haunting brown eyes invaded his thoughts. Soft brown eyes that flashed with specks of fire when angry were vivid in his mind. He found himself

smiling at the memory, trying to understand their strange familiarity. For the first time in months, memories of Allison did not keep him awake. Instead, his thoughts were of the young woman who had threatened to pummel him with her rubber mallet.

He smiled as he settled deeper under the warmth of the covers and found that his body was beginning to relax. He hoped that he would finally be able to get a decent night's sleep.

“This might be an enjoyable and interesting summer after all,” he whispered out loud before he yawned widely and closed his eyes. For the first time in a long time, he fell asleep with

hope in his heart and a smile on his face.

Chapter 6

Sam stood silently in the kitchen area of his camper, gazing out the mesh window into the stillness of the campground. He liked the quiet of the early morning hours. How different life was here. Not at all like his life in Denver. His hectic schedule at the hospital had worn him out. He had hated his life there.

He wanted a personal side to his practice that could never be achieved at Denver Memorial. There, his patients had become a series of blurred faces that were pushed by him with alarming speed in an effort to treat as many people in a

day as possible. He found himself losing the personal touch that he craved. He would only be able to accomplish what he wanted by being a part of a practice here in the mountain towns that had given him so much peace and joy when he was growing up.

He tucked his blue flannel shirt into his jeans then pulled on his heavy, black hooded sweatshirt to protect himself from the chill of the morning. Reaching forward, he carefully poured himself a cup of hot coffee from the small coffeepot that sat on the miniature stove before him.

“Not exactly roughing it,” he said quietly, laughing as he sat down at the small table to drink his coffee. He

sipped at the hot brew and looked out at the farthest campsite.

He could see the young woman moving about the site and knew from her sureness that she was an efficient and experienced camper. She had set up a portable stove and was cooking breakfast. He also had to give her credit for setting up her tent alone and in the dark, *and* doing it correctly. He wasn't about to give her more credit for anything else, though.

He had learned not to rush to judgment the hard way. He considered himself a pretty smart guy, but he was the first one to admit that he had been an idiot to be so fooled by a woman who only saw him

for the social status that he could give her and the expensive lifestyle that he could provide for her.

“Sam, are you up?” a man’s voice called from outside the camper.

“Come on in, Roy,” Sam called out, standing and leaning forward to open the door for him before stepping back to give him room to enter. “Want a cup of coffee?” he asked quietly.

“I sure could use one, thanks,” Roy Monroe accepted the offer tiredly as he stepped up into the camper.

Sam handed his friend a filled cup and couldn’t help but smile as the ranger accepted the coffee and sat tiredly across from him at the table. Roy had stood by him through the years. He was a

good friend that he valued.

“Rough night?” Sam asked him.

Roy took off his ranger hat and placed it on the bench seat beside him. He ran his hands through his light brown hair and smiled weakly at the man across from him. The years of friendship that he shared with Sam, and the understanding it afforded him, was a comfort that he needed right then.

“Paulette had me up half the night with her cravings,” he explained tiredly. “I think pregnancy is harder on men than it is on women,” he told his friend seriously.

Sam laughed softly. “I don’t think your wife would agree,” he told him smiling.

“Maybe not,” Roy conceded. “But I sure believe it.”

Sam smiled and took another sip of his coffee. “How’s Paulette feeling?” he asked seriously, the doctor in him surfacing. “She’s had a pretty rough time of it.”

“I never should have agreed to let her try and get pregnant,” Roy said worriedly, leaning back in his seat and facing his good friend squarely. “The doctor told her she would be risking her health to chance getting pregnant, but she locked herself in the bathroom and wouldn’t come out until I said yes to us trying to have a baby.”

“You talked to her obstetrician last

week and he seemed to feel she's doing pretty well," Sam reminded him, knowing that he needed to assure his friend. "His only recommendation was that she should be taking more periods of bed rest. I'm sure you can convince her to stay in bed a little more for both her sake and the baby's."

"Keeping her in bed is what got us into this predicament in the first place," Roy told Sam, smiling for the first time.

Sam laughed softly. He was not ashamed to admit to himself that he was a little jealous of his friend's life. "Try to get her to rest more, Roy," he told him quietly. "It will only help them both."

Roy nodded and placed his cup down on the table. "I'll lay down the law when

I get home,” he told Sam seriously.

“Yeah, right,” Sam said, laughing. “I’m sure Paulette will let you lay down the law when you get home.”

“I’ll just have to convince her without letting her know I’m laying down the law,” Roy said quietly, amending his decision.

“Good idea.”

Roy looked at his friend and nodded. They drank their coffee in silence, but Roy was watching his friend carefully. He was worried about him.

“You look tired,” he said finally when he saw the circles under Sam’s eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Sam assured him honestly. “I

actually had a pretty good night's sleep. It's just that I had a late night, too. I took a walk around the campground around midnight and had a little confrontation with a late arrival at site twenty-seven. I guess it's true what they say about Easterners being unfriendly."

"What do you mean?"

"Her plates say she's from Connecticut. She sure is tough," Sam told him, smiling as he put down his coffee mug. "You should have seen her. She told me that she could take care of herself. I know that she wanted to hit me with the mallet she was holding. Of course I have to admit I wasn't exactly cordial to her." He couldn't help but smile wickedly at his admission. "She

was pretty mad.” Sam looked out across the campground through the mesh window, forgetting for the moment that Roy was there. “I’m curious to get a good look at her this morning. It was pretty dark last night and I really only got a look at her eyes. And her eyes told me she was pretty pissed at me.”

Roy smiled as he put down his coffee cup and picked up his hat to place it squarely on his head. “Let’s make an official call on this woman,” he said suddenly, standing up and facing Sam. “How do I look?”

Sam’s coffee mug stopped halfway to his mouth. “You look fine,” he answered, confused. “Why?”

“Do I look impressive?” he asked seriously.

“Ranger Roy, you would impress the stripe off a skunk,” Sam joked.

“Good, let’s go,” Roy said quickly, opening the door and stepping out before Sam could question him further.

Sam barely had time to grab for his own hat and clipboard before he raced after Roy. He put his hat on and hurried to keep up with his friend. It was obvious that Roy wasn’t going to offer any more information, and Sam was a little confused. Roy had never singled out any camper before unless they were violating some law. He usually just ran a general check on the area and made sure

that all campers had paid for their sites. Roy's steps quickened even more as they approached site twenty-seven, and Sam didn't miss the way he was straightening his already perfect uniform.

"Roy, what're you up to?" Sam asked him suspiciously.

Roy raised his hand to stop him from questioning him further. They were already at the site. The woman had her back to them and was bending over a big pan of water that was on her portable stove. She was bundled up against the brisk morning air, her hooded thermal jacket zipped tightly and the hood pulled up to shield her face from the coolness.

"Excuse me, miss," Roy broke the silence.

Rachel spun around quickly and faced the two men calmly, her face partially concealed by the hood. She resisted the urge to go to Roy and hug the stuffing out of him.

Sam looked to Roy for an explanation of his actions and had to hold back the smile that threatened to burst forth when he saw the official stance that Roy had taken. He had never seen Roy act so formally in his job before.

“I’m Ranger Monroe and I’m investigating a complaint that I’ve received concerning your late arrival at this campground,” he told her in his most authoritative voice.

“Really?” Rachel questioned slowly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Roy said formally.

“Well, my arrival was late, I’ll admit that, but I was quiet and set up my things as quickly as I could. No one would have even noticed me if it hadn’t been for the nosiness of this man,” she told him angrily, pointing accusingly at Sam. “I would suggest that you have a talk with him about the way he’s harassing campers. You should arrest him or at least throw him out of the campground. Do you have that authority, Mr. Smoky the Bear?” she challenged him.

“What did you call me?” Roy asked quietly, stepping toward her menacingly.

“You heard me, you poor excuse for a policeman,” she flashed back at him

angrily.

“Now wait a minute, this is getting a little out of hand,” Sam finally spoke up, stepping in and putting his hands out between them. He couldn’t believe the hostility between them. He had never seen Roy act this way in all the years he had known him.

“You’re right, it is,” Rachel agreed, her eyes never leaving the ranger’s face. “Do you treat all your campers this way, Roy Monroe? I’m going to have to speak to Paulette about keeping you happier so you won’t be so grouchy on the job. I thought you two were going to make love after I hung up with you the other night. That should have helped with your grumpiness.”

Sam turned to Roy and saw the smile of tenderness on his friend's face and had to step back as the two reached out to embrace each other. Roy was lifting the woman off the ground and hugging her so hard she could barely speak.

"You two obviously know one another," Sam said dryly, watching the disgustingly sentimental scene before him. There was something oddly familiar about this woman that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Roy planted a big kiss on Rachel's cheek and carefully lowered her to the ground to stand before him. "I've missed you, Rachel," he told her sincerely. He hugged her gently, not wanting to let her

go.

“I’ve missed you, too, Roy,” Rachel answered happily, unshed tears making her soft brown eyes sparkle brightly.

“Rachel?” Sam whispered, confused, before the full realization of who was standing before him hit him.

“You okay?” Roy whispered to her against her face so that only she could hear him.

“I am now,” she told him honestly, feeling better to be in the safety of the mountains with her family and friends.

“Rachel, Sam is this campground’s host for the summer.”

“I figured that out last night,” Rachel said sarcastically, stepping out of Roy’s arms and giving him a look that made

him cringe.

She turned to face Sam and looked at him with interest. He had matured, but he still looked like the Sam who had constantly haunted her thoughts.

“Are you always so pleasant to people or did you reserve your special brand of welcome just for me?” Rachel asked Sam, looking him square in the eyes, a little angry at the way her heart flipped as she looked into the crystal blueness.

“You look a little different without a mallet in your hand,” Sam told her, smiling. “Sorry about that.”

“Yeah right,” Rachel retorted, not letting him off the hook just yet.

She faced him stonily. As much as she

wanted to hug him and return to the comfortable friendship that they once had, she cautioned herself to keep her distance. A lot of years had passed. She had changed, and he probably had, too. Her eyes lost the sparkle that had been there moments before as she had greeted her cousin.

“I suppose I have to be nice to you since you’re a friend of Roy’s,” she told him seriously, irritation evident in her voice.

“I thought I was your friend, too,” Sam told her quietly, a little confused by her distance.

Rachel took a calming breath and stepped away from the two of them. Keeping herself apart from Sam might be

the only way she could get through the hurt of seeing him once again.

“That was a long time ago,” she began tiredly. She looked up at the man who still held her heart even after all these years of separation, and felt a sense of panic. She had to keep her distance to protect herself and her heart. “Look, it’s probably best if you just stay on your side of the campground, and I’ll stay on mine.”

“Hold it!” Roy stopped them. “Let’s just start over, shall we?”

He looked at both of them for a moment and then smiled. He refused to give up on the plan that he and Paulette had devised. He was going to get these

two together if it killed him. And it just might.

“I have to get going but I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll let Paulette know you’re here, and we’ll set up a day for you to come for dinner and visit. Just let me know what will be good for you and I’ll make sure Paulette is up to it before we set the day.”

Rachel turned to face him and smiled at the mention of his wife. “I’d love to come by anytime. I can’t wait to see Paulette.”

“Good, then it’s settled,” Roy said happily, turning to leave. “Paulette will be glad to see you again, too, Sam. See you tomorrow.” He called those final words over his shoulder, walking

quickly to his truck before Rachel could protest. He quickly climbed into his truck and drove away.

Rachel stared after her cousin but didn't trust herself to answer him. He had trapped her good and he knew it. She turned and was about to walk back to her tent when she nearly collided with Sam. His hands came up quickly to hold on to her arms to steady her. She brushed them off her and stepped back as if she had been burned by his touch.

"Don't you have anything to do?" she asked him angrily, her eyes flashing.

Sam looked down at her silently for a moment then a small smile began to tug on his mouth. He tipped his hat to her

slightly then turned and walked back toward his camper.

Rachel watched him leave and found that she was breathing heavily. He had an unbelievable ability to make her so incredibly angry. She turned and walked to the pot of water heating on her portable stove. She stuck her finger in it to see if it was warm yet and pulled back immediately as the water scalded her.

“Just great!” she muttered, putting her finger in the bucket of cold water that sat beside the stove. She reached up with her good hand and turned off the flame under the pan.

She nursed her finger for a few minutes then got to work. She cleaned up

the dishes and utensils from breakfast then carried the cooled pan of water to the picnic table that was set off to the left of her tent. She went into her tent and brought out a bottle of shampoo, a brush and a towel, and proceeded to wash her hair with the warmed water. Using a big cup to pour the water over her head to wet and rinse her hair, she sighed with satisfaction as the warmth of the water soothed her. When she was finished, she wrapped her head in the towel and sat down on the top of the picnic table.

She rubbed her head vigorously with the towel then placed it beside her on the table, picked up the brush, and began to brush her hair. When she was finished,

she looked up at the sky and breathed in deeply. It was a beautiful day.

She had a lot to do. First she would take the warmed water into the tent and take a sponge bath. Afterward, she would drive into town for supplies and ice. When she returned she would finally get to work on the edits for her novel. She knew she would be able to get a lot done once she was settled and able to focus on her work. Once she immersed herself in her writing, she knew that nothing would be able to invade her thoughts.

As long as Sam stays on his side of the campground, her mind added silently.

Chapter 7

Rachel closed the lid on the chest cooler and surveyed her tent. All the food and supplies had been put away and the tent was clean and orderly. Satisfied that all of her chores were done, she grabbed a white silk scarf and tied her long hair back into a ponytail. The day had become warmer and she had changed into a pair of jeans shorts and a white and blue checked cotton blouse with three-quarter sleeves. She wanted to take a walk along the rushing stream that she had seen on the other side of the campground and just take some time to daydream.

She needed to relax and enjoy her surroundings for just a little bit before she sat down and began working on her book. Her laptop was already charged and was ready for an afternoon of editing. The car charger had been one of the best purchases she had ever made—especially now that she was in a campground that had no electricity.

Stepping out of the tent, she zipped it closed behind her and headed straight across the campground toward the stream. She could hear the sound of someone chopping wood as she neared the stream and could see a man at the bottom of a small hill near a circle of rocks. His back was to her as he raised

the ax and swung it down powerfully to split the log. He wore no shirt and his broad chest and bulging muscles were covered with perspiration. Rachel couldn't help but admire the strength and the beauty of his body. She mentally made a note of the scene before her. It would be perfect to use in a novel that she would write in the future.

She started down the hill to walk toward the stream and found that the hill was steeper than she had thought. She had to run the last couple of steps to catch her balance before she could stop at the bottom. The man threw aside the newly split piece of wood and turned to face her. Rachel's breath caught in her throat in surprise as she realized that it

was Sam, and her eyes flashed with uncertainty.

Perspiration covered his body, making the sculpted muscles of his chest glisten. His stomach was a six pack of heaven and, once again, she fantasized about kissing his chest and circling his nipples with her tongue. She followed the path of dark hair that lightly dusted his chest and trailed the midline of his body to escape her gaze below the waistband of his jeans. How she wanted to trace that line of hair and cup the hidden treasure behind his pants. Her breathing was labored as she looked up to meet his gaze, the crystal blueness of them seeing straight into her soul. She was afraid that

he could see directly into her hidden thoughts and desires. She had to keep her distance from him. Her heart couldn't take much more.

Sam noticed her at the exact same moment and stopped his chore to watch her silently. He saw the look in her eyes and wondered sadly what had happened to the young woman whose comfortable friendship with him had made him so happy. He wasn't sure what he saw right then, but he was sure she was gazing at him with open admiration, and something else. Perhaps desire? No. It couldn't be.

“No, Rachel, we do not have electricity and we do not have showers,” he teased her, trying to rekindle the easy

relationship that they had once had.

Rachel looked at him silently for a moment, unable to speak because of the absolute gorgeousness of him. She shook herself mentally, not wanting to jeopardize the friendship that they had once had but knowing that she had to keep him distant for her own protection. She couldn't take the deep sadness she knew she would feel over the lost love that she knew only she felt. The added pressure of a one-sided love was something she couldn't handle. Especially now. Her face mirrored her myriad of emotions until the anger and determination settled over her to form a barrier of protection.

“Maybe you should drive into one of the bigger cities and see if you can find a nice hotel to your liking,” he told her finally, his voice harsher than he had meant it to be. He had been thinking about Allison again and Rachel had just shown up at the wrong time. Seeing the anger on her face just pushed him that extra bit too far.

“If you’re trying to make me angry you’re doing a wonderful job,” she told him evenly, fighting to control her temper. She wished she hadn’t walked near his site. She wished she had approached the stream from further away so that she wouldn’t have had to go anywhere near him.

Without another word, she turned and walked away from him. She couldn't help but mutter to herself as she made her way through the area of trees that separated her from the stream. She had to get as far away from him as quickly as possible before her mood was totally ruined. If that happened, her afternoon would be useless and unproductive.

She followed the path along the edge of the water then snaked her way through the maze of trees to find a secluded spot far away from the sites of the campground. Once she stood next to the crystal stream she was determined to force herself to forget all about Sam McCoy.

It was so beautiful here. She had to find a way to keep Sam from her thoughts, just as she had done for the past ten years. She walked a little further downstream and climbed across some rocks to one large boulder that sat in the middle of the rushing water. She sat down on it, looked down into the clearness of the stream and found herself absorbed by the beauty around her. Everything was so peaceful.

Thirty minutes passed quickly but she remained where she was. For the first time in such a long time, she was totally relaxed and at peace. As she looked into the sparkling water, memories drifted through her mind, and she found that she

was becoming overwhelmed by her loneliness.

“Enough of that,” she whispered, standing quickly and carefully walking across the stones to make her way back toward the streambed. She would not allow herself to be dragged down into a depression. She had to get back to her site and begin working on her edits.

As she walked toward the trees a bird flew overhead, catching her attention. She looked up to admire it, for the moment not paying attention to the ground before her. She stepped on a small rock which turned under her right foot, making her twist her ankle and lose her balance. She reached out to prevent herself from falling and succeeded in

grabbing hold of a tree branch that was within easy reach beside her. She fell forward and scraped her arm against another branch before she was able to regain her balance. Her blouse sleeve tore slightly and pain shot through her right arm.

She sat down on the ground, not knowing which to grab first, her ankle or her arm. Both were throbbing with pain. She took a deep breath and tried to compose herself, fighting the pain and frustration. Once she had her emotions under control, she began to assess the damages. Her arm was bleeding but the cut didn't look deep. After catching her breath, she stood carefully to test her

ankle. It was sore but she didn't think that it was broken. She thought she could walk if she were careful and took her time to get back to her tent. She knew that she would have to baby it for a few days.

“Rachel, you're batting a thousand!” she muttered angrily to herself as she tried to hobble forward. When she put her weight on her right foot she had to bite back the cry of pain that nearly escaped her. She stopped for a moment and wiped the beads of perspiration from her forehead in an effort to calm herself then headed slowly back toward the stream.

She sat at the edge of the rushing water and removed her sneaker and sock. She

gaspd as she submerged her foot into the icy coldness of the mountain stream. She kept it there as long as she could stand it, but the frigid temperature forced her to take it out within a few minutes. She held her foot in her hands, trying to rub some warmth back into it.

She decided it would be best if she tried to walk back to her tent before all the feeling came back to her injured foot. She put on her sock and then carefully eased her sneaker back on, lacing it tightly to give her foot more support. She stood carefully and began the slow journey back to her tent.

She hoped that Sam wasn't in the same spot she had left him less than an hour

before. She didn't want to have to pass him and risk him seeing that she had gotten hurt. She couldn't handle him touching her or showing any concern for her. Her wall of protection would crumble if he was the least bit kind to her. Or sarcastic. That would be all that she needed—his sarcasm on top of her pain.

She hobbled through the trees and concentrated on walking as normally as she could once she entered the clearing next to Sam's camper. He was stacking logs when she emerged from the seclusion of the trees. She was glad that he was ignoring her and she was able to pass by him without his comments. Quietly and as quickly as she could, she

tried to walk up the small hill but had to stop halfway up when the pain in her foot became too much for her to continue.

“Are you lost?” he called to her, goading her from the bottom of the hill.

Rachel turned to face him angrily. “I don’t find any humor in your obnoxious remarks, and I would prefer that you save them for someone else,” she told him abruptly.

Sam folded his arms across his chest as he looked up at her silently. He was covered in perspiration from the exertion of his chores. “Reprimand received and noted,” he said quietly, nodding his head slightly in agreement.

He really had to stop teasing Rachel. There was just something about her that made him revert to the same relationship they had when they were younger. He had to remind himself that she was no longer a teenager. She was a mature woman who had no right to look as appealing as she did.

He couldn't help but take in the full vision of her and smiled in appreciation. It was then that he saw the blood on her right sleeve. He was beside her in three long strides, scaring her in the process and making her back up in fear. When he reached out to touch her arm she panicked and pulled away from him sharply.

She tried to continue up the hill but her

ankle gave way beneath her and she collapsed to the ground. He was by her side immediately and reached out to help her up but she pushed his hands away in anger.

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed up at him. She saw the confusion on his face but she didn’t care. “I can take care of myself. I don’t need anything from you, so leave me alone.” She tried to stand but the pain in her foot forced her to sit back down on the ground.

Before she knew what was happening, she was being lifted by strong arms and carried up the remainder of the hill. The expression on Sam’s face was calm but determined. He ignored her as he carried

her up to his camper. Rachel had no choice but to hold on to his powerful arms as he carried her upward. She may be stubborn but she was not stupid enough to not hold on.

She was uncomfortably aware of his lack of clothing and did not like being forced to touch his naked, although drool-worthy, body. His muscles were taut under her hands, making her aware of the incredible strength that this man possessed. He wasn't even winded when he reached the top of the hill. She was shocked into silence until she realized that he was heading toward his camper.

"Put me down!" she said finally, afraid that he would actually take her

into his camper.

“Be quiet,” he said coldly, ignoring her protests as he carried her inside the camper and set her down gently on the double bed that was set up at the right side of the camper. He left her there for just a moment while he opened a cabinet below the sink and began pulling out medical supplies.

Rachel took the moment to survey her surroundings. The pop-up camper was well organized. Two mattresses extended from either side of the camper with a table with bench seats and a small cooking area complete with a sink and a stove in the center of the camper. There was a small area to walk around in at the

entrance. Supplies for cooking and cleaning were stacked neatly on the counter that connected the small sink and stove area. There were books stacked on the opposite bed and clothes were folded neatly beside them. She looked down at the small ledge that was below her where he had placed her on the mattress and saw a plastic container filled with water on top of what appeared to be a chest refrigerator.

“Take off your shirt,” he told her firmly, his deep voice invading her thoughts.

She looked up at him in shock. “What?” she asked incredulously. “Are you crazy?”

“No, I’m a doctor,” he reminded her

calmly.

Rachel looked at him with instant anger. She had no response to his honest statement. Instead she crossed her arms across her chest and looked at him with a stubbornness that wasn't about to be breached.

He stared at her for a moment then reached forward, ignoring the way she cringed away from him, and took hold of the ripped seam at the top of her sleeve. With one quick pull he separated the sleeve from her shirt.

Rachel gasped in shock. “You *are* crazy!” she yelled.

“Shut up,” he told her calmly.

Rachel opened her mouth to speak then

thought better of it and snapped it shut. It was better to lose her shirtsleeve than her dignity.

He set to work quickly and efficiently, opening up packages and laying them out before him. He picked up an antiseptic gauze and raised it to clean the wound.

“This may hurt a little,” he told her, hesitating for a moment.

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy that,” Rachel said angrily, turning her head away from him and staring at the camper door.

“I’ll enjoy every minute of it,” he answered her quietly, holding her arm gently but firmly as he began to clean the wound.

She gasped slightly at the initial stinging of the antiseptic then clamped

her mouth firmly shut, refusing to let him see her pain. She felt a coolness of air brush across her skin as Sam slowly blew on her skin. She closed her eyes at the relief from the pain only to clench her teeth together at the sensation of Sam's gentle caring. A familiar ache tugged at her stomach at the desire she had for him and the loss she felt from being away from him for so long. The silence continued as he taped three bandages across the cut and covered them with a sterile gauze.

"I've put butterfly bandages on your arm," he told her quietly as he taped down the gauze. "The cut wasn't deep enough to require stitches but it won't

heal neatly without the butterfly strips.”

His explanation was brief but helpful, and Rachel was glad for it. He didn't have to explain anything to her. She grudgingly admitted to herself that it was a kind thing to do. She could just imagine that he would give that same consideration to any patient.

Taking a wet cloth, Sam cleaned away the rest of the blood from her arm and dried it carefully with the towel beside him. His touch was gentle but firm, and she could tell that he was competent in what he was doing.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” he asked her, his voice professional.

“I'm fine,” she answered quickly, pushing his hands away and leaning

forward to get down from the bed.

She needed to get away from him. She couldn't stand the pain of being this close to him once again. She had to keep her distance. She had to stay strong even if it meant acting as if she were angry when she knew in her heart that it was because she wanted to pull Sam into her arms and never let him go. Instead she gave him one last strong shove and quickly tried to stand.

He took firm hold of her arms and sat her back down on the bed. She was uncomfortably aware of the way that his biceps bulged as he detained her. It was painful to view his body. It was torture being so close to him that she could

easily reach out and touch the washboard muscles of his stomach. She couldn't prevent her eyes from traveling from the very attractive patch of black hair that covered his bulging pectoral muscles to follow the dark hair down the center line of his body, blushing slightly as it disappeared below his waistband to an area Rachel often dreamed about.

“Rachel, what is wrong with you?” he demanded, frustrated by her attitude.

“Nothing is wrong with me,” Rachel insisted, pushing at his chest to get him as far away from her as possible so she could get down from the bed and leave. “I just want to go back to my site.”

Sam stopped her with strong hands on her shoulders. He wasn't hurting her but

he was determined to have her remain where she was for the moment.

“If you won’t tell me where else you’re hurt, I’ll be forced to conduct a complete physical examination,” he told her calmly when she refused to talk.

“Just who do you think you are?” she demanded, roughly pulling herself free from his grasp. Her eyes bore into his and was somewhat surprised by his lack of reaction.

“Dr. Sam McCoy at your service,” he told her formally, bowing slightly at the unnecessary introduction.

“Shouldn’t you be working at a hospital somewhere instead of working in a campground for the summer?” she

challenged him angrily. “Why are you here?”

“Because the police are looking for me for beating up a patient who refused to answer my questions,” he answered quickly.

Rachel had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. She had to admire his quickness—that was for sure. If she wasn’t careful he would melt her resolve very quickly. She sat back slightly, folding her arms across her chest as she faced him. She looked at him silently and knew that she was going to lose this standoff.

“I twisted my ankle,” she said finally. “That’s *all*.” She stressed the last word, unable to stand it if he touched her

anywhere else.

He nodded and reached forward to take her two legs gently within his hands then carefully turned her and pushed at her shoulder to force her to lie down on her back. He removed both sneakers and socks and examined her ankles in complete silence.

“Did you already soak your foot in the stream?” he asked her quietly when he felt the coolness of her skin.

“Contrary to popular belief, I’m not a total idiot,” she told him angrily.

He smiled slightly and looked up to face her. “I don’t think you’re a total idiot,” he protested calmly. “Only a partial idiot.”

“You’re just full of charm, aren’t you?” she asked him, turning away from him when she saw the amusement that crossed his features. She turned her head to stare up at the top of the camper and ignore him while he wrapped her ankle with a compression bandage and replaced her socks and sneakers, tying the right one loosely so as not to put any more pressure on her injured foot. He turned then and started to put away the medical supplies. When he saw her trying to get down from the bed, he stood up quickly and faced her.

“Don’t put your weight on that foot,” he told her abruptly.

“And just how am I supposed to get

back to my tent? Fly?" she asked him, barely able to control her temper.

Before she could stop him, he was beside her and lifting her into his arms once again. He carried her from his camper and walked the length of the campground toward her tent.

"How much do I owe you for your services, Dr. McCoy?" she asked him sarcastically.

"It's on the house," he said quickly, ignoring her as he carried her the remaining distance to her site.

He deposited her on the lounge chair beside her tent and straightened to look down at her. Turning, he unzipped her tent and disappeared inside it before Rachel could protest and came out with

two pillows. Lifting her foot gently, he placed one pillow beneath it and one pillow under the crook of her knee then took a step backward.

“Keep your foot elevated and stay off it as much as possible. If you need anything just holler. I’ll be able to hear you from my camper. Loud noises carry in the mountains.”

“Ass,” Rachel muttered, ignoring the soft laughter that her comment caused.

He turned then and started to walk away. “I’ll check on you later,” he called to her without turning around.

“Your bedside manner stinks!” Rachel called after him angrily.

Sam stopped walking as soon as the

words left her mouth. He turned around and walked slowly back toward her. Rachel's heart began to beat a little faster as she saw the way his muscular body had tensed and his blue eyes had darkened.

Flashes of another angry man lashing out and hitting her face made her chest constrict in sudden fear and pain. She held her breath as he leaned forward and placed his hands on either side of her on the arms of her chair. He stared into her eyes, his face mere inches from her own.

"Honey," he said quietly, his voice a husky calm. "My bedside manner would leave you weak and satisfied." He looked at her silently for a moment, his eyes sparkling with humor and certainty.

He searched her face silently then stood and turned to walk away. He didn't look back.

Rachel sat there completely stunned. All her anger and fear were gone. As she watched him walk away from her, she found herself in awe of his controlled strength and sensuality. Goodness, she wanted to throw her arms around him and feel the safety of the comfortable friendship she had felt as a kid with him and Roy. She was also not ashamed to admit that being the recipient of his bedside manner was exactly what she had wanted for as long as she could remember.

When she saw him disappear into his

camper, she leaned her head back against her lounge chair and let out a groan of frustration. Closing her eyes did not shut out the picture of his incredibly sexy body or the feel of him holding her so tightly against him as he carried her.

The dream she had of waking up with him and making love with him was very clear in her memory. He had demanded that she belonged to him. He had made love to her with such fierceness she had been stunned by the level of desire and ownership. She remembered how she was pregnant with his baby. It was a beautiful dream, but she knew it was not something that could ever possibly be her reality. She had to ignore that dream. She had to deny her need for him.

What she wanted to do was to pull her to him and throw her arms around him. She wanted to kiss him within an inch of his life and pull him deep into her body. God help her.

She knew then that she would have to leave the campground. If she was this out of control after only being with him one day, she would not last a second. The very thought of being so close to him and having to keep herself away from him exhausted her. In her already weakened state since her attack, she knew she didn't have it in her to fight anymore.

She had to stay angry with Sam. It was her only defense. But she was so tired.

She wasn't up to any more arguments. Besides, she knew that she really should be nice to him. He deserved it. She wanted more than anything to be nice to him. She wanted to do more than that actually. She sighed tiredly and rubbed her temples as an ache began to pound there. She needed rest.

"I'll just close my eyes and relax for a few minutes," she whispered as she settled herself more comfortably on the lounge chair. In a matter of minutes she was sleeping soundly.

"Do not be so filled with anger and suspicion, Rachel," the angel Bernadette whispered to her as she slept. "Sam is a good and a kind man. He will value you. You need to give him the chance to show

you just how important you are to him.”

Rachel moved restlessly in her chair, turning toward the gentle warmth and the sweet smell that surrounded her. “No,” she whispered as she slept. “He’ll hurt me and then leave me.”

“No, sweet child,” Bernadette said softly. “Sam is the man who is destined to be yours. Open your heart and allow your love to flourish. Sam needs you. You must help him heal. You must be the woman who is his future. You will have beautiful babies with him.”

Rachel smiled as she slept. Bernadette surrounded her with her pink wings, keeping her safe and warm as she sent her sweet dreams of Sam holding her

tenderly and kissing her as she held their baby in her arms.

“I want that,” Rachel whispered, unable to keep the single tear from falling from the corner of her eye to slide past the crescent moon birthmark there.

“You deserve that,” Bernadette told her gently, reaching out and touching the single tear with the tip of her index finger. “Sam deserves that.”

“Sam,” Rachel said, moaning softly as she moved restlessly in her chair.

“You will have that, Rachel,” Bernadette promised. “Have faith, my child.”

Rachel relaxed, slipping into the dream that soothed her soul. She kissed

Sam's neck as he leaned in and kissed the top of their baby's head. Yes, Sam did deserve to be happy. She wanted him to be happy with her.

Chapter 8

Rachel felt warmth surrounding her. She snuggled closer toward the body that was leaning against her shoulder. Her eyes opened slowly as she tried to comprehend where she was. She found herself looking straight into Sam's face and she couldn't help but jump in fright at the surprise.

"Must you always sneak up on me?" she asked him angrily.

"I just came by to see if you were okay," he explained, straightening up to stand beside her. "I can see that you are."

He turned to walk away without

another word. Rachel looked down and saw that she was covered with two of her own blankets and realized that Sam must have covered her. His thoughtfulness touched her, and she felt guilty for snapping at him. It was already getting dark and cold, and she would have frozen in her shorts and blouse if he hadn't come by. He was already changed into a red flannel shirt with long sleeves and a down vest. He must have realized that she was not dressed for the coolness of the coming night.

“Sam,” she called to him hesitantly.

He turned and faced her stonily. “I won't bother you again, Rachel. I promise,” he vowed with one hand raised.

“I’m sorry,” she told him sincerely. “I really do appreciate what you’ve done for me. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he told her, nodding. “It would be best if you got changed into some warmer clothes. It gets pretty cold here at night.”

“I remember,” she answered quietly. “Thanks.”

She leaned forward to pull herself up from the chair and found his hands there to help support her. Rather than dismiss his help, she accepted it gratefully and stood next to the chair on one foot. She started to hop toward the tent when he reached out and offered her his arm for support. She hesitated a moment then

placed her cold hand on his arm, impressed by his strength and kindness despite her determination to keep her distance and not feel anything for this man. She hopped toward the tent while he carried the blankets.

They stopped at the tent entrance and she could tell that he was unsure how far to go with her. He opened the flap and held it back for her, letting her hold his arm while she hopped into the entrance.

“I have some chicken and potatoes cooking,” he said finally when she turned to face him. “If you’re up to it, you’re welcome to come over and eat with me—so you won’t have to worry about making dinner for yourself and you can rest your foot.”

His last words were added carefully, making Rachel know that he was hesitant to extend the invitation. She felt a deep sense of guilt at having been so rude to him, but she also acknowledged that Sam wasn't completely innocent in the rudeness department. She hesitated only a moment then smiled sincerely at him.

The smile transformed her whole face and Sam found himself unable to look away from her. Rachel was absolutely beautiful, but it was the memory of her kindness and caring that drew her to him. He wanted that caring friend back in his life. He had missed her.

"I would appreciate the food," she finally told him sincerely.

“I’ll be back in about twenty minutes,” he said, nodding. Turning, he walked back to his campsite.

Rachel watched him walk away, then closed the flap of the tent and hopped toward the back of it to her suitcase. She sat down carefully on the cot and took out her warmest sweats. She laughed as she looked down at the old navy sweatshirt and realized that she had never worn such an outfit to eat dinner with a man before.

It’s not a date, she reminded herself. *He’s just an old friend to have dinner with.*

As she dressed she began to shiver, partially from the cold and partially

from the nervousness at spending an evening with Sam. His kindness was tearing down her walls of defense. It was more difficult to keep herself distant from him—especially since all she ever wanted was to be close to him.

The sweet dream she had experienced just moments before of holding Sam's baby in her arms while Sam leaned forward to kiss his child flashed through her mind. There was an immediate sense of warmth surrounding her. The soothing scent that filled her nose made her smile. She liked the feelings both gave her.

Turning, she quickly undressed and pulled on the warm clothes. She had to admit to herself that she was pretty happy and excited to be spending some

time with Sam. She was also feeling something that she was very much afraid to feel. Hope.

* * * *

True to his word, Sam was back at her campsite in twenty minutes. By then, Rachel was dressed and ready for him. When he reached out to lift her into his arms she couldn't help but shriek in surprise.

"Is this really necessary?" she asked him seriously.

"If we wait for you to hop across the campground, our dinner will be cold before we get there," he explained

patiently.

Rachel couldn't help but smile. She was enjoying herself already. She hated to admit it, but she liked the feel of him holding her and was ashamed of herself for enjoying the innocent intimacy so much. She knew she could not allow herself to become close to him and find herself in the difficult predicament of putting Sam's career and her family at risk. She doubted she could survive the heartbreak of having Sam in her life, even for a short while, and then having to walk away from him again, but she wanted this time with him. She missed him and the easy friendship and comfort that they had with each other.

When they approached his camper, she

saw that it was glowing warmly from the lantern that was placed in the center of the table. He set her down just inside the doorway. She hopped over to the table and sat down. She allowed him to lift her foot and gently turn her body to the right so that her foot and knee could be placed on pillows along the bench seat.

He turned and removed two dishes from the counter and placed one in front of Rachel and the other across from her for himself. Both plates were already filled with half a barbecued chicken and a baked potato each. He reached out to retrieve the plate of corn on the cob, the napkins, and the utensils, and placed them on the table.

“Sorry, I only have water to drink,” he apologized.

“That’s fine,” she insisted, impressed already by his culinary expertise. “Do you always spoil your patients this way?” She couldn’t help but tease him, happy when she saw the small smile that immediately came to him.

“A few hours ago you accused me of treating my patients very poorly,” he reminded her as he poured two glasses of water and placed them on the table before sitting across from her and looking at her very seriously.

Rachel sat back and looked at him. “I’m really sorry about that, Sam,” she apologized sincerely.

He looked at her quietly. She looked so ashamed and forlorn that he couldn't help but smile. "That's okay," he said without hesitation, dismissing it.

"No, it's not," Rachel stopped him. "I know how important being a doctor is to you. I know you care about your patients. That was wrong of me to say what I said. I'm sorry."

Sam searched Rachel's face and saw the sincerity in her eyes. The beautiful brown eyes that looked at him with such sadness were enough to unnerve him. There was such a deep despondency about her that he was worried. He tried to search her face for a clue, but the shadows in the camper prevented him

from getting a really good look at her.

“Apology accepted. Dig in,” he told her, pointing to the food. “I make a mean barbecued chicken if I do say so myself.”

Rachel smiled and picked the chicken up in her hands. She bit into it hungrily and made a sound of pleasure at the taste. Sam smiled and made the same sound back.

“You’re a good cook,” Rachel complimented him as she wiped the corner of her mouth with a napkin.

“Thanks,” Sam said with a mouthful. “I’m a pretty good doctor, too.” He looked at her with blue eyes that were sparkling mischievously.

Rachel looked at him silently for a

moment. She reached forward to lift her glass of water and took a sip before setting it down on the table before her.

“Are you okay, Sam?” she asked him finally, crossing her arms across her chest as she faced him.

“I’m fine,” he answered a little too quickly to be taken as fact.

“You have to admit it’s a little strange that you’re here,” Rachel continued, relentless in her quest to find out what was wrong. “After all, how many doctors do you know that are campground hosts in an obscure campground in the mountains of Colorado?”

Sam smiled as he put down his nearly

devoured piece of chicken. “Just one,” he admitted, sitting back and licking his fingers with total enjoyment. “And now you know one, too.”

Rachel couldn't help but smile as she watched him. “I guess I do at that,” she agreed.

“I hope you and Roy enjoyed your little joke earlier,” he said finally, reaching for the plate of corn on the cob and offering it to her.

“Had you going there, didn't we?” she asked him, laughing as she accepted the corn and placed it on her already full plate.

“That's an understatement,” Sam told her, shaking his head. “I was afraid I was going to have to break up a

fistfight!”

Rachel laughed softly. “I love to tease Roy. He’s so much fun when he’s riled up.”

Sam looked at the woman across from him and couldn’t help but smile. He was enjoying her devilish sense of humor. It was nice to see this side of her personality again. She was acting more like the Rachel he once knew.

“It’s obvious he likes having you around.”

Rachel smiled and nodded. “I miss him a lot. I miss everything about Colorado,” she admitted honestly.

Sam watched her as her vision glazed over and she looked somewhere over his

left shoulder into the darkness beyond. It was amazing how much her face softened as she disappeared into her thoughts.

She looked at Sam's face and smiled at the grown man before her. Her face was suddenly alive with animation. "I seem to remember a certain story about a guy who got into big trouble one summer when he was skinny dipping and Roy took his clothes. Something about a long, naked walk back to the ranch where my Aunt Kay was having a church meeting. Could this guy be you, Sam?" she asked him with wide eyes that were sparkling with humor.

Sam shifted uncomfortably in the bench seat and cleared his throat in

embarrassment. “I don’t think those proper ladies ever had a more interesting meeting before or since,” he admitted, wincing slightly at the memory. “I wanted to kill Roy, but he was smart enough to keep himself scarce until I had cooled down.”

Rachel’s burst of laughter made him smile despite the embarrassing memory. He watched her silently as she took the napkin from the table and wiped away the tears of laughter from her pretty brown eyes.

“I’m glad my humiliation causes you so much enjoyment,” he told her dryly, not really upset at all.

“I’m sorry,” Rachel told him in

between the laughter. "I keep remembering Roy's story. He really enjoyed telling it to me. I keep picturing how you must have looked trying to sneak into my aunt's house to get some clothes and then walking right into the middle of all those sweet old ladies." Rachel burst out laughing again then sobered instantly. "Oh, I'm so sorry. You must have been so embarrassed." She reached out and touched his hand gently as she realized that she might be hurting his feelings.

Sam looked down at the soft hand that touched his and smiled at her sudden concern. He looked up at her and winked to ease her worry as she pulled her hand from his.

“Embarrassed doesn’t even touch how I felt,” he admitted, blushing lightly at the memory, making Rachel enjoy the moment even more.

She reached out once again and touched Sam’s hand, trying with all her efforts to be comforting, but laughter was threatening to bubble out. She hadn’t enjoyed herself so much in such a long time. Being with Sam gave her that enjoyment. It was really nice.

“You’re cute when you blush,” she told him, smiling when she saw his blush deepen.

Sam cleared his throat nervously, trying not to let her comment fluster him. He looked down at the hand that gently

covered his and felt something that he hadn't felt in a long time. He felt cared for.

His index finger gently stroked the underside of her wrist, causing her to gasp at the contact. He was disappointed when she pulled away from him and placed her hands on her lap. He didn't know why, but he wanted to reassure her, bring their time together back to a non-threatening comfort level.

"I found humor in it eventually," he told her lightly, ignoring what had just happened when he had touched her. "Especially when I remembered how your Aunt Kay jumped up and tried to cover me with her floral china plate that had just served the entire ladies' group

apple pie.”

Rachel’s explosion of laughter made him grin at the memory. The hand that was moments before holding his was now holding her stomach, and she was looking at him with such incredible enjoyment that he had to tell her the rest.

“I gripped that plate and backed my way out of the room as fast as I could. When I left at the end of my vacation, she gave me that plate as a keepsake of my time with them. Whenever they come to visit me in Denver I make sure I serve them desert from that plate. Only your Aunt Kay knows why. Roy just thinks that we have a weird attraction to that piece of china.”

Rachel rested her head on her hand, unable to stop laughing. It took her a few minutes to calm down, but Sam waited patiently, smiling the whole time.

When she was finally quiet, she sat back and looked at Sam with an expression of total joy. “I haven’t laughed like that in so long,” she told him quietly. “Thanks.”

Sam nodded and reached forward to refill her water glass. “Any time,” he told her seriously, watching her as her expression changed from joy to sadness in the short span of seconds. “Are you okay?”

Rachel looked up at him and nodded. “This last week has been a bear,” she

told him quietly.

“Do you want to talk about it, honey?” he asked her gently.

Rachel shook her head. She couldn't speak. His concern was sweet, but it was the way he called her *honey* that had her tied in knots. She wanted him to call her that all the time. She wanted him to love her.

Hell. It doesn't matter what I want.

She reached forward and lifted the glass to her lips. Sam watched her as she drained the liquid and put the glass down. “Do you have any other embarrassing moments you'd like to share?” she asked him suddenly, her eyes sparkling as she looked across at him.

He could only smile.

Chapter 9

As Sam carried Rachel across the campground later that evening, he couldn't help but be a little disappointed that the night was separating them. He had enjoyed her company during the meal. He hadn't enjoyed a woman's company in such a long time. He had forgotten how much fun it was to spend time with Roy and Rachel.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked him suddenly, aware that he was not walking toward her tent.

"I figured you would want to stop at the facilities before turning in," he explained quietly.

Rachel looked up at his face and smiled at his thoughtfulness. He hadn't changed. He was still a really nice guy. It was too bad that things had worked out the way that they had. She truly mourned for the friendship and possibly more that they might have shared.

"Thanks," she told him quietly, averting her eyes to hide the sadness she couldn't help but feel.

He nodded in response and set her down before the women's side of the structure that housed the pit toilets. After she hobbled inside, he walked off to the side to stand quietly as he looked out at the sites. Once he brought her back to her tent he would do his last minute

check on the campground and turn in. It had been a full day and a lot had happened. He looked out across the campground while he waited. He realized that he felt peaceful and relaxed. It had been a long time since he had felt so good.

“I’m ready,” her voice came from behind him a few minutes later.

He turned to face her and bent forward to lift her into his arms. It was odd how natural it was for him to hold her. He guessed it was a natural result of a friendship that was a good one, even if it had been interrupted by so many years of being apart from each other.

When he set her down before her tent she turned to face him. He looked down

at her and had to step back because he suddenly felt too close to her.

“Thanks for everything, Sam,” she told him, smiling. “The dinner was delicious. I really enjoyed myself.”

“Me, too,” he told her honestly. “You owe me a dinner when you’re feeling better.”

“Deal,” she agreed quietly. “Good night, Sam.”

“Good night, Rachel,” he answered, waiting for her to light her lantern and zip her tent closed before turning to walk back to his camper.

Rachel sat down on her cot and placed the lantern on the floor beside her. The cold night air made her shiver, and she

pulled on her hooded sweatshirt to keep warm. She unhooked her bra, removing it to throw into her open suitcase before she settled her arms into the warm sleeves of the sweatshirt. She snuggled between the layers of her blankets then reached out to take a book from the top of her briefcase. She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep just yet. Too much had happened, and her mind was filled with thoughts about Sam and her time visiting with him.

She read for about twenty minutes then gave up and put the book away. She had read the same sentence four times and didn't have any idea what she had read. Her thoughts were constantly returning to Sam. Her body grew hot with desire as

she thought of him, of his smile, of the feel of his hand covering hers, and of the feel of his chest against her body as he carried her.

She wanted to share her bed with him and hear him moan with pleasure as she touched and teased his body. She wanted him to touch her, kiss her, and desire her. The thoughts made her ache.

She took a shaky breath and tried to calm herself. Shifting carefully so that she wouldn't hurt her foot, she turned down the lantern and closed her eyes. When sleep finally came, her dreams were haunted by smiling, ice blue eyes.

* * * *

Sam walked back to his camper and retrieved his clipboard, flashlight, hat, and coat for his last walk around the campground for the evening. He found himself looking toward Rachel's tent often to see if he could catch a glimpse of her and saw the progression of her light as it passed through her tent. It wasn't until he saw the light finally go out that he was able to concentrate on his duties.

He finished his survey of the grounds and assured himself that everything was safe and secure. No one had left any campfires burning and all the campers were accounted for. He headed back to

his camper and stepped up inside it.

Turning off his flashlight, he removed his coat and work boots before retrieving the gray sweatpants and sweatshirt from the bed. He pulled off his clothes quickly, stretching to relieve the tightness in his shoulders before pulling on the warm clothing and climbing onto the bed on the right side of the camper. He covered himself with the many blankets there and settled back onto his pillow, but sleep eluded him for the longest time. He kept going over the evening in his head.

He had really had a good time during dinner. He had enjoyed laughing and talking with Rachel. The comfortable time with her reminded him of the times

that he often returned to in his mind when he was too stressed. The times with Roy and Rachel during their youth, when his mother was still alive, were memories that made him feel cared about, appreciated, and loved. He hadn't felt that way since he had taken up residence in Denver, met Allison, and began working at Denver Memorial Hospital.

He wasn't kidding himself though. Things had changed. Rachel was a successful woman now. Roy was a married man with a great wife and a baby on the way. Sam had been through things that had made him stronger but had also made him cynical and distant.

His mom had once told him that true friends would weather the difficulties throughout the years. She had said that time and distance wouldn't matter when you had true friends.

She had cautioned him never to forget that Roy and Rachel would always be there for him when she knew that she would not. Being with Roy and Rachel today had proven his mother to be right. He felt relaxed and at ease with himself for the first time in many years. It was a great feeling.

But it was more than comfort with Rachel. He felt that something about her was different. Maybe it was the years that had passed. Maybe it was that they both had matured and gone through

major changes in their lives. Maybe it was just the way that he was allowing himself to think about her now.

He remembered how she had felt in his arms as he had carried her to her tent and his body tensed and hardened. She was incredibly soft in all the right places, but he could feel the strength in her, too. The way her body had filled in with womanly curves caused him to desire her. When she was pressed against him, it felt right.

He found that he had wanted to touch and kiss her and that surprised him. He remembered how he had felt that day on the mountain when Rachel had broken her leg. He had admitted to himself that

he was attracted to her. He had never felt that way about Rachel before that time. It had scared him back then. He shouldn't have been feeling that way about her. But he had. And now he was feeling that attraction again. He certainly hadn't felt that way about any woman in quite a while. Not since Allison. And, if he was honest with himself, he hadn't even felt that way with Allison.

"You're slipping, Sam," he warned himself sternly as he turned on his right side and closed his eyes. He could not allow himself to get involved with anyone. He had already decided what he wanted to do with his life and getting involved with any woman was not part of his plan. Even if that woman was

Rachel.

Sleep eluded him for the longest time. He turned over restlessly and bundled under the many covers, seeking warmth. It was a while before he could feel himself unwinding and was surrounded by a sense of comfort and warmth as sleep finally claimed him. He found himself part of the most realistic dream he had ever had.

He walked up the front steps of a large white house and opened the door to go inside. He could see the furniture in the living room and recognized some of the pieces as the furniture that was now in his Denver apartment. This

house had to be his home. He turned toward the stairway that led to the second floor and took them two at a time, climbing them quickly. At the top of the stairs there was a door the color of deep mahogany, and he reached forward to place his hand on the glass doorknob. He turned the doorknob and opened the door then walked into the room.

It was a master bedroom with a king-size bed of rich mahogany covered with a soft blue comforter and many small lace pillows. The door to the right of the bedroom opened and a woman dressed in a long, flowing, white nightgown walked toward him. He found himself being drawn toward her.

She lifted her arms to greet him. He saw himself take her into his arms and hold her close to him. He kissed her gently and hugged her tightly against his body. He stepped back and lifted his hand. He reached out and touched her fully rounded belly. Her hand covered his and pressed it to the child that was growing inside of her. His child. He bent forward and placed a loving kiss on her belly.

“I love you, Sam,” she whispered as she looked down at him, touching his face gently. “Your baby is happy that you’re home, too.” She smiled as she took his hand and placed it on her swollen abdomen just below her left

breast.

Sam smiled as he felt the movement of his child beneath his hand. "Hello, little one," he whispered as he rubbed his hand over his wife's belly tenderly. Leaning forward, he placed one more kiss on his child that was growing within his wife's body.

Her hands touched his head gently, lacing her fingers through his hair to caress him tenderly. He looked up at her, his blue eyes sparkling with love as he caught her eyes and stood slowly to face her. His right hand moved upward to gently cup her very full left breast, and he smiled as she groaned with pleasure at his touch.

"Sam, what you do to me," she

whispered before his mouth captured hers.

“Honey, I intend to do more,” he told her huskily, taking her hand in his and walking backward, leading her to their bed.

He pulled the feminine nightgown up and over her head to remove it from her body, revealing the beauty of her very pregnant form. He traced his index finger over her breasts to lightly circle her darkened nipples.

She moaned with pure pleasure as his hand wandered and finally reached for his hands to stop them as her breathing quickened. She helped him shed his clothes, kissing his chest lightly and

holding him tenderly within her embrace.

He helped her to unbuckle his belt and open his jeans, stepping away from her for a moment to pull them from his body. When he was completely naked before her, she smiled up at him as her soft hand reached out and cupped his sac tenderly, rolling its contents gently within her hand before releasing them and taking hold of his hard cock.

She swiped her thumb across the head to capture the drops of liquid that escaped it then brought her hand to her mouth to lick his essence from it.

“You taste delicious,” she whispered, reaching down to take hold of his shaft and pull up on it gently, smiling as he

moaned his approval.

“So good, baby,” he whispered, pulling her into his arms and gasping as her full breasts were pressed against his chest. “I need you.”

“Sam, I’ll always need you, too,” she whispered, leaning up to accept the kiss that he bestowed upon her.

He pulled away just slightly and smiled down at her. “I’m glad,” he told her softly.

Walking backward, he drew her with him toward the bed, sitting down and pulling her so that she stood between his legs. Reaching up, he stroked her breasts tenderly, tugging on the peaked nipples and smiling when she moaned

her appreciation. Leaning forward, he kissed her full breasts, palming them and drawing one toward him so he could draw her nipple into his mouth and suckle tenderly.

He trailed his hand down her body, loving the swell of her belly as he felt the proof of their love beneath his hand. He caressed the cheeks of her ass lightly, tracing the crease of her body where her thigh met her hip and nudging her legs apart so he could caress the soft curls of her mound.

“Spread your legs for me, baby,” he whispered, his eyes hungry as he looked up at her.

He smiled when she immediately stood with her legs apart so he could

follow the folds of her sex with his fingers, parting her and sliding his middle finger into the warmth of her body. When he felt her silky heat, his cock pulsed with need for her. He needed to be deep inside of his wife.

“You’re so wet for me,” he moaned, pumping his finger inside of her before pulling out just enough to make her moan as he rubbed around her clit with just the right amount of pressure.

“Sam, please,” she moaned.

“What do you need, baby?” he asked her, pulling his hand away from her and lying back on the bed, taking her with him until she sat astride him, her hips nestled intimately against his

groin.

She reached down and took hold of his cock, dragging it slowly through her already wet folds to place it at the entrance to her body. She guided him into her, groaning at the incredible feeling of fullness as her body opened to accept him so deeply within her warmth. She pushed down and took him to the hilt in one smooth move, moaning as he filled her completely.

She leaned forward and took his lips in a gentle kiss. "I love when you're deep inside of me," she whispered, moving her hips slowly to begin a rhythm that made them both groan.

He moved slowly within her, holding her hips carefully, easing her

movements so as not to hurt her or their child. She looked down at him and smiled tenderly, leaning forward as best she could to rest her hands on his shoulders, and quickened her movements up and down the length of him.

He could feel the coiling of excitement within her and saw that her breathing was becoming labored. He loved the way the wet heat of her sweet pussy gripped him.

“Come for me, baby,” he whispered, reaching between them to rub her clit gently but firmly. “Come for me now.”

She gasped and moaned as her orgasm overtook her. He smiled with

satisfaction. Her body clenched around his cock, pulling him tightly into her wetness, wringing his own release from him and pulling a groan from him that filled their bedroom with the sound of his pleasure. He gripped her hips and held her still as his cock exploded and he filled her with his seed.

She caressed his chest slowly, gasping with each spurt of his release. "So good, Sam," she whispered.

He turned them so that she lay on her side facing him. He didn't want to move. He wanted to stay deep inside of her, and she was in no hurry to have him pull out. He smiled at her and reached up to touch her face tenderly.

She looked at him and smiled, love

and satisfaction evident in her eyes. It was then that her face was clear to him for the first time. She leaned closer and kissed his lips tenderly, nuzzling into his neck as his hands ran up her body to gently stroke her back, her belly, and her breasts.

“I love you, Sam,” she whispered to him.

He reached up to touch her face and held it gently between his hands before leaning forward to gently take her lips with his own. “I love you, sweetheart,” he whispered, smiling when she snuggled against him and kissed his neck softly.

“You’d better,” she told him firmly,

smiling when she heard him chuckle.

“How could I not?” he asked her gently. “You’re my life. You’re my heart. You’re my world.”

Sam’s heart pounded. He came so hard that he moaned his pleasure to the empty camper. His body trembled with the aftershocks of his orgasm. He reached down and gripped his sensitive cock, holding it tightly as more spurts of seed escaped him and filled his sweatpants. It had been a long time since he had come in his sleep.

The dream had been so incredibly real. It was as if he could feel his wife in his arms. He could feel her arms around him, tenderly caressing him and

hugging him tightly to her body. He could feel how her sweet pussy had gripped his cock and had milked him dry. And he could feel her body filled with his baby.

He closed his eyes and took a steadying breath as he thought about the woman in his dream. He knew in that moment that his dream was exactly what he wanted as his reality. He wanted that woman making love with him. He wanted that woman to be filled with his child. He wanted that woman to be with him for the rest of his life, making a future with him that would only be possible if she were his.

He opened his eyes and looked

through the mesh window of the camper to the darkened campground. His heart had finally slowed. Sitting up, he took a deep, shaky breath as he thought through what he had seen in his dream.

At first, the woman who loved him had been hazy and hidden in shadows, but as they became intimate she became clearer to him with each kiss, each touch, and each caress. He had clearly seen the beautiful face of the woman that he had held so tenderly and had made love to in his dream. He had seen his wife.

It had been Rachel.

Chapter 10

Rachel woke up early and lay back in her sleeping bag. She felt cold and sore and didn't really want to remove herself from the warmth of her bedding, but she knew that she had to get up and move around so that she wouldn't stiffen up. It had been a long night. Thoughts of her dinner with Sam had filled her mind throughout most of the night.

She kept worrying that she was getting into something that she couldn't handle. The last thing she needed was a man around who was constantly checking up on her or who was expecting to spend his evenings with her. She didn't want to

be tied down to nightly visits. She needed to be alone to write and to breathe. She was feeling scared and trapped. And she feared for the safety of Sam and her family if Sam's father ever found out that she had renewed contact with his son.

No matter what her feelings for Sam were, she knew that she didn't have the energy to go through a relationship with anyone—especially now. She wanted to be free from any pull on her mind. She had had enough of that already. She could barely stop thinking about Richard's attack, and she didn't want anyone else to interfere with her time in the mountains so she could heal both physically and emotionally.

She had to admit that being with Sam last night had kept her mind occupied. She hadn't thought about Richard once. But her time with Sam had also scared her. She had enjoyed his company too much. She could envision herself wanting to be with him more. That scared her, too. She had to distance herself from him. She should pack up and move to another campground. If she moved after a couple of days, he wouldn't take it personally. She could just move on and he would never know that she was leaving because of him.

She pulled back her covers and carefully lowered her feet to the tent floor. Her head pounded furiously as she

sat up. She covered her eyes with her hands to try to keep herself from getting dizzy, but it didn't work.

It took every bit of strength that she had to lift her sneakers from the floor of the tent, slowly put them on, and tie them. Once she had them on she had to sit back and breathe deeply for a few seconds so that she wouldn't be sick to her stomach. Finally, she pushed herself to her good foot, hobbled to the front of the tent and carefully leaned over to unzip the flaps.

Once outside the tent she looked around for a piece of wood and succeeded in finding a tree branch that had fallen to the ground. It was slightly crooked in the middle but it was sturdy.

She picked it up and used it to steady herself as she walked slowly toward the bathrooms.

“This is going to be a long day,” she told herself tiredly.

She used the facilities as quickly as she could then headed back to her tent to set up her small stove and put a small kettle of water on it to heat for tea. While it was heating she headed back into her tent and gathered up her pillow, her glasses, a blanket, and her laptop, and carried them outside to set them on her lounge chair. She was ready for a full day of editing.

Going back into the tent, she pulled off her sweats and was pulling on her jeans

when she heard voices outside. She recognized one to be Roy's and knew the other had to be Sam's. She pulled on her pink shirt and began to button the front.

"Are you sure nothing was broken, Sam?" Roy asked him worriedly as they approached Rachel's tent.

"I'm sure," Sam assured him. "She has a sprained ankle and a cut on her arm, but she'll be fine."

"I knew she shouldn't be out here alone," Roy muttered angrily, partially blaming himself. "She should be staying with me and Paulette. At least she'd be safe with us."

"She should be home with someone taking care of her," Sam corrected him. He had to mentally push aside the image

in his mind of her in his house and pregnant with his child. He didn't want to think about that right now because it made him want things he knew he shouldn't want.

Rachel nearly ripped the zipper of her tent in her hurry to confront the two men. The anger was evident on her face as she stumbled out of the tent to stand her ground before them. She ignored the pain in her ankle as she hobbled toward them, her walking stick lifted as she pointed her finger at them both and shook it in anger.

“Rachel, are you okay?” Roy asked her quickly, surprised at her sudden appearance.

“You listen to me, Roy Monroe,” she told him angrily, her cheeks flushed. “I don’t need you checking up on me. I came out here to be alone and that’s exactly how you’d better leave me. I thought you, of all people, would know better, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Rachel, I know you can take care of yourself, but...” Roy began.

“And you, Dr. McCoy,” she nearly growled, ignoring her cousin completely as she turned to face Sam defiantly. The thoughts about him that had kept her awake most of the night washed over her, making her angrier at him than she should have been. “I did not ask for your help and I don’t need your archaic

opinions of where a woman's place should be. Is that clear?"

She faced them squarely, her breathing labored from her outburst. She clutched the stick tightly, ready to beam either one of them if they dared to utter one more word.

"Now leave me alone! Both of you!" She turned and hopped back into her tent, zipping the flaps shut and cutting off any chance for further discussion.

Roy had the decency to flush in embarrassment. He should have known better than to underestimate his cousin.

"I'm sorry, Rachel," he called to her through the tent closure. He hesitated a moment, hoping that she would call out to him, but he knew deep down that she

would not. He turned and walked toward his truck. Sam followed closely behind him in silence.

“She sure does get fired up, doesn’t she?” he asked Roy quietly as he stood beside Roy’s truck. He held the door open for him and slammed it closed behind him.

“I think we said the wrong thing at the wrong time,” Roy admitted, lifting his hat and running his fingers through his hair in frustration before adjusting his hat atop his head once again. “We’ll have to give her some time to cool off. I think she’s just been pushed too far. It was just a matter of time before she snapped.”

“Why?” Sam asked, confused, and more than a little interested.

“Sam, you know that Rachel has always been very independent,” Roy said quietly. “She’s smart and successful and one of the strongest people I know. She’s been writing books since her teens and never let anyone discourage her dream of being published. Lord knows people did try to discourage her,” he said, shaking his head in disgust at the memory. “As far back as I can remember someone was always telling her to put away her writing and get a real job. People in town told her to stop dreaming and settle down and begin a family. That’s when Rachel moved out on her

own and pretty much made them eat their words ten times over.”

“But why is she so upset? Why doesn’t she just tell us off like she used to?” Sam asked in frustration, looking back at the tent to see if by some miracle Rachel happened to come out of her tent and do just that.

“Sam, something happened last week to Rachel that she would kill me if she knew I was telling you,” Roy told his best friend seriously, looking up at him with eyes that were filled with pain.

Sam found himself holding on to the door of the truck tightly. He knew whatever it was that Roy was going to tell him was not going to be good.

“What happened, Roy?” Sam asked

him calmly, his voice remarkably quiet despite the sudden tightness that gripped his stomach.

“Rachel called me last week,” Roy began quietly. “When I answered the phone, she fell apart. I could barely understand her she was crying so hard. It took a while for me to get her to calm down. When I did she told me that she had been attacked by her date.”

“Hell,” Sam whispered.

Sam’s hands gripped the door of Roy’s truck. He wouldn’t be surprised if he made permanent dents in the frame. Just the thought of someone trying to hurt Rachel made him furious. She was theirs to protect. He felt responsible for her

pain just by the fact that he hadn't been there to watch over her as he had promised his mother so long ago.

"She wouldn't get into specifics with me," Roy continued. "When she talked to Paulette, she told her that a man she was dating was using her to get ahead in the publishing business."

Sam watched his friend as he relayed the conversation, noticing that Roy's hands were gripping the steering wheel tightly. "What happened, Roy?" he urged him.

"The guy tried to rape her, Sam. He hit her a few times and nearly got the best of her, but she knocked him out with his clock radio."

"Good!" Sam muttered angrily.

“Rachel called 911 and reported the attack. She spent the rest of the night at the hospital being treated for her injuries. The police took her statement and the hospital staff took physical evidence. It must have been horrible for her to go through it alone.” Roy rubbed his temple in frustration.

“Does this guy know about you and where you live?” Sam asked calmly, unable to speak very loudly.

“No, I don’t think so,” Roy answered. “There’s more, but I don’t know what it is. Rachel made Paulette promise not to tell me. I don’t know what he did, but Paulette was pretty furious when she talked to me about it later.”

“Damn,” Sam whispered, unable to say more.

“I know,” Roy agreed. “You know Rachel, Sam. She’s strong and independent and all that, but she’s just about the most sensitive person I know.”

Sam could only nod. He felt as if his heart was being squeezed tightly.

“I think the two of us just put her over the edge. She obviously has been through hell by herself, and we just sounded like two pompous jerks who thought she couldn’t function without us.”

“We’re bad,” Sam said honestly.

“You’ve got that right,” Roy agreed.

“So what do we do?” Sam asked.

“I think we should give her some

space. Maybe we could try to talk to her again tomorrow.”

“Better give it two days,” Sam said, being more pessimistic about her forgiving nature. “Remember how mad she was at you when you cut off her ponytail while she was sleeping?”

Roy cringed. “Maybe you’re right. We’ll try in two days.”

“We have to make this right, Roy,” Sam insisted. “We have to help her.”

Roy looked up at his friend and smiled. “I’ve already set the wheels in motion,” he admitted.

Sam’s forehead furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I got her to come here to stay at the campground that you’re the host of for

the summer. I'll bet a month's pay that you'll finally realize that you're in love with her before the end of the summer." Roy smiled and looked out the window of his truck at his friend. "Why don't you give it a try?" Roy started the engine and put the truck in gear, smiling as he watched his friend.

Sam stepped back, saying nothing. He waited for Roy to start his truck and put it in gear. He didn't dare speak. His mind was too jumbled with thoughts to trust himself to say anything just then.

"I'll bring you one of her novels tomorrow," Roy called to him before he drove away. "You might learn more about her by reading one. She's not the

kid we used to hike with anymore. She's all grown up, buddy. You need to see her the way she really is, not the way you remember her."

Sam watched him go, ignoring the way the dust swirled around him as Roy drove away. If Roy only knew how he was thinking about Rachel, he wouldn't have felt it was necessary for him to tell him that Rachel was no longer a kid. He was so busy thinking, he didn't realize that he must have stood there a good five minutes before he pulled himself together and turned to walk to his camper.

He stepped up inside, closing the door silently behind him. Sitting at the table, he lifted the coffee pot to pour himself

another cup as he looked out through the mesh window to the far campsite where Rachel was hobbling about. He saw her stumble and fall and couldn't help but wince in sympathy at the pain he knew she must be experiencing.

He knew he had better keep his distance from her for a while—partly because she was angry and partly because he had to process what Roy had told him. He didn't want to approach Rachel and upset her. Considering she had been abused by an unimaginable bastard, it was amazing that she had been so upbeat and happy with him last night.

His dream about her had scared him. It

made him want things that he had no right to want with her. He couldn't help but think about her. He wanted to be near her to comfort her and hold her. What scared him the most was that he wanted to entertain the possibility that the things that he had dreamed about last night could actually be his future.

He closed his eyes tiredly and rubbed them. A vision of Rachel flashed in his mind. She was lifting her arms out to him and smiling. She was wearing the white nightgown he had dreamed about, and she was pregnant with his baby.

He opened his eyes quickly and reached for his medical textbooks. Studying would help him get his mind back on track. And he needed to get

himself back on track right now.

* * * *

Rachel grabbed for her ankle as she fell to the ground. She couldn't help but cry out from the pain, and was angry to find tears filling her eyes. She got up slowly, using her stick to help her, and hobbled back into her tent. Once inside, she sat down on her cot and put her head in her hands. It was then that she realized that her shirt was unbuttoned except for the first button on the very top.

“Damn!” she swore in embarrassment. This was not going to be one of her better days.

She quickly buttoned the rest of the buttons, praying silently that neither Roy nor Sam had noticed, and reached to get her warm jacket and pulled it on. Once it was zipped, she reached into her suitcase and pulled out a small blue zippered pouch and opened it to find something for her aches and pains. She felt like she had a fever, too. Once she found the small bottle, she opened it and removed two capsules, then poured a cup of water from the jug next to the cooler and downed the medicine. She poured the remainder of the water from the cup onto a cloth and wiped her face, feeling a little refreshed by its coolness.

She stood slowly and exited the tent.

She poured some hot water into the waiting mug and dunked the tea bag slowly. Discarding it in the small trash bag beside the picnic table, she spooned in a teaspoon of honey, stirred it slowly, and brought it with her to her lounge chair.

She sipped the tea slowly and looked out across the campground. She was still so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. It would be best if she got to work on her book so that her mind would be occupied and she would be able to put her anger and embarrassment aside. Her work would take her away from the thoughts and realities of this world and bring her to the beauty and perfection of her written fantasies. Real life held no

promise or gentleness for her, but with her book, as with all of her books, she was allowed to live a life that was filled with loving, touching, caring, and tenderness. Isn't that what every woman wanted after all?

She put down her mug and tucked her blanket around her legs, then picked up her laptop, put on her glasses and got to work. It wasn't long before she was immersed in the love story that she had created. It was the best escape she could ever hope for.

* * * *

Sam kept his distance from Rachel for

the entire day. He watched her from his camper but didn't dare go near her for fear she would attack him with her stick. He smiled at the thought and couldn't help but admire her strength. He was enjoying every moment with her, and he had to admit that she was really beginning to wear down his resistance.

Roy's words had started him thinking. There was no doubt that Sam enjoyed the dinner that he and Rachel had shared the night before. He had found himself smiling and laughing more than he had in a long time. He appreciated her humor and felt comfortable with her, just as he had when they were growing up. Life had been hard for both of them. Even though they had been apart for many

years, he knew that they still shared a deep friendship.

His dream had made him think that he might possibly have been the recipient of divine intervention that had allowed him to glimpse a part of his future. Whatever it was, he couldn't help but admit to himself that he would not be averse to having something happen with Rachel if that was what was meant to be. The memory of loving her, the possibility of filling her body with his child, and the experience of being the recipient of her touch and caring made him happy. A sense of calm came over him as he thought about the possibility of a loving future with Rachel as something that was

actually within his grasp.

After lunch he drove into town to get supplies and was disappointed to find that it didn't eat up as much time as he had hoped it would. He found himself wishing the day away so that he could go and check on Rachel at the end of the evening just to make sure that she was all right. He knew he should probably wait the two days, but he had decided to check on her around dinnertime. Maybe she would have cooled down a little by then.

Dinnertime came and went. Sam felt uncomfortable to be eating alone. That fact alone was very telling. He hadn't felt that way a mere two days before. Rachel's presence had changed that.

When darkness replaced the light of late afternoon, he made his decision. He took his clipboard and flashlight and started out for his final check of the campground. The last site he would check would be Rachel's. He was determined to talk with her. He hadn't seen any light or campfire and was worried that she hadn't taken care of herself by eating anything.

When he got to her site, he stood before her tent, unsure what to do. The area around the tent was clean and orderly. Her tent was zipped up tight and no light shone from within. Her car was still there, so he knew that she had to be inside her tent. He hesitated a moment,

fighting with his instincts to go into Rachel's tent and see that she was okay. After a moment of indecision, he turned and walked back to his camper, mumbling under his breath that he had to respect her privacy. He had no right to intrude. He wasn't too crazy about how he was feeling about that fact either.

Once inside his camper, he tugged off his coat and set aside the flashlight and clipboard then sat at the table and tried reading one of his textbooks for a little while. After only a few minutes he put the book aside and turned down the lantern. Standing, he removed his clothes and pulled on a clean pair of black sweatpants and sweatshirt and climbed into bed.

The night was quiet and cold. He tried to concentrate on the sound of his own breathing as he lay there thinking. He closed his eyes to sleep, but the events of the day kept playing over and over in his mind. He kept seeing the anger on Rachel's face. He heard Roy's voice telling him what had happened to his cousin.

He could imagine the fear she must have felt when she had been attacked. He hated that she was alone and hurting. Watching her as she stumbled around her campsite wasn't helping the fact that he felt guilty about causing her more pain.

Thoughts of his dream about her were also filling his mind. He remembered

how he had held her in that dream. He remembered how he had touched her swollen belly and had felt something very close to pure happiness at the thought of finally being a part of such a special love. He kept thinking about how it felt to see Rachel lift her arms to him to embrace him. He also thought of the possibility of his child growing inside of her. Despite his determination to stop thinking about her, he found himself thinking about making love to her and filling her body with his life.

When he had seen her today, he had found that he wanted to hold her. His dream about her had reinforced what he was already feeling and made him desire her as more than a friend. When she had

stood before him with sparks of anger shooting from her eyes, he was stunned by his reaction to her. He admired her strength and was impressed by her abilities. He thought back on their time together as friends when they were growing up and realized that he had always admired her and had looked to her for the caring and support she had been always ready to give.

He missed the easy friendship that they had shared. He missed the fun and mischief they had gotten into. She had been so much a part of his youth that he had taken it for granted. Roy was his best friend. He had never really put a label on what Rachel was to him. As he

thought about her, he still couldn't define exactly what she was to him. He just knew that she was someone very important to him, and he couldn't get her out of his thoughts.

When he and Roy had stood outside her tent and she had confronted them with well-deserved anger, he had felt so many conflicting emotions. He was contrite at the justified anger she had for them. He was concerned for her health. He was sad for the loss of the easy friendship that they had once shared. And he had to be honest with himself. He was incredibly aroused by her.

The sight of her naked body beneath her clothes had tempted him beyond reason. His desire for her had intensified

by the unexpected display of her beauty. He swallowed and squeezed his eyes shut tighter as his body quickly grew excited and hard at the memory of seeing the pearly softness of her full breasts as they peeked out at him from behind her unbuttoned shirt.

His body had reacted with pure desire and need. He wanted her with a passion that was completely foreign to him. He had desired other women before, but never with the intensity that he wanted Rachel. How was he ever going to last the summer keeping his desires under control? Rachel Williams was a beautiful, kind, and strong woman.

He admitted to himself that he had no

choice but to want her as his.

Chapter 11

“I haven’t seen her since yesterday afternoon, Roy,” Sam told him worriedly as they stood beside Roy’s truck.

“I still don’t think we should bother her yet,” Roy said quietly as he looked across the campground toward the site where Rachel had set up her tent. “She was pretty mad at us yesterday.”

Sam hesitated a moment then nodded in agreement. “Okay, I’ll give her until lunch. If I don’t see her by then, I’m going to check on her.”

“You’re the doctor,” Roy said, smiling. “You could always tell her that she has to calm down and let you check

on her medical condition.”

“Oh, I’m sure that will go over big,” Sam said sarcastically. “No matter what, I’m going to make sure that she’s okay. I’ll give her until noon.”

Roy smiled and climbed behind the steering wheel of his truck. He knew that he was leaving his cousin in capable hands. He could put his worry for her aside for now and concentrate on worrying about his own wife instead. He started the engine of his truck and put it in gear then reached for the paperback book that lay on the seat beside him.

“By the way, here’s one of Rachel’s novels,” he said, handing the book through the open window to his friend. “Paulette said this one was the best one

to give you.”

Sam accepted the book and looked it over quickly. He had never read a romance novel before. It should prove interesting.

“*Dreams of the Heart*,” he read the title out loud. “Am I going to need a cold shower after I finish this one?” His question was a joke, but he really did wonder how erotic Rachel’s book was.

Roy shook his head and smiled. “Don’t knock it until you’ve read it,” he warned. “You just may be surprised.” He started to drive away when he stuck his head out the window. “And you definitely will need a cold shower. Too bad you don’t have one handy. Guess

you'll just have to jump in the stream!"

Sam chuckled to himself as Roy drove away and made his way out of the campground. He looked across the clearing toward Rachel's site then turned to walk to his camper. He would be able to view her site through his camper window from the bench seat at the table without worrying about being seen. He knew she would really be furious if she happened to come out and catch him watching her.

He seated himself at the table, opened her novel and began reading. Early morning soon turned into late morning, and late morning soon became early afternoon. The sound of a car driving into the campground brought Sam's

thoughts back to the present. He looked out the window and saw that Rachel's campsite still remained void of movement. He looked at his watch and gasped when he saw that it was already after one o'clock.

He looked at the book in his hand and realized that he was more than halfway through it. It certainly had held his interest. Roy was right. It really was a very good story—not at all mushy or full of fluff as he had expected it to be. The erotic love scenes were very beautifully written and he found himself thinking about making love to Rachel in the same way that her characters made love. When he was reading the love scenes, he

had pictured himself as the hero and Rachel as the heroine. He had been hard most of the morning from thinking about Rachel being naked.

He thought about the vivid dream he had of making love to her, burying himself deep inside her body. He had to admit to himself that he really wanted to do just that. He put the book aside, carefully marking his place with an envelope that had been in the stack of mail that Roy had just brought him.

“I really do need to jump into the stream,” he said out loud in frustration as he stood up and reached for the container of water on the sink. He tugged at his jeans to ease the discomfort he was feeling from the hardness of his

body. He reached down to cup himself, closing his eyes as erotic thoughts of Rachel flashed through his mind. He squeezed his cock, gasping at the incredible feeling, and wished suddenly that Rachel was the one touching him and releasing him from the torment of his body. His breathing grew ragged and labored as he pictured Rachel taking him into her mouth and easing his ache, or taking him deep into her body and pulling his release from him.

He leaned forward and placed both hands on the edge of the small sink, trying to breathe deeply and evenly to help calm his tense body. He poured some cool water into his hand and

splashed it over his face. Wiping off the excess water with the nearest towel, he threw it onto the counter next to the sink and opened the camper door to step out into the sunshine of the day, not even bothering to shut the door behind him. He suddenly found that he was in a hurry to check on Rachel.

For some reason, the walk across the campground seemed incredibly long. Site twenty-seven had never felt so far away before. Luckily the walk in the coolness of the day served to calm him, and the hardness of his cock eased somewhat. When he arrived at her tent, his curiosity turned to concern. The tent was still zipped closed and there was no sign of any activity around her site. It

was obvious that she had not cooked breakfast or lunch.

“Rachel, are you in there?” he called to her through the closed canvas opening of the tent. When there was no answer he called her name again, this time louder. When there was still no answer, he reached down and unzipped the tent’s two flaps. It was time to take matters into his own hands.

He entered the tent and stopped a moment to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the semi-darkness. When he saw her, he gasped in shock. Rachel was huddled under the covers of her blankets and sleeping bag and was shivering violently. He was unable to

move for a few precious seconds before instinct finally took over. He had to take care of her, regardless of what she would have to say to him when she was better. He reached her cot in three long strides and knelt down beside her. Reaching up, he gently touched her face and was astounded by the heat that was emanating from her.

“Rachel,” he called to her urgently. When she didn’t respond he took firm hold of her shoulders and shook her, repeating her name as he did so.

Rachel’s mind forced her to surface to reality. The sound of a man’s voice hurt her head. She turned over in anger and pushed at the hands that were shaking her body.

“Leave me alone. I don’t feel good,” she mumbled groggily before submerging back into the depths of blackness.

She knew nothing else for the next few minutes and drifted between a state of semiconsciousness and total oblivion. She was aware only of strong arms embracing her body and lifting her. Her head fell against the body that was holding her, and she felt content to rest there while darkness claimed her once again.

She became aware of the softness of a bed and the warmth of blankets covering her. She snuggled into the pillow that was gently placed beneath her head.

“The pillow smells good. It smells like Sam,” she whispered, her mind a little muddled as she tried to make sense of everything. Giving up, she snuggled deeper under the covers to try to get warm.

Sam smiled at her comment then reached forward to lift the blankets off her feet. He removed her sneakers and set them on the bench seat below the bed, and carefully removed the sock from her injured foot. He examined her ankle and saw that it was still swollen but reasoned that it was probably not the cause of her fever. He replaced the sock and covered her feet, tucking in the blankets to make sure that she would

stay warm. He lowered the blankets that covered her right arm and reached under her sweatshirt to carefully remove her arm from its sleeve.

Her skin felt so hot to his touch. Her fever had to be pretty high. He was very concerned that it might be at a dangerous level. If he couldn't get the fever down, he would have to drive her to the hospital. He pushed the sweatshirt up to her neck and gently peeled the gauze bandage from her arm. The cut looked to be healing nicely and showed no signs of infection.

He turned and quickly retrieved a sterile gauze from his medical bag that was in the cabinet beneath the sink. Quickly covering Rachel's exposed cut

and taping it down carefully, he gently eased her arm back into the sleeve, pulled the sweatshirt down to cover her completely, and replaced the blankets over her body.

He straightened and looked down at her, forcing himself to think. All his years of medical study seemed to be deserting him. He rubbed his right temple tiredly and concentrated. Finally, his knowledge and training kicked in. To his relief, the doctor was back.

He turned to place his medical bag next to Rachel. He opened it up and searched through it quickly. Removing his stethoscope, he placed the eartips in his ears, then gently removed her left

arm from her sweatshirt and wrapped the blood pressure cuff tightly around the upper portion of her arm.

She moaned slightly at the pressure and tried to push him away, but she was too weak to make any real protest. He continued his vital signs evaluation, taking her pulse and listening to her heart and lungs. Satisfied that everything was normal, he removed the cuff and placed it, along with his stethoscope, in his bag.

He sat down next to her on the bed and reached forward to slip her arm into the sleeve of her sweatshirt. She felt as if she were on fire and he knew that he had to get her fever down. Reaching into the medical bag, he took out a small bottle of pills. He opened it and dumped two

into his hand then put down the container and reached for a spoon. He placed the tablets on the spoon, poured a little water over them to dissolve them then sprinkled sugar over them and mixed up the concoction with his finger. He carefully placed the spoon on the counter and turned to get the small plastic container of orange juice out of the refrigerator. Pouring some into a mug, he set it aside and retrieved the spoon with the medicine.

He turned to Rachel and found that his heart was pounding against his chest as he reached forward and lifted her into his arms. Her head rolled against him and nestled into his neck. One of her

love scenes suddenly flashed through his mind and he had to push it away as his body tightened once again.

“Steady, man,” he said to himself as he lowered his shoulder so that her head would roll back to allow her to face the top of the camper.

“Sam?” she whispered, confused.

“Rachel, swallow this,” he told her sternly, lifting the spoon to her lips and pushing it inside her mouth.

Rachel felt something in her mouth and tasted a bitter sweetness. She swallowed instinctively as the semiliquid dripped down her throat. She licked her lips to get the taste off them and found a glass at her mouth and more liquid entering her throat. She

swallowed greedily. She had been so thirsty.

Then the cup was gone and she felt herself being lowered back into the softness and warmth of the bed. She turned toward the voice of the man that spoke to her and the strong arms that had held her.

“Thank you,” she told him, her voice barely above a whisper.

“You’re welcome,” Sam answered, smiling at her manners. He turned and wet a cloth with cold water then sat beside her on the bed.

She didn’t speak or move while he passed the cool cloth across her forehead. His teeth clenched in anger as

he saw the discoloration of the bruises on her cheeks. Why hadn't he noticed them before? He cooled her face then wiped her arms and stomach, his hand freezing in horror as he saw the bite marks that her bra barely covered.

“Damn it!” he swore out loud.

He couldn't stand the fact that she had been violated and saw for himself that she had been tortured throughout the attack. He closed his eyes to steady himself then opened them and continued to wipe down her body with the cloth. He hesitated slightly when he saw the gold chain that had fallen to her shoulder and realized that it was the necklace that his mother had given to her. He held the blue crystal in his hand gently before

tenderly resting it against Rachel's body. He was touched by the fact that she still wore the necklace.

He forced himself back to the task of cooling Rachel's body. He rewet the cloth often. The heat from her body quickly warmed the cloth and made it too hot to be soothing. When he finished wiping down her back with the cool cloth, he put it aside and covered her carefully. All he could do now was wait and hope that the medicine would help lower her fever until the sickness ran its course. If she was no better in the morning he would drive her to the hospital.

He stood and watched her silently for

a while. She looked so pale and vulnerable. He didn't like seeing her this way. He liked it better when she was telling him off or threatening to hit him. He smiled at the memory then became very serious as he pictured the way she had appeared to him in his dream.

His gaze went to the mound of blankets that covered her stomach, and he found that it was difficult to breathe because of the tightness in his chest. The feeling intensified as he thought about the incredible possibility that he might actually be destined to share his life with this woman. He experienced a feeling of rightness at that thought.

He knew that Rachel was a woman that he could trust. He knew that she was

someone who would give her love to him without reservation. He thought about her kindness and her gentleness and knew that she would be a giving lover. He was honest with himself as he admitted that he wanted to make sweet, gentle love to her and make the dream of her carrying his child a reality. He wanted his child growing inside of her. He wanted to feel their baby moving, be there to help in the birth of their baby, and watch their baby nurse at Rachel's beautiful breasts.

His breath came short and quick as his body once again betrayed him. He lost patience with himself. What was wrong with him? He hadn't been so out of

control and in a constant state of arousal since he had been a teenager. He had to get himself under control. Standing slowly, he reached out and touched Rachel's cheek with the back of his index finger, smiling as she turned toward his touch and sighed. Bending down, he kissed her forehead lightly before resting his cheek against her temple.

"I'll be right back, honey," he whispered, easing back and looking down at her. As sick as she was, and as pale as she was, she was absolutely beautiful. Placing the cool cloth across her forehead, he smoothed it carefully, running his fingers across her temples before pulling away.

He left the camper and walked to site twenty-seven determinedly. The walk across the campground and the cleaning up of the area served to help calm him. He was glad for the distraction. It didn't take him long to circle the campground once to check all the other sites, and he found his step quickening as he came back to his camper. He didn't realize the fast pace he must have been traveling until he stepped up into the camper and found that he was out of breath.

His eyes sought out Rachel's form in his bed and smiled when he realized that he had actually thought that she might be gone when he returned. He reached out and touched her face gently, feeling the

heat of the fever that still consumed her. Concern for her filled him. He drew his hand away and stood beside her silently for a moment as he watched her sleep. Removing the already hot cloth from her forehead, he wet it with cool water, squeezed out the excess, and placed it gently across her eyes. It would be a comfort that he would repeat often over the next few hours and well into the night.

“Please fight to get better, Rachel,” he whispered to her. “I’m here with you. I won’t leave.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek lightly. “Please, honey. I need you to fight this sickness.”

Turning finally, he sat down at the table, picked up the novel that Roy had

brought him, and opened it to the place where he had left off. He began to read. Roy had said that he would get to know Rachel if he read her books. He suddenly wanted to get to know the woman she had become very much.

* * * *

The afternoon passed quickly. Sam read the novel continuously, stopping only to administer another dose of medicine and doing his best to get Rachel to drink as much water and juice as he could. He wiped her body with a cool, wet cloth, talking to her in a soothing tone to remind her that he was

there with her. Each moment he spent with her made him understand the depths of his feelings for her. It was more than friendship. Maybe it had always been.

Her book had given him insights into her character that he hadn't seen develop because of the years of separation. The book was a loving, gentle, and romantic love story with comfortable humor, and he knew that only an exceptionally kind and caring person could ever write such a story with such incredible intensity and understanding. Rachel had always been a great kid. It was obvious to Sam that she had become an outstanding woman.

He also found himself becoming unexplainably jealous over the erotic love scenes. He wondered who she had

shared such intimate and tender memories with to be able to write such detailed accountings. He wasn't at all happy with the fact that she had shared such experiences with any other man.

Time held no measure for Rachel. She only knew fragments of the day. She tasted bitter sweetness and felt coolness being wiped across her body. She knew strong arms held her gently and touched her often, but was blissfully unaware of all else. She was content to just rest and give in to the quiet blackness that surrounded her every time she closed her eyes.

For dinner, Sam heated up some soup and carefully spooned the broth into

Rachel's mouth. It took a while, but he was able to get her to eat about half of the contents of the bowl. He wiped her face and settled her back against the blankets then turned and left the camper to check the campground one last time for the night.

He couldn't walk the campground fast enough. He wanted to be back with Rachel in case she woke up and needed something, or her condition worsened. When he stepped back up into his camper, he froze in surprise. Rachel was sitting up and staring at him.

"What're you doing in my tent?" she asked him weakly, looking at him through fever-glazed eyes.

He walked to her quickly and reached

out to ease her back down onto the bed. She looked straight up at him, and he found that he was overwhelmed with emotions.

“You’re sick, Rachel,” he told her finally. “I brought you to my camper so I could take care of you until you’re feeling better.”

He waited for her to get angry but she just stared up at him. He could feel that she was still feverish and wondered just how lucid she really was.

“You have the most beautiful blue eyes, Sam,” she told him quietly. “Why do you have to be so damned handsome?” With that she turned onto her side and burrowed under the covers.

Sam couldn't help but smile. His ego needed that little boost that she had just given him. He reached out and brushed back the long hair that had fallen forward to cover her face. His brows furrowed with concern when he felt the heat of her skin. The fever was still hanging on. He could see that she was starting to shiver again.

He stood and looked down at her for a moment, debating what to do. There really was no choice. He removed his clothes and pulled on his sweatpants and hooded jacket, leaving it unzipped to bare his chest and abdomen. He lowered the flame of the lantern so that it was barely lit, knowing that he would need to

have some light in the camper when he had to give her the next dose of medicine in the middle of the night. He turned then and climbed over Rachel to get under the covers with her.

He drew her into his arms to share his warmth with her. He pulled her tightly against his body so that her back was against his chest, wrapping his jacket around her so she was cocooned against him. Settling back onto the bed, he pulled the blankets over them both to protect them from the chill of the night. He knew that she would give him hell in the morning if she was able to make sense of her surroundings, but he didn't care.

Rachel snuggled against him

immediately and leaned her head back into the hollow of his throat. The clean smell of her hair filled his senses and his body tightened at the incredible feeling of her bottom pressing intimately against him. He was glad that she was oblivious to the immediate hardening of his body. It took every effort to not pull her body closer to his. He gasped when she snuggled her bottom more firmly against his, pressing against his erection. It was sweet torture. He didn't dare move.

When she moved restlessly before finally settling, he couldn't help but moan with the pure pleasure of the feel of her rubbing against him. He kept picturing the beauty of her body that he

had seen as he had cooled her with the wet cloth. He loved the feel of the softness of her curves as she pressed so closely against him.

He thought about the bruises and bite marks that covered her delicate skin. The idea of someone being so brutal to this gentle woman made his body tense with anger. He wanted just a few minutes with the guy who had attacked her. His mother had always taught him to be a kind and gentle man, but he would certainly be ready to unleash his fury on the man who had dared to hurt this woman that he really wanted to be his.

“Rachel Williams, you’re driving me crazy,” he whispered into her hair.

He lay awake, holding her. Despite the

torment, he enjoyed the feeling of her body pressed against his. Suddenly she turned to face him, still asleep, and snuggled closer to him. He gasped as a new wave of excitement overtook him. He groaned at the feeling of her breasts pressed against his chest and her arm wrapped around his body beneath his jacket.

He took a deep breath and hugged her closer to him, gasping as her arm rested trustingly across his hip and her hand lightly touched his lower back. If her hand moved any lower he would have to remove himself from her side. He just couldn't handle the sweetness of being so close to her without touching her.

When she lifted her leg and draped it over his hip, he held his breath, afraid to move. As her leg settled behind him, her body was pulled against him, and his groin pressed closer to the sweetness of her core. She rested against him and he groaned as her body rubbed his cock with her movement, causing him to tremble at the feel of her innocent seduction. He wanted to pull her clothes from her, and bury himself deep within the delicate folds of her body to the place he knew would hold wetness and warmth for him.

She kissed his chest lightly, humming softly as she settled her face against him. It took all his energy to calm the

shudders of anticipation that shook him. Just when he thought he had himself under control, she moved against him once again, causing another round of forbidden pleasure.

“Rachel, you need to rest,” he whispered against the top of her head, unable to prevent himself from kissing her hair lightly.

“Okay,” she whispered, kissing his chest once again.

Her hand caressed his back gently, making him sigh with contentment at the feel of her tender touch. She settled her hand on his hip and pulled him tighter against her core, rubbing her body against his erection.

“Rachel, you have to stop,” he told her

firmly, touching her hip and pushing her gently away from him so that she wasn't rubbing against his hard cock.

Rachel lay back and looked up at him. "Sam?" she asked, her eyes struggling to focus.

"What, honey?"

"Don't you want me to hold you?"

Sam closed his eyes and took a steadying breath before opening them and looking at the beautiful woman beside him. He reached up and gently brushed the long silkiness of her dark brown hair from her face, rubbing the silky threads through his fingers as he gently placed it behind her shoulder to settle the long tresses behind her.

“Rache, I love that you’re holding me,” he told her honestly. “And I love holding you. I just want you to choose to do it when you’re aware of what you’re doing, honey. You’re sick. You don’t really have control over what you’re feeling or doing.”

Rachel reached up and touched Sam’s face lightly, slowly pushing her fingers into his black hair and holding on tightly. “I know what I’m doing,” she insisted.

“No, baby, you really don’t,” he told her softly. “As much as I want to have you touch me and as much as I want to touch you, I’m not going to take advantage of this. I want you aware when you choose to be with me.”

Rachel smiled and leaned against his neck, kissing it lightly. “Sam, I’ve wanted to be with you for a very long time,” she told him, leaning back to look into the blue eyes that had haunted her memories for years.

She reached between them and cupped his groin, rubbing it firmly. His responding groan made her smile. He covered her hand quickly, unable to take her hand away before she wrapped her hand around his length and traced the head with her thumb.

“Baby, you don’t know what you’re doing to me,” he croaked as he pulled her hand away from him.

“Am I doing it wrong?” she

whispered, pulling his hand to her mouth and kissing it gently. “You’ll just have to teach me what you like.”

Tugging her hand free, she ran her hand down his naked chest, slipped her hand beneath the waistband of his sweats, and took hold of his shaft. Her touch was gentle as she gripped him and pulled up on the hard shaft with tenderness. She swiped her thumb over the flared head of his cock, drawing the drop of liquid that escaped him, and used it to ease her movements down his length once again.

Sam grabbed her wrist and gently pulled her away from his cock, ignoring the way his cock was screaming at him to leave her hand exactly where it was.

Taking her hand and placing it palm down on his chest, he struggled to maintain his control as his heart beat frantically against her touch.

Rachel leaned up on her forearm and looked down at him. He watched her silently as she pulled her hand from his grip and brought her thumb to her mouth, sucking his essence from it and smiling down at him.

“I like the way you taste, Sam,” she told him, winking. “I want to taste more.”

He groaned and flipped them so that she lay beneath him. “You have to stop, Rachel. You don’t know what you’re doing. You don’t really want me.”

Rachel's eyes were glazed with fever as she looked up at him. She smiled softly and removed her right hand from his grip.

"I've wanted you forever," she told him honestly. "If I didn't want you then my body wouldn't be wet for you." She smiled seductively. "I think you need to check and see if I'm wet for you."

Sam closed his eyes and groaned. "You're killing me," he told her, his determination wavering. "I can't do that. When you're better, we'll talk about this, but until then, you need to go to sleep and rest."

He watched as Rachel lowered her hand between them. His eyes were glued

to her actions as she slid her hand into her sweats and moaned as she touched herself. His cock throbbed at the thought that she was actually sinking her fingers into her sweet pussy.

She sighed at the contact of her fingers against her mound. She slid two fingers into her dripping channel and dragged them up across her clit, groaning as the swollen bud demanded attention. But she had another use for her fingers right then. Pulling her hand out of her sweats, she showed Sam the wetness that made her fingers glisten.

“See,” she told him huskily. “I’m wet for you, Sam. Only for you.”

She reached up and touched his lower lip with her index finger, pushing both

fingers inside his mouth as he opened to accept them. His tongue licked at them, and he sucked her juices from them like a dying man taking in life-giving liquid.

Her taste exploded in his mouth and he couldn't prevent the groan that escaped him. He wanted to pull her clothes from her body and taste her directly from the source until she screamed in ecstasy. Once he brought her to orgasm he would plunge his cock deep into her pussy and love her until his seed erupted from him and found a home within her.

But he couldn't. He wouldn't. Not without her being fully aware and giving him her complete consent. He needed her to choose to be with him.

It took every bit of willpower that he had to stop himself from making love to her right then. He lay beside her, gathering her tightly against his chest, and petting her hair gently. She settled against him tiredly, her body exhausted and ravaged with sickness.

“Rest, Rachel,” he told her firmly. “I’ll take care of you.”

It seemed like forever until she fell into a deep sleep. Only then could he relax a little and try to calm himself. Sam kissed the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her. She hugged him tightly, even as she slept, kissing his chest lightly every few minutes.

The joy he felt at her innocent

affection gave him an unbelievable feeling deep within his chest. He smiled and pulled her closer to him, wrapping the blankets around her securely and settling back to get some rest.

It was a while before his body relaxed. He was amazed that the excitement he felt gave way to a deep contentment from lying beside Rachel. When he finally fell asleep, he was totally at ease and relaxed. Lying there with her in his arms felt right. Her body fit against his perfectly. The way she held him and kissed him as she slept made him smile. Even as she slept she gave him comfort and love. In that moment, he realized that he was not only content to hold her—he was determined

to keep her.

Chapter 12

Sam opened his eyes suddenly. It was the middle of the night and something was wrong. Rachel was moving about restlessly. He could feel the heat radiating from her body. She was kicking off the blankets, and he had to reach out to hold her arm to stop her from climbing down from the bed.

“No, Rachel,” he stopped her, gently pulling her back onto the bed. “You have to lie down and get some rest so you can get better.” He tugged on her arm carefully to settle her back down beside him.

She turned and looked straight at him,

but he knew that she wasn't really seeing him. Her eyes were bright with fever. He knew that she was most likely delirious.

He climbed over her, zipped up his jacket to protect himself against the frigid night air, and prepared another dose of medicine. She looked up at him with strangely haunted eyes as she swallowed the mixture that he brought to her lips. She drank the water he offered, never letting her eyes leave his face.

"Are you taking care of me?" she asked him, confused.

"Yes, for a little while, until you can take care of yourself," he told her, smiling.

"I'm glad," she said seriously. "I

didn't like the other man."

"What other man?" Sam asked, smiling at her confusion.

"You know," she whispered, closing her eyes and lying back down on the bed. "Richard. He wasn't very nice at all." Her voice held a dreamlike quality as she spoke. "He hurt me."

Sam looked down at her for a long time. He felt as if his heart was being squeezed. He ached for her and the pain she had suffered at the hands of this man named Richard.

"I'm too hot, Aunt Kay," she said suddenly, throwing the blankets off her body. "Make it go away."

Sam reached for the wet cloth that sat

in a bowl of cool water, squeezed out the excess, and began to wipe her body with it. She relaxed under his touch, and he found that he didn't mind losing sleep to make her more comfortable.

He wiped down her arms in soothing motions then pulled up the pant legs of her sweatpants to expose her long, muscular legs. He exposed as much skin as he could and still protect her modesty.

His pattern of wetting the cloth and wiping her body continued for nearly an hour. He was at the sink pouring fresh cold water into the bowl and rewetting the cloth when he heard her soft whimpers of fear. He sat down on the bed, bringing the bowl of water with him and putting it aside on the counter,

making sure that it was still within reach. He raised his hand and touched her face gently. She looked up at him with fear in her eyes.

“Richard hurt me,” she told him, her voice barely above a whisper. She sat up and rested her head against his chest. She wrapped her arms around his waist and held on to him tightly.

“It’s okay, Rachel,” he said as he tried to soothe her. “He can’t hurt you anymore.” He held her tenderly, stroking her hair gently.

“He said that no one would ever want me,” she told him, her eyes distant as she gazed up at him, not really seeing him. “He said I was ugly. He said I wasn’t

good enough.”

Sam closed his eyes and held her close against his chest. Her pain became his. It killed him to see the silent resignation that her face mirrored. He didn't understand how that bastard could say things like that to her. He wanted to beat the shit out of the guy. He had done his best to destroy Rachel both emotionally and physically. It was obvious that the guy enjoyed tormenting her.

“Rachel, he's wrong,” he told her in a clear, deep voice. “You are a beautiful person. You *are* good enough. Someone will want you.”

“No one will want me,” she told him seriously, believing every word she

spoke.

He looked down at her and gently wiped away the single tear that slid down her flushed cheek with his fingertips. Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead tenderly then pulled back to look down at her.

“Sam will want you,” he told her finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

* * * *

The angel Bernadette looked down on the two sleeping forms before her. Her kind brown eyes held tears as she viewed the two people who were truly

destined to share their lives with each other.

She floated gently over the young woman she had looked after since she had been an infant, kissing her lightly at the corner of her eye. The young woman stirred slightly, sighing at the warmth of love that she felt. Bernadette smiled as Rachel snuggled in closer to Sam's gentle embrace. With Sam, Rachel felt protected and safe.

"Do not worry, Rachel," Bernadette whispered against her ear. "All will be well."

Pink and white radiated from the gentle being as she retreated from the sleeping couple. She couldn't help but smile as she saw Sam pull Rachel closer

to him and Rachel snuggle lovingly against his side.

“Trust each other,” Bernadette whispered.

The sleeping couple sighed contentedly, comforted by the warmth that emitted from the tiny angel and the sweet smell that was a gentle reminder of her caring and protection.

Chapter 13

“What the hell is going on here?”

Sam opened his eyes slowly and looked toward the voice that had invaded his sleep. He could feel Rachel snuggle against him, and he instinctively drew her body closer.

“Sam, you’d better start talking before I drag your ass out of that bed and beat the living daylights out of your sorry hide!” Roy threatened, stepping toward the bed where his best friend was sleeping with his cousin. “I told you I wanted you to realize you were in love with my cousin. I didn’t mean you should make her a conquest.”

Sam came awake fully, seeing the way Roy was looking down at him with barely controlled anger. He must have overslept. He had been up most of the night taking care of Rachel and had not heard Roy call to him from outside of the camper like he usually did every morning. He realized how things must look to his best friend.

“Roy, calm down,” he whispered as loudly as he dared as he climbed over Rachel to stand before his friend as Roy stood there facing him angrily with his hat in his hand. “This isn’t what you’re thinking.” He zipped up his jacket as he spoke, taking a calming breath and looking over his shoulder at Rachel

before returning his attention to her very protective cousin.

Roy just looked at him. His face was set and cold, and his eyes held such anger that Sam actually took a step back from him.

“Explain,” Roy said quietly, hoping there was indeed a good explanation.

“I checked on Rachel yesterday afternoon and found her sick in her tent. She had a high fever and was disoriented. I took her back here to take care of her.”

“She’s sick?” Roy asked, concerned. All anger left him as he took a step toward his cousin and placed his hand on her forehead. She felt warm to him, and he knew that his friend had not lied

to him.

“I was up most of the night with her,” Sam explained. “She was chilled from the fever and was shaking violently so I got into bed with her to try to keep her warm—nothing more.” He found no reason to enlighten him as to Rachel’s amorous attempts. That was between the two of them. He smiled inwardly as he thought about sharing such intimacies with Rachel for the rest of their lives.

Roy turned away from his cousin and faced his friend. He hesitated a moment then offered his hand. “I believe you.”

Sam took it gratefully. “I would never hurt her, Roy. You know that,” Sam told his friend sincerely.

Roy nodded and squeezed Sam's hand quickly before releasing it to rub his temple tiredly. "I'm sorry I lost it there for a second. She can't take much more, Sam. She's been through a lot."

"I know," Sam admitted. "She was delirious last night and said some things I don't think she would want me to know."

"Don't tell her," Roy advised.

"I won't," Sam agreed. "Let me get on my coat and boots and I'll make the rounds with you."

"No, that's okay," Roy stopped him. "You've had a rough night. Stay put and get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

“Thanks,” Sam said gratefully.

Roy picked up the clipboard from the table and left the camper. He turned to close the door behind him but hesitated and looked up at his friend.

“Thanks for taking care of my cousin,” he said sincerely.

Sam nodded and smiled tiredly. Roy closed the door and Sam could hear him walking away. He hesitated a minute then turned to look at the adorable sleeping bundle in his bed. Before he could change his mind he unzipped his jacket and climbed back into bed with Rachel, covering them both with the heavy blankets that had been pushed aside in his haste to exit the bed. He

smiled contentedly as Rachel turned to face him and snuggled against his bare chest immediately. He closed his eyes and relaxed, content for the first time in a very long time. He was asleep before Roy came back to replace the clipboard on the table.

Roy looked down at the two of them and smiled. He knew that they would be good for each other. Fate had stepped in and had seen to it that they would be together. He and Paulette were determined to help nudge Fate along.

* * * *

Rachel moved restlessly. She was dreaming that someone was holding her.

She could almost feel the strength beneath her head. She raised her hand and rested it beside her, amazed at the realness of her dream. It was as if she could really feel someone's body beside her. She opened her eyes slowly and froze in fear. She was actually lying against a man's chest. A very large and muscular chest covered with black hair.

Very slowly, she raised herself up to look at the face that belonged to the chest she had slept on and gasped in shock. Sam McCoy lay beside her, sound asleep. His right arm was wrapped around her body, holding her close to him.

“Oh, hell,” she whispered desperately.

She tried to ease herself out of his arms, but the minute she tried to pull away from him, Sam's arm tightened around her and he was instantly awake. They stared at each other silently for a moment.

Sam raised his hand to touch her face gently. Rachel was too stunned to move. She held her breath in fear, leaning away from him. After a moment, anger took over at the thought that she had been taken advantage of. Before she could stop herself she fisted her hand and punched him in the shoulder with all the strength that she could muster.

“What the hell was that for?” he demanded angrily, realizing that Rachel

was obviously lucid and had intended the punch to be for him and not some man who had haunted her dreams.

He grabbed for her hand and held her still to prevent her from hitting him again. He was surprised by her rush of strength and had to lay his body across hers to stop her from jumping from the bed. She began to struggle violently beneath him and he grew afraid for her.

“Please stop, Rachel,” he asked her calmly. “You’re not strong enough to be doing this.”

Her face was against his shoulder, shielding it from his gaze. He felt her shaking and pulled away from her to look down at her. Deep brown eyes filled with pain and anger stared up at

him.

“I suggest you explain immediately,” she told him angrily, pulling her hand free from his.

“I found you in your tent yesterday afternoon,” he told her calmly. “You had a high fever and chills so I took you back here to take care of you until you were better.”

“Then why are you naked?” she asked him accusingly.

His eyebrow shot up in surprise before a slow smile spread across his face. “I’m not naked,” he told her, pulling back the blankets. “Look.”

Rachel’s eyes lifted to the ceiling of the camper. “I’d rather not,” she told him

quickly.

“Okay,” he said quietly, trying not to laugh. “Don’t you remember feeling sick before you went to bed the other night?”

He waited patiently while Rachel closed her eyes in an obvious attempt to remember something. He couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she was. Her face was slightly flushed from the fever but it only accented the rosy beauty that was natural for her.

“I don’t remember anything,” Rachel told him slowly. “I only remember being cold.”

“Then I guess you don’t remember how you crossed the campground last night completely naked and knocked on my camper door, do you?” he teased her.

“I did no such thing!” She looked at him indignantly, her eyes immediately searching his face and flashing angrily.

“How do you know you didn’t? You can’t remember,” he continued to bait her.

“Because I wouldn’t do that,” she told him firmly. She looked away, embarrassed by the very thought of betraying her deepest wish to the very man she never wanted to know her secret.

“Rachel,” he said quietly, unable to keep from smiling as he took her chin gently in his hand and turned her face to meet his eyes. “You should know me well enough to know that I wouldn’t take

advantage of you. I only shared my body heat with you because you were shaking with chills.”

Her large brown eyes looked up at him warily. “Really?” she asked him, unsure if she should believe him.

“Really,” he told her sincerely.

There was no way he would ever tell her how she wanted him to make love to her. The intimacy he had shared with her gave him hope that he could win her affections. He wouldn’t jeopardize that chance by making her feel bad about her honest desire for him.

She closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief then opened them in fright as she felt his weight above her. He was climbing across her to get out of the bed.

She was glad to see that he did indeed have on sweatpants, but turned her head away at the feelings that began to well up in her chest at the sight of his naked chest and stomach. Lord, but he did have a nice body!

“Here, take these,” he told her, pulling her out of her thoughts and causing her to turn back to face him. He offered her two pills and an opened bottle of water.

She sat up carefully, reaching up to hold her head in her hands in an effort to keep the room from spinning. He was beside her immediately, placing his arm around her back to steady her and hold her to him.

“Take it slowly, Rachel,” he told her

quietly. “You’ve been pretty sick, honey. Your fever was very high. You’ll probably be weak and shaky for a while. I think it would be best if you just stayed put for a while until you get your strength back.”

She looked at him silently, the endearment he had used making her stomach flutter. Taking the pills, she placed them into her mouth before accepting the bottle that he offered her. She swallowed the water then handed him back the bottle and lay back down on the pillow. She watched him silently as he covered her before turning to set down the pill container and the water bottle.

“Do you feel up to eating anything?”

he asked her as he reached for his down vest and pulled it on quickly.

Rachel watched him silently, amazed by how comfortable she felt lying there in his bed and watching him get dressed.

“Just tea if you have it, with a little bit of honey,” she said quietly.

“It’s not much, but it’s a start,” he said as he filled a pan with water, placed it on the small stove, and lit the burner.

He turned and reached for a clean pair of socks from the opposite bed and sat down to put them on. Rachel watched him silently, unsure of how she felt about him taking care of her. She had to admit that it gave her a kind of a warm feeling. She closed her eyes and rested, listening

to his movements around the camper.

When he reached over to prop her up, she could smell the natural male scent of him and reveled in the emotions that overwhelmed her at the familiarity of him. She turned into his neck as he settled her against the two pillows he placed behind her, and breathed in deeply, joy exploding within her before she could push it down. Accepting the mug of tea from him, she sipped the tea slowly, looking down to hide the blush that she knew had to be covering her cheeks. After a moment, she held the cup out to him with half the contents still in it.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t feel like drinking any more,” she told him tiredly.

He took the cup from her and was about to turn away when he saw her pull back the blanket and slowly ease her legs down onto the floor. He pulled himself up straight and stared down at her.

“Don’t you dare get out of that bed,” he told her sternly.

Rachel froze in surprise. She looked up at him and saw the serious expression on his face. She was immediately consumed with anger by his display of power.

“And just who the do you think you’re talking to?” she asked him angrily. “No one is going to tell me what I can and cannot do. If I decide that I’ll go back to

my own tent and rest then that's what I'll do." Her breathing was coming in quick gasps. She could feel herself getting lightheaded from the exertion, but she would be damned if she let him know it.

"As your doctor, I most certainly will tell you what to do," he countered angrily. "I was up with you half the night. Your fever was so high you were delirious. You're still sick and very weak, and I will not allow you to ruin your health further just because you're uncomfortable staying in my camper."

Rachel stared across at him and found that her anger was losing some of its intensity. He had been up with her all night. She had been delirious. He had taken care of her and had nursed her

through the worst of her sickness. She was being unreasonable in her stubbornness. Although she hated to admit it, she knew that he was right. She shouldn't try to go back to her own tent.

The silence hung heavily between them. Rachel's anger was evident but so was Sam's determination to take care of her. This battle of wills was not going to be won lightly. Sam searched Rachel's face and found himself softening at her frailty. He understood that she was trying to take care of herself and be strong, but sometimes you just have to allow someone else to help. He wanted to be that someone for her. He saw the dark circles under her eyes and the

paleness of her complexion despite the feverish flush of her cheeks. She needed him to take care of her, even if it was only temporarily until she could take care of herself.

“Please, Rachel,” he pleaded with her quietly, his anger all but gone. “You really have to take it easy. I’m very concerned that you’ll have a relapse and I won’t be there to help.” He took a step toward her and looked down at her. “I don’t want you to end up in the hospital. Please stay until you’re sure you’re up to camping alone.”

Rachel closed her eyes and rubbed them tiredly. She could feel the heat behind her eyes and knew he was right. She still felt sick and was in no shape to

camp alone.

“Okay,” she said finally. “I’ll stay until I feel better.”

She lay back down on the bed and didn’t protest when he moved to cover her once again. When he reached forward to touch her cheek, she found herself holding her breath at the sudden and unexpected contact.

He removed his hand and turned to get the cool cloth that sat in the bowl of water that he had used to bathe her body throughout the night. He lifted the cloth and squeezed out the excess water. He placed it gently across her eyes and forehead, and she couldn’t stop herself from sighing at the refreshing feel of it. It

seemed to pull the heat from her face.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, pressing the cool cloth to her eyes.

“You’re very welcome,” he answered her, smiling. He was glad her eyes were covered so that she couldn’t see his smile. “I’ll be back in a little while.” He heard her make a sound and took it to mean that she had heard him.

He left the camper to complete some necessary daily chores around the campground. He also knew he should give her some time alone to adjust to her situation.

When he returned she was sound asleep, and he took the time to clean up and change out of his sweat clothes and put on a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt.

As he removed the cloth from her head, she turned her face toward the center of the camper.

He looked down at her silently for a moment. Her right hand was tucked under the pillow and her left hand was resting on top of her stomach. He had to hold himself back from reaching out to caress her. She looked so vulnerable. He found that he wanted to climb back into bed beside her, hold her within his arms again, and maybe finish what she had started last night. He wanted to kiss her and touch her and make love to her.

He thought about his dream again as he looked down at her. He felt deep in his heart that this woman that he had known

most of his life actually might be—no, was indeed meant for him.

He turned, picked up her novel and sat down at the table to continue reading. He positioned himself on the bench seat with his back resting against the framing of the other mattress in the camper so that he could watch her by just raising his eyes from the book. It was funny to him how he kept looking up to make sure that she was really there.

In a matter of moments he was concentrating so intently on the words before him that he became totally oblivious to his surroundings. When he finally turned the last page of the book, he placed it reverently on the table and looked up at the sleeping woman before

him.

He was in awe that she had written such an extraordinary novel. What truly amazed him was how much of her he saw in the story. Her own personality was so much a part of the female character that he felt that he had gotten to know her secret, innermost desires just by reading her book. If that was indeed true, then he knew what she hoped and dreamed for.

A light knock on the camper door pulled his thoughts up short. He rose and went to the door to open it quietly. An older couple, somewhere in their sixties he would guess, was standing there before him.

“Can I help you, folks?” he asked them kindly.

“Sure hope so,” the man replied, clutching a beat-up map in his age-lined hands. “My wife and I are planning on camping around here after we check out the area and load up on supplies and wondered if you might help us out by pointing us in the right direction.”

Sam smiled widely. The two before him reminded him of Roy’s mother and father. The friendliness and warmth they displayed were typical of the people of the mountains.

“Sure, come on in,” Sam invited them, stepping back to allow them to climb up into the camper. “Have a seat.” He

removed the book that he had just finished from the table to place it carefully in the small cabinet next to the camper door so they could spread their map out.

“Thank you,” the man said as he sat down on the bench seat, moving over so his wife could slide in beside him.

“Oh, dear,” the woman said, quietly. “We wouldn’t want to disturb your wife.”

Sam looked at her in confusion then realized that she was looking at Rachel and smiled at her mistake. “Don’t worry. She’ll sleep soundly for a while. She hasn’t been feeling well,” he told them, not bothering to correct the error.

“Poor dear,” the woman sympathized.

“Such a pretty little thing too.”

Sam smiled and nodded as he looked down at Rachel's sleeping form as she lay in his bed. He decided that her being in his bed was where she was supposed to be. He was going to make sure that she knew that he wanted her there. A soft voice telling him that they were meant to be together echoed in his mind. He thought about the sweet voice that had spoken to him as he slept and wondered if his inner feelings were the real culprit of the imaginary voice.

“Yes, she is,” he agreed, bringing himself back to pay attention to the elderly couple before him.

He was slightly embarrassed at having

been caught looking at Rachel. He cleared his throat self-consciously and sat across from them to view the map. Once he had straightened out their sense of direction and recommended some sights and campgrounds, the man folded the map and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

“Much obliged,” he told Sam, offering his hand. “Name’s Stan Fletcher. This here is my wife, Gwen.”

“Sam McCoy,” he introduced himself. “Nice to meet you.” Sam smiled as he offered his hand to both and shook theirs warmly. “I was just about to make some lunch. Would you like to join me?”

He hoped that they would say yes. They made him feel like he was part of

Roy's family again. He missed sharing times with Kay and Gabe Monroe. When Gabe had died when Roy had been ten years old, he had been as devastated as Roy was. Gabe Monroe was a kind and humorous man who died too young. He had always enjoyed the feelings of acceptance that he had received whenever he had visited with them. Sam could sense the same peaceful kindness in these people.

"Oh, we couldn't," Gwen protested. "We'd be putting you through so much trouble."

"Not at all," Sam stopped her. "It's only sandwiches, and it would be nice to have some company."

“That’s right nice of you,” Stan accepted happily.

Sam stood and started to remove some items from the refrigerator. He placed them on the table, handed the elderly couple some utensils, and surveyed the cabinet under the sink. His eyes skirted to the sleeping form in his bed, his face softening immediately.

“I’d better make some soup for Rachel,” he said, more to himself than to the two visitors. “She’ll only be able to eat something light. You two go on and start.”

He removed a can of soup from the narrow shelf below the sink and opened it, poured its contents into the small pan

that he had placed on the stove, and lit the burner beneath it. Stan and Gwen looked at each other and smiled at the obvious concern that he had for his young wife. They worked silently for just a moment before Sam joined them once again at the table.

As they ate the sandwiches, Sam noticed that Rachel was beginning to move restlessly. He removed himself from the bench seat, stood, and walked over to her. He reached forward to gently touch her forehead. She opened her eyes slowly, and he found himself immersed in the gentle softness before him.

“How do you feel?” he asked her worriedly, taking his hand from her

forehead and resting the back of it against her cheek. “Your fever’s down.”

Rachel looked up at him tiredly and closed her eyes for a second before opening them once again to look at him. “I’m tired but I feel a little better,” she told him quietly. “I smell food.”

Sam laughed and reluctantly took his hand away. “It figures,” he teased, reaching forward to help her sit up, surprised when she let him aid her without protest.

He pulled her forward and was removing the blanket from her body when his hand was captured and held by hers. He looked up at her in confusion and saw that she was looking at the

couple who sat at the table.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I forgot for the moment that we had company. Rachel, this is Gwen and Stan Fletcher. I asked them to stay and have lunch before they head out.”

“Nice to meet you, Rachel,” Stan greeted her warmly.

“I’m sorry you aren’t feeling well, dear,” Gwen told her sympathetically.

“Nice to meet you both,” Rachel answered, smiling despite the awkward feeling she had at having them see her in bed. The older couple seemed friendly enough.

She eased herself down off the bed, grateful for Sam’s assistance, and held on to his arm as he helped her to the

table. She closed her eyes briefly as she took a steadying breath. The mere proximity of Sam's strong body pressed up against hers as he guided her from the bed to the table was enough to rob her of coherent thought. Her heart sped up and she licked her lips nervously, suddenly wanting to wrap her arms around him and cuddle into his warmth.

Too soon, his hands left her and his body moved away from hers. She felt the loss so greatly, her chest actually ached. She sat down carefully, tucked her hair behind her ears and smiled at the couple across from her, making a conscious effort to calm herself and let go of the fantasy that assaulted her.

Sam placed the bowl of warm soup in front of her along with a spoon and a bottle of water. She looked up at him and smiled gratefully, her mouth watering at the delicious aroma of the soup. When Sam slid onto the bench seat beside her, she made a conscious effort not to move away from him. Even though she didn't want to admit it to herself, she liked that his strong body touched hers. She could feel the power of his leg as it touched hers and closed her eyes as she absorbed the strength of him. She kept the sigh of contentment inside of her, forcing herself to open her eyes and concentrate on the meal before her.

She ate slowly and listened as Sam

talked with the Fletchers. All of them finished their sandwiches, but she was unable to eat more than half of the soup. She pushed it aside and took a small sip of the cold water.

“I’m sorry. I can’t eat any more,” she explained when she saw Sam’s concerned face. “My stomach is still a little queasy.”

“Maybe you’re pregnant, dear,” Gwen offered politely.

Rachel looked at her in shock then looked with wide eyes at Sam who sat beside her. A smile slowly spread across his face as his eyes darkened with an emotion Rachel was at a loss to identify. Rachel looked back at Gwen and saw her confusion.

“That would be nice, wouldn’t it, dear?” Gwen offered hesitantly.

“Yes, it would be nice,” Rachel agreed hesitantly. “But it’s hardly likely.”

“What Rachel means is that it’s too soon for her to be experiencing any symptoms,” Sam interrupted her quickly. “We’ve only been married a few weeks. Isn’t that right, honey?” His eyes twinkled with mischief as he looked down at her.

He saw the flash of anger that ignited in her eyes and couldn’t help but smile wider. It was obvious that she was trying to control herself and not cause a scene. Under the table, however, she

was not so controlled. Her hand was squeezing his thigh with such strength that it was hard for him to believe that she could be weak from her illness. After some difficulty, he was finally able to remove her hand from his leg to hold it firmly in his hands on top of the table, in clear view of Stan and Gwen's watchful eyes.

“Don't worry, Rachel,” Gwen told her reassuringly. “We were married nearly two years before I was lucky enough to find myself with child. I thought I would never have any children but, thankfully, it finally happened. We have seven children now. Every one of them is a source of joy. I'm sure you'll be just as blessed someday.”

“We’ll work on it, won’t we, honey,” Sam told her, smiling and winking at her.

Rachel blushed hotly in embarrassment. “Please excuse me,” she said quietly, trying to remove herself from the table.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Sam asked her seriously, all teasing gone from his voice. He refused to move from his seat, preventing Rachel from going anywhere.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she told him slowly, enunciating each word and blushing in embarrassment as she spoke.

“I’ll go with you,” Gwen offered, extending her hand to help.

Rachel looked across the table to the kind, elderly woman and smiled gently, ignoring her anger at Sam for the moment. She reached her hand out and took Gwen's hand in her own.

“If you don't mind helping me, I would really appreciate it,” she told her sincerely.

Gwen stood and waited while Sam helped Rachel out of the seat and lifted her out of the camper to place her gently on the ground. He handed her the same bent stick she had used before and made sure that she was holding on to Gwen for support before he removed his hand from her elbow. He watched them as they slowly made their way toward the

bathrooms before turning to go back into the camper and sit with Stan.

Stan smiled as Sam entered the camper. He had watched the way Sam had helped Rachel and was touched by the concern that Sam had shown his young wife.

“I bet they’re a lot alike, Sam,” Stan told him quietly.

“Think so?” Sam asked, sitting back down at the table to face him.

“Seems to me that they’re independent, proud, and loving women,” he said thoughtfully. “Ease off on your wife a little.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked, totally baffled.

“It makes a difference how you talk to

your woman,” he explained patiently. “Especially if they’re used to doing things for themselves like my wife is. You’ll be surprised at how much can be accomplished with tenderness. A lot can be decided in the wee hours of the morning when you two are snuggling in bed. A quiet word, a gentle touch. You’ll both be part of the decisions, and they’ll be reached together in a pretty enjoyable way.” Stan winked at Sam and smiled. “Course, all that talking and touching will probably lead to other things. And that’s pretty necessary if you want to have some children.”

Sam couldn’t help but laugh softly. He leaned back, content with the thoughts

that filled his head and not afraid to admit it to himself.

“Thanks, Stan,” he said, offering his hand to shake the elder’s hand. “You’ve just made my day.”

Chapter 14

Gwen helped Rachel hobble across the campground toward the bathrooms. They traveled in silence as Rachel struggled to hop without losing her balance because of her weakened state.

“I twisted my ankle the other day,” Rachel explained quietly. “I’ve also had a fever, so I’m a little weak. I really appreciate that you’re helping me. I hope I’m not too heavy for you.”

“Oh no, my dear,” Gwen protested even though she was, herself, a small woman. “You’re just a little slip of a thing. You won’t be a burden even when you’re heavy with child.”

Rachel stopped and looked down at Gwen in embarrassment. “Gwen, I don’t...” she began, trying to explain the misunderstanding.

“Don’t worry, Rachel,” Gwen stopped her. “I’m sure Sam will be very good to you—especially when you find out you’re going to have his baby. Men are all bushy and strong and all that, but when it comes right down to it, they’re just as cuddly and as gentle as they can be. You’ll see. Stan and I have been married for over forty years, and he’s gentler with me every day.”

Rachel looked into the older woman’s hazel eyes, unable to speak. All her frustration and loneliness rushed forth.

Before she could stop herself, she threw her arms around Gwen's shoulders and broke down into tears. Gwen put her arms around Rachel and held her gently while she cried.

"There, there, honey," she soothed her. "Don't get so upset. Time has a way of making things work out. You'll see."

"I'm sorry," Rachel apologized between sniffs. "I just can't help it."

"That's all right, dear. You go on and have yourself a good cry if you need to. You'll feel better." She patted her back reassuringly, holding her until she calmed down before letting go.

"It's been a rough couple of weeks," Rachel told Gwen, smiling sadly. "It's probably better if I stay angry. It'll keep

me strong.”

“Sometimes it’s better to cry, honey,”
Gwen offered.

Rachel nodded. Gwen was right. But she couldn’t give in to her tears right then. She needed to stay strong. It was the only way she would be able to survive.

* * * *

Stan and Sam were standing beside the small truck that the Fletchers drove when Gwen and Rachel returned. Sam watched them as they made their way toward the camper and couldn’t help but smile at the sight they made. Gwen

barely came up to Rachel's shoulder, yet she held her firmly and supported her while she hobbled her way back to the camper.

"Ready to go, Gwen?" Stan asked her, smiling lovingly at his wife.

"Ready, Stan. Now you take care of yourself, Rachel," she said, turning to embrace the young woman and give her a kiss on her cheek. "I hope you and Sam are very happy." She whispered the words against Rachel's temple so that only Rachel could hear her.

"Thank you, Gwen," Rachel whispered back, hugging her tightly. "Take care of yourself."

"Bye, Stan," Sam said, shaking hands with the elder man. "And thanks for the

advice.”

Stan nodded and smiled. “Maybe we’ll be back this way to set up camp. We have to stock up on supplies and then decide where we’ll be camping for a while.”

“If you’re coming back to this campground, try to get here early,” Sam suggested as he opened the passenger door for Gwen. “The camp usually fills up pretty quickly and there’s supposed to be some rain tonight.”

“Thanks for everything,” Stan told him, climbing in behind the steering wheel. “I hope we see you again. Good-bye, Rachel.”

Sam and Rachel waved as the SUV

pulled away. She turned to face him and saw that he was staring down at her.

“They’re nice people,” she said quietly, averting her face so that he couldn’t see that she had been crying.

She started to walk past him when he put his hand under her elbow to steady her as she hobbled along. She hesitated a moment but decided to say nothing and allow him help her back into the camper. She really wasn’t feeling well at all at the moment.

Once inside and seated at the table she turned to face him. “Would you mind telling me why you told them that we were married?” she asked him quietly.

“I didn’t,” Sam denied as he stood before her. “They assumed that the

woman sleeping in *my* bed in *my* camper was *my* wife. A logical assumption, don't you think?"

"Maybe so, but you could have told them the truth," she pointed out, getting a little angry.

"What should I have said? That a woman from the campground is sleeping with me?" he teased.

"You're an ass!" she stammered in frustration, her anger building. She stood and made an attempt to leave.

Sam blocked her path immediately. "You're not going anywhere, Rachel. You're sick," he told her angrily.

"You're sick if you think I'm going to stay within fifty miles of you," she

yelled at him, pushing at his chest in an attempt to get him out of her way. “Telling those sweet old people that we’re married, and trying to have a baby no less!”

“Rachel, stop and let’s talk about this, please,” he said calmly, concerned that his teasing had upset her this much. “I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She struggled in his arms for a moment then looked up at him with wide eyes. He looked back at her in silence and couldn’t help but feel bad that life had been so rough for her. She stopped struggling abruptly and leaned against his chest for support.

“Sam,” she said suddenly, very

quietly.

“What?”

“I think I’m going to faint.”

She barely got out the words when her knees buckled beneath her and she sagged against his body as the blackness engulfed her.

Chapter 15

Sam's arms were quick to encircle Rachel's body as she lost consciousness. He lifted her easily and turned to gently place her on the bed that she had occupied the night before. He checked her pulse then quickly covered her with the blankets that were beside her.

He left her for a moment to dampen a cloth with cold water from the pitcher on the table and then returned to her. Gently placing the cloth on her face, he wiped her forehead and tenderly passed its coolness across her eyes. He lifted her head carefully to place the cold cloth behind her neck. It was only a moment

later that her eyes fluttered lightly and then opened.

His face was close to hers and she found herself looking up into two beautiful but worried blue eyes. She closed her eyes for a moment and felt him moving back away from her.

“Are you okay?” he asked her quietly.

Rachel opened her eyes and nodded slowly. “Just a little weak. Sorry about fainting.”

“Don’t apologize for something you have no control over,” he told her, his voice quiet. “Do you want a drink?”

“No, thank you,” she refused politely, very aware of how close his body was to hers and remembering how good it felt to lie next to him.

She looked up at him and knew that she had to distance her feelings from him. He was dangerously close to her in more ways than one, and she didn't like the feeling she was having of wanting him to be closer.

“Why did you have to tell them that we were married?” she asked finally.

“I didn't tell them we were married,” he told her again quietly. “I let them assume that we were married.”

He stood and looked down at her in silence. His whole body seemed to be weighed down. He no longer stood as tall or as strong as she remembered.

“If I had known that the very idea would repulse you, I would have told

them that you were my sister.”

His gaze moved away from her slowly, silently looking out the window at the campground beyond. Rachel watched him, pain gripping at her heart. She knew without a doubt that she had hurt him deeply.

“I have some work to do,” he said finally. “Please stay in bed and rest until I get back. You’re still not strong enough to be up on your own.”

He left the camper without even looking at her again. Rachel’s eyes followed him as he left then closed in frustration at the situation. She truly hadn’t meant to hurt him.

He had taken care of her through her sickness and had lost sleep because of

her. She knew that he was concerned about her health and was only trying to help her. It was her own fears and insecurities that were making the situation unacceptable. Worse than anything else, she worried that she had damaged their friendship.

She couldn't understand why she was being such a baby about things. She couldn't help it. Whether she wanted to admit to it or not, Richard had done more than assault her. He had affected her in ways that she was only beginning to experience and was struggling to understand.

She turned onto her left side to face the center of the camper and drew the

blanket up to her chin. She knew that she had to apologize. Sam didn't deserve the way that she had treated him.

* * * *

Sam returned to the camper about an hour later. When he stepped up inside, Rachel's eyes quickly searched his and was saddened to see the distance that he had put between them. He showed no outward sign of emotion but she knew that he was upset.

"Sam," she called to him quietly.

He looked at her silently and waited for her to speak. She looked like she had something to say, but he wasn't sure if he was up to another attack. He was too

tired of all the crap that life had brought him to this point.

“I’m sorry,” she said finally, slowly sitting up to face him squarely. She noted the way his eyebrows rose and wondered if it was because he was surprised, or because he didn’t believe her. She couldn’t blame him either way.

“Forget it,” he said abruptly, dismissing it.

“No,” she stopped him. “I was wrong to question you. I know you were only trying to protect my reputation. You’ve always been so good to me and have always helped me. I shouldn’t have been so awful to you. You don’t deserve it. I can never thank you enough for helping

me out. You really are a good doctor.” She looked up at him and hesitated, not sure if her words were good enough to express what she was feeling.

“Thanks,” he said dryly, shrugging off the compliment.

“Sam, I was not repulsed by the idea of being your wife,” she told him finally, knowing that he needed to hear it and that she needed to say it. “I was just surprised by the possibility that someone might consider me someone’s wife. It’s my problem and it doesn’t have anything to do with you.” She looked down at her hands for a moment and took a steadying breath before looking up to face him again.

Sam watched her carefully and

remembered the words that she had spoken during her delirium. His expression softened, and he couldn't keep the smile from his face. Walking the few steps to the bed, he sat down beside her and reached out to touch her chin gently. He turned her face to the left and then to the right, as if studying her.

“What’re you doing?” she asked, unable to keep the smile from her face or the humor from her voice.

“Just checking out your looks,” he said, teasing. “I think you look like someone’s wife. You sure are pretty enough.” He dropped his hand and looked deep into the soft brown gentleness of her eyes. “And I know

you're nice enough."

Rachel's heart began to pound at his closeness. Her eyes closed as emotions filled her at his last words. "Don't tease," she told him quietly. When she opened them to meet his gaze, she couldn't hide the sadness that she was feeling as she looked up at him.

She remained silent, unsure what to say. Anything she said at this point would just make her feel more awkward and alone. She didn't want Sam to pity her. She certainly didn't want him to laugh at her.

He leaned over her, and she was forced to lie down to keep his face from touching hers. As he looked down at her, she found herself lost in the crystal

blueness of his eyes. She didn't even realize the closeness of his mouth until she felt his lips gently touch hers. Her eyes closed and she could feel her body melting at the tenderness of the joining. His lips were warm and gentle on hers, tenderly tasting her, exerting slight pressure as he slowly moved his mouth to tease a response from her. She held her breath at the sweet gentleness. When he pulled away she looked up and saw him smiling down at her.

“I have never been more serious,” he assured her quietly.

He lowered his mouth to hers to taste her lips again. He kissed her once more, then again, and then a fifth time. His lips

parted slightly and he brushed her lips with his tongue but went no further. The kiss was gentle and soft, and Rachel found herself leaning up to increase the pressure of his mouth upon hers.

When she leaned back into the pillows his mouth never lost contact with hers, his lips moving sensuously over hers, his head leaning toward hers, making the pressure more demanding and passionate. When he pulled back and leaned his forehead against her right temple, they were both breathless.

“I’d better stop or I won’t be able to control myself,” he whispered, sitting up and looking down at her, gently touching her lips with his index finger. “Unless you’d like to try and make that baby that

Stan and Gwen were talking about.”

His eyes twinkled as he spoke the words, and Rachel couldn't help but smile up at him. Before she could stop herself, she reached up and carefully brushed back the lock of curly black hair that had fallen onto his forehead as if it was something that she did every day. His hand captured hers, and he held it against his chest. She could feel the way his heart was pounding. She was glad that he was enjoying her touch.

“Don't tempt me,” she whispered finally, smiling up at him.

His breath caught in his throat and there was a pull in his chest at her words. He had never expected her to

respond in that way. Releasing her hand, he pulled away from her slowly. He found that he didn't quite know what to say. When she squeezed his hand, he found himself holding on to it tightly, as if to reassure himself that she was actually there and had actually said what he had heard.

"You don't really know me anymore, Sam," Rachel finally told him seriously, breaking the silence. "It's been a long time since we've spent time together."

"That's true," Sam admitted. "We've both gone through a lot of years without spending any time together. But, I read the letters you sent me, even though there were only a few, and I've kept up with your life through Roy."

Sam looked down at her silently for a moment then released her hand and stood to go to the side cabinet next to the camper door. He opened it up and removed the novel that he had finished reading just an hour before. He turned to face her and gently placed the book in her hand.

“Roy gave this to me yesterday,” he explained when he saw the confusion on her face. “I read it.”

Rachel looked down at the title and gasped when she saw that it was one of her own novels. Cold fear gripped her heart. She sat up slowly and held the book limply in her hand. When she looked up at him, her eyes were distant

and cold.

“Go ahead,” she said finally. “Tell me how trashy and unrealistic it is.”

He leaned back against the cabinet and crossed his arms across his chest as he looked at her. “I can’t say that because it isn’t true.”

“Okay. Accuse me of writing porn,” she said, crossing her arms across her chest and waiting for the accusation that she had heard countless times.

Sam laughed softly. “I’ll admit that your love scenes were hot, but they’re hardly porn, honey. Porn is just sex. Your stories are all about love.”

She looked up at him, surprised, but remained silent. He could tell that she was trying to figure out if she should

believe him or not. He turned and sat at the table with his back against the opposite bed so that he could still face her as she turned her body toward the center of the camper.

“I thought it was a very nice, tender love story,” he told her honestly. “I thought it was very well written. It held my interest and it made me want to jump in the cold stream more than once.”

Rachel smiled and slowly lowered her body back down onto the mattress to rest her head on his pillow. She didn't realize it, but she was clutching the book to her chest as she looked across the camper toward Sam.

“Did you really think the book was

good, or are you just trying to make me feel better?" she asked him, still smiling.

"I said I liked it because I did," he told her, raising his right hand as if to swear to his honesty. He lowered his hand and smiled as he saw the obvious relief that crossed her features. "I was a little surprised that you know so much about the sadness that people feel. You're a little young to have had much experience in that."

"How old do you have to be to understand what it's like to be hurt or lonely?" Rachel asked him calmly.

Sam watched her silently for a moment. He could tell that she *did* know all about those things and was saddened that she had come to know such things so

well.

“I saw a lot of you in your characters,” he told her, changing the subject. “It was as if I got to know you better by reading your book.”

Rachel smiled and reached out to place the book on the counter beside her. “I guess I can’t help but put some of myself in each book,” she admitted truthfully. “Sometimes I have to stop myself from writing from my heart rather than from my head.” She turned onto her back and looked up at the top of the camper, lost in thought. “Sometimes I even write my own fantasies.”

She was quiet then, and he watched her silently as she became lost in her

own thoughts. He thought it was wonderful to have such power over words and such talent to create such beautiful stories. He closed his eyes and took a steadying breath to calm himself as one of the love scenes she wrote flashed through his mind. When he opened his eyes to look at her once again, he smiled softly at the woman who occupied his bed, totally unaware of the turmoil she was creating in his mind and his body.

Rachel turned and faced him once again, her face calm and happy as she looked at him. They faced each other in silence for a moment. Rachel found that she wanted to explain what she meant a little further. She could tell from Sam's

searching eyes that he really wanted to understand and know what she meant. She opened her mouth as if to speak then closed it suddenly, unable to tell him anything more that might make her the object of his disbelief, or worse, his laughter.

Slowly easing herself forward, she made a move to step down from the bed but found her path blocked almost immediately by Sam's rather large and immovable body. She raised her hands and steadied herself by holding on to his arms, not sure if she should push him away or latch on to his strength.

"Where're you going?" he asked her gently, offering to help her step down

from the bed.

“I want to go to my tent and get cleaned up and changed,” she explained, her breath coming quickly at his closeness. She found herself looking at his mouth and remembering the feel of his lips on hers. She looked up into his eyes and saw him smiling down at her. She blushed slightly, realizing that he must have guessed what she had been thinking.

“Let me help you,” he offered sincerely.

She hesitated a moment, then nodded and was rewarded with a full smile. “You’re trying to capture my heart, Sam McCoy,” she told him, relaxing finally as he helped her step down from the

camper and supported her as she slowly made her way to her tent.

“I’m doing my very best, ma’am,” he teased, happy to see her smile up at him. “I’ll even help you bathe if you want me to.” His offer was sincere even though he said it with humor. Just the thought of soaping up her naked body made him hard.

Rachel laughed and squeezed his arm, unable to keep the blush from her face at the thought of Sam helping her bathe. She found herself thinking of other things that she would like Sam to do to her and had to mentally shake herself. Her thoughts were getting completely out of control.

When they reached her campsite, Sam

unzipped the tent for her and stepped back out of her way. She hobbled into the tent carefully and was reaching for her portable stove when she saw Sam's hands reaching in to take it from her.

"That's okay, I can manage," she protested.

"Please let me help get you set up," he offered. "I promise I'll leave you alone after that."

Rachel looked up at him, her expression calm and serious. "You don't have to leave me alone," she said quietly.

Sam faced her and smiled, certain that she could hear the way his heart was beating within his chest. He took the stove from her and carried it to set it

atop the picnic table. He turned to see her hopping out of the tent with a large pan and went to her quickly and took it from her.

“I want to heat up some water to wash my hair and bathe,” she explained, a little nervous at how close he stood beside her.

He nodded and placed the large pan on the picnic table, lit the burner with the pack of matches that he kept in his pocket, and placed the pan on the burner.

“Do you have a water container?” he asked her, turning to face her.

“It’s in the tent,” she said, making an effort to turn and retrieve it.

“I’ll get it,” Sam said, halting her

movement with his hand.

Rachel looked down at the large hand that touched her arm gently and swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. “Thanks,” she said finally, her voice soft.

She remained where she was while Sam disappeared into her tent and reappeared quickly with the water container. She watched him as he filled the pan and replaced the container in her tent.

“Are you sure you’re feeling up to being alone?” he asked her, concerned. He stood before her waiting, unsure what to do. “I’ll stay with you if you don’t feel strong enough.”

“I’m fine,” she reassured him. “I’ll

just sit in the lounge chair and rest while the water is heating and take my time cleaning up so I won't get dizzy."

He stepped toward her and reached out to touch her left arm gently. "Are you sure you don't need any help bathing," he teased. "I'm very thorough, and I'll be very gentle."

Rachel blushed and had to push away the images that flooded her mind. She felt a tightness deep within her body at the thought of Sam touching her intimately, and her breath became noticeably labored.

"I have no doubt that you would be, but I'll manage, thank you," she said finally.

Sam smiled and nodded, very aware of the effect his words were having on Rachel. His own body was beginning to coil in anticipation at the thought of taking a warm, soapy cloth and erotically washing every inch of her body.

Leaning toward her slowly, his lips claimed hers, and his arms gathered her body snugly against his, making her absolutely aware of his arousal. He lifted his lips from hers and his warm breath caressed her face as he fought to control himself.

“You have no idea how much I want you, Rachel,” he whispered, his crystal blue eyes clouded with passion as he

looked into the gentleness of her eyes.

Rachel couldn't speak. She could see the passion in his eyes and feel the hardness of his body. She was shocked that he was affected as strongly as she was by their closeness and the possibility of their intimacy. She could feel her core throbbing and knew her body was wet from wanting him.

"Do you have any idea the torture you have put me through the past twenty-four hours?" he asked her quietly, fighting to control his breathing and calm his body.

"What do you mean?" Her voice was a little shaky as she asked the question.

"Your body next to mine all night. The way you snuggled your bottom against me. The way you put your arms around

me and kissed my chest. The way you draped your leg across my hip.” He closed his eyes and took a shaky breath. “Every touch, every intimacy you shared with me made me nearly crazy with desire.”

Rachel gasped at the intensity of his words and the way he was looking at her. She wanted to reach out and pull his body toward hers to bring their mutual desires to fruition. She wanted to feel him touch her, make love to her, and bury himself deep inside of her.

He kissed her gently, pulling away and taking a cleansing breath before touching her right cheek with the knuckles of his left hand. He extended his index finger to

caress the beautiful birthmark at the corner of her eye.

“I need to calm down,” he told her, smiling. He took a step back from her, not trying to hide the effect she had on his body. His heart quickened with desire as he saw Rachel’s eyes cloud with passion at the discovery.

He watched her as she looked up at him with a gentle smile. There was no fear, no disgust in her gaze, just pleasure and, perhaps, matching desire. If possible, that made him want her even more.

“I’ll check on you later,” he told her finally, leaning forward to kiss her quickly before turning to walk away slowly, wiping at the beads of sweat that

covered his forehead.

Rachel watched him as he walked away, her own heart pounding in her chest at the pure sexuality of what had just occurred between the two of them. She was not ashamed to admit the desire and the intense need she had for him.

His body screamed strength. Every step he took accented the long, muscled lines of his body. She was excited by his touch and was amazed by the reaction of his body. She wanted to reach out and grab his ass, knowing he would turn to face her so she could continue her bold explorations of the rest of his body. She wanted to touch him, draw him to her, rip the clothes from his body, touch

every part of him, and make love to him.

She blushed at her bold, uncensored thoughts but was not in the least bit ashamed. She wanted him, but it wasn't just a physical thing for her. Sam was the one man who had shown her caring and kindness from the time she had been a kid. His friendship, his humor, his support, even his teasing nature, had endeared him to her. He would always hold a special place in her heart. She loved him. She always had.

It took her a while to calm down. She had to control her desires and her dreams. What she wanted most was what she was most afraid to hope for. She looked out across the campground in search of Sam. He was no longer in

view. She turned then and hobbled over to her lounge chair and sat down, leaning back and closing her eyes tiredly.

Memories of Sam's gentle touch and his coaxing kisses washed over her, making her body tingle at the memory. His tenderness was totally unlike anything she had ever experienced before. She felt no threat from him and no pressure to accept his advances. She felt comfortable and safe with him. She always had. It was a nice feeling.

She thought about what it would be like if Sam had indeed stayed and helped her bathe. She closed her eyes at the thought of having him wash every inch of her body, touching her breasts, and

finding the warm wetness that waited only for him.

She wondered what it would be like to make love with him. His gentle touch had soothed her and his kisses had aroused her. Her mind drifted as she thought about him. She remembered his words to her just days before. He had said that his bedside manner would leave her weak and satisfied. Of that she had no doubt in her mind.

Chapter 16

Rachel bent over carefully and poured some of the warm water over her head with a cup, repeating the process until her hair was fully saturated. She put the cup aside and poured some shampoo into her hand. She had to close her eyes and breathe deeply for a moment as dizziness overcame her, but she was determined to do this by herself. Pushing through the wave of nausea, she scrubbed her hair slowly, doing her best to concentrate on the task and not the way her stomach was rolling.

Thoughts of Sam helping her wash her hair and her body made her face flush in

embarrassment. She knew that it was not only embarrassment she was feeling, but excitement at the thought of him touching her so intimately. She wished with every ounce of her being that she could enjoy the feel of him touching her again. And she wanted to touch him, too.

Pouring fresh water over her head, she rinsed out the shampoo and wrapped her head in the towel she had set aside on the picnic table. Straightening up slowly, she held on to the picnic table as she made her way to the lounge chair and carefully eased herself down onto it. Leaning back, she closed her eyes and rested. The very effort of washing her hair had nearly drained her of all her strength.

She waited a few minutes to get some energy back then removed the towel and brushed her hair. When she was finished she found her eyes wandering to Sam's camper. She couldn't see him and wondered where he was and what he was doing.

“Pull yourself together, Rache!” she told herself angrily as she stood, flipping the towel across her shoulder and reaching out to lift the pan from the portable stove to slowly carry the remaining heated water into her tent. Her ankle was still pretty sore, and she wasn't able to move quickly at all.

Once inside, she brought the pan of water to the back of the tent near her cot

then returned to zip the tent securely closed behind her. She made her way to her cot and sat down tiredly. She tried to ignore the dizziness that continued to plague her but wasn't successful. She had to wait a few minutes before she could stand and remove her clothes. She bent over to immerse a washcloth in the warm water and lather it up with the bar of soap she had brought along with her. As she scrubbed her naked body she found her mind wandering to the man who was now somewhere in the campground.

Memories of a cloth being passed over her body during her sickness were coming through with striking clarity, and she knew that it had to have been Sam.

She blushed slightly at the thought of him touching her when she wasn't aware and felt a little afraid at having been in such a vulnerable position. Somehow though, she knew that he had not extended his touch beyond the boundaries of decency.

Every instinct she possessed had made her trust him from the time she had been a child. She had always felt comfortable and safe with Sam. She liked that he was so gentle with her. She saw no reason to change her opinion of him now. She was especially relieved that she didn't feel any of the tightness in her chest that she had felt with Richard whenever he had touched her.

She wished that she could remember

everything that had happened during her sickness, especially how it felt to have Sam touch her body. She also wished that he would touch her for a different reason other than medical assistance. His tenderness was making her ache with the need of wanting to be touched with passion and desire.

She finished her sponge bath and wiped her body dry with the towel. When she was fully dressed in clean, warm clothes, she felt refreshed. Although she was still weak, she felt better now that some of the sickness had been washed from her body. She threw out the used bath water and stuffed her dirty clothes into the duffel bag beside the cooler before turning to lie down on

her cot. She needed to rest for a few minutes to regain her strength.

A few minutes turned into nearly an hour as her body took over and demanded rest. When she opened her eyes she looked at the portable clock on the suitcase beside her and gasped in shock. It was nearly three o'clock. She sat up quickly, grabbing her head in an effort to stop the dizziness that surrounded her. After a moment, the dizziness subsided and she was able to stand. She was determined to finally get some work done on her book. She reached for her laptop and glasses and carried them out of the tent.

Going to her car, she unlocked it and

sat in the front seat. She kept the door open as she started the car and plugged in the portable charger for her laptop. After a moment, she turned off the engine and connected her computer. She opened it and started it, looking around the campground as it went through the booting process.

She waited while it recharged, thinking through the revisions she had to make to her latest book. Once it completed the charge, she started her car once again, glad when she saw that the car battery was at one hundred percent. She shut off the engine and slowly made her way back to the comfortable lounge chair, sitting tiredly, and placing the laptop on her legs. Opening the file for

her latest book, she began from page one, reading and editing her latest story of love.

It was only a matter of moments before she was totally absorbed in the revisions. It was difficult for her to maintain her concentration, though, because she still wasn't feeling very well, but she forced herself to work diligently for nearly an hour.

Her attention began to wander, and she found herself looking toward the site across from her to see if she could catch a glimpse of Sam. She had to force herself to get back to work. She couldn't seem to keep her mind on her revisions. Sam's face kept invading her thoughts.

She thought about the comfort she felt lying next to him in his bed when she had slept beside him, wishing she could remember it more clearly. The memory of the way that he had touched her and kissed her haunted her, making her want more.

She removed her glasses, set them on her lap, and rubbed her eyes tiredly. She was already exhausted and didn't think she would be able to do any more work. She was too distracted, and she really wasn't feeling all that well. Saving her edits and shutting down the computer, she sighed tiredly and did her best to take slow, even breaths to calm herself.

Holding her laptop loosely on her lap, she sat back and closed her eyes, taking

a moment to relax. When she opened her eyes, she looked across the campground and found herself smiling when she saw Sam walking the distance that separated them.

“Hi,” she called to him, unable to keep the blush from her face as she remembered his touch. She hoped that he was far enough away not to notice.

“Hi, yourself,” he called back, walking toward her slowly, stopping in front of the foot of her chair. She looked wonderful. Her hair was freshly washed and her face held a touch of color that complemented her features. She was dressed in light pink sweats and he found himself wanting to reach out to

touch the softness of her.

He had wanted to come over long before now but had forced himself not to push her by moving too fast. He knew that she needed time to wash up and rest, and his appearance would not have been appreciated. It had been a long afternoon of waiting for him.

“Checking up on me?” she asked him finally, not sure if she should be annoyed or not.

“Not really,” he told her calmly, squatting beside her chair to bring them to the same height. “I wanted to invite you for dinner. It’s not ready yet, but I could sure use some company while it’s cooking. Feel up to it? If you don’t, I understand.”

Rachel looked into Sam's blue eyes and saw the guarded hope that was there. She was surprised at his sudden boyish insecurity. She had to stop herself from reaching out and touching his face to caress it lightly. It amazed her how much she wanted to touch him and soothe him all the time.

"I never turn down an offer for dinner," she teased, unable to keep herself from smiling when she saw the relief on his face.

It was time to put aside the threat that Edwin McCoy had held over her head for so many years. She no longer had to worry about protecting Sam from his father. Only the threat to her Aunt Kay's

home was the one threat that could still be wielded to hurt her family. She would have to talk to her aunt about accepting the money that she needed to finish paying off her mortgage. Only then would all threats from Edwin McCoy be empty promises of hurting the ones that she loved.

“Do you want to take your work with you?” he asked, pointing to her laptop. “You can work on it after dinner while I check the campground if you want.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to do any more writing. I’m pretty tired. But I’ll take it with me just in case,” Rachel said as she reached for the computer case. She quickly slid the laptop inside of it, placed her glasses beside it, and zipped

it closed.

Sam stood before her, worried at her tiredness. “Are you feeling dizzy, honey?”

Rachel looked up at him, surprised by the endearment he was becoming more and more comfortable using. She liked it.

“Sometimes. Only a little,” she admitted.

He nodded and offered her his hand to help her up. Taking her computer bag, he slung the long strap across his shoulder before pulling her toward him firmly and encircling his arm around her body.

Rachel felt a rush of desire race through her as he held her body so tightly

against his. She was glad to have his help as she walked awkwardly with him across the campground.

“I’ve got you, honey,” he told her reassuringly.

She didn’t trust herself to answer him. She just held on to his arm and followed his lead.

He led her to the campfire that he had built a safe distance from the picnic table not far from the edge of the stream and settled her in a chair that had already been set up for her. She sat down, looked up at him and smiled.

“Pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you, Dr. McCoy?” she teased him.

“Actually, no,” he told her honestly. “I just hoped that you would agree to join

me.”

Rachel was warmed by his words. As she watched him walk toward his camper and disappear inside of it, she knew that this man was the one that had always held her heart. He had since she had been a very young woman.

She had to be completely honest with herself. She knew that every male character in her books had Sam’s characteristics. He was kind, gentle, caring, honest, and sexy as hell. Every female character was a representation of herself. She had written about Sam over and over again. Each novel ended the same way—with Sam’s character loving her and making a future filled with love

and babies.

Rachel closed her eyes and sighed softly. If only real life mirrored her books.

Chapter 17

Rachel watched Sam as he shoveled dirt over the campfire and cleaned up the area. Dinner had been fun for her. Even though she only ate soup and a little bread, she felt full and happy. Sam had kept her entertained with stories of her cousin Roy and himself in high school. She had sore jaws from smiling and laughing so much. It had been a very entertaining dinner.

“Roy’s definitely one of the good guys,” she told Sam, standing to take the plates from the picnic table. “Paulette is the best too. Have you met her?”

Sam straightened and turned to face

her, going to her immediately to take the plates from her hands. "I was working my residency when they got married so I didn't get to meet her until two years ago. Once my residency at the hospital was through, I did get to spend some time with them both every few months."

"You were that busy?" she asked, astonished.

He looked up at her and smiled. "Some days I didn't even have time to go home and shower and change. I lived in hospital scrubs and slept in the doctors' lounge."

"No wonder you need some time away," she told him as she slowly made her way up the hill to the camper, holding on to his arm to steady herself.

Sam watched her silently. No one had ever acknowledged that he had needed a break. Allison had encouraged him to work the late hours so that he could establish himself at the hospital and work his way up the promotional ladder. His father had insisted that he work hard to create an impressive reputation that was worthy of his family lineage. No one had understood that he was becoming burned out or that he was unhappy. No one except Rachel.

He followed her into the camper and placed the dirty dishes in the sink. He saw that she had already set some water on the stove to heat so that they could wash the dishes and smiled at her

camping efficiency.

“Sit and work on your book while I clean up,” he told her, a little worried at the paleness of her complexion.

She sat down at the table gratefully and leaned back against the frame that housed the second bed. “I *am* a little tired,” she admitted. “Thanks.”

Sam nodded and put the lantern on the table before her, lighting it quickly and illuminating the inside of the camper. He turned to wash the dishes quickly and silently, very aware that Rachel had taken her computer case from the floor and had opened it to remove her laptop.

He watched her covertly from the corner of his eye as he worked and saw her put on her glasses and open the

computer to start it up. He wondered what this story was about. He knew it would be another romance with explicit love scenes. He was glad that he was turned away from her when his body hardened at the memories of some of the love scenes that she had written in the novel that Roy had given him to read.

He took a steadying breath as he focused on controlling the racing of his heart and the hardness of his cock, but it was of no use. Remembering how Rachel had touched him during the night, and how he had sucked the juices of her sweet pussy from her fingers, made him desire her beyond reason.

He tried to concentrate on the dishes

before him, but found himself remembering the softness of her skin and the delicious feminine curves of her figure as he had cooled her body with the wet cloth. He thought about how she felt within his arms as she lay in his bed. He picked up the wet cloth and wiped at his face in an attempt to calm down. He was doomed.

“Are you okay?” Rachel asked, stopping her work and looking up at him.

“I’m fine,” he said quietly, putting down the last dish and turning to pick up his hat and coat, the clipboard, and a flashlight. “I have to check the campground. I shouldn’t be very long.” He left the camper quickly before she could see his discomfort and walked

briskly away from the source of his frustration.

Rachel watched the camper door silently for a moment then stood and left the camper to slowly make her way toward the bathrooms. She knew that the walk in the cold night air would help to clear her head. She didn't like the way that she was feeling or the thoughts that she had been thinking. She had always been close to Sam but it was as if she could sense his thoughts and feelings the more time she spent with him, and it scared her.

She finished up quickly and made her way back to the camper but she didn't feel refreshed. The night air had felt

good, but her head was still clouded with thoughts of Sam, and she didn't know how to shake them from her mind.

She stepped up into the camper and looked at the table to the open laptop. She decided that working on her book might help so she sat down on the bench seat, settled her sore foot on the pillow that Sam had given her to elevate it, put on her glasses, and started editing once again. When she reached a love scene, she couldn't help but think about Sam and how he would touch her and love her. She ached to have him hold her and fill her.

“Geez! This is not helping me get my mind off him at all,” she muttered. “If I keep this up, I’ll jump him when he

comes back into the camper.”

She laughed softly as she decided that jumping him might not be a bad plan.

* * * *

As he walked around the campground, Sam found himself thinking about Rachel. He wanted to go back to the camper and pull her into his arms to kiss her long and hard. He wanted to remove her clothing and touch every part of her body and love her until she screamed his name in ecstasy. He wanted to be deep inside of her and fill her with his life.

What surprised him the most was the fact that he realized that he wanted his

dream of the other night to come true. He wanted her to be waiting for him in their home with open arms, ready to love and support him, with his baby growing inside of her. He wanted to feel his baby's life moving within her. He wanted the happiness of being a part of a loving, nurturing family that Rachel would be the center of.

The sky opened up and poured down on him just then. The coolness of the rain calmed him a little, but he had to stop walking for a minute to try to breathe normally. His desires were beginning to engulf him. He had to pull back and think rationally.

Inside the camper, Rachel was standing at the door waiting for him. She

heard his footsteps and flung open the camper door so that he could step up inside it quickly to get out of the downpour. Their eyes met briefly as he removed his hat and coat and threw them on the bench seat beside him. Rachel found herself stepping back at the raw hunger and pain that she saw there.

“Sam, what’s wrong?” she asked him worriedly, reaching out to touch his arm.

He looked at her silently and smiled. She looked so soft and inviting, and the glow of the lantern made him feel warm and romantic as he looked at her. Before he could stop himself he took a step toward her and reached out to frame her face with his hands.

Rachel held her breath as he cradled her face so gently between his strong hands. It seemed an eternity before he leaned toward her and captured her mouth with his own. Her mouth opened slightly to accept his, and she found herself lost in an achingly tender kiss. She could feel the need in him and worried that she would disappoint him. His arms encircled her, and she gave in to her need to hold him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and caressed his back lightly as the kiss continued. All caution escaped her. She knew only that she wanted to kiss him, hold him, and she wanted him to do the same to her.

His body felt strong and hard against

hers and she wanted so desperately to be as close as possible to him, but she was also afraid. It would destroy her to have been so close to such tenderness only to have it disappear at the end of the summer.

His lips left hers and he looked down at her silently, his eyes clouded with passion and need. Rachel could feel the hunger in him.

“You’d better take off your clothes,” she told him softly, breaking the silence and reluctantly pulling away from him.

“I will if you will,” he whispered against her lips, smiling and kissing her lightly once more.

She looked up into the soft blueness of his eyes and knew that behind his

teasing, he was serious. “You’re making me nervous,” she whispered, unable to speak any louder.

He looked at her tenderly and smiled then stepped closer to rest his forehead against hers. He waited silently until she leaned into him, relaxing against him. He drew back from her slightly then quickly kissed her lips once more.

“I know,” he whispered. “Turn around.”

“Why?”

He removed his flannel shirt and T-shirt, and she found herself staring at his naked chest. He watched her silently as he began to unfasten his pants and chuckled when she gasped in realization

that he was taking off his clothes. She spun around quickly, her heart beating furiously at the intimacy of the moment.

She heard wet clothes being dropped into the sink and felt his hand on her shoulder as he steadied himself to remove his boots and socks then quickly pulled off his completely soaked jeans and boxer briefs. He toweled himself dry quickly, then threw the damp towel over her head and pulled on a pair of brown sweatpants.

He heard her laugh as the towel landed on her head and couldn't help but smile. "Okay, I'm decent," he told her as he lifted the heavy gray sweatshirt from the end of the bed and pulled it over his head.

Rachel turned around, threw the towel into the sink and placed her hands on his chest to push him toward the bed. “Into bed right now,” she insisted.

“Only if you’ll join me,” he said quietly, covering her hands where they touched his chest.

“Very funny,” she told him sternly, not letting him fluster her again. “You’re not the doctor now. I am. Get yourself into that bed and get warm so you don’t get sick like I did. Are you going to follow orders or not?”

She looked at him so seriously, he couldn’t help but be touched by her concern. As much as he knew she was right, he didn’t want to let her go and get

into the bed alone. He had only slept with her one night, but he was already addicted to having her sleep in his arms.

“Yes, ma’am,” he agreed, reluctantly letting go of her hands to climb across the bench seats of the table to settle himself on the bed.

He allowed her to cover him with the warm blanket that was at the foot of the bed and found that he liked being pampered. When he was settled against the pillows, she sat at the table, replaced her glasses, and opened her laptop. Sam watched her silently for a moment then reached over to lift the medical text from the bench seat below him. He turned onto his right side to face the center of the camper and opened the thick book to

begin reading.

Rachel looked up and saw Sam engrossed in the thick textbook. Goodness, but he made her heart race and her body need. Her childhood crush had morphed into something much greater. She had always known that Sam was a kind and caring friend. She had always been attracted to him.

But it was more than a physical thing for her. Yeah, he was pretty freaking sexy. He was handsome, physically strong, and every woman's dream of what a virile man should be, but it was much more than that for her. He was a good friend who understood her, listened to her, helped her, and looked

out for her. He truly cared about what she had to say. He gave her honest attention and was open to all of her thoughts and opinions. The way he enjoyed her was so important. He honestly valued every moment he spent with her. He made her feel that every time he was with her, it was exactly where he wanted to be. And the way he made her laugh was priceless. She experienced so much joy with him.

She wanted to climb up onto the mattress and cover his body with hers. She wanted to kiss him and show him just how much she desired him. She wanted to rip his clothes from his body and love on him until he shouted with pleasure. Oh, the wicked things she

wanted to do to him and have him do to her. She wanted to make love to him until they were both exhausted and knew that they would only find that pleasure with each other—for the rest of their lives.

Hell! I've got to stop thinking like this!

Taking a calming breath, she did her best to push her sexy thoughts aside. She concentrated on thinking about the career path that Sam had chosen. She found herself smiling as she watched him and wondered about his life as a doctor.

“Do you miss being a doctor?” she asked him suddenly, breaking the comfortable silence.

Sam looked up at her, surprised. "I'm still a doctor, Rachel," he corrected her. "I'm just not working at the hospital right now."

"Where do you want to work?"

Sam leaned back and rested his head on his pillow. "I want to join a practice around here," he said, looking up at the ceiling of the camper.

"Why don't you?" she asked, confused.

"Because the woman I was engaged to didn't want to be the wife of a mountain doctor."

"Then you chose the wrong woman to be engaged to," Rachel told him matter-of-factly. She returned her attention to

her laptop. “I think you dodged a bullet on that one, Sam. I know it was difficult when you and Allison broke up, and I’m sorry that you hurt because of it, but why would you want to marry a woman who doesn’t want to be the wife of a mountain doctor if what you want to be is a mountain doctor?” she asked quietly, shaking her head in confusion as she looked down at her work.

Sam watched her silently for a while, amused by her logical answer. He had come to that very same conclusion at the beginning of the summer. Allison had become enraged by his decision and had refused to accept the end of their engagement. She had told him that he should go off and play in the mountains

and come back to her at the end of the summer when he had gotten his crazy ideas out of his system and had come back to his senses.

To his relief, the more time he spent here, the more determined he was to carry through with his plans. Having a practice in the mountains would not include having a life with Allison, and he was pretty happy about that fact as well.

He watched Rachel work and thought about how far she had come in her career. She was an accomplished, published writer, and he wondered what her desires for the future were.

“What about you?” he asked, truly

interested. “Is your writing career your life or do you want to get married and have a family?”

Rachel blushed but looked at him without blinking. “I’ve learned to accept what comes and not wish for things to happen,” she told him, returning her attention to laptop.

Sam’s brows furrowed in confusion. *What the hell does that mean?* Rachel’s head was bent to her task of writing, and he knew that their discussion had been ended.

Time seemed to disappear. Rachel worked on her novel, and Sam read his medical text for nearly an hour. He closed the textbook finally and leaned back against the pillows, listening to the

steady sound of the rain against the top of the camper. He watched her silently and smiled at the way her face showed every emotion as she wrote. The lantern light glowed softly and he found himself seeing her through a misty haze, much as he had seen her in his dream, and his body tightened with desire at the memory.

“Rachel?”

“What?”

“Look at me, honey.”

Rachel looked up at him, removing her glasses and placing them on the table beside her laptop. She waited patiently for Sam to tell her whatever it was that he wanted to tell her.

“Come here,” he said finally.

“Why?” There was wariness in her tone. What could he possibly want?

“Please, come here,” he said softly.

Carefully easing out of the bench seat, she climbed up to sit beside him on the bed. She reached out and touched his forehead lightly. He didn’t feel warm.

“What’s wrong, Sam?” she asked, brushing his wet hair off of his forehead.

“Nothing, now that you’re here,” he said honestly.

She laughed and tugged at his hair lightly. “You’re crazy,” she told him, turning to go back to her seat at the table.

Before she could move, Sam reached out and wrapped his arms around her

waist. He pulled her gently toward him and settled her beside him on the bed, carefully covering her body with his.

“I’ve missed holding you, honey,” he told her softly, smiling at the surprise on her face. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get another good night sleep without you in my arms.”

“Yeah, right,” she told him, laughing.

“I’m serious, Rachel,” he told her, leaning forward to kiss her lips lightly. “I was able to sleep peacefully last night because you were in my arms. You relaxed me.” He smiled down at her and laughed softly. “Actually, you made me hard.”

“I did?” she asked, astonished.

“Yes.”

He reached down and took her hand in his, drawing it to his lips and kissing her knuckles lightly. When he drew her index finger into his mouth and sucked on it gently, she felt a pull in her stomach and a gush of liquid bathed pussy.

The sudden memory of him licking her fingers clean after she had gathered her cream for him flashed through her mind. Embarrassment flooded her as she realized that it was a memory of what she had done the night before.

“Sam,” she whispered. “What did I do last night?”

“You wanted me to make love to you,” he told her gently, leaning forward and kissing her lips lightly once again.

“Did I...um...did you...” She couldn’t say the words.

“What, baby? Did I what?”

“Did you lick my fingers last night?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “I loved the taste of your cream, sweetheart. I want to taste it directly from your body. Will you allow me to do that, baby?”

“You want to...” she stammered, unable to finish her thought.

“Very much,” he answered without hesitation.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said finally.

“Say yes,” he whispered as he covered her body with his and settled his hips in the cradle of her thighs. He

rubbed against her lightly, pressing against her core with his hard shaft. “Can you feel how much I want you, baby?”

Rachel nodded, unable to speak.

“Please, honey. I want to taste you.”

Rachel thought she would actually die right then.

Holy crap! He really wants to taste me! Can I do this? Won't this ruin our friendship? I love him. I want him. Do I have the courage to love him like I want to?

Looking up at him, she touched his face gently, tracing his strong jawline and smiling at the scruff of his beard.

“So sexy,” she whispered, glad when he smiled at her words. “Can I taste

you?”

His responding growl made her jump. When he took her mouth in the most intense kiss she had ever received, she couldn't help but moan at the completely wonderful and decadent way he made her feel. She loved how he sucked at her lip, biting on her lower lip lightly before easing away the sting with his tongue. His tongue tangled with hers, drawing hers into his mouth and sucking on it with an intensity that made her clit throb in response.

“You're going to make me come just from your kiss,” she whispered against his face when he pulled back to give her a moment to breathe.

He looked down at her with a smug smile. "I'll do that next time," he told her. "Right now, I have other ideas."

Rachel laughed as he wiggled his eyebrows at her. "What kind of ideas?" she asked, teasing him.

All laughter stopped as he reached for the hem of her pink sweatshirt and slid it slowly up her body, pulling it over her head and staring down at her with undisguised appreciation. He reached out and palmed her heavy breasts, groaning softly at the feel of them in his hands. He ran the pads of his thumbs across the underside of each creamy mound before slowly circling her nipples. Leaning forward, he kissed the

center of her chest before doing the same to each of her breasts, gently laving at the bite marks that marred the beauty of her skin. The thought of Rachel's pain and humiliation served to cool his ardor.

"Baby, I'm so sorry you were hurt," he whispered, looking at her and seeing the way her eyes filled with emotions. "I promise you, I will never hurt you."

"I know you won't, Sam," Rachel whispered. "I don't want to think about what happened. I want to think about you."

Sam nodded and leaned forward to kiss her lips lightly before traveling slow kisses down her neck to nuzzle against her breasts once again. "So beautiful," he told her gently.

“Sam,” Rachel moaned. When he latched on to her left nipple, sparks shot through her and she arched her back to get closer to him.

“Rachel, I want to make love to you,” he told her quietly, easing back to look down at her.

Rachel smiled up at him, reaching up to thread her fingers through his hair and hold him tightly. His words made her heart race. Could she do this? Could she allow their friendship to be jeopardized by moving forward to something more intimate?

“I want that, too,” she whispered. “I just don’t want to lose our friendship, Sam. Please.”

Sam smiled tenderly at her, leaning forward and kissing her lips lightly. “We won’t lose our friendship,” he told her after a moment. “I think our friendship is a good foundation for us to build something more.”

“I would like that,” Rachel said quietly.

“Me, too,” Sam told her seriously.

“Are you sure, Sam?” Rachel asked, concerned. She didn’t want to be his rebound affair. She wanted so much more.

“I’m sure. What about you?”

Rachel nodded, wrapping her arms around him and drawing him closer. “I’ve never been surer about anything,”

she whispered against his temple, kissing it lightly.

Sam smiled against her shoulder, something in him easing at her words. He could feel his entire body relaxing as her warmth and gentleness surrounded him. He knew that it would always be this way for them, and he looked forward to a lifetime of being in Rachel's arms.

"I don't have any condoms," he whispered. "I never expected to have any kind of a physical relationship this summer."

Rachel smiled at his admission. She didn't want to think about Sam being with any other woman. She wanted to keep him all to herself.

“I don’t have any condoms either,” she told him, smiling at the soft laughter that escaped Sam at her words.

“I’m clean,” he told her quietly.

“I am, too,” she said, her words ending on a moan as he kissed his way across her chest and drew her nipple into his mouth to flick the tip with his tongue.

She loved this man with her whole heart and soul. She needed to touch and love him for whatever time she had with him. She was tired of keeping her feelings to herself. She was tired of denying any moment of closeness with him. She knew he cared about her. It was also obvious that he desired her. She

didn't know if he would ever feel the deep love for her that she felt for him, but she would love him enough for the both of them—even if it was just for now. Maybe that would change. She hoped that it would. She could easily see a future loving Sam McCoy.

“Sam,” she moaned, carding her fingers through his hair and holding him firmly against her body.

She didn't need to try and keep him close to her. That was exactly what he planned to do. As he suckled each nipple and kissed each breast, he pictured how beautiful she would be nursing their babies. He wanted that with her.

Kissing his way down the center of her chest, he reached up and hooked his

fingers into the waistband of her pink sweats and slowly dragged them and her underwear down her body to push them gently over her flared hips. He kissed her belly tenderly, knowing that someday their child would be growing within her. He had every belief that his dream of their future would be their reality.

Kissing her hips, he thought about how sexy their flare was and knew that it was a good trait for Rachel to have so she would be able to give birth more easily. He bit down lightly on her left hip and smiled at the immediate moan that left her lips. She was a responsive lover. Good.

Pulling her sweatpants from her body,

he shouldered her legs apart and rested his head on her right thigh, reaching up to cover her mound with his hand and slip his thumb between her delicate folds. Her responding gasp of pleasure made him smile. Kissing the crease of her leg, he nuzzled her dark curls with his nose and breathed in her scent, loving the sweet perfume of her arousal.

“Baby, you’re so beautiful,” he whispered as he spread her lips and saw the glistening pink folds of her pussy. Cream was already dripping from her channel.

Leaning forward, he laved the delicate folds to gather her cream and hummed in appreciation at her taste. Pointing his tongue, he speared inside of her as far as

he could go to gather more of her wetness. Pulling back slightly, he ran his tongue through her channel again and continued up to the swollen bundle of nerves of her clit.

“Such a pretty, clit,” he whispered, just before he swirled around it and drew it into his mouth to suck on it firmly.

Rachel’s hips rose and a gasp escaped her at the incredible feelings Sam was pulling from her. When his tongue circled her clit over and over again, sucking on it and pressing against it with just the right amount of pressure, she could feel her orgasm building.

She slapped her hands onto the

mattress and gripped the sheets, moaning softly as she raced toward the ultimate release that Sam was so intent on giving her. Before she could tell him that she was about to come, she felt him press deep inside of her with his fingers, touching her G-spot and flicking at her clit at the same time. That was all she needed.

She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Her hips rose up as the pleasure of her orgasm tore through her. Her clit throbbed and cream gushed from her channel. She was vaguely aware of Sam lapping up her release and humming against her wet curls, but she was completely drained of all strength and couldn't do anything except touch his

hair lightly.

When he kissed his way up her body, she felt his cock nudging against her core. He still wore his sweatpants and she had a moment of sadness that he wasn't deep inside of her. She looked up at him and smiled.

"That was incredible. Thank you," she finally whispered.

"My pleasure," he said, smiling down at her. "You taste delicious."

Leaning forward, he kissed her and shared her taste. She should have been embarrassed by it, but she wasn't. It was just another instance of sharing something with Sam that she had never shared with anyone else.

“My turn,” she whispered against his mouth, smiling at his groan of desire.

He eased back and looked down at her. “You don’t have to, Rachel,” he told her quietly.

“I know I don’t have to,” she said as she reached up to touch his face and caress his cheek lightly. “I want to. Please.”

Sam laughed as he sat back and knelt between her legs. “So polite,” he teased her.

His laughter morphed into a groan as Rachel reached up and palmed his shaft through his sweatpants. He was so hard, he ached.

She looked up at him and watched his

face as she slowly pulled at the waistband of his sweats and dragged them down his hips, allowing his shaft to bounce free. She tucked the waistband beneath his sac, unable to hold back the sounds of desire she made as his cock and balls were presented to her.

He was hard. He was beautiful. And he was at least ten inches long. His girth was going to stretch her to capacity if he ever plunged into her. She could feel the cream dripping from her at the thought of him filling her. She wanted to feel his shaft deep inside of her. She wanted him to fill her with his warm seed.

Leaning forward, she licked at the tip of his cock, gathering the drop of fluid there. His flavor burst over her taste

buds, making her hum with appreciation at the salty flavor of him. Opening her mouth, she sucked on the spongy cap, running her tongue below the flared head to stimulate the bundle of nerves beneath it. Sam's soft groan made her smile.

She had never really liked oral sex before. But this was different. This was Sam. She could feel his caring, and she knew that she loved him. That made all the difference in the world. It made it sexy. It made it wonderful. And it made it right.

Gripping Sam's hips, she pressed forward, taking as much of his length into her mouth as she could. When the tip of his cock hit the back of her throat, she

fought through the gag reflex, swallowed, and took him deep into her throat.

“Rachel,” he groaned as he gripped her hair and held her securely, never pressing her to do more than she was comfortable doing.

Pulling back, she released his shaft with a wet slurp then kissed the tip of his cock. Before he could say a word, she repeated the process over and over again, loving the sounds of pleasure that escaped him.

“I’m going to come, baby,” he warned her, attempting to remove himself from her decadent mouth.

When she gripped his hips tighter and looked up at him, he nearly came from

the sexy look of her sweet mouth wrapped around his cock. He saw the way her eyes pleaded with him and knew what she wanted.

“You want to swallow my cum, baby?” he asked her.

Her eyes softened as she looked up at him.

“You’re sure?” he whispered.

She pulled against his hips and encouraged him to continue pumping until he found his release. He did as she bid him to do.

Pulling out, he looked down and watched as his cock slid in and out of her mouth. The way his cock glistened with her saliva made him crazy. The

tight heat of her mouth and the way she caressed him with her tongue pushed him toward orgasm. It wasn't long before he pressed deep and roared as his balls pulled up tight against his body and he came.

Rachel swallowed every bit of seed that he had to offer. When his shaft stopped pulsing, she pulled back and gently laved the length of his sensitive cock, kissing it carefully.

Before she could do anything more, she found herself being pulled up into his arms and kissed fiercely. It was incredibly sexy that he wanted to kiss her and taste his flavor himself.

He pressed her down onto the bed and continued to kiss her as his hand once

again found its way to her core and his fingers pressed deep inside of her. He groaned as he felt the wetness that was dripping from her. Pressing in deep, he pushed against her clit with the heel of his hand as he searched for and found her G-spot once again. Before Rachel could speak or even make a sound, she was shooting off again as he gifted her with another orgasm. She covered his hand with hers to stop his movement.

“Too sensitive,” she whispered, leaning into his neck and kissing him tenderly.

“Baby,” he whispered, unable to put into words exactly what this meant to him.

He pulled the covers over the both of them. The crisp Colorado night was making them both shiver as their bodies cooled. After a few moments, Sam helped Rachel dress. As much as he wanted to lie with her naked in his arms for the rest of the night, he didn't want her to relapse. He already felt bad enough that she was too tired to do what he had just done with her.

Getting dressed quickly, he looked at her and saw that she was watching him silently. She probably didn't know what to say or do. To be honest, neither did he.

"How're you feeling?" he asked her quietly after a few minutes.

“Good,” she whispered.

He nodded, worried that she already regretted what they had done. He shouldn't have initiated it. She had been too sick to be so taxed.

“I'll take you back to your tent in a minute,” he told her quietly.

“Okay,” Rachel said, her heart breaking. She was determined to keep strong. She was the one who loved him. He wasn't the one who loved her.

Slowly climbing down from the bed, she sat a moment on the bench seat at the table. She shut down her laptop, packed up her things, and looked at him warily.

“I'll see you in the morning,” she said, her voice surprisingly strong considering

she was so upset.

“Are you okay?” he asked, unsure what she was thinking.

“I’m good,” she said without hesitation, doing her best to keep her voice calm. “I’d better get back to my site. I’m pretty tired.”

Sam’s heart hurt at her words, but he had no one to blame but himself. He should have never said he would bring her back to her tent. He just thought she wanted to go back to it. For such a smart guy, he was a complete idiot when it came to Rachel.

A door slamming brought both of their thoughts back to reality. Rachel looked at Sam in confusion. He could only shrug in answer. They heard footsteps and then

three quick knocks on the camper door.

“Come in,” Sam called loudly as he sat up and faced the door.

The door opened and Stan and Gwen Fletcher quickly stepped up into the camper. Rachel’s face brightened with a smile immediately.

“How nice to see you both again,” she greeted them warmly.

“Sam, we’re sorry to bother you,” Stan said quickly, nodding a friendly greeting to both of them. “The camp is full and we wanted to ask permission to pitch our tent down there in your eating area,” he said, indicating the area at the bottom of the small hill beside Sam’s camper. “We’ll move on in the morning,

but we're too tired to do any more driving tonight."

"But it's raining," Rachel protested before Sam could answer. "You'll get soaked before you can get your tent up. Can't they stay in the camper just for tonight, Sam?"

"Oh, no, dear, we couldn't impose," Gwen protested worriedly.

"Sam, please," Rachel turned to face him, her eyes wide as she begged him to help the older couple.

"It's okay with me," he said finally, watching Rachel's face and smiling at the relief he saw there.

"If you're sure it wouldn't be too much trouble, we would sure appreciate it," Stan said sincerely.

“Not at all,” Sam told him honestly. “Go on and get your things. You’re more than welcome.”

“You’re such a dear,” Gwen whispered to Rachel, her soft, wrinkled face smiling widely as she looked down at her.

Rachel turned to face Sam when they left and saw that he was staring intently at her. “Are you mad that I suggested that they stay here?” she asked him nervously.

“No, Rachel,” he said quietly. “But they think that you’re my wife. Just where do you think you’ll be sleeping tonight?”

Chapter 18

Rachel looked up at Sam as he reclined in his bed. She found herself tensing to the point of near panic.

“I forgot about that,” she barely whispered. “I’m sorry. I know you didn’t want me to stay the night.”

“That’s not true,” he protested.

Rachel ignored his words. She stood slowly and looked at the door, waiting for Stan and Gwen to return. “It’s okay. We can just pretend for the night,” she offered, unable to look at him and see the expression on his face now that he might be forced to spend the night with her.

“Rachel, you’re wrong,” he began.

“Okay, I’m wrong,” Rachel said quickly. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t mind staying here with you tonight. I hope you can handle it if I stay. Please don’t say anything to Gwen or Stan.”

“I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do,” Sam told her, standing on the bench seat before stepping down to stand on the camper floor to face her. “I’ll just tell them the truth.”

The camper door opened and Gwen and Stan stepped up inside, carrying their sleeping bags and a small valise. Sam faced them squarely and was about to speak when he saw Rachel lift her hand to touch his arm and shake her head

no.

“You two must be tired,” she said finally, carefully climbing up onto the bed that she and Sam had just vacated. She looked up and saw Sam watching her silently. “Sam, come to bed.” She pulled back the blankets to ready a spot for him beside her.

Sam hesitated a moment then climbed up onto the bed and took his place beside her. Covering himself, he settled back and turned onto his left side to place his back to the Fletchers. He looked at Rachel and saw that she was turned away from him, far enough away so that her body didn't touch his.

“Please turn the lantern off when you're ready,” Rachel called back over

her shoulder to the older couple.

“Thank you so much,” Gwen told them sincerely, smiling at the two of them. “We’ll just be a minute.”

Sam watched Rachel silently, listening to the movement of the couple behind him. He knew that neither he nor Rachel would be able to relax enough to sleep until the lantern was extinguished and the veil of darkness hid them from each other.

It seemed an eternity before the Fletchers spread their sleeping bags out on the bed, Stan turned down the lantern, and he and Gwen climbed onto the bed across from them. Sam found himself sighing with relief and waited for his

eyes to adjust to the darkness of the night so that he could make out Rachel's form beside him.

He felt the bed move slightly and sensed rather than saw that she was turning to lie on her stomach. Her elbow accidentally touched his chest and he heard her gasp at the contact.

"Sorry," she whispered.

Sam leaned closer to her until their bodies touched. Rachel nearly panicked until she realized that he was trying to whisper in her ear so that the Fletchers would not hear him.

"I'm the one who's sorry, Rachel," he told her sincerely. "I should have told them the truth this morning. You wouldn't be here in this predicament

right now if I had been honest with them.”

Rachel turned her face toward him and leaned up to whisper in his ear. “I know you didn’t want me to sleep here tonight, Sam. I just didn’t want to destroy their picture of us as a happily married couple.”

“Rachel, that’s not true,” Sam told her, determined to make her realize that her thinking that he didn’t want her to spend the night was completely incorrect.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. Once they leave, I’ll be leaving, too.”

“What?” The panic that slammed through him at her words stole his breath.

“I’m going to go and visit Roy and Paulette for a while,” she said quietly.

“Rachel, I don’t want you to go,” Sam said, leaning against her face and kissing her temple lightly.

Rachel remained quiet. She didn’t know what to say.

“I want you to stay.”

“Sam,” Rachel began. “I can’t stay.”

“Why not? I like it that you’re back in my life.”

Rachel didn’t say a word. She didn’t really know what to say anyway. She could feel how tense Sam was and knew she had to say something. She didn’t want him to be upset, and she didn’t want him to realize that she was upset.

What a mess everything was.

“Get some rest, Sam. It’s okay,” she said after a moment. “I guess I’m getting used to sleeping beside you.”

“We’re going to have a talk in the morning to clear this up, honey,” he told her, touching her face gently.

When she didn’t respond, he knew he had a hell of a lot to explain. He just hoped that she would take the time to listen and, hopefully, understand.

“Good night, Sam,” she whispered.

“Night, Rachel,” he whispered back, removing his hand from her face and taking hold of her hand.

When Rachel attempted to pull her hand free, he refused to let go, and she found herself resting lightly against his

chest with her face dangerously close to his. She relaxed a little when his hand finally released hers but gasped as he placed his hand on her back and leaned forward to lightly kiss her temple.

Her breathing stopped. His lips were so soft and warm and held such tenderness that she found her heart swelling with happiness despite her best effort to keep herself under control. Every memory she had of him, every feeling she had for him, every future dream she wanted to share with him, slammed into her chest at that moment. It was too much for her to bear. She could barely breathe because of the tightening in her chest and the want in her heart.

She turned her face away from him, trying to control her emotions. She reminded herself that he didn't want her. He was going to take her back to her tent.

The silence in the camper made Sam aware of every movement and sound that Rachel made. He wasn't sure if he would be able to sleep beside Rachel and not hold her. He needed her gentleness to surround him as he slept. He wanted so much more, and he didn't know if he would be able to hold back much longer.

Rachel's movements drew him out of his thoughts. He could tell that she was upset. He hesitated only a moment then reached out to pull her closer to him.

She turned toward him and allowed him to hold her against his body. He gently caressed her hair, leaning forward to kiss the crescent moon birthmark at the corner of her eye that he had always found so endearing.

“It’s okay, Rachel,” he whispered to her gently, holding her to him. “We’ll talk this out tomorrow. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Rachel did her best to keep her body away from his, but he wasn’t cooperating. He insisted on holding her close. She didn’t understand why.

“You’re exactly where you’re meant to be, baby,” he whispered against her ear, kissing her neck lightly before

settling back and relaxing against his pillow.

She was so confused. It took a long time for her to relax and fall asleep. Sam's arms surrounded her, and she couldn't help but feel protected by his strength. She gave in to the feeling of peace that his tenderness offered her.

Sam drew the blankets around them both and held her gently against him. He was only able to unwind when her body relaxed against his and her breathing slowed. He listened to the even rhythm of her breathing and closed his eyes in relief. As she lay against him so relaxed and trusting, he felt a calm peacefulness envelope him that he only felt when Rachel was in his arms.

He no longer felt like the same man who had come to this campground just two weeks before. He was no longer angry and cynical. The short time that he had spent with Rachel back in his life had allowed him to release his pain. She had helped him to accept that his decisions were the right ones. Her logical viewpoint of his situation was the support that he had needed to verify that he was correct in his thoughts and his desires. The dreams that he had experienced had given him a brief glimpse into their future—a future that he wanted to share with the woman in his arms.

Memories of Allison could no longer

destroy him. He fell asleep with a smile on his face and his mind free from torment for the first time in such a long time. He turned toward the woman beside him and breathed in the scent of her hair as he drifted off. The way Rachel snuggled against him made him smile. It seemed that she was just as comfortable to lie within his arms and search out his embrace. He sighed in contentment as her softness pressed against him, loving the way she fit so perfectly within his arms. She was made to be with him. He just knew it. Smiling softly against her temple, he kissed her tenderly, unaware that he even did so. Rachel's presence continued to soothe him as he slept.

* * * *

Rachel rested her head snugly against Sam's chest, smiling in her sleep as Sam's arms pulled her closer toward him. He sighed contentedly as she laid her hand across his stomach to gently hold him at his waist. Rachel breathed in deeply, reveling in the scent of him.

She saw herself sitting on an old, worn tartan blanket, the green of the grass spreading out before her. She looked up and saw the back porch of a beautiful white house, and somehow knew that this was her home. She lifted

her face to let the warmth of the sun beat down on her and found herself surrounded by the most peaceful feeling. She felt happy and contented.

The back door of the house opened and she saw a tall figure walking toward her carrying a crying baby. She lifted her arms to take the child and gasped as she saw that it was Sam who knelt down beside her and handed her the most incredibly beautiful baby that she had ever seen.

“My daughter is hungry,” she heard him telling her and saw that he was smiling down at her.

She unbuttoned her shirt and placed the baby to her breast, smiling as the tiny bundle of sweetness latched on to

her nipple and began to suck hungrily. An incredible feeling of pleasure filled her as she saw herself nursing her own child. Sam's child.

Sam reached forward and touched the child's soft black hair tenderly as she nursed at her mother's breast. His large hand covered the swollen fullness of Rachel's breast, caressing it gently just above where his daughter suckled.

She looked at him and was amazed by the tenderness and love that was evident on his face. She smiled up at him, love shining in her eyes. The happiness that filled her was something she knew she was experiencing because she was sharing this intimacy with this

wonderful man.

He sat down beside them, supporting his weight with his hand on the blanket as he leaned forward and nuzzled her temple. She turned to face him as his head lowered to hers and she found her lips captured by the gentle softness of his. Her heartbeat quickened from the joy of his touch. He leaned back then reached out to gently touch the tiny head of his daughter.

“Thank you for giving me my daughter, Rachel,” he told her sincerely.

“You’re a wonderful father, Sam,” she answered him, kissing his hand tenderly as he caressed her cheek lightly. She reached up to hold his hand

gently, her eyes shining with the love that she had for him. Sam's hand covered hers, and he turned into it to place a loving kiss on the palm of her hand.

"You make me so happy, honey," he told her.

Rachel smiled and leaned forward slightly to meet him as his lips claimed hers. "You do the same for me, Sam," she told him breathlessly against his mouth.

When he pulled back his eyes were dark with desire. "When our daughter is asleep, you're all mine," he nearly growled at her.

"Promise?" she teased, her own eyes

filled with desire as she looked at him.

He nodded silently, taking her hand in his and bringing it to his mouth so he could kiss her knuckles. She shivered in anticipation. He smiled at her reaction and pulled her closer so he could whisper in her ear.

“You let me know when you’re ready, honey,” he told her quietly. “I’m looking forward to making another baby with you.”

She smiled and reached out to touch his face gently. His crystal blue eyes sparkled with love and desire, and she knew that she had finally found the happiness and love that she had always dreamed of.

Rachel awoke suddenly and lifted her head to look around. The dream had been so real. She looked at the sleeping form beside her and strained her eyes to make out his features. She leaned toward him and gently kissed his lips. Pulling back, she settled herself next to him and found that she wanted to touch him.

She placed her hand on his chest and smiled when he covered her hand with his own without waking. She rested her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes, wishing that he really did want her to stay and have that loving family with him. The steady rhythm of Sam's breathing lulled her back to sleep. She smiled as she thought about the little girl

that she had seen in her dream who looked exactly like her father. She sighed as she allowed the beauty of that baby to fill her heart with hope.

* * * *

Sam awoke in the early, predawn hours. Rachel still lay trustingly in his arms, peacefully asleep. Her hand rested intimately on his chest and her face was turned toward his shoulder, her breath gently caressing his neck. He leaned toward her and lightly placed a kiss on the top of her head, careful not to wake her.

The camper was slowly illuminated as the sun rose above the mountaintops that

concealed them. He studied her features silently and found that he couldn't help but reach up to gently trace them with his fingertips. She stirred slightly and turned onto her back, placing her hand just below her chest, conforming the blankets to her body.

He lay on his side, facing her, watching her. His eyes slid down the length of her body, and he found himself smiling at the way that she had slept against him all night. Her hand moved suddenly and his attention was drawn to where it rested. His eyes darkened with passion as he saw her hand lightly resting on her breast. How he wished he could replace her hand with his own to

caress her, to slowly wake her with his touch.

The memory of his dream suddenly flashed through his mind, and he remembered how she had looked in the white nightgown. He slowly reached his hand toward her and gently touched her flat abdomen. He held it there for a moment, wishing that she really did have his child growing within her body. He rested his head against hers and closed his eyes.

“Rachel, you’re consuming my thoughts and my dreams,” he whispered quietly.

He dozed briefly, unable and unwilling to remove his hand from her body or move away from her. Her

presence calmed him and he found that he slept better with her curled up next to him and snuggled against his body. He was going to have a talk with her in the morning to make sure that she understood that he wanted her to share every night and every morning with him for the rest of their lives.

“Rachel,” he whispered against her temple, pulling her tighter against him. “You’re going to listen to what I have to say. And you’re going to understand that I don’t want you to sleep anywhere but exactly where you are.”

* * * *

“Sam,” a voice called to him quietly but sternly.

Sam pulled himself out of the comfortable haze that surrounded him. He opened his eyes slowly and saw that Rachel was still asleep within his arms. He closed his eyes and tried to get back to sleep.

“Sam,” the voice called to him again.

He growled softly as he struggled to wake up. He turned and saw Roy towering above him, his face not too friendly at the moment. He carefully released Rachel from his embrace and sat up to face her cousin.

“Every time I see you, you have more people sleeping in your camper,” Roy

told him sternly. "I'm starting to worry about you."

Sam quietly stepped down from the bed and pulled on his boots. He lifted the clipboard, his hat, and his jacket, and led the way out of the camper. He was relieved to find that Roy followed close behind him. He walked away from the camper, opened the door to Roy's truck and waited for Roy to climb in behind the driver's wheel.

He handed the clipboard to Roy and waited while he looked over the list of campsites and checked off the payments from each of the envelopes he had removed from the pipe at the entrance to the camp. Once the paperwork was settled, he handed the clipboard back to

Sam and sighed.

“Okay, explain,” Roy said, looking at his friend and waiting for what he expected to be one hell of an explanation.

His face was cold as stone and Sam knew that he had better talk fast. He didn’t fault Roy for his concern. He was just as overprotective when it came to Rachel’s safety.

“Rachel offered the other bed in my camper to the elderly couple because they pulled in last night in the middle of the storm, and she was concerned that they would have to pitch their tent in the rain,” Sam explained.

“That doesn’t explain why Rachel was

in bed with you again this morning,” Roy said quietly, crossing his arms across his wide chest.

“Well, that’s a little more difficult to explain,” Sam told him, hesitating slightly.

“I’ve got all the time in the world,” Roy told him calmly.

Chapter 19

Sam watched Roy drive away then turned and headed back to the camper. He greeted the Fletchers as they came out, feeling a little awkward at facing them, but they were warm and friendly and put him at ease immediately.

“We’ll be setting up our gear as soon as a spot opens up,” Stan told him quickly. “We won’t bother you at all.”

“Come back and have breakfast with us. We would enjoy your company,” Sam told them sincerely. “By the time we’re through, someone will have left and you’ll be able to set up your tent.”

Gwen smiled up at him, her hazel eyes

twinkling. “Rachel has found a very generous young man to love,” she told him honestly, reaching out and taking her husband’s hand in hers to squeeze it lightly. “Just like I did.”

Stan Fletcher smiled down at his wife. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her to him, loving the way she cuddled into his embrace. She was his destined mate. He thanked the Great Spirit for her every day of his life.

“Hear that, Sam?” Stan said, never looking away from the beauty of his sweet woman’s face. “You and I are prize catches. It’s pretty great that our mates find us sexy.”

“Now, I never said you were sexy, Stan,” Gwen said with a huff. “Really!

You need to check your ego.”

“Sweetheart, I know exactly how you feel. Don’t ever think you can hide it from me,” Stan told her gently, leaning down and kissing his wife’s lips tenderly. “You think I’m sexy.”

Gwen couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes, I do,” she admitted. She turned to face Sam as she cuddled against the broad strength of her husband’s chest. “Rachel must feel the same way about you, Sam.”

Sam found that he was blushing slightly—something he hadn’t done since he had been a teenager. He thought about Rachel and wondered how she thought about him.

“I sure hope she does,” he said

honestly.

He smiled at them then turned and walked toward the camper, opening the door and stepping up inside. He looked at Rachel's still sleeping form and found himself being drawn to her. He hoped that Rachel thought he was a prize catch and was sexy. He certainly felt that way about her.

He removed his coat and boots and climbed into bed beside her. He smiled as she turned toward him immediately and snuggled against him. He felt warm and alive next to her and found himself wishing that he could gently wake her with his lovemaking.

Rachel moved against him then, stretching her body as she awakened,

arching her body closer to his and tipping her head back. She opened her eyes and found herself looking into the crystal blueness of Sam's eyes. Realization hit her, and she suddenly remembered her dream. She blushed deeply and tried to remove herself from his arms, but he held on to her tightly.

“You blush as if we just made love,” he told her quietly. “I wouldn't mind accommodating you.” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead lightly.

“I don't know what to say,” she stammered, looking away from him in embarrassment.

“It would be great if you said yes,” he told her seductively, leaning forward to

kiss her lips lightly. "I know I would enjoy making love to you, and I can guarantee you that you would enjoy it, too."

He kissed her cheek lightly, then her temple, then her forehead, his warm breath sending shivers throughout her body as he finally found her lips and gently kissed them once again. When he eased back slightly, he saw that Rachel was looking at him very seriously.

"Sam, I'm not going to do this," Rachel said quietly. "I can't give myself to you and then walk away."

"I don't want you to walk away," he told her firmly.

"No, you want to take me back to my tent."

“Rachel, I only said that because I thought you wanted to leave,” he explained tiredly. “I wanted you to stay.”

She was quiet as she thought through his words. She wanted to believe him, but she couldn't. She hurt too much at his rejection after they had been intimate.

“Do you realize that you held me all night, just like you're doing now?” he asked her, smiling.

“I'm sorry,” she stammered, pulling away from him quickly. She hadn't realized that she was so close, or that she was holding on to him.

“I'm not,” he told her quietly, pulling her back into his arms. He kissed her

lips gently, then pulled back to look down at her. "As much as I hate to stop, we'd better get up. Stan and Gwen will be joining us in a few minutes for breakfast. Very thoughtful of them to leave the honeymoon couple to wake up in privacy so we could snuggle. Want to snuggle some more?" he teased her.

"Get off me," she told him, as she pushed at his chest. She didn't want to smile. She didn't want to enjoy him.

"You know, it was pretty difficult to hold you in my arms all night and not make love to you," he told her honestly. "Just give me a little encouragement and I'll certainly do my best to please you. I don't think Stan and Gwen would mind waiting for their breakfast. They'll

probably make themselves scarce and say an extra prayer that God will see fit to help us make a baby.”

Rachel looked up at him silently. Her dream was vivid in her mind and she found herself blushing. She was pretty sure that he was teasing, but her insecurities made her think that maybe he was mocking her deepest desires.

“I don’t think that’s funny, Sam,” she said softly as her chest filled with pain.

“I’m not trying to be funny, Rachel,” he said calmly.

“Are you trying to hurt me?”

“Of course not,” Sam said, stunned by her question. He reached up and touched her face gently. “Have I hurt you,

honey?”

“Not yet,” she answered honestly.

“But you think I will?”

Rachel didn't answer. Pushing him from her body and climbing down from the bed to stand before him, she looked at him silently for a moment. How could she answer that when she didn't have a clue if he was going to hurt her?

Sam watched her put on her sneakers and then pick up his coat to put it on. She rushed out of the camper without another word, forgetting to retrieve her walking stick as she attempted to hurry away. His forehead furrowed in confusion. He didn't know what had been the cause of her fear. He only knew that his bed felt empty without her in it. He wasn't at all

happy without her in his arms, snuggling against him.

* * * *

Rachel passed Gwen and Stan on her way to the bathrooms. She could only smile and nod a greeting. She didn't want either of them to see how upset she was. Thankfully, they only waved and headed back toward Sam's camper.

She walked as quickly as she could to the bathroom, glad that her ankle wasn't hurting quite as much as it had been. She was only limping slightly, and she really *was* feeling so much better than she had the day before. She hated to admit it, but

she really had gotten a pretty good night's sleep lying beside Sam. She realized that being held by him so tenderly throughout the night had given her such a sense of peacefulness and joy. She reveled in the gentle caring he showed her, and she loved the feel of his body pressed solidly against hers.

Her dream flashed through her mind again and she found herself blushing at the memory. She must have had Paulette on her mind when she went to sleep and had been subconsciously thinking about having a baby herself someday. To have such a vivid dream with Sam being the person she was sharing such a wonderful future with was not something that scared her or surprised her. She had

dreamed about sharing her life with him many times over the years, but this was the first time that the dream had been so real. She could actually feel the baby moving within her. Sam's touch was more than the ghost of a dream lover. It was real. It was tangible. It was wonderful.

She tried to rationalize the dream. It seemed to her that Sam was only in the dream because he had been so much a part of her life the last few days. That had to be the reason. It was the only reason that she was willing to accept. If she thought about it being an actual glimpse into their future, it would be frightening to her. Not because it was

something that she didn't want. It was exactly what she wanted. It was worrisome because she didn't want to be the only one feeling that way. Sam had never given her any indication that he wanted a permanent relationship with her that would give them a future filled with children. That was all her. As far as she knew, she was the one who thought about that and ached for it.

Stepping out of the building that housed the toilets, she looked across the campground to Sam's camper. There was no sign of anyone outside it, so she decided to risk going to her tent to get a change of clothing.

Inside her tent, she sat down on her cot and rubbed her neck tiredly. She reached

forward and flipped open her suitcase.

“This is getting out of hand,” she whispered to herself as she pulled out a clean pair of socks and underwear and hid them in the pockets of Sam’s warm coat. She brushed her hair quickly and threw the brush back into her suitcase before standing.

She left her tent then, zipping it closed behind her, and made her way back to the camper. When she stepped up to climb inside the trailer, Sam halted in mid-movement.

Gwen and Stan were seated on one side of the table on the bench seat and Sam was about to put a plate stacked high with pancakes in front of them. All

three of them turned to face her. Gwen and Stan smiled, but Sam just looked at her silently with no expression on his face.

“Have a seat so we can eat,” he told her quietly, pulling his gaze from hers almost sadly as he turned back to the stove to remove two more pancakes.

Rachel removed the coat that she was wearing and placed it carefully on the bed where the Fletchers had spent the night then walked slowly to the table and sat across from the elderly couple. Despite her determination to remain calm, she found herself blushing at the intimacy of the morning.

“You look beautiful,” Stan told her, smiling, his blue eyes sparkling with

happiness as he looked from Rachel to his wife. “Just as beautiful as my Gwen.”

Rachel looked up at him, surprised, and couldn't help but smile at his sincere compliment. “Thank you,” she answered, self-consciously tucking her hair behind her ears.

Sam turned with his hands full of dishes and mugs and looked down at Rachel as he placed them on the table. His somber face softened visibly as he looked down at her. Gwen nudged Stan with her elbow and smiled knowingly.

Turning to get the pot of heated water from the stove, Sam returned and placed the small container of honey on the table

and handed Rachel a tea bag, shaking slightly when her fingers brushed his as she took it from him. He took his seat beside her and could feel his heart beginning to pound as his leg was forced to touch hers due to the lack of room under the table.

“It’s so nice to see such a happy young couple,” Gwen told them, smiling as she ate her pancakes. “You two certainly give hope to us old cronies.”

Sam sat back in his seat and smiled. He looked at Rachel and saw the blush that was creeping up her face. He suddenly felt bad that they were deceiving such a nice old couple.

“To tell you the truth, Gwen,” he began quietly, still looking at Rachel.

“We’re not all that happy all the time,” Rachel finished for him, not allowing him to continue with his confession. She looked up at him over her teacup and silently implored him to remain silent about their true state of un-matrimony. There was no need to crush the innocent beliefs of Stan and Gwen. It wasn’t fair to do that to the kind couple just to save herself some embarrassment. Besides, Rachel admitted to herself that she wanted the fabricated relationship that she and Sam had created to be real.

“I hear that’s normal for everyone though,” Sam said, smiling at Rachel, his eyes softening at her kindness.

“You wouldn’t be normal if you never

had fights,” Stan told them, laughing. “Gwen and I have had some doozies.”

“But we always made up,” Gwen said seriously. “As soon as Stan realized that I was right.”

Rachel couldn't help but laugh and was pleased to hear Sam do the same. He had a deep, hearty laugh that made her feel good inside. She found herself smiling up at him and didn't turn away when his attention was drawn to her.

As she faced him silently, Rachel suddenly saw Sam from a different viewpoint. She was glad to see him laugh and knew that deep down in her heart that laughter was part of what was missing in his life. He seemed too serious and worried about everything.

She wondered what had made him lose the fun in his life. She wondered if what he had told her about not wanting her to leave last night was the truth. It seemed to her that it might be. Sam had never lied to her in all the time she had known him.

“So how did you two meet?” Gwen asked, breaking into Rachel’s thoughts.

Sam’s blue eyes twinkled at the memories of their childhood escapades. Where could he begin to tell about how they had grown up together? He wanted to tell them about their childhood friendship. They had shared so much. He realized suddenly how much time they had lost by being apart for so many

years. All he knew was, he was glad that she was with him now. Having her with him again had already made a difference in his life. Although he cautioned himself for hoping, he felt that he might actually have a possibility of a happy future. A future that included Rachel.

“We actually knew each other as kids,” Rachel explained. “Sam is my cousin’s best friend. We hadn’t seen each other for a while and when we crossed paths again I hurt myself in a fall,” Rachel told them honestly. “Dr. McCoy here took care of me, and he’s been taking care of me ever since.” She reached up and patted his shoulder, smiling.

Sam reached up and covered Rachel’s

hand with his own and squeezed a silent message of thanks. The explanation she gave was technically true, and no one was embarrassed or hurt by it.

“Not that Rachel can’t take care of herself,” he added quietly, his blue eyes sparkling with humor. “I’ve got the scars to prove it.”

Stan’s bark of laughter made them all smile. “Good for you, Rachel,” he told her, reaching out to pat her hand gently as she held her mug of tea. “It’s good to know there are still nice girls left in this crazy world.”

They ate breakfast in comfortable silence. When they finished, Sam reached for the plates and was about to

rise from the table when Rachel stopped him with her hand.

“I’ll clean up,” she offered.

“I don’t want you to overexert yourself,” he told her worriedly.

“I wish you would stop being so overprotective,” she said quickly, frustration evident in her voice.

“Yes, ma’am,” he told her, leaning back in his seat and smiling at Stan.

Gwen touched Stan’s hand and nodded toward the door. “Let’s give them their privacy,” she said quietly. “We’ve been enough of an imposition already, and we should start setting up our camp.”

They slid out from the bench seat and walked toward the camper door. Rachel pushed at Sam’s body to make him stand,

too.

“Go on and help them unload, Sam,” she urged him. “I saw an empty site when I was coming back from the bathroom.”

“Oh, no,” Stan protested. “You’ve done more than enough for us. We’ll be fine. You two need some time alone.”

“I’ll be out to help you unload as soon as I help Rachel clean up,” Sam told them firmly. “You’d better grab that site before someone else does.”

They headed out the door, turning as they stood just outside the camper. “Thank you for everything,” Gwen told them sincerely. “I hope we’ll see you around the campground.”

Rachel waved then looked up at Sam when the camper door closed. He was watching her silently and she got a little nervous as she became aware of his close scrutiny.

“You don’t have to stay and help,” she told him, carefully rising from the table and turning away from him to start stacking the dirty dishes.

“I was glad you answered Gwen’s question,” he told her quietly as he reached for his coat.

Rachel turned to face him and couldn’t help but blush. She watched his powerful arms slip into the coat sleeves and was bombarded by memories of those arms holding her gently as she

slept.

Sam buttoned the coat and smiled at her. Reaching into the pocket to pull out his pen, intending to place it next to the camp records on the clipboard, his eyebrows shot up in surprise as he felt soft material. He pulled it out and found himself looking at a pair of very feminine pink panties.

“Are these your way of telling me that you want me?” he teased, holding up the panties.

Rachel gasped and pulled the panties from his hand. She hid them behind her back, fighting the embarrassment that rushed through her.

“These must be yours, too,” he said, handing her the pair of socks that were

in the other pocket.

Rachel took them silently, looking down at the floor. She was afraid to lift her eyes to see his expression. She had shared her body with this man and had pleased him to orgasm, yet she felt such uncertainty her chest actually hurt.

“I’m very embarrassed by this whole situation,” she told him quietly.

“I know,” he told her, wanting to take her in his arms and comfort her. “I’m sorry about that. Rachel. I don’t want you to be upset. I want you to know that I didn’t want you to leave last night. I really thought you were having second thoughts about staying with me and wanted to give you an out.”

Rachel remained silent. “You really wanted me to stay?” she asked after a moment.

“Yes. Very much,” he told her sincerely.

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why?”

“Because I value you. You’re a good friend and a kind person. I love being with you and holding you. When you’re with me, I feel at peace. It’s a good feeling. I think we should be together, and I can’t help but want to keep you with me.” His words were soft, but firm as he spoke. “I think that what we have is something that might be the best

foundation for a future. Do you think about that at all, honey? Do you think about having a future and a family with me?"

Rachel gasped in surprise, her eyes flying up to face him. "Are you teasing me, Sam?" she asked him quietly, turning her back to him and taking a deep breath to calm herself.

Sam hesitated a moment then reached for her, ignoring the way she tried to pull away from him. He took gentle hold of her shoulders, turning her to face him.

"That's the second time you've told me to stop teasing you," he said in frustration, his patience finally reaching its limit. "You've known me for years. Don't you know by now when I'm

teasing and when I'm serious?" He searched her face as he took a breath to calm down. "God help me, Rachel. You've got me all confused." His voice was softer, gentler now. He took a breath to calm himself as he struggled with the words he wanted to say. "Rachel, I'm feeling things about you that I'm terrified to feel. You make me think things that I really don't deserve to think." His fingers bit into Rachel's shoulders and he shook her once in frustration. "I'm teasing you when I tell you that you look like a mess, don't know how to camp, or don't know your way around here. But when I tell you that I enjoy holding you in my arms and that I

want to make love to you—I'm dead serious. I think about kissing you, touching you, and knowing every part of your body.”

His grip on her shoulders eased and he found himself caressing her arms, unable to stop himself. When he looked at her, his eyes were clouded with confusion and something very close to pain.

“I don't know what it is, but I think about you during the day and dream about you at night. I keep remembering how great it was to have you in my life even if it was a long time ago. I miss our friendship, Rachel. I miss being so comfortable with someone that the days feel so easy. You being here with me now makes me remember how great it is

to be together. I'm enjoying this pretense that we really are together. And my dreams are making the fantasy very real. The image of you carrying my child has haunted my dreams for the past few nights. I can't push the thoughts from my head."

Rachel gasped in shock. Her heart ached with the pain of wanting exactly what he was saying. She couldn't help but love him all over again. She didn't want that love to be something that only existed in her dreams.

His dream was so close to her own that she couldn't even respond to his words. As she stood there looking up at him, unable to respond, she saw the

anger in his face turn to cold remoteness at her silence. He let go of her then and stepped back toward the camper door.

“I keep forgetting that women don’t want those things unless they can get something in return like jewelry or a new car,” he said finally, a deadly calm entering his voice. He turned and opened the camper door.

Rachel looked at him in silence, her heart nearly breaking at his words. He had been hurt worse than she could ever have imagined. Could someone really have refused his love and tenderness unless she was compensated with expensive things? Could someone really have been that cold? Had Allison done those things? That woman had been a

fool.

“Sam,” she said quietly, stopping him before he could exit the camper. He stopped and turned to face her, his face void of expression.

“What?”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, crossing her arms across her chest nervously. “I guess I can’t forget the times that I’ve been ridiculed for wanting children and a nice family. I guess it’s hard for me to accept that a man can understand or want the same things that I do. It’s hard for me to believe that you won’t end up laughing at me like the others did. I’ve learned the hard way not to let anyone know I want...” Her voice broke off and

she turned away from him. She cleared her throat and took a steadying breath. “Anyway, I’m sorry.”

She picked up the dishes and placed them in the sink, trying to keep busy so that she wouldn’t have to look at Sam and see his reaction to her confession. She felt Sam’s hand gently touch her arm and allowed him to turn her around to face him. When she looked up at him, she saw warmth and tenderness in his eyes.

His eyes searched hers for a moment then looked down at her mouth. He leaned toward her slowly and touched his lips to hers, kissing her tenderly. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her into his embrace, bringing her body

close to his and molding her intimately against him. His lips moved slightly against hers, gentle and soft as he lightly licked the fullness of her bottom lip, stirring her with emotion. His hand gently caressed her back and soon was lost in the softness of her hair. He pulled back slightly and smiled down at her.

“I’m sorry, too,” he told her sincerely.

“You’re wrong, you know,” she told him quietly.

“About what?” he asked, kissing her lips once again very gently.

“I don’t need you or any other man to provide me with jewelry or cars or anything else,” she reminded him. “I can get them for myself, remember? I’m not

in need of financial support. My books support me just fine.”

Sam smiled down at her, leaning back slightly but not letting her go. “You’re right. I forgot,” he admitted, still holding her gently against his chest. “Then what is it you *do* need?”

Rachel hesitated only a moment. “Same thing you do,” she said finally, looking up at him seriously. “Someone who is tender and kind and who loves me.”

Sam looked at her silently, releasing his hold on her and lowering his arms to his sides as all strength seemed to escape him. “You’ve decided that I need that, huh?” he asked her quietly.

“No, I didn’t decide it,” Rachel

denied emphatically. “You’ve shown me that’s what you need by the way that you act. I’ve known you since we were kids, Sam. You, Roy, and I shared a lot. You can’t possibly think that we don’t know how you feel.”

Sam backed toward the camper door and opened it without taking his eyes off of Rachel. Her words scared him. She was haunting his dreams and was now seeing into his very soul. She was scaring the hell out of him. He needed some time away from her to clear his head.

“I’m going to help Stan and Gwen unload their gear,” he told her as he stepped down from the camper. “Then I

have some errands to run so you'll have complete run of the camper today. I probably won't be back until late afternoon."

He left then, clearly escaping from the intense and knowing words that relentlessly chased him. Rachel watched the camper door close behind him and couldn't help but smile.

"Looks like you struck a nerve, Rachel," she told herself, smiling.

She turned to wash the dishes, suddenly very happy.

"You can run, Sam McCoy, but I'm not going to allow you to hide from me. We're destined to be together. You know it, and I know it."

She felt the warmth of a gentle caress

against her right cheek, smiling at the tingle that began at the corner of her right eye that felt almost like a soft kiss. It filled her with a warmth and a gentle calmness so great she let out a sigh of pleasure.

Sweet Rachel, you are destined for love and happiness with Sam, the angel Bernadette whispered within Rachel's mind. He will be a wonderful husband and father.

Rachel laughed as the words echoed in her mind. She knew it was her own imagination and desires that made her hear them, but she was okay with that. Sometimes your own imagination and desires were one hundred percent

correct.

Chapter 20

Sam pulled his black truck into the parking space in front of his camper. He shut off the engine, unbuckled his seat belt and rubbed his neck tiredly. It had been a completely wasted day.

After he had finished helping Stan and Gwen unpack their gear, he had driven away from the campsite with no clear destination in mind. He had just needed to get away, and that's exactly what he had done.

He drove for nearly an hour before stopping and pulling over to rest. He stepped out of his truck and sat along the side of the road. He sat for quite a while

looking out at the beautiful landscape, unable to think about anything but Rachel and the way everything had changed in the few days since she had come back into his life.

Although he still had plans to join a medical practice in the mountains, the rest of his plans for his future had changed dramatically. He had decided that no woman would interfere with his life, yet here was Rachel, throwing his life into a spin just by being a part of his days again. Being with her and feeling the comfort of her trusted friendship was making him begin to hope again. He was frightened by his sudden vulnerability.

But it was more than that. He knew that his feelings toward her spoke of

much more than the friendship that they had shared. He felt comfortable with her. He enjoyed her. He wanted her. Permanently.

He sat and thought for nearly two hours then got into his truck and headed back toward the campground. On the way he stopped in town to stock up on supplies before beginning the journey up the mountain road to head back to the camper that he realized had become his home. He also realized that he felt that way because Rachel was there.

As he drove, his mind continued to race with thoughts of Rachel. His recent relationships had taught him to be wary. But his friendship with Rachel kept

creeping into his thoughts. Wasn't it better to start as friends and grow into something more? Shouldn't two people like each other more than anything else? Wasn't that a good foundation for a loving relationship?

He had learned the hard way not to trust any woman, and he didn't like the fact that he was ignoring all the warning bells going off in his head. The only thing he was certain of was that he didn't want to think about not being able to see Rachel when she left to go back home to Connecticut at the end of the summer. The past ten years had been difficult for him, and having her and Roy in his life again was something that he wasn't prepared to lose again.

Sam smiled and shook his head as he sat in his parked vehicle. He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. He opened the truck door and stepped out, turning to lift out his coat and the bag of groceries before slamming the door shut and locking it. He walked toward the camper with a determined stride, hoping that Rachel was still inside.

As he stepped up into the camper, he found himself breathing a sigh of relief as he saw Rachel asleep in the bed that they had occupied together the night before. Her laptop was on the table beside her. He was glad that she had stayed to work in his camper the entire day.

He placed his coat on the opposite bed, and threw his hat next to it then set the bag of groceries down on the table. As quietly as he could manage, he removed the food from the bag and began to put everything away. He was surprised and confused when he saw items of food in his cabinet and refrigerator that he hadn't put there.

He walked over to the bed where Rachel was asleep and knelt on the bench seat at the table so that he could reach forward to touch her forehead. He was relieved to find that she felt cool to his touch. He watched her silently and smiled. She looked so beautiful. He liked that she was in his bed.

He reached out and carefully took her hand in his, holding it briefly, smiling as she unconsciously tightened her hold on him before releasing it and relaxing, sighing contentedly as she tucked her hands beneath her cheek. He felt the loss of her immediately. He wished that he could join her in bed, but he knew that she needed her rest. He reached for his medical text from the shelf next to the camper door and took a seat at the table.

His back was to the camper door and he faced Rachel, able to watch her occasionally by just lifting his eyes from his book. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was a little after two o'clock. He could read a while before he had to start

a campfire to cook dinner. Rachel moved to lie on her back and he smiled at the way her arm covered her forehead. When she sighed, he found himself wishing that he could know what she was dreaming about that was making her so contented. He remembered his own dreams and couldn't prevent the desire that immediately flooded his body.

Rachel sighed and snuggled into the pillow that smelled of Sam. She gave herself over to the peacefulness of the dream as the familiar scent of cinnamon and sugar surrounded her.

He was holding her and kissing her. She was aware that they both were naked, and she wasn't the least bit

embarrassed by it. He was touching her face and gently easing her back onto the softness of his bed.

“I could touch you forever,” he whispered to her, his fingertips tracing her collarbone as he spoke.

Rachel reached up to hold his face in her hands to pull him gently toward her and kissed his mouth slowly. His response was immediate, and she found herself surrounded by his arms and being held tightly against his chest. It felt wonderful and exciting to feel his naked body against hers.

“I’m very lucky that you’re mine, Sam,” she whispered against his mouth.

Sam pulled back and smiled down at her. "Fate was certainly smiling down on us the day you came back to me," he told her quietly, leaning down to capture her mouth with his once again. Lifting his head, he watched her silently for a moment and was rewarded by her loving smile. He lay down beside her, pulling her closer to him, reveling in the feel of her naked body tucked intimately against his.

"I never thought I'd ever love anyone as much as I love you," she told him honestly, stroking his arm as he lay beside her, a soft sigh escaping her as he rested his hand upon her breast.

"I could touch you forever, too," he

whispered, the palm of his hand gliding lightly across her left nipple, sending shivers of pleasure throughout her body. "I love you, Rachel. Please don't ever leave me." He raised his body up and covered her chest with his own, closing his eyes at the sheer pleasure of it, then opening them to face her tenderly.

He looked down at her silently, his blue eyes vulnerable. When he leaned down and tasted her lips, Rachel slid her hands over his back and held him to her tightly. Her hands gently caressed the taut muscles of his back then reached down to tenderly cup his buttocks and push his body intimately against hers.

The feel of his hard shaft against the lips of her pussy made her moan in anticipation. She opened her body to him as he settled himself between her legs, a moan of pure pleasure escaping him as she accepted the hardness of his body into the wet, softness of hers.

His mouth captured hers as his cock sank deep inside of her, whispering her name as he settled against her pubic bone. Pulling out slightly, he moved slowly within her. She could see the passion burning brightly in his eyes and felt her own pleasure intensifying with each loving thrust.

Time seemed suspended as they found their rhythm, trading kisses and gentle

touches. He nuzzled her neck, sending shivers throughout her body. When his lips claimed hers, she reached up to hold his face gently between her hands. He stopped moving and looked down at her with exquisite tenderness.

“I love you,” she whispered, looking up into the passionate depths of his eyes.

Total happiness and love shone from them as he looked down at her. “I love you, baby,” he whispered before lowering his head to hers, tenderly claiming her lips with his own.

She reached around him to hold him tightly to her. She moaned as she felt him moving deep within her, gasping in excitement as he moved faster. With

each thrust, he pushed her further toward the precipice. His lovemaking would soon take her over the abyss and into orgasmic ecstasy.

His moans of pleasure drove her higher. She met each thrust with a tilt of her hips that seated him deeper and drove them both toward completion. When he reached between them and found her swollen clit to rub it with just the right amount of pressure, the excitement coiled tightly within her, exploding with an ultimate release of such intensity that she called out his name passionately.

He smiled down at her, holding his body above hers, watching the pleasure

as it spread across her face and shook her body with tremors of rapture. His expression changed to one of intense concentration as he quickened his strokes, bringing her with him to another explosive climax and his own intense release.

Rachel held on to him tightly as his seed exploded from him, the warmth of it filling her and making her sigh with happiness. She could hear him moan in ecstasy against her ear and felt the pulsing of his cock.

His breathing was labored as he sagged against her body, sounds of pleasure escaping him as small waves of residual pleasure surged through his body. He couldn't help but smile in

total satisfaction as he felt her body spasm and tug on his cock as he was nestled deep inside of her.

She kissed his cheek lightly and held him gently, not wanting to move. He kissed her temple, his breathing deep and labored. His body was covered with a sheen of perspiration. As their heartbeats slowed and slowly returning to normal, he leaned back to hold himself up on his forearms as he looked down at her.

“Don’t pull out yet,” she whispered, holding on to his hips as he was about to ease himself from her body.

“Whatever you want, baby,” he told her, smiling.

“Good,” she whispered. “I love how you feel inside of me.”

Sam’s face softened at her honesty. “I love it too, Rachel. There’s no place I’d rather be.” He pushed in deeper, drawing a moan of pleasure from her.

“Sam, I want us to have a baby,” she told him, caressing his face tenderly.

The expression of love that Sam gave her made her heart flutter. When he leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers, she could feel his heart pounding.

“I want that too, Rachel,” he finally told her quietly.

He pulled out of her gently, slowly easing himself from the warmth of her

body. She moaned with a combination of pleasure and loss as their bodies separated. He lay down beside her, holding her gently against his chest and kissing her face tenderly.

She stroked his arm lightly, smiling as he turned toward her to kiss her lips lightly. His mouth blazed a trail of soft kisses along her neck, making her quiver with pleasure as he continued to her breasts, sucking a pebbled nipple into his mouth and sucking gently. Biting down on it lightly, he smiled against her as he heard her moan of approval. Kissing his way down her body, he settled against her stomach. His hand touched her abdomen gently, caressing her lightly.

“I think our baby is already growing inside of you, Rachel,” he told her softly. “Can you feel her growing?” He kissed her belly then took his place beside her to hold her gently within his arms as he saw that she was starting to cry.

“Why are you crying, baby?” he whispered, kissing a tear from her cheek.

“Because this isn’t real,” she told him, her logical mind intruding on the dream.

“But it could be real,” he told her seriously, taking her hand and placing it on his chest to feel the pounding of his heart. “Let it be real, Rachel.”

His face started to fade before her. She could feel only an emptiness surrounding her where there once had been the warmth of his arms.

“Don’t go, Sam,” she called out to him, reaching out to try to keep him from disappearing.

“You need to want me to be with you, Rachel,” he told her sadly.

“Sam!” she screamed for him, afraid of him leaving her empty and alone.

It was too late. She was surrounded by coldness. Sam was gone.

Sam closed his textbook and looked up at Rachel worriedly. She was moving about restlessly and looked like she was

getting upset.

“Sam!” she screamed, bolting upright and breathing heavily.

He climbed up onto the bed and took her into his arms immediately. “I’m here, Rachel,” he told her quickly, rubbing her back as he held her tightly against him. He could feel her heart pounding against his chest.

She held on to him tightly, trying desperately to pull him closer to her body. When she felt his arms around her, she leaned her face into his shoulder, breathing in the scent of him as she buried her face in the crook of his neck and tried to calm down. This was not a dream. Sam was really here and he was holding her. She pulled back slightly so

that she could look up at his face and smiled at the worried look that she saw as he gazed down at her.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly, leaning back to sit comfortably beside her. He couldn’t help but worry as she continued with her death grip on his arms.

“It was just a dream,” she explained, nodding.

“About me?”

“Why do you ask?” She looked up at him, a little worried at what she might have said in her sleep.

“You called out my name, so I just assumed that you were dreaming about me,” he said quietly.

Rachel just nodded. She couldn't tell him what she had dreamed. How do you tell someone that you just had the most erotic dream of your life, and they were the star? The mere thought of it was enough to make her weak with desire, and she couldn't bear it if he knew the intimate details of her totally uninhibited sexual abandon when it came to him.

Sam smiled down at her, waiting for her to release him. When she did, he made no attempt to move from the bed. He liked where he was.

"Did you get much work done?" he asked, nodding toward her laptop on the table.

"Some," she said quietly. "But I was

tired. I had to lie down and rest for a little while. I guess I must have fallen asleep. I probably should charge the battery on my laptop.”

“I’ll charge it for you. You should rest,” he told her, reaching out to gently tuck her hair behind her ear. “You were pretty sick, you know. You really should be taking it easy until you regain your strength. I wasn’t very good about letting you rest last night.”

She smiled at the memory of how they had been together. She wouldn’t mind doing it again. She couldn’t help the soft smile that crossed her lips at the thought.

“What’s that sweet smile for?” he asked.

“What sweet smile?”

“The one you’re wearing that tells me you were thinking about how I didn’t let you rest yesterday,” he told her, leaning against her and kissing her temple lightly. “When you’re feeling stronger, we can take it a step further, honey.”

Rachel blushed as she eased out of Sam’s hold and lay back down on the pillow, turning onto her side toward him and closing her eyes. She was more than willing to take their intimacy a step further. It was something she had wanted for a very long time.

“I went to my tent this morning while Stan and Gwen went for a walk and brought all my food supplies back here so we could use them before they spoil. I

also brought my suitcase so I don't have to hide any more of my underclothes in your coat."

Sam laughed softly and Rachel opened her eyes to look up at him and smiled. She liked the sound of his laughter.

"Don't embarrass me," she warned him, her eyes twinkling with merriment.

"I wasn't going to say a word," he told her, raising his hand in a promise. "I guess that means you're moving in."

"I don't want to disillusion Stan and Gwen," she said honestly. And she didn't want to be far from Sam, she added silently. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," he said quietly, his chest constricting at the thought of spending the next two weeks with her in close

proximity.

“This is my bed and that one is yours,” she said, indicating the bed on the opposite side of the camper.

Sam smiled down at her and offered his hand to her. “Okay,” he agreed, disappointment evident in his voice. “It’s a deal.”

Rachel took his hand and smiled. His hand was warm and surrounded hers with gentleness.

“All deals are negotiable,” Sam whispered, smiling as he leaned down to kiss her lips quickly.

Rachel blushed lightly. She remembered her dream vividly and wondered if she really was meant to be

a part of Sam's life. She didn't dare acknowledge the fact that she was already thinking about renegotiating.

Chapter 21

Rachel sat back in her lounge chair, drawing her jacket tightly around her as she stared into the fire. Sam sat near her at the picnic table playing cards with Stan. Gwen leaned toward her as she sat in her own lounge chair next to her and touched her arm gently with her age-lined hand.

“Aren’t they cute?” Gwen whispered loudly, indicating the two men.

Rachel looked up at the two of them and laughed. “I guess so,” she said, shrugging. “If you go for that sort of a guy.”

Sam turned to face her and smiled at

the happiness that animated her face. The campfire cast light and shadows across her features, but he could distinctly see the smile in her eyes as she looked up at him.

“Why do we put up with such abuse, Stan?” he asked the older man, indicating the two women who huddled together as if they held the greatest secret in the world.

“Gluttons for punishment, I guess,” Stan said seriously, never taking his eyes off his cards.

Sam laughed and turned his attention back to the card game. He angled his cards toward the lantern light so that he could see what card to play next. He could see Rachel and Gwen laughing

together out of the corner of his eye and felt such contentment at that moment. He couldn't have been happier.

It had been a thoroughly enjoyable evening. Stan and Gwen had come by after dinner and Rachel had invited them to sit by the fire with them. Sam felt as if his own grandparents were there with him. They were so much fun and made him feel so good about himself, just as his real grandparents had done when they had been alive. Stan and Gwen liked him without knowing that he was the son of Edwin McCoy or because of his profession. They liked him and enjoyed his company without qualification. When he realized that

Rachel was also part of that acceptance of him, he felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He looked at the three people surrounding his campfire and felt at peace.

“We’d better get going, Stan,” Gwen said, rising from her chair to stand before the fire.

Stan threw his cards down in disgust. “Might as well. This boy’s killing me,” he said, indicating Sam. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were cheating.”

“I don’t have to cheat,” Sam said, getting up from the picnic table to stand before Rachel’s chair. “I’m just lucky.”

Rachel looked up and smiled as their gazes met. The gentleness in his eyes

was matched only by the happiness in hers. Gwen saw the exchange between the two and leaned down to whisper in Rachel's ear.

"You two are good together," she said quietly. "Just relax and enjoy each other. You'll get pregnant before you know it."

She straightened and took the hand that Stan offered her to walk with him to their campsite. Rachel watched them leave then turned and saw Sam looking down at her.

"What did she say?" Sam asked, already knowing, since he had overheard. He wondered if Rachel would tell him.

"Never mind," Rachel said quickly,

trying to stand and walk away. He reached out automatically, and she found her arm being held to help steady her as she carefully hobbled her way up the incline to the camper. She was glad that he had offered his help. It gave her the perfect excuse to touch him again. She wanted to touch him often and was glad to take advantage of every opportunity to do so. She enjoyed his closeness and found herself both comforted and excited by his touch.

He left her at the camper door, handing her the lantern he had carried up with them, and then returned to the campfire to extinguish it before making his final check of the campground for the night. As he worked, he saw Rachel

leave the camper with a flashlight to guide her and knew that she was heading for the pit toilets. He waited for her to return to the camper before retrieving his clipboard and starting his late-night check.

Rachel climbed into the bed beside the table and pulled the blankets around her. It was colder tonight. She listened for Sam, intending to wait for him to return before going to sleep, but she was so tired. Her eyes closed of their own volition, and she was soon deeply asleep.

When Sam entered the camper a short time later, he set down the clipboard as silently as he could manage. Rachel was

sound asleep. He felt a little disappointed. He had enjoyed himself so much this evening he hadn't wanted it to end. He watched Rachel tenderly as he removed his coat and boots and changed into his warm sweats. He extinguished the lantern and climbed up onto the opposite bed, covering himself quickly with the blankets to protect himself from the chilled night air.

Sleep was a long time in coming. He turned onto his side to face the center of the camper and strained his eyes to make out Rachel's form, but it was of no use. It was so dark in the camper he couldn't even see his own hand in front of his face.

He turned over restlessly and closed

his eyes. He knew something was missing. When he was finally drifting off to sleep a while later, he realized what was wrong. He had grown used to sleeping beside Rachel, and he missed the warmth and softness of her body curled against his.

Sam, you must make your decision, the angel Bernadette whispered in his mind. Rachel is meant to be yours. Do not lose this opportunity to claim her as your destined mate.

Sam moved restlessly in his bed. He turned over and reached out, disappointed to find the space beside him empty.

“Rachel,” he whispered, his strong

fingers gripping the sheet beside him.

Rachel is waiting for you, Sam, Bernadette told him gently. *Don't make her wait any longer. She is meant to be yours.*

“She’s mine,” Sam whispered.

Yes, Sam. She’s yours, Bernadette whispered. *She loves you. She wants a future and a family with you. You must decide to claim her or let her go.*

“She’s mine,” Sam repeated, this time more forcefully. “So is the baby she’s carrying.”

Bernadette’s soft laughter confused him.

You must commit yourself to her before you make your beautiful children, Bernadette whispered. *Do not*

be afraid. Rachel will love you with all of her heart. She will be a devoted wife and a loving mother. She will love the babies you gift her with. They will be beautiful just as her love for you is beautiful.

Sam smiled as he tugged the blankets around him to keep away the chill of the night. Thoughts of Rachel, their babies, and the loving future they would have together soothed him as he slept.

Chapter 22

Rachel sat quietly in the passenger seat of Sam's truck. She stared out into the developing darkness of the evening as they drove toward her cousin Roy's home. Her mind was drifting and she found herself thinking about her dreams. She had never had such vivid dreams about a real person before. Sam being the person she was dreaming about not only made her happy, it excited her.

She turned slightly and stole a secretive glance at him. He was silent as he drove, and she could tell that he was lost in thought. She found that her stomach fluttered when she looked at

him. The memory of being in his arms, naked, in her dream as well as in his camper made her blush, and she turned to look out her window so that he couldn't see her embarrassment.

“How are you feeling?” he asked her suddenly, his voice startling her.

“Much better, thanks,” she said quietly. “How about you?”

“Me?” he asked, glancing at her in surprise before quickly returning his gaze to the road ahead of him.

“You’ve been awfully quiet,” she explained. “Is something bothering you?”

Sam’s gaze remained on the road but she could tell that he had tensed at her question. She suddenly felt

uncomfortable and wished that she had never asked him anything.

“I have a lot on my mind,” he said finally, turning onto the street where Roy and Paulette lived.

He parked his truck behind Roy’s truck in the driveway, turned it off, and got out quickly. Rachel didn’t wait for him to open her door. She flung it open, jumped out, and closed the door quickly before she hurried toward her cousin’s home as fast as she could without hurting her injured ankle. She managed to get up the steps to the front door in no time at all.

Sam smiled at her excitement at seeing her cousin and followed closely behind

her up the stairs. The door of the small ranch home opened before they even made it to the top stair and Roy stood there smiling.

“Hi,” he said happily, taking Rachel into his arms, giving her a big bear hug, and kissing her soundly on the cheek.

“Hi,” Rachel answered, hugging her cousin to her. “Where’s Paulette?”

“I’m right here,” a voice called from behind them.

Rachel left Roy’s arms and walked into the house to face her cousin’s wife. She smiled broadly as she faced the petite woman. She looked adorable. Dressed in a maroon corduroy maternity jumper and a pink shirt with long sleeves, she looked the picture of

motherhood. Rachel walked to her slowly, raising her arms to envelope her within her arms as she got closer. Paulette came to her quickly and hugged her tightly.

“You look beautiful,” Rachel told her, smiling through the happy tears that were forming in her eyes. “How’re you feeling?” She leaned away from her slightly and touched her belly gently, almost reverently, as she smiled at the brunette with the adorable pixie face.

“Tired, but happy,” Paulette said, smiling. “How are you?” Her question was whispered, worry evident in her voice and in her eyes.

“Much better,” Rachel answered

quietly.

She would talk with Paulette later when they could steal some time alone. She saw Paulette looking at the bruises on her face and held her hand to stop her from reaching up to touch them.

“I really am better, Paulette,” she told her quietly.

She watched as Paulette’s gaze turned to Sam then looked back at Rachel and winked. Rachel found herself blushing. She turned to find Sam and Roy watching them, smiling.

“Hi, Paulette,” Sam said warmly. His throat felt a little constricted when he saw the tenderness Rachel had for Paulette. His dreams washed over him, and he suddenly ached to hold Rachel in

his arms. Instead, he took a step forward and hugged Paulette to him, nearly lifting her off the floor.

“Sam, you’re squashing the baby,” Paulette squeaked, kissing his cheek before he loosened his hold on her.

“Sorry, little guy,” he said to her stomach, bending to speak directly to it and touching it lightly.

A tightness pulled at Rachel’s chest. She had to turn away or everyone would see the raw ache in her eyes as she watched the tenderness before her. She felt arms surrounding her and looked up to find Roy standing next to her and hugging her to him. He smiled down at her, and she knew that she wasn’t

fooling him. Of her entire family, Roy knew her the best. They had shared dreams and goals, and they knew exactly what touched the other's heart and soul. Roy also knew how much she cared about Sam from the time they had been children.

"If you take mine, I'll take yours," Roy teased Sam, smiling at Rachel as he spoke.

Sam laughed and released Paulette reluctantly. He turned to face Roy and saw the happiness in Rachel's eyes. With an effort, he looked away from her. He faced Roy and found that Roy was grinning at him.

"Come help me," Paulette said to Rachel as she walked toward the tiny

kitchen.

“Sure, you just wanted me to come to dinner so you could take it easy while I do all the work,” Rachel teased as she followed her. She stood next to Paulette as she checked on the carrots that were cooking on the top of the stove.

“You’re right,” Paulette said, laughing. She leaned forward to open the oven door and check the dinner of pot roast and potatoes that was making the kitchen smell so wonderful.

The heat of the oven bombarded Paulette, and she stumbled a little as weakness assailed her. Rachel reached for her immediately to steady her and pull her away from the hot stove. She

guided Paulette to the padded chair next to the table and carefully eased her onto it. Once Paulette was settled, Rachel left her briefly to shut the oven door and reached for the towel on top of the counter. Wetting it with cold water from the kitchen faucet, she knelt beside Paulette, held the towel to her forehead before pressing it to the back of her neck, and waited nervously until color replaced the pale white that had washed over her face.

“I think I should go get Sam,” Rachel said quietly, making an attempt to stand up.

“No, please,” Paulette stopped her, holding on to her arm tightly. “I’ll be okay. I guess I just did too much today,

that's all."

"Well, I won't let you do any more work," Rachel told her worriedly. "Now you just sit there and relax, and I'll do everything." She turned and surveyed the kitchen, then set about checking the progress of the dinner.

Paulette started to protest but stopped herself. Rachel was more than capable of finishing the preparations for the meal. "I won't argue," she promised as she watched her friend pour the water from the steamer and set the perfectly cooked carrots into the waiting bowl on the counter. "I don't want to lose this baby. We've been trying for so long."

Rachel heard the anguish in Paulette's

voice and turned to face her friend worriedly. She knelt back down beside her and held her hand gently. "Is everything okay, Paulette?" she asked her, concern etching worry lines across her forehead. "Don't try to hide how you're feeling with me. I know how hard this pregnancy has been on you."

"I'm fine. I just have to rest more," Paulette reassured her. "The doctor said the baby is doing fine."

She looked at Rachel and smiled at her concern. She reached out and tugged gently on Rachel's long hair as it fell over her shoulder to hang just below it.

"I'm a little afraid, Rache," she admitted quietly. "Sometimes I think I'm going to lose the baby. And sometimes

I'm afraid I'll die and leave Roy alone with the baby."

Rachel squeezed Paulette's hand and nodded in understanding. There were tears in Paulette's eyes, and she couldn't help but begin to get choked up a little, too. Memories of the mother she never got to know surrounded her, and she said a silent prayer that Roy and Paulette's child would never know that loss.

"Paulette, I think I should stay with you until the baby is born," Rachel told her quietly. "I'll take over all the chores and you can just rest."

Paulette smiled and shook her head. "Actually, Roy has arranged for someone from our church to come in and

spend time with me and do things for me while he's at work," she said, sniffing a little as she wiped at her eyes. "I feel like such a failure. I can't even take care of the house or Roy or even myself or the baby."

"Paulette," Rachel stopped her, touching her hand gently. "Look at what you're doing. You're carrying a life inside of you. Do you know what a miracle that is? Do you know what joy you're bringing Roy? Do you know what a wonderful mother you're going to be?"

Paulette looked down at Rachel as she knelt before her. "You think so?" she whispered.

"Absolutely," Rachel answered without hesitation.

Rachel stood and pulled a chair next to Paulette to sit down beside her. She watched her silently for a moment then reached out to pull at the end of her sleeve.

“You knew you were going to take a risk before you got pregnant, and you knew that you would have to be extra careful so that both you and the baby would be healthy,” Rachel reminded her. “Having a little help will make sure that the both of you will be around to enjoy family life with my crazy cousin.”

Paulette laughed and leaned back, rubbing her neck tiredly as she looked across the table at Rachel. “I guess so,” she finally admitted. She smiled and

nodded and was glad to see that Rachel was smiling too.

“What about you?” Paulette asked her quietly, making sure that neither Roy nor Sam could overhear their conversation. “How are you doing? Do you feel okay?”

“I was sore for quite a while,” Rachel admitted quietly. “But I’m doing much better. See, the bruises are almost gone. You can barely see them anymore.” She offered her face to Paulette and turned to allow her to see the faint yellow hue along her cheekbones. “It will take a while to get through the days and the nights without thinking about what happened with Richard. Sometimes I can still feel him on top of me.”

Paulette reached out and held her hand. “What a slime!” she said vehemently.

Rachel burst out laughing. “My sentiments exactly.”

“Do you think you should talk to someone about the attack? How are you doing with the emotional part of it?”

“I’m not sure. It’s hard sometimes to stop thinking about it, but things have really changed this past week. I seem to have other things to occupy my time and my mind now.”

“I can see that you do.”

Rachel smiled, blushing slightly. “It’s so nice that we’re all together again,” she told her honestly. “Sam has changed

though. He's still the same guy and still teases me and all that, it's just, I don't know. He just seems so defeated."

Paulette nodded and lowered her voice to speak so softly that Rachel had to lean forward to hear her. "That's because of Allison," she explained. "She really did a number on his self-esteem. I don't know the whole story, but Roy was really mad when he hung up with Sam at Christmas."

"Why?" Rachel whispered.

"Something about his father and his money, and Allison didn't want Sam to leave the hospital."

"But Sam and his father never agreed on anything," Rachel shook her head, confused. "It had to be something more."

“I think so, too,” Paulette admitted. “I think it was something personal. Sam has always been a deep guy. She had to have done or said something really awful.”

Rachel nodded as she gazed toward the living room where she could hear Roy and Sam’s deep voices. They had both cared for her when she was a kid, and they were still protective of her. She felt the same way about them.

“Did you kiss him yet?” Paulette’s voice startled her out of her thoughts.

“Paulette, you’re something else!”

“Well, did you?” Paulette asked. “Come on. You can tell me.”

Rachel smiled at Paulette as she rubbed her tummy absentmindedly. She

leaned in toward her cousin's wife, her shoulder touching Paulette's as she paused inches from her ear to whisper her answer.

“Yes, I did.”

Paulette's brown eyes sparkled with excitement. “How was it?”

Rachel laughed and reached out to touch Paulette's shoulder as she leaned in closer to her. Paulette held her breath in anticipation.

“It was wonderful,” Rachel whispered. “He is so tender he makes me want to cry. I have to be careful because I know I'm going to get too involved and make things more than they are. I'll be upset enough when I go back home.”

“You don’t have to go back,” Paulette told her seriously, leaning back to look at her. “Stay here. Roy and I would love to have you stay with us until you’ve found a place of your own and settle in. It would be great. Our baby will get to know his Aunt Rachel. You’ve always wanted to come back here to live anyway, and we would get to see you all the time instead of just in the summer. That way you’ll be able to see Sam, too, and maybe things will progress very nicely.”

“Paulette, don’t make things more than they are. For all I know I could just be a summer fling.”

“Sam isn’t the fling type, Rachel,”

Paulette told her seriously, shaking her head. “I know his only serious relationship was with Allison and that was more than six months ago.”

Rachel looked at Paulette quietly and Paulette could see the sadness in her eyes. She reached out and touched her hand gently.

“What’s wrong, Rachel?”

“I’m afraid to hope for anything, Paulette. I think it would be best if I just enjoy what I can for now and go back home and be happy that I had a nice summer. I’ve never had any luck with men, you know that.”

“Not all of your dates turned out so bad,” Paulette insisted.

“Really?” Rachel smirked as she

faced her friend.

“What about Ernie? He always supported your independence.”

“Sure he did,” Rachel agreed. “He encouraged the fact that I was able to support myself and bring in a comfortable salary. He was the master of Dutch treat.”

“But he supported women’s rights,” Paulette reminded her.

Rachel laughed a brittle laugh. She shook her head and leaned back to look at Paulette’s eager face. “Paulette, his famous quote to me was ‘You are woman, hear you roar, open your own damn door!’ Can you believe that guy?”

Paulette’s face registered immediate

shock then she burst out laughing. Rachel couldn't help but join in the laughter. The awful dating history that she had was certainly a great source of humor for them both now that she wasn't actually experiencing it.

“Okay, I guess your dates really did stink,” Paulette conceded, wiping away the tears of laughter from her eyes as she spoke.

“That’s an understatement if ever there was one,” Rachel admitted, laughing. She was enjoying herself completely. She always had fun with Paulette. She was the sister she never had.

The oven timer rang, interrupting them. Rachel stood and opened the oven door. She grabbed for the oven mitts and put

them on then reached into the oven to remove the roasting pan. She sniffed the delicious aroma as she set the pan on the top of the stove.

“It smells wonderful,” she said as she removed the oven mitts and placed them on the counter. “What dish do you want me to put the roast on?”

“The platter is in the cabinet,” Paulette told her, attempting to stand to get the plate for her.

Dizziness overcame her immediately, and she had to grip the table for support. She sat back down quickly and closed her eyes to stop the room from spinning. Rachel was beside her immediately.

“That does it,” she told her worriedly.

“Don’t you dare move. I’m going to get Sam and Roy.”

She left the kitchen quickly and ran into the living room. Sam stood in alarm when he saw the panicked expression on her face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her quickly.

“Paulette,” was all she was able to get out before both men rushed past her to make their way into the kitchen.

She followed them and stood out of the way while Sam knelt beside Paulette and took her hand in his in order to check her pulse. Roy was holding a cold cloth to his wife’s face and rubbing her arm nervously.

“Sam?” he asked quietly.

“Rachel, get my medical bag from the truck,” he said quickly, taking control of the situation. He pulled his truck keys out of his jeans pocket and handed them to her, never taking his attention off of Paulette.

Rachel took the keys and ran from the house to go to Sam’s truck. She found the bag behind the driver’s seat and pulled it out quickly. She ran back into the house and found the living room and kitchen empty. Following the sound of voices, she made her way toward the bedrooms and saw that Paulette was now lying on her bed. Roy had climbed onto the bed to sit beside her and Sam was just settling her back onto the pillows. He

looked up and smiled at her.

“Thanks,” he said, taking the bag from her and placing it on the bed, thankful that Rachel was there beside him. He opened his black bag and took out his stethoscope and blood pressure cuff. He placed the stethoscope in his ears and held the end of it to Paulette’s chest.

Rachel watched in silence, impressed by his calm and his efficiency. When he wrapped the cuff around Paulette’s arm and placed the end of the stethoscope to the hollow of her arm, Rachel stepped forward to kneel down beside him. If he needed help, she wanted to be there for him. She took the blood pressure cuff from him when he removed it from Paulette’s arm and set it on the bedside

table.

Roy sat next to his wife and took her free hand in his own, kissing it lightly to try to comfort her. He was glad that Sam was there.

“Rachel, hold this here,” Sam told her quietly, indicating the spot on the side of Paulette’s abdomen where he had gently pressed the stethoscope.

Rachel reached out to hold the stethoscope in place and watched as Sam reached forward to place one of his hands on the left side of Paulette’s swollen belly and the other directly on the center.

“Are you bleeding?” he asked Paulette quietly, taking great care not to panic

her.

Paulette shook her head. “No,” she barely whispered. She looked up at Roy with tears in her eyes. He leaned forward to kiss her forehead tenderly and held her hand tightly.

“The baby’s heartbeat is strong,” Sam told her as he concentrated on the tiny, fragile life beneath his hands. “I can’t feel any movement right now, but I don’t think there’s a problem.”

He removed his hands from her belly and took the stethoscope from his ears, nodding at Rachel to allow him to take it from her. Folding it, he placed it in his bag and handed the bag to Rachel. She took it from him and placed the blood pressure cuff inside it. Closing the bag,

she set it aside and waited for him to continue. Her hand rested on Sam's knee, unconsciously placed there in a need to touch him for confidence and reassurance.

“Your blood pressure is a little high,” he told Paulette calmly. “You’d better stay off your feet and rest. Call your obstetrician in the morning to make an appointment to see him sooner than your next checkup. I would advise that you to see him tomorrow. Roy, don’t let her do another thing that will jeopardize her health or the baby’s. Tie her to the damn bed if you have to, but don’t let her exert herself.”

“You heard the doctor,” Roy told her

sternly, squeezing her hand tightly in fear. "Please, honey." His voice was quiet as he pleaded with her.

"Whatever you say, Sam," Paulette agreed, touching Sam's hand gently. "Thanks."

Sam nodded and rubbed her hand tenderly, reassuring her. Rachel stood and wiped her hand nervously down the front of her jeans. She turned to leave the room before anyone could see how worried she was. She didn't want to make Paulette any more upset than she already was.

"I'll check on the dinner," she called over her shoulder as she left.

She almost ran to the kitchen and reached for the wet towel that still lay

on the table where they had left it. She picked it up to place it over her eyes, trying to breathe normally to keep the fear from overwhelming her.

“Are you okay, Rachel?” Sam asked her as he entered the kitchen. She had her back to him but he knew that she was upset.

“I’m fine,” she said quietly, placing the towel on the side of the sink and calming herself as best she could.

“Are you sure?” he asked worriedly, stepping toward her and reaching out to touch her shoulder to gently turn her body so that she faced him.

Rachel tried to avert her eyes but Sam had already seen how upset she was. He

reached out to touch her cheek gently, caressing it lightly, and she found herself undone by his tenderness. Before she could stop herself she leaned toward him and rested her head against his chest, unable to stop herself from holding on to him tightly. His arms encircled her immediately, holding her tenderly until she was able to calm down.

“Paulette has been through so much to have this baby,” she finally whispered. “I’m so afraid that something is going to happen to her or the baby.”

Sam held her silently. There was a lump in his throat as emotions welled up inside of him. He couldn’t have spoken a word if he had tried. All he could think

about was Rachel pregnant with his baby. He would be just as worried for the health of his woman and his child.

Do not worry, the angel Bernadette whispered gently within his mind. Rachel will have no trouble when she is pregnant. Your babies will be healthy and strong, and Rachel will be safe.

Sam closed his eyes and breathed in the sweet scent of cinnamon and sugar that surrounded him. When Rachel turned to ease herself from his hold, he pulled her so that her back rested against his chest. He slid his arms about her waist and covered her belly with his large hand. Slipping beneath her shirt, he caressed the warmth of her skin and

pictured his child growing within her.

“Rachel, what you do to me,” he whispered against her temple, kissing her lightly.

“What do I do to you?” Rachel asked, confused.

“You make me forget every promise I made to myself to keep everyone out of my life.”

Rachel turned in his arms and searched his face, smiling softly at the expression of caring and desire she could see in his beautiful eyes. “You don’t really want to do that, do you, Sam?” she asked him quietly.

Sam hesitated just briefly before he smiled as he accepted what it was that he truly wanted.

“No, honey. I don’t. Not anymore.”

Chapter 23

Roy looked down at his wife and couldn't help but smile at the sight of her very pregnant form lying beside him. He reached out and gently placed his hand on her swollen abdomen, rubbing it lightly. Reaching around her, he pulled both her and their child toward his body as he settled to lie beside her and hold her body against his.

"Paulette," he whispered, his eyes filled with love as he looked down at her.

Paulette smiled, her soft brown eyes sparkling with unshed tears as she looked into the gentle and very

concerned face of her husband. "I'm okay," she assured him quietly.

Roy kissed her temple. "I love you, honey," he whispered against her face.

"I love you, too." She leaned toward him and kissed his cheek lightly. "I'm fine. Really."

Roy leaned back to look down at her, never letting go of her. "Paulette, I wouldn't want to live if something happened to you." He gently caressed her stomach as he spoke. "You have to stay in bed until the baby is born. My mom will come to stay with us. You know she would love to help."

Paulette looked up at her husband and smiled gently. "I think that would be a good idea, Roy," she admitted.

Roy's face showed the immediate relief he felt, and his body visibly relaxed at her acceptance of his idea. "Thank God," he whispered.

Paulette smiled and reached up to touch her husband's cheek. "I do that every day," she told him honestly. "For you and our baby."

Roy smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. "My mom is going to spoil you rotten."

"Sounds good," Paulette said, laughing. "Good thing we have an extra bedroom for her."

"I'll call her in the morning," Roy told her quietly. "I'll have her go home on the weekends so she can take it easy. Then

it'll be my turn to take care of you.”

“You take care of me all the time,” she said huskily, making it obvious what she meant.

“You little devil,” Roy whispered, laughing softly before leaning down to kiss his wife deeply.

“Help me take my dress off,” Paulette told him quietly when he leaned back to look down at her.

“Paulette!” Roy choked out, looking down at her in shock at her boldness.

“No,” Paulette told him, laughing softly. “I don’t mean that. I’m just uncomfortable and I want to get into my pajamas.”

Roy smiled and stood beside the bed, carefully reaching down to pull Paulette

to her feet and holding her arms with sure hands until she was standing beside him. He reached up and slowly brushed her hair back from her face, leaning in to kiss her lips gently before pulling back to smile down at her. He was filled with emotions as he gazed into the eyes of the woman who so captured his heart. It never ceased to amaze him that she actually felt the same way about him. He truly believed that every person was meant to have one person who was their perfect soul mate who was destined to be theirs, and he counted his blessings to have found his.

He reached up slowly, watching his wife's face intently as he unhooked the

straps of the maternity jumper. He smiled as he heard her breathing quicken when he began to slowly unbutton the tiny buttons of her blouse. His hands were visibly shaking as he tried to gently remove the dress from his woman's body.

“Don't tell me you're nervous about taking off my clothes after all these years,” Paulette teased him as she eased herself forward to allow Roy to pull the jumper over her head and slowly remove the blouse from her body.

Roy placed the clothes on the chair next to Paulette's dressing table then turned to help take off her slip and nylons. As he helped her remove her bra he reached out to take her pink brushed

flannel top and matching gray and pink bottoms from beneath her pillow, and sat before her silently on their bed.

“What?” Paulette asked when he hesitated.

Roy smiled at his wife and reached out to gently caress her full breasts. Leaning forward he kissed her right breast tenderly, searching out her darkened nipple to lick at it lightly, smiling as it rose to a tightened peak. Paulette’s moan made him smile. He pulled away, slowly standing to trail kisses up her neck to finally find her waiting mouth. She kissed him deeply, searching his mouth with her tongue, moaning once again as his danced with

hers. When he pulled away from her and looked down at her, both of them were breathing heavily and their eyes were filled with desire.

He pulled her into his arms gently and hugged her tightly then released her and helped her to put on the soft top. “If I keep touching you I won’t be able to control myself,” he told her, his voice rough with need.

Paulette smiled and tried to help Roy dress her as best she could. When she was dressed and safely tucked into the gentle embrace of her husband’s arms as they lay in their bed, she turned to hold him, gently laying her head on his chest.

“You’d better be ready for some serious ravishing when Sam and Rachel

leave,” she told him seriously, reaching up to trace his lips with her index finger before leaning up to capture them with her own.

Roy moaned into the kiss, deepening it quickly to one that was filled with passion and promise. “I don’t think it’s safe to make love to you,” he told her worriedly, leaning back slightly to look down at her.

Paulette smiled and slid her hand down the length of her husband’s body, cupping his erection through his jeans and rubbing it firmly. Roy pulled her hand away. She smiled at his groan and pulled her hand free from his to return it to his body.

“Don’t make me stop, Roy,” she whispered, leaning in to kiss him as her caresses grew bolder.

Roy’s sudden movement surprised her as he rolled quickly to cover her body with his, careful not to press against her belly as his hands caressed her and his mouth claimed hers. The kiss was passionate, thorough, and devastatingly erotic. There was no sense of time or place for either of them. They were aware only of each other, their need, and their devotion. When Roy pulled back to look down at his wife there was unmistakable love shining brightly in his gentle, brown eyes.

“Paulette,” Roy whispered.

“Mmm?” she answered contentedly.

“I love you.”

Paulette looked up to see him looking at her with such emotion she knew she would always be thankful for this wonderful man. “I adore you, Roy Monroe,” she whispered before she leaned up to kiss him once more.

Roy kissed her gently, leaning in to respond to his wife’s advances. Sam and Rachel would just have to deal with it if they happened to walk in on them.

* * * *

Sam stood beside Rachel in the kitchen, holding her silently. He felt her

pull away and reluctantly let her go. When he saw that she was getting things together for the meal, he watched her silently for a moment then offered his assistance and found himself carrying trays and plates into Roy and Paulette's bedroom.

He nearly slammed into Rachel's back when she stopped short just inside the doorway to the bedroom. He looked up and saw that Roy and Paulette were wrapped in each other's arms and engaged in a kiss that was filled with passion.

Rachel looked back at Sam, unsure what to do. Sam cleared his throat loudly, making Rachel smile. She looked up at him and winked, trying to hold

back the laughter that threatened to bubble forth. Sam smiled down at her and wished at that moment that his hands were free so he could take Rachel into his arms and kiss her.

“Come on in,” Roy called to them.

Rachel turned around and walked into the bedroom. She looked at her cousin and Paulette. “We can give you guys some time if you need it,” she offered, standing next to their bed and smiling down at them.

“No, that’s okay,” Paulette said laughing. “I’m hungry anyway.”

“Done in by pot roast!” Roy huffed.

“Have to keep my strength up for later,” Paulette whispered against his

neck so that no one else could hear him, smiling when she heard his low growl against the top of her head.

Within minutes, they were enjoying the delicious meal while sitting on Roy and Paulette's bed. Paulette was already looking much better and everyone was a little more relaxed.

"By the way, Sam, some mail came for you today," Roy said suddenly, getting up and leaving the bedroom to return quickly with two envelopes in his hand. He handed them to his friend and took his place beside his wife on the bed.

Sam put aside his plate and looked over the envelopes. The first one he folded in half and tucked into the back pocket of his jeans. When he looked at

the second envelope his face became hard with anger when he saw the writing. Rachel watched him silently, wondering what was causing him to be so upset without even having read the contents. She looked at Roy but his attention was on his friend.

“If you want, I can send it back,” Roy offered.

“No, that’s okay,” Sam stopped him. He turned the envelope over and ripped open the back flap. Pulling out the contents, he unfolded the single piece of paper and hesitated slightly when he saw the embossed invitation drop out of it and fall onto the bed.

Rachel picked it up and handed it to

him. He took it from her and looked down at it to read it. He made a noise of disgust and flung it on the bed toward Roy.

“Get a load of that, Roy,” he said sarcastically.

Roy picked up the invitation and read it quickly. He looked up at his friend in silence. He handed the invitation to Paulette, his eyes never leaving his best friend’s face, and watched him silently as he read the handwritten note that was included in the envelope.

Rachel’s gaze went from Sam, to Roy, to Paulette, and back to Sam. She saw the anger on Sam’s face, but she knew that there had to be more than just that. She could almost feel the pain that was

consuming him.

Paulette handed the invitation to Rachel, her eyes sad and worried. Rachel took it from her and read it, wondering what had put all three of them in such a somber mood. Without realizing it, she reached out and held Sam's hand as she read the note. The long, lean fingers of his warm hand closed around hers and she was glad for his touch, but she saw the coldness and distance in his eyes and was worried by his reaction. The invitation was to a formal dinner honoring his father at the exclusive restaurant *Chez Pierre* in Denver.

Rachel looked up and watched Sam as

he took the invitation from her and stuffed it back into the envelope. He handed the written note to Roy and waited for his friend to read it.

Roy read the note quickly and shook his head in disgust at the words written in it. He looked up at Sam and wondered how his friend could be the son of such an unfeeling man. The note from his father was arrogant and cold. In it he demanded that Sam attend the dinner in order to show the members of Denver's elite society that he supported his father and was grateful for what he had given him.

"So, are you going?" Roy asked him quietly.

"No," Sam said, leaving no room for

discussion.

“I think you should go, Sam,” Paulette spoke up, ignoring the anger in Sam’s eyes when he turned to look at her. “He *is* your father.”

“An accident of genetics,” Sam answered seriously, facing Roy calmly. Roy and Rachel, of all people, would know what Sam’s life had been like. The only warmth and comfort he had ever felt had come from his mother, Jarod, Roy and his family, and Rachel.

“Sam, you have to face him eventually,” Roy told him logically. “You said it yourself that you want the satisfaction of telling him to his face that you won’t be returning to Denver

Memorial. Here's the perfect opportunity. Plus, with all the people there, he'll be less likely to cause a scene."

Rachel watched the three of them silently. She could see the pain in Sam's eyes and wished that there was something that she could do to help. She, above everyone else, knew what his father had done to him to make Sam actually hate him so much. She knew firsthand how Sam's father had manipulated and controlled Sam's life. She had been the recipient of the power and cruelty of Edwin McCoy and had lost ten years of Sam's friendship as a result.

Sam looked down at his hand and

smiled when he realized that Rachel had taken hold of it without his even being aware of it. He looked up and saw the unmistakable compassion in her eyes and found his anger beginning to ease.

“Are you going to tell me to go, too?” he asked her calmly.

Rachel shook her head slowly. She was the last person to suggest Sam show any compassion for his father. She had her own issues with Edwin McCoy that she was still dealing with.

“I think you should do what you want to do,” Rachel told him softly. “We’re all behind you. Whatever you decide, you know we’ll support you.”

Sam smiled down at her. He found that

the anger within him was subsiding. She had always been able to calm him. How could he have forgotten that? So many things about Rachel were coming back to him. And all of them were comforting and loving.

“I guess it *would* be a good time to tell him my decision,” he conceded finally. He looked up at Roy and nodded calmly, smiling at the relief he saw on his friend’s face. “I’ll need a date though.” He looked directly at Rachel and smiled.

“Rachel would love to go with you, wouldn’t you, Rache?” Paulette said quickly, not waiting for an answer. “Look in my closet, Rachel. There’s an absolutely gorgeous black dress in there that’s brand new. I bought it long before

I got to be this size, and I never got a chance to wear it. It'll fit you perfectly."

"Wait a minute," Rachel stopped her, totally overwhelmed. "I couldn't impose. Besides, your father wouldn't appreciate it if I showed up." *And he warned me to stay away from you or else he would ruin you and my family.*

Sam reached out to gently touch her face to return her attention to him. "I could sure use the moral support," he told her sincerely.

Rachel hesitated, struggling violently with the decision. It was a no-win situation for her. Supporting Sam was the only thing she could possibly choose. She stood up and opened the closet door.

“Okay, where’s the dress?” she said finally, rummaging through the closet to hide the blush that was creeping across her face at the thought of going on a date with Sam. She was glad that her back was to everyone so they couldn’t see the smile that was lighting up her eyes.

“It’s behind Roy’s suits in a clear garment bag,” Paulette said happily. She turned to her husband and winked conspiratorially. Roy smiled and looked at his friend, breaking into a grin at the happiness that was obvious on Sam’s face. Maybe his father’s dinner wasn’t going to be so bad for Sam after all.

Rachel located the garment bag and pulled it out of the closet. She couldn’t

help but gasp at the elegance of the dress as she viewed it through the clear plastic of the bag. It was black chiffon with black sequins accenting the halter top. It was sophisticated and daring and she wondered how Sam would react to her wearing such a blatantly sexual dress. She looked up and found him staring at it then saw him look up at her, a slow smile spreading across his face. He was going to like it just fine.

“I’ll have to get some shoes and underthings,” she barely whispered, blushing immediately.

“We can drive into Denver the morning of the banquet. You can buy whatever you need there,” Sam told her, smiling.

Rachel nodded and turned to find both Roy and Paulette watching her and grinning. She was immediately annoyed at their obvious meddling, and walked from the bedroom to gently rest the beautiful dress on the couch so that she could take it with her when they left. Walking back toward the bedroom, she got busy removing the remains of the delicious meal.

At Rachel's insistence, Roy and Paulette remained in the bedroom while she and Sam took the dishes and trays back into the kitchen to begin cleaning up. Rachel washed the dishes quickly, very much aware that Sam was watching her closely.

“Sam, you’re making me a nervous wreck watching me like that,” she said finally, wiping her hands on the dish towel and throwing it onto the counter.

“Sorry,” he said, amusement evident in his voice as he put the last dish away before turning to face her once again. He smiled softly, her beauty and kindness filling him with emotions. “You look tired.”

He reached forward and gently touched the dark circle under her left eye, rubbing his thumb across her cheek to stroke the pale bruise that still marred her beauty. He felt a combination of concern and anger filling him as he thought about the pain she had to have

experienced during her attack.

“I am, a little,” she admitted. Before Rachel knew what was happening, she was being lifted into Sam’s strong arms and carried back into the bedroom.

Roy and Paulette were shocked into silence when they saw Sam carrying Rachel into their room. Roy pulled Paulette closer toward him when he realized that Sam’s intention was to place Rachel beside Paulette on the king-size bed.

“What are you doing?” Rachel demanded, embarrassed.

“Be quiet,” he told her sharply, laying her down on the bed and sitting down next to her. “She’s been sick lately and needs to rest, too.” His explanation

made Roy and Paulette grin at him, and he couldn't help but smile back at them.

“Now this is what I call after dinner conversation,” Roy said very seriously.

Rachel couldn't help but laugh. “I'm surrounded by lunatics,” she said, shaking her head as she looked at the three of them.

Paulette's gasp drew their attention and all laughter subsided. She was clutching her stomach, making them worry.

“Paulette, what's wrong?” Roy asked her nervously, covering her hand with his own.

“The baby is moving,” she said happily, taking her husband's hand and

placing it on the lower part of her abdomen.

Rachel smiled at Paulette, relief and happiness filling her. “May I feel the baby, Paulette?” she asked quietly.

Paulette nodded, taking Rachel’s hand and drawing it toward her belly. Rachel looked down as her hand touched the hardness of Paulette’s stomach and smiled as she felt the baby move beneath her hand. She turned and faced Sam with a look of wonder. He was looking at her with such tenderness that her heart began to flutter.

He reached across her to gently place his hand on Paulette’s abdomen and smiled at the strength of the baby’s kick. Feeling the movement of the life that was

growing inside of her made him think about Rachel in the same condition as Paulette. He admitted to himself that he was looking forward to it becoming a reality. When the baby moved again, he couldn't help but feel a rush of happiness.

“You’ve got a tiger there, Roy,” he teased.

Roy looked at his wife, then at his cousin, and finally at his friend. He said a silent prayer of thanks for the three people beside him. He was overwhelmed with the love they shared and the feeling of his son moving strongly beneath his hand.

“Thank you, Paulette,” he whispered

as he leaned forward and lightly kissed her temple.

Paulette closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. The love that surrounded her was all that she had ever wanted or needed. She would be forever thankful for the day she had met her husband. Because of him, she had a life filled with love and happiness.

Now, all they had to do was make sure that Rachel and Sam were equally blessed with a future filled with love and babies. Both Sam and Rachel were stubborn, but so were she and Roy. It was going to be an interesting summer.

Chapter 24

They drove back to the campground in silence. Paulette's gorgeous dress hung behind them on the hook above the passenger side rear window. Every once in a while, Rachel looked back as if to make sure that the beautiful creation was still there. Sam watched her out of the corner of his eye as he drove. He could tell that she was thinking very seriously about something. He knew that she had enjoyed herself tonight. He had, too—after the initial scare Paulette had given them all.

“After we get to Denver on Saturday and you get the things you need at the

store, we can go to my apartment to get ready for the dinner,” Sam told her quietly, keeping his eyes on the road as he spoke. “Is that okay with you?”

Rachel looked at him a moment then nodded. “That’s fine,” she said, leaning her head back against the headrest to relax. “You’re not exactly masher material. I trust you.” She thought about the last time he had touched her and wondered if they would enjoy more intimacies. She was not averse to carrying it further.

Sam laughed a little and stole a glance at her before returning his gaze to the road. “I don’t know if I should be insulted or relieved.”

Rachel turned toward him and smiled.

“You should feel complimented,” she told him honestly. He had no way of knowing just how much she did trust him. The last time she had been at a man’s apartment, she had been brutally attacked. The thought of the same thing happening with Sam wasn’t even a remote possibility. She would trust him with her life. She always had.

Sam hesitated a moment then reached out and found her hand on the seat beside him. Taking it gently within his hand, he squeezed it tightly then brought it to his mouth to kiss it lightly.

As the truck made its way into the dirt driveway of the campground, he found himself relaxing at the thought of being

home. Rachel opened her door and stepped out. She walked quickly toward the camper and was about to open the door and step inside when Sam reached out and stopped her with his hand.

“Thanks for a nice night,” he told her quietly.

“I had a nice time, too,” she said, smiling.

He looked at her for a moment then reached out, took her into his arms, and drew her into his embrace. Slowly lowering his head toward hers, he kissed her lips gently and drew her closer toward his body. For the briefest of moments, both felt an intense rush of pleasure as their bodies pressed intimately against each other. Too soon,

the embrace relaxed, the kiss lightened, and both had to decide what was to be done about their time together.

When Sam started to draw away, he found that Rachel was holding on to his arms and pulling him closer to her to prevent him from ending the kiss. His arms engulfed her then, crushing her to him in a passionate embrace. His lips pressed against hers and he kissed her with all the passion that he had been keeping in check since she had arrived at the campground. That one moment of intimacy they had shared made him want her more than ever. He wanted her touch. He wanted her gentleness. He wanted her love.

He moved his head slightly, pressing his mouth to hers with more urgency, coaxing her lips to respond with the same passion that he was feeling. Long gone were the memories of the awkward teenager that tagged along after him and Roy. The person he held tightly against him was a mature woman who was making him feel astonishing things. As their kiss intensified, he found that he wanted more of her.

He tasted her mouth hungrily, sweeping his tongue inside and delighting in the feel of her tongue meeting his. He leaned back and looked down at her, smiling at the way she was looking up at him.

“Your heart is pounding,” he whispered to her gently.

“So is yours,” she said, a little breathlessly.

“We’d better get inside,” he said finally, reluctantly letting her go so that she could step up into the trailer.

He followed her inside and lit the lantern that rested on the table. He looked down at her for a moment and could sense that she was nervous. He knew that he had to change the situation so that the fear in her would not make her pull away from him or the feelings that they were just beginning to explore.

He emptied his pockets and put the contents on the table, the folded

envelope he had put in his back pocket thrown down among the change and keys. Picking up his flashlight and clipboard, he turned toward the door and opened it.

“I’ll be back in a little while,” he told her as he stepped down from the camper. “You’d better get some sleep.”

Rachel watched him go and realized that she had let out a sigh of relief. Although she wanted nothing more than to be physically close to Sam, she was afraid that he would want to continue their lovemaking and she would find herself in another predicament. If she made love with him she knew that she would be devastated when she had to leave him at the end of the summer.

Removing her coat, jeans and sweater, she pulled on her navy sweatpants and sweatshirt, and climbed up onto the bed beside the table. As she made her way across the table she knocked the envelope to the floor. She bent to retrieve it, hesitating when she saw the return address was a hospital in Denver. She placed the letter back on the table and climbed up onto the bed. She lay down on the pillow and cuddled under the many blankets. She was freezing.

When Sam returned half an hour later, she watched him quietly as he stepped up into the camper. He looked at her silently for a second then placed the flashlight and clipboard on the table. He

noticed the envelope and picked it up, tearing the end off and pulling the single piece of paper from it. He opened it and read it quickly then folded the paper and placed it back into the envelope.

“Everything okay?” Rachel asked him worriedly.

Sam looked up to face her and smiled. “Yes,” he said quietly. “I had some blood work done before I left Denver.”

“Are you sick?” Rachel asked quickly, sitting up to face him.

“No, I’m fine,” he told her, crossing the short distance that separated them and kneeling before her. “I wanted to make sure I was clean. Even though I’ve always used condoms, I didn’t want to take a chance. I already knew the

outcome of the tests, but I thought it would be best to have a copy of the results for my records.”

“Oh,” she said quietly, relieved.

“I wanted to have the results in case I needed to show the woman I wanted to share my life with,” he told her gently. “I wanted her to know that it was safe to be intimate with me.”

“I trusted you when you told me you were clean,” Rachel whispered.

“I know you did, honey,” he said quietly. “You took a chance when you swallowed my seed, though.”

“I never did that for any other man,” Rachel admitted, reaching up and touching his lower lip lightly with her

index finger. “You’re the only one.”

Sam’s heart pounded within his chest at her admission. “I’m glad you only did that for me,” he told her. “I’m pretty possessive of you, Rachel. I don’t know how you feel about that, but I can’t help it.”

“I like it,” she said quietly, leaning forward and kissing his neck lightly before pulling back to look up at him.

His face was mere inches from hers, and she saw that his gaze was directed at her lips. She held her breath as he slowly closed the gap between them and gently touched his lips to hers.

She melted into him. Whenever Sam touched her, she wanted more. He called to her heart and made her body sing. She

reached up to gently place her arms around his neck and pulled him closer to her, loving the feel of his chest pressed against hers.

“Nice,” she whispered when he eased back slightly.

“Mmm,” he whispered, licking at her lower lip.

When he pulled back to look down at her, his heart hammered in his chest at the pure sensuality of her. The soft look in her eyes made him smile. He knew that she wanted him just as much as he wanted her.

He stepped back, smiling as her arms fell to the bed as if she had no strength to hold them up. Standing in front of the

table, he took off his coat and boots. Rachel was watching him intently as he started to remove his shirt and jeans. He wished suddenly that he had been able to watch her as she had undressed just moments before. When he stood before her in just his boxer briefs, he saw her take a deep breath and knew that she wanted him just as much as he wanted her.

“If you keep looking at me like that, baby, I’m not going to be able to keep away from you tonight,” he told her, his voice gruff.

Although the camper was barely lit, he was sure that Rachel could see the passion that was evident in his eyes and the hardness of his cock. It took every bit

of strength and control he had to pull on his sweatpants and sweatshirt, extinguish the lantern, and climb up onto the bed opposite from Rachel. The emptiness of it struck him immediately.

“Sam, are you sure you don’t want to sleep over here with me tonight?” she asked him quietly.

“Rachel, if I sleep with you we won’t sleep.”

“We won’t?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Okay, we’ll sleep after I make love to you over and over again until we’re both exhausted.”

He turned on his side to place his back

to Rachel's view, closed his eyes, and tried to make his mind rest and his body relax. The thirty minute walk around the campground had calmed his body but not his mind. He couldn't stop thinking about her. He wanted her, but it was much more than that. He truly needed her.

"Are you okay?" Rachel's voice quietly called out to him.

"I'm fine, go to sleep," he said tiredly, trying to control his voice so that he wouldn't betray his emotions. The sound of Rachel's soft voice was making it difficult to think about anything but her. He hoped the quiet of the night would ease his tension.

Sam remained silent. He wanted Rachel beside him in his bed more than

he wanted his next breath. He wanted to continue with their intimacy. But he needed it to be her decision. A lot had happened to her recently. The attack on her was something that he knew had to be having an impact on her. He would not force her to start a relationship with him. She had to be ready to take that step. As much as he wanted to pull her into his arms, make love to her, and keep her with him in his bed and in his life forever, he had to hold back. It had to be Rachel's choice.

Rachel lay silently, thinking. After a moment, she made a crucial decision. Pulling back her covers, she climbed down from her bed, lit the lantern,

lowering the flame so that it barely glowed, and walked the short distance across the camper to the bed where Sam was trying to sleep. She hesitated a moment, reached out to pull back the blankets, then climbed up to step over him. She lay down next to him and drew the blankets over the both of them.

“What are you doing?” Sam asked her, his voice a combination of amusement and pleasure.

“I just wanted to get your complete attention,” she told him quietly.

“Well you sure as hell have it, baby,” he told her calmly, unable to keep the smile from his face.

“Sam, I want to tell you some things, but I don’t think I’ll be able to finish

telling you if you interrupt me. Promise you'll wait until I've finished before you say anything.”

Sam searched her face silently then nodded. They faced each other quietly in the bed for a moment. Without hesitation, he reached out to drape his arm across her waist and pull her toward him gently, rubbing her back tenderly.

“Okay,” he told her quietly.

“When I helped you with Paulette tonight it felt so good to be a part of your world. I realized how you must feel every day. It really bothers me that you aren't helping people with your skills. You should be doing what you want to do. If you want to go back to the hospital

to work, then you should. If you want to be a part of a practice here in the mountains, then you should do that. You have a gift that you should be using. You shouldn't let anyone dictate your life to you. You should be practicing medicine and you should be doing it where you want to.”

Sam looked at her silently. He could see the deep sincerity in her eyes. He was touched by her concern for him, and he couldn't help but smile. Keeping silent, he lowered his hand to her hip and held her gently, waiting for her to finish whatever it was that she wanted to tell him.

“Tonight you were so gentle with Paulette when you touched her. I

watched your hands and felt things I can't even begin to understand or explain. I've known since I was a kid that you were a great guy. You were always so caring. I liked you a lot, but I knew that I was just Roy's kid cousin and you were going to find someone else and make a new life for yourself. To be honest, every guy I've ever dated didn't come close to the person you are, and I never thought I would ever find anyone else that I wanted to be close to." She sighed and moved a little closer to him, wanting to share his warmth and his gentleness. "A lot has happened to me recently and I'm pretty disgusted with men in general."

Sam waited silently, hoping that she would be able to tell him about the attack. He wanted to help her get through it somehow. She was already helping him in ways she would never know. He saw the uncertainty on her face and it took every effort to remain silent as he pulled her into his arms to comfort her. Her eyes were closed and she took a shaky breath against his chest.

“When you were touching Paulette’s belly to feel her baby, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from you. I kept seeing me in a dream that I’ve been having.”

“What kind of dream?” Sam asked, his voice barely a whisper. His heart was slamming against his ribs at the mention

of her dream, and he wondered if it were possible that they were both having the same dream.

“I keep dreaming that we have a baby together,” she said quietly, looking directly into his kind eyes. “I know it sounds crazy but I keep dreaming that we’re together. The dream is so real. It’s as if you’re really touching me and holding me. I’ve never had such explicit dreams before, and it scares me.”

“Why does it scare you, honey?”

“Because I want my dreams to be real, Sam.”

“Dreams?” he asked, realizing that she said more than one dream.

Rachel nodded and looked into the deep blueness of his eyes. They held no

scorn and no laughter—just kindness and caring. She hesitated a moment, touching his chest lightly as she thought.

“Being close to you makes me feel good. It feels right. It feels like home,” she told him in a whisper. “And I find myself wondering how you would be toward me if I really was carrying your baby.”

“How do you think I would be?” he whispered, making every effort to remain calm.

“I think you would be wonderful,” she answered without hesitation.

Sam smiled and leaned forward to tenderly kiss her lips. When he pulled back and looked into the soft brown of

her eyes, he saw the shyness there, but he also saw something else. Desire.

Rachel looked away from the intensity of his gaze. She wanted to tell him the rest of her dream but she was afraid that he would laugh at her.

“What else did you dream?” Sam urged her.

“I saw you carrying our daughter to me and me nursing her,” she told him honestly.

Sam smiled at the image of his child suckling at Rachel’s breast and felt a peacefulness overcome him. His own dream of her flashed through his mind.

“That sounds nice,” he said honestly.

Rachel nodded, smiling, but when she looked up at him there was fear in her

eyes. “Sam, something happened to me before I came out here,” she began.

“I know,” he told her quietly. “You told me some of it when you were delirious. And I saw your bruises when I was taking care of you.”

Rachel froze in fear. How much had she told him? He had seen her bruises? She pulled her hand free from his and pulled her arms against her chest, covering her breasts as if to shield the horror from him. The memory of the brutality of the attack swept over her in an instant and she pulled away from Sam’s embrace, unable to stand being touched by anyone. Even Sam.

Sam watched her silently. He could

feel the fear that washed over her. "I'm sorry you had to endure such cruelty, Rachel," he told her calmly, reaching out to touch her hand and hold her fingers lightly with his. "I wish I could have been there to stop it from happening."

He reached up and lightly touched her cheekbone where one of the bruises was beginning to fade. Rachel covered his hand with her own and turned her face into the palm of his hand. She kissed it gently.

"I understand if you want your distance, but you don't have to be afraid of me. I would never hurt you."

"I know."

"I want to make all your pain go away, but I know it'll take time."

Rachel nodded and relaxed visibly. “Sam, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you, but I’ve never stopped thinking about you.” She hesitated, not sure if she should tell him more.

Looking up into his face she saw only tenderness and caring and knew that she had to be honest, even if it meant pushing him away with her words. She needed to take a chance.

“It’s impossible to forget your first love,” she admitted finally.

He smiled at her but didn’t laugh. Instead, he leaned toward her and kissed her again with such tenderness that her chest ached with raw emotion. He gathered her gently within his arms and

hugged her tightly to him. Reaching up, he touched her face tenderly, almost as if she would break. Taking her hand in his, he drew it toward his chest and held it there.

“When I think of you I remember the kid who used to hang around with me and Roy, but I also see the woman you are now. You’re the same, but you’re different. And to be honest, Rachel, you’re driving me crazy.” He closed his eyes and took a calming breath.

“Crazy good or crazy bad?” she asked, confused.

“That’s a very good question,” he told her, laughing softly. He opened his eyes and looking down at her very seriously. “You’ve always been smart.”

“Thanks. I am pretty smart, Sam,” she said, teasing him. “You know that.”

“I *do* know that,” he said, laughing softly. “You were smarter than me and Roy put together. We were the ones who always did something stupid that you had to rescue us from.”

“You got that right, buddy,” Rachel said, snorting.

Sam couldn't help but laugh with her. He hugged her tightly and kissed her neck lightly. “How could I ever forget how much I enjoyed being with you?” he whispered against her ear. “You haven't changed, baby. You're still fun, you're still gentle, you're still kind, and I don't want to be without you.”

“Sam,” Rachel whispered, surprised by his words even though they thrilled her.

“I want you, Rachel,” he whispered, sending shivers throughout her body. “I want you more than I’ve ever thought it was possible to want someone. I don’t want to scare you away, especially after what you’ve been through. I have to hold myself back because all I want to do is touch you.”

He leaned toward her, gently easing her back onto the bed to lie beside him, and covered her chest with his own. He looked down at her searching her face for any sign of fear, and was relieved to see that she was looking at him calmly.

“Sam,” she whispered hesitantly. “I want...”

“What do you want, honey?”

“I want to make love with you,” she whispered.

He gathered her gently within his arms and lowered his mouth to hers, hesitating just before his lips met hers. His warm breath ghosted across her mouth, and he smiled when he heard and felt the soft sigh that escaped her.

“I want that, too, baby,” he whispered, a soft groan escaping him as he felt her slide her hands beneath his sweatshirt to tenderly caress his back.

He kissed her softly then leaned back to help as she pulled the sweatshirt over

his head. He smiled down at her as she gently ran her hands over his chest before enveloping him in her embrace and kissing his neck tenderly. He sighed heavily at the incredibly loving contact and turned to kiss her forehead, trailing the delicate skin of her temple and cheek to find the waiting lips that he had to claim.

Rachel kissed him deeply, her hands reaching around to pull him tightly against her. As she intensified in the urgency of her touch, he found that he needed to touch the warmth of her body. Slipping his hand beneath her sweatshirt, he lightly caressed her breast, carefully pushing aside the lace material of her bra that acted as a barrier between his

hand and the sweetness of her body. He felt her warm skin quiver beneath his touch.

Raising his head, his lips left hers, and he smiled down at her tenderly. He reached for the bottom of her sweatshirt to slowly pull it up to reveal her beautiful body. Rachel lifted her shoulders slightly to help him ease the shirt over her head to be discarded on the far side of the bed. It was quickly followed by her bra.

He looked down at her silently, his eyes clouding with passion as he viewed her naked beauty. He reached out to caress each breast tenderly. Very slowly, he leaned down to kiss each

swollen mound, hesitating when he saw the bruise of the bite marks that marred her perfect skin. He kissed the bruises lightly and looked up to see her looking at him with sudden fear in her eyes.

“He was an animal,” Sam told her, angry at the brutality.

“Yes, he was,” she whispered, not moving.

“Do you want me to stop touching you?” he asked softly.

“I’m not sure,” she answered him honestly.

He eased his body up to lie beside her, took her into his arms and pulled her against him. Reaching down, he pulled the blankets up to their shoulders, careful to keep the night chill away from

them. Her bare chest was pressed tightly against his own. He closed his eyes at the pure pleasure of having her partially naked, lying trustingly in his arms. Kissing her temple lightly, he pulled her tightly into his embrace and sighed.

Rachel could feel Sam's heart pounding against her hand as it rested on his muscled chest. His gentleness had undone her. She pushed aside her thoughts of Richard and concentrated on the incredible caring of this man who held her so gently.

"Having you around again is something that's easy to get used to. You have a way of working your way into my thoughts. You always did," he confessed

after a moment.

Rachel smiled at his admission. “I grow on you, huh?” she whispered, smiling softly.

“Yes, you do. I’ve been such a loner for so long. It’s hard for me to accept that I enjoy having you around,” he admitted quietly. “My resistance is worn down, Rachel. You’re wrapped around my brain, consuming my thoughts. And my dreams.”

She looked up at him in surprise. He was having dreams about her? Were they as real as the dreams she was having about him?

He leaned forward to kiss her lips lightly. His breath became ragged as her response to him grew more passionate.

When she reached around him to gently stroke his back and she kissed him so tenderly, he thought he would die from the pure pleasure of her tenderness.

He pulled away from her and tried to take a calming breath. He reached down and took hold of her hand that tenderly stroked his back. He drew it gently to his lips and kissed her open palm slowly.

“Being able to touch you every night would make me a happy man,” he whispered softly.

Rachel thought she would cry at the tenderness he was showing her. She closed her eyes to enjoy the feeling of his hands gently touching her body, opening them when he slowly caressed

her breasts. She saw him smile at the gasp of pleasure that escaped her when he brushed his open palm across her nipple. She felt a strange combination of tenseness and joy at the feeling of his mouth trailing kisses along her neck and shoulders.

He hesitated slightly, looking into her eyes and seeing the passion there, before continuing toward her breasts. He kissed them lightly then suckled at each nipple gently before pulling back slightly to look down at her again. He traced each nipple slowly with his index finger, then stroked the fullness of each breast tenderly before slowly passing his hand down her body and resting it lightly on her abdomen, his mouth trailing kisses

along the warmth of her skin.

Rachel's body felt as if it were on fire. His touch was so beautiful. When he suckled at her breasts and kissed her stomach, she thought she would die from the pleasure and happiness that he gave her.

"I want you, Rachel," he told her again quietly, kissing her lips passionately before pulling back to search her face for any sign of fear.

"I want you, too, Sam," Rachel whispered. "I know this is just for now, and I'm okay with that. You have to get yourself back into medicine and I have a lot of obligations back East."

Sam looked at her and smiled a sad

kind of a smile. He should have known better than to hope that things would work out for him. Her words served to cool him off just as if a bucket of ice cold water had been dumped over him.

“I understand,” he said calmly, his voice suddenly sounding very tired. “You have a thriving writing career. Children wouldn’t fit into your life’s plan.”

She watched him silently for a moment, unsure what to do or say. She just knew that she had to do something. She could never let him continue to think that she was rejecting him. She knew what it was like to be rejected and had felt the deep pain from not feeling good enough or worthy enough.

“It has nothing to do with my career,” she tried to explain.

Sam looked at her and waited silently. She could see the distance in his eyes and knew that he was growing more disconnected from her with each moment.

“Okay, it’s not your career,” he told her calmly. “Babies wouldn’t fit into your life right now.”

Rachel looked at him silently for a moment. Considering how conflicted she was about keeping her distance or showing Sam the affection she ached to give him, it really took her no time at all to decide what to do.

“Are you offering?” she asked finally,

reaching out to touch his cheek and stroke it gently, tracing his lips before resting her hand upon his muscular chest and gently teasing the black hair that covered it.

“Offering what?” he asked, a sadness beneath the anger in his voice.

“To get me pregnant,” she told him calmly.

He looked at her in surprise then searched her face silently. He covered her hand with his own and squeezed it gently.

“Are you willing?” he asked her finally, smiling. When she hesitated and looked away, he reached for her face and held it so that she couldn’t hide her expressive eyes from him. “Answer

me.”

His voice was firm, deadly serious. He did not want to misunderstand what she was telling him. This was one question whose answer he had to be sure of.

“Do you want to have my baby?” he asked calmly.

Rachel looked up at him, blushing slightly at their intimate conversation. She hesitated a moment to think through the consequences that her answer would bring.

“Very much,” she barely whispered, a soft smile crossing her lips as she looked at him and saw his blue eyes flash at her response.

She wanted to be with him and love him and share his tenderness. She wanted to laugh and listen and talk with him. Having a baby with him would be an added bonus to the loving relationship that she knew that they could share.

She waited what seemed like an eternity while he looked down at her silently. The intensity of his blue eyes nearly sparkled as he searched her face. He smiled down at her but did not laugh.

“We can’t do this,” he said finally.

Rachel’s heart stopped. He was rejecting her. She wasn’t good enough for him. There was something about her that was lacking. No man would want

her. Isn't that what Richard had told her?

His rejection hurt her deeply but she was determined to remove herself from the bed with as much dignity as she could manage. She sat up and reached for her discarded sweatshirt and pulled it on as quickly as she could. His hands reached out to stop her as she tried to climb across him to step down from the bed. She turned to face him calmly.

"Sam, let me go," she told him firmly, trying to remain emotionless.

Sam watched her as coldness settled within her eyes. He realized that she didn't understand what he meant, and he knew that he had better explain before she lost herself to thoughts that he couldn't erase.

“Rachel, what I mean is that I want our child to be conceived the right way,” he tried to explain.

Rachel looked at him calmly, her expression distant and cold. “I didn’t realize there was more than one way to conceive a child. Please tell me about this medical breakthrough, doctor.”

Sam couldn’t help but smile. “I don’t mean physically,” he told her, laughing softly. “I mean our situation.”

“What situation?”

“Rachel, I would not make a baby with you unless we were married.”

“I understand,” she told him honestly. “Until this very moment, I’ve always felt the same way.” But things had changed.

She tried to climb over him once again but he stopped her midway through her attempted escape, and she found herself straddling his hips. She blushed at the intimacy of it but looked at him directly.

“Please...” she said quietly. She tried to pull herself free from his hold.

Sam let her go and she stood quickly on the camper floor. She turned away and tried to step away from him to walk the short distance back to her own bed when his hand gently touched her forearm to stop her. She looked down at the hand on her arm and watched as he ran his hand down the length of her arm and took her hand in his. She faced him silently and saw him sitting up in bed.

Her heart ached at the sight of him.

The lantern light was glowing softly, throwing shadows across his muscled chest. She had to close her eyes to control herself because the very sight of his body still affected her strongly even if he didn't want her. She thought about the dreams that she had dreamed, and her body ached with sadness for a future that wasn't meant to be.

"Rachel," he said quietly, breaking into her thoughts.

"What?"

"Please marry me."

Chapter 25

“What?”

She was stunned. Of all the things he could have said to her, she would never have imagined that he would ever make that request. She looked into his eyes and saw tenderness and worry. She wondered if she also saw love there. She looked at the hand that held hers so tenderly and melted at the thought of that gentle hand touching her, caressing her, and holding her for the rest of her life.

“Rache,” he whispered, bringing her attention back to his face. “I didn’t mean that I didn’t want you. I want you so much I hurt.”

He pulled her closer to him and took both her hands in his. His eyes locked with hers and he saw the hesitance and confusion there.

“You don’t have to marry someone to have sex with them, Sam,” Rachel told him sadly.

“That’s not what I want, Rachel,” he told her immediately, his voice strong and clear. “I want a lot more. Don’t you?”

Rachel didn’t trust her voice to answer. She nodded her head slowly.

“The sooner you say yes, the sooner we’ll be married and the sooner we can get busy making our baby.” He smiled at her, gentle tenderness in his eyes.

“I can’t,” she told him sadly.

Sam looked at her in confusion. He tried to make sense of her words but no explanation he could come up with mattered.

“I know you’re not married,” he finally told her seriously.

“No, I’m not,” she admitted.

“You’re not engaged.”

“No.”

“You don’t have a boyfriend.”

“No.”

“I’m not good enough for you?”

Rachel reached out and gently touched his face. “Do you have any idea how ridiculous that is?”

She leaned toward him to kiss his lips

tenderly. Sam's arms encircled her immediately. His kiss remained gentle, melting her already weakened resistance. She couldn't stop the sigh that escaped her as he held her so tenderly against his chest.

"Then tell me why you can't marry me," he said quietly.

Rachel hesitated a moment while a million reasons raced through her mind. "I don't think we know each other well enough," she told him finally.

"Rachel, I've known you since you were five!" he answered, stunned, pulling back to look down at her in surprise.

"I mean the person I am now," she explained.

“We’ve been friends for nearly our whole lives. You’re caring and sensitive and have given me support and encouragement whenever I felt alone. You and Roy were the two people who knew everything about me and didn’t care who my father was. You’re the person who stood by me when my mother died,” he whispered. “You will never know how much having you and the Monroes by my side meant to both my mother and me. She loved you very much.”

“I loved her, too,” Rachel whispered, her eyes tearing up at the memory of his mother.

“I know you did,” he said seriously,

reaching up to pull the gold chain with the ice blue stone from beneath the neckline of her sweatshirt to rest it gently between her breasts. “You wear this all the time, don’t you?”

Rachel nodded, holding his hand as he gently touched the precious stone. “She gave it to me the day she died.”

“I know.”

“Do you mind?”

“No.”

“I’m glad,” she whispered.

“Rachel, my mother gave you something that was very important to her. She told me that no one was to ever take this from you. I promised her I would make sure it would always be yours.”

Rachel nodded, not trusting her voice to speak because of the deep emotions that filled her. She watched as Sam let go of the stone and raised her hand to his mouth to kiss it lightly. Reaching up, he traced her jawline with his index finger then reached down to once again cradle the beautiful blue stone in his right hand.

“My mother told me when I turned eighteen that the girl I was going to marry would receive this.” He looked up at her seriously. “When she gave it to you I thought she had changed her mind. I thought she had given it to you because she thought of you as her daughter. I realize now that she actually did give it to the girl I was going to marry. I just

didn't see it back then. I guess we both had to go through a lot until we finally found our way back to each other."

Rachel was speechless. She had no idea that the necklace she wore carried such significance. Joanna McCoy had foreseen this event. She remembered how Joanna had told her to give Sam time. Joanna had told her that Sam would someday realize Rachel's worth.

"It's been a lot of years, Sam. I don't know if what you are with me is the real you. You might have changed. You're on your best behavior right now," Rachel argued halfheartedly.

Sam's bark of laughter took her by surprise. He kissed her lips quickly and hugged her to him. She was unable to do

anything but go along with his enthusiasm.

Yeah, it's a real hardship to let him hug and kiss me, she told herself sarcastically.

“If you think this is my best behavior then you’ll only think I’m getting better,” he told her, smiling. “I haven’t exactly been very nice to you. I seem to remember you ready to pummel me to death with your mallet the first night you were here.”

Rachel laughed despite her efforts to remain serious. “That’s different.”

“Why is it different?”

“Because we were both a little...” she began, searching for the words.

“Ornery?” he supplied for her.

“Yes,” she agreed, smiling. “But since then you’ve been tender and caring and responsible. Just as you always were. You’re really a nice guy.”

“Go ahead, insult me,” Sam whispered, kissing the top of her head to hide the happiness that her words gave him.

Rachel turned to face him and kissed his shoulder before resting her head against his chest. “I think you’re a wonderful man,” she whispered. “I’ve always thought so.”

“Then marry me,” he told her, reaching down to touch her chin to tip her face up to meet his and draw her

gently toward him.

“Your father hates me,” she reminded him.

“Who cares?” he shrugged. “He’s not crazy about me, either.”

She couldn’t help but smile, but she was also wary of the possibilities of Edwin McCoy’s wrath. Sam’s warmth was melting away any reserve that she had. Before she realized it, she found herself leaning toward him, accepting his kiss and his embrace.

They kissed tenderly, each holding the other gently as their arms encircled each other. They both had years of untapped emotions to give to the other. Rachel couldn’t protest any longer. She wanted and needed to be a part of this man’s

life.

“Marry me, Rache,” he asked her again, kissing her gently.

“Yes,” she finally whispered against his mouth.

He crushed her to him then, kissing her passionately, pulling her toward him, and lifting her across his body to gently lay her back down on the bed beside him. He drew the covers around them to ward off the chill of the cold night air. He lay back on his pillow and drew her head against his chest. She could feel his heart pounding and was happy that his desire for her was so strong. When he leaned over, releasing her for a moment to extinguish the lantern, she felt such an

incredible sense of loss that she was amazed. When he returned to her and drew her once again into his embrace, she settled back and smiled, contented at last.

“Thank you,” he whispered, kissing the top of her head and breathing in the clean smell of her hair. She made him feel so good.

They lay quietly for so long that Rachel found herself relaxing and drifting off. She pushed aside any concerns that she had about her decision. She was very content to be exactly where she was—in Sam’s arms. Just knowing that she would remain there for the rest of their lives beckoned a sense of peace that enveloped and relaxed her.

She could feel her body surrendering to the calm.

She turned and snuggled against Sam's body, draping her arm across his stomach and kissing his chest lightly as she drifted off. Her forehead furrowed in confusion as she tried to distinguish the words that she heard him whisper against the top of her head. She couldn't tell if she was dreaming or if she had actually heard Sam whisper, *I love you*.

Chapter 26

Rachel opened her eyes and saw Sam's beautiful blue eyes looking down at her. She couldn't help but blush at the moment that they were sharing, knowing that she was thinking decadent thoughts about the gorgeous man lying next to her.

"Good morning," he whispered.

"Morning," she answered, smiling shyly as she looked up at him.

She suddenly found herself more than a little nervous. She wasn't sure if the clarity of the morning would change the events of the night before.

"What size ring do you wear?" he asked her quietly, reaching down to lift

her hand and place it gently on his chest.

She looked up at him and smiled. He had been serious last night. He hadn't been swept away by the events of the evening to say things that he would regret the next morning.

"Seven," she told him, still smiling.

"I'd better get it a little bigger in case your fingers swell when you're pregnant," he said, more to himself than to her.

Rachel laughed and pushed at his chest until he was lying beside her then sat up and rested her body across his chest. "You're awfully sure of yourself, aren't you?" she teased.

Sam couldn't believe how happy he was. He reached up to gently pull

Rachel's face toward his and kissed her. His slid his hands beneath her shirt and gently stroked the softness of her back. She leaned back and allowed his hands to slide around her waist and caress her stomach. When he covered her full breasts, he groaned softly as he caressed them. His eyes closed at the sheer pleasure of touching her. When his thumbs rubbed across her nipples, and she gasped in excitement, he opened his eyes and saw the desire that she had for him.

“Your touch drives me crazy,” she whispered breathlessly.

Pulling her shirt up over her head, he leaned forward and kissed her breasts,

humming against her softness and breathing in her scent. Holding on to her firmly, he turned them both so that she was lying on her back and he was covering her body with his. He hugged her to him almost desperately then released her and caressed her shoulder lovingly.

He reached down to hold her hand in his, gently rubbing the pad of his thumb across her knuckles. Eventually his breathing slowed and he was able to think beyond the hardness of his body.

“We can drive into town and get the marriage license and blood test today,” he told her quietly, looking into the warmth of her eyes.

“That’s a little quick, don’t you

think?” she asked, surprised.

“Do you want to change your mind?”

“No, do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

Sam looked down at her silently for a minute. His eyes held hers as he leaned forward and kissed her lips gently. His mouth parted slightly and he tenderly kissed the corner of her mouth, pulled back slightly then kissed her once again, settling softly against her lips as she met his kiss with equal tenderness. He felt her fingers in his hair as she pulled his head toward her, intensifying the kiss. Their breathing became slow and even as they settled in to an achingly beautiful joining of heart and flesh. He covered

her left breast with his right hand and caressed it lightly as his kisses grew more passionate.

Rachel found herself losing herself to the passion and kindness that was this man. He was exactly as he seemed, exactly as he had always been—kind, gentle, and loving. There was no turning back. Her heart had already made the decision to love him forever.

“If it’s okay with you, we can get married when we get back from Denver,” he told her quietly. “We can have a nice, quiet ceremony. I’d like to have Kay, Roy, and Paulette there, if Paulette is up to it. And Jarod, too.”

Rachel smiled and squeezed his hand. “I would like that,” she said happily.

She touched his cheek gently before sliding her hand around his neck and pulling him toward her to take the kiss she wanted. She held on tightly, growling into his mouth as he opened to her and slipped his tongue into her mouth. She sucked on it carefully, loving his taste. She wanted him desperately.

Sam kissed her thoroughly, laughing softly at the sexy growl that left her lips as their kiss deepened. Covering her body with his, he settled in the cradle of her hips and pressed his groin intimately against her. His hard cock pressed against her mound, and he damned the material of her sweatpants for keeping him away from her. He needed to sink

his shaft deep inside of her and feel the wetness and the warmth of her body.

“Rachel, you don’t know what you’re doing to me,” he told her, his voice husky with emotion. “I want you, honey.” He whispered the words, unable to say them any other way.

“I want you, too,” she told him, leaning forward to kiss him deeply.

“I want you so much, I can barely think.”

Rachel smiled as she tipped her hips and pressed against his erection. “I can tell,” she said, teasing him.

“You women have it easy,” he told her, laughing. “You can always tell when a man desires you.”

“You can tell that I desire you pretty

easily, too,” she told him very seriously.

“I can?”

“Check for yourself.”

Sam growled at her soft demand. Easing back, he pulled her sweatpants and white lace underwear down very slowly, loving the way her body was revealed to him in tantalizing increments. When she was completely naked before him, he kneeled before her and reached out to place his hands on her inner thighs. He pressed lightly, smiling when Rachel eased her legs open to him without hesitation.

He touched the dark, trimmed curls of her mound and smiled as she moaned softly when he used his thumbs to spread

her lips and slide them along the glistening pinkness of her folds. Slipping his thumb inside of her, his cock throbbed at the warmth of her body and the wetness that soaked him.

“So wet, baby,” he whispered, removing his thumb from her body and bringing it to his mouth to suck her juices from it.

“I think you should check deeper,” Rachel told him, smiling up at him.

“Do you?” he asked, smiling at her boldness.

“Yes. And I need you to check with something much longer and thicker than your thumb, Sam,” she told him, loving the expression of surprise that crossed his face just before he growled. “Take

off your pants and make love to me.”

He didn't need to be told twice. Pushing down his sweats and underwear, his cock bounced free. For a brief moment, he didn't move, wanting to capture this incredible moment in his mind forever. When he saw Rachel open her arms to him, he leaned forward and held her gently, kissing her neck as his cock nudged her pussy.

She adjusted the position of her hips, moaning softly as the head of his cock nudged against her and slid inside of her. She moved slightly, matching his press and retreats, unable to keep the soft noises of pleasure from escaping as he slid deeper and deeper inside of her

with each gentle movement.

When he was finally as deep as he could go, she sighed and caressed his back, scraping her nails down the hard, sexy muscles there. She loved the way he felt in her arms and inside of her body. He filled her completely, his length and girth stretching her deliciously. She could feel the fresh rush of cream that eased his way inside of her.

“You feel incredible inside of me, Sam,” she whispered, gasping with pleasure when he pulled almost all the way out of her then pressed back inside of her slowly.

“Rachel,” he groaned. “So good, baby.”

It was the first time in his life he had ever gone without a condom. He was glad it was with this woman who was meant to be his. He felt their connection, a warmth spreading through him as their souls merged. He didn't know how he knew this, but he did.

He wrapped his hands beneath Rachel's body to cup her shoulders and hold her in place while he pumped into his beautiful woman's body over and over again. The way she matched his rhythm with the cant of her hips was perfect. He pressed against her, rubbing against her mound with each thrust and retreat, determined to stimulate her clit as he moved.

He spread his legs slightly to lift her legs up onto his thighs and tip her hips to angle her so he could peg her G-spot with his thrusts. At her gasp of pleasure, he knew that he had put her in the perfect position.

“Good, honey?” he asked as he looked into her eyes and watched her as he increased his tempo and pressure.

“Sam,” she moaned, unable to articulate exactly how she was feeling.

“I know, honey. Don’t hold back. Come for me.”

Rachel arched her back, presenting her breasts to him as she reached for her orgasm. Leaning forward, he captured her right breast with his mouth and

sucked firmly on her turgid nipple, biting down on it lightly and snapping his hips harder at the same time.

Rachel opened her mouth in a silent scream as her orgasm ripped through her. She gripped Sam's forearms, digging her nails into them and holding tightly as her body came apart.

Rachel's hot channel clamped down on his cock. The ripples of her release caressed his shaft, making his balls draw up tight against his body and pulling his orgasm from him. He pressed into her and held himself tightly against her as his cock erupted, sending a torrent of seed deep into her womb.

"Sam," she whispered, holding him tightly as she felt his shaft throbbing

deep inside of her.

He kissed her then, devouring her mouth and pulling her closer against him as his cock spurted over and over again. His heart hammered against his chest. He released her mouth and gently kissed her cheek to settle contentedly against her neck. As Rachel held him tightly and kissed his shoulder over and over again, he smiled at the gentle loving she gave him.

“That was really nice, Sam,” she whispered, smiling when he chuckled against her neck.

“Yeah. It was.”

He smiled against her neck, kissing her gently. Pulling out of her carefully,

he smiled at the groan that left her. Lying to her left, he drew her toward him and tucked her safely against his body. She cuddled against him and rested her head against his shoulder, making him know that this was exactly as it should and would always be.

This incredible, kind, and loving woman was going to be his wife and the mother of his children. Their lovemaking might have already sparked their baby's life. And he was completely okay with that possibility.

Chapter 27

Sam pulled his truck alongside the doorway to one of the most elegant clothing stores in Denver and waited while Rachel opened the door and stepped out. She turned and reached in to gather up her purse and found her hand captured by his. She looked up and smiled at him, happy nearly to the point of giddiness.

He pulled her toward him and lightly placed a kiss upon her lips. "I'll be back in two hours," he told her quietly. "I have an errand to run. My cell phone is on if you need me. I don't have your number. You can give it to me later. Do

you have mine?"

"Yes," she whispered, nodding. She let go of his hand reluctantly then stepped back and pushed the door shut.

She took another step back to stand safely on the sidewalk and watched as Sam pulled away then turned and entered the store. She made her way toward the lingerie department and found herself blushing as she remembered the intimacies that she and Sam had shared during the past week.

Each night, they had slept side by side, holding each other, touching and kissing, and making love. Each time was beautiful. Each time was exciting as hell. Sam was an incredible lover who always showed her tenderness, concern,

and mind-numbing orgasms.

They had talked about so many things. They caught each other up on all that had happened in their lives during the time they had spent apart and all the events that had shaped their lives over the past ten years. They talked about their future together, the children they would lovingly welcome, and the family they would tenderly create and nourish.

Their time together had been so special, and Rachel found that she loved Sam more with each day that they spent together. She admired his strength of character, his intelligence, and his accomplishments, but she truly adored him for his gentleness and caring. His

tenderness with her made her feel warm and special. He treated her with kindness and respect. He listened to her. He respected her thoughts and opinions. He enjoyed her. The friendship they had shared as children remained a deep part of their relationship. They had fun together. Whether it was the both of them working around the campsite or Rachel quietly working on her manuscript while he studied, they were content to spend time with each other and settled in to a comfort of sharing their days. Every day seemed to add a new dimension to their lives together.

His concern for her well-being made her feel like a queen. He had been so serious when they had gone for their

blood tests. He had held her hand tightly in his without realizing it, supervising the young woman who had taken the blood from her. Rachel was deeply touched by his honest caring.

Memories of the way he had held her each night and caressed her body and made love to her flooded her mind as she walked through the store, making her breathing become somewhat erratic as she waited for the store elevator. She pushed the call button and waited for the doors to open then stepped inside and selected the second floor button. Her thoughts wandered once again as the doors closed and she was lifted toward the intimate apparel department.

The elevator doors opened and she exited to make her way toward the lingerie department, thinking of Sam as she walked. The memories of Sam's touch were very vivid. He had driven her wild with desire every time they made love. She wanted to grab him and make love to him right then.

"You're out of control, girl," she whispered to herself, wiping at her face in an unconscious effort to brush the heat from her cheeks. She couldn't help but smile to herself as she walked toward the displays of the beautifully delicate lingerie.

She had to mentally shake herself and set about to buy herself a strapless bra, a

slip, and nylons. While she was at it, she would buy the delicately decadent panty and bra set that she noticed when she approached the center of the department. She lifted up the soft pink set before her and smiled, knowing she would feel sexy and feminine in it. Sam would love it. She couldn't wait to see his face when she stood before him wearing it and nothing else.

She could feel her body tensing in anticipation of what Sam would do to her. She smiled a knowing smile and picked up three other sets to add to her purchase. It should prove interesting to watch Sam try to control himself as he removed her clothing to see what color would entice him each day. She couldn't

help but giggle as she added three more colors to her bundle.

“Might as well have one for each day of the week,” she said softly, making sure to choose different styles to keep his interest.

When she finished in this department she would look for a pair of shoes, a purse, perfume, and some makeup. She hoped that once she was immersed in shopping she would be able to push her erotic thoughts aside.

She viewed the silk slips with a critical eye. She wanted to get one that was feminine and alluring. She smiled to herself as she thought about wearing it, and only it, for Sam. She couldn't help

but blush as she imagined him reaching out to pull it slowly from her body. How she was consumed with thoughts of Sam! She made an effort to stay focused on her shopping and smiled at the young saleswoman who approached her.

“May I help you?” the pretty blonde with sparkling blue eyes asked her, smiling sweetly at her.

“Yes, please, Aubrey,” Rachel answered, reading the young woman’s name tag, and concentrating on pulling herself out of her decadent thoughts. “I’d like to buy these.” She handed the lace trimmed black slip and the delicate underwear sets to the girl. The soft material of the slip floated from her grasp as she handed it to her, the texture

gently caressing her hand as she released it.

Rachel sighed happily as she opened her purse to remove her wallet. She knew that the heightened sense of awareness that she had for textures, colors, and smells was the direct result of the new appreciation she had for life—which was directly related to her feelings for Sam.

As she shopped she realized that she was finally happy with the way her life was turning around. When she had left Connecticut, she had never thought that she would leave behind her pain and loneliness. She certainly never would have dared to believe that she would be

reunited with Sam and find such beautiful and absolute love with him. And she did love Sam. She always had. Her childhood love for him had deepened to one so true that it often scared her with just how right it felt.

The fact that Sam never said that he loved her bothered her a little but, deep in her heart, she knew that he must. He could never share his life and desires with her if he didn't have deep feelings for her. They were just words. It was more important that he showed her how much he cared for her in the way that he cherished her.

The time passed quickly, and she found herself rushing to get all that she needed in the time she had left. Her

many bundles hung from her hands, and she realized that they were shaking slightly. Was it anticipation? Fear? Longing? Probably all of those. She looked at her watch and saw that she had about twenty minutes before Sam would be coming back to get her.

She walked quickly through the busy store. She gathered her bags of exciting new purchases in one hand and rang for the elevator. It seemed an eternity before the elevator doors opened before her. She stepped inside, turned to push the main floor button, and shifted her bundles to get comfortable for the short ride down to the main floor of the store. There was a man dressed impeccably in

a black suit standing at the back of the elevator. His height and coloring were oddly familiar. His cologne bombarded her senses with the familiar scent of another man—another man who had haunted her thoughts and had tortured her memories.

The man behind her stepped forward slightly, causing her to step aside to lean against the wall of the elevator. He was too close to her. The steady hum of the elevator fan made her lose focus on her immediate surroundings, and she found herself slipping into a place where her memories overwhelmed her.

Richard's face suddenly flashed across her mind's eye. His mocking look and cold eyes seized her heart as she

remembered vividly the cruel words that he had spoken to her the last time she had seen him. The physical attack he had made on her replayed in her mind in a split second, and she was sickened at the memory. His face loomed before her, cruel and intense.

The memories of that night assailed her. She suddenly felt unable to breathe. It didn't matter how successful or confident she had been before that night. He had made her question her worth, her confidence, and her sexuality. His physical attack played into her deepest fears of insecurity and pain.

She had to get off the elevator before she was sick to her stomach. The

elevator doors finally opened. She rushed out before the man could take one step. She desperately needed fresh air. She walked quickly through the store, clutching her bags tightly in her fists as she went.

She hated that she was suddenly consumed by panic and fear. Rushing out of the store, she took deep, even breaths to try and calm down. It was a long time before her heart rate slowed, but her nerves never settled.

* * * *

When Sam drove up to the store's doorway, Rachel was waiting for him. He smiled and reached over to open the

door for her. She allowed him to take the bags containing her purchases from her and place them in the rear seat of the truck then climbed in and closed the door, trying to avert her face from his gaze.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly, noting her pale complexion.

“Just a little tired,” she offered lamely, sitting back to buckle the seat belt securely around her.

Sam looked at her a moment but didn't say a word. He looked to his left to check the traffic flow before pulling out and driving away. They drove in silence toward his apartment, but it was not a comfortable silence.

“Did you find everything you needed?” he asked her quietly, stealing a glance at her out of the corner of his eye. He didn’t like her complexion at all. She looked as if she was going to be sick.

“Yes,” she barely whispered, staring out at the traffic ahead of them, lost in thought.

He wanted to reach over and hold her hand but knew better than to touch her when she was so tense. Her hands were gripping her purse, her knuckles white from the strain. Something was very wrong.

When they finally arrived at his apartment on the outskirts of the city, he parked his truck and climbed out then

walked to her door and opened it for her. Reaching in, he offered her his hand and helped her to step out then leaned in to lift out the many bags and the garment bag that held Paulette's dress that was hanging in the back. When Rachel reached out to take some of the bags from him, he didn't protest. It was obvious that she needed to carry something to occupy herself.

Rachel followed him into the building, concentrating on carrying her bags and keeping her gaze averted from his. They walked through the foyer of the apartment building and waited for the elevator in silence. It seemed to Rachel that she could hear Sam's heart beating as he stood so closely beside her. She

was relieved when the elevator doors finally opened and they stepped inside, only to become nervous once again as they were forced to stand close together in the small space inside of it. She saw Sam reach into his pocket and pull out his keys. She found herself settling somewhat as she watched his right hand select the key to his apartment door and remembered how beautifully he had touched her.

Sam watched her worriedly, noticing how she looked away from him every time he looked toward her, but he said nothing. When the elevator stopped and the doors opened, he led the way to the right of the elevator to the door of his

apartment. He inserted the key to unlock it then stepped back to allow Rachel to enter before him, and closed and locked the door behind them.

He followed her inside, going to the air conditioning unit in the living room to turn it on. The apartment was dark and stuffy from non-use. He opened the tan drapes and flooded the room with sunshine, making Rachel feel a little better.

She surveyed the room and liked what she saw. The room was sparsely furnished but held two immense, overstuffed beige couches and one comfortable recliner. She walked over to one of the couches and sat down, smiling as she sank into its softness. She

rubbed her hand across the soft material and willed herself to relax.

Sam watched her silently. He placed the garment bag carefully on the back of the couch that was facing Rachel, walked over to her, and knelt down before her. She looked so small as she sat on the huge couch. Flashes of his dream loomed before him, and he saw the two couches in the home that he had seen in the vision. When she looked at him, she smiled, reaching out to touch his hand gently as it rested on the couch beside her. His strong fingers wrapped around hers and he squeezed her hand gently.

“I’m glad you’re smiling,” he said

finally, the memory of his dream making him suddenly content. “You didn’t look very well when I picked you up at the store.”

“I saw someone in the elevator that reminded me of Richard,” she told him quietly, looking down at the couch cushion, not wanting to get into it further.

“And?” he asked quietly.

She looked at him with fear in her eyes. “I think it was the smell of his cologne that made me panic.”

“Scents often trigger memories,” Sam said quietly.

Rachel nodded. “Everything flashed through my mind. I guess I had a panic attack. I couldn’t get out of there fast enough.”

Rachel looked down at his hand and touched it gently with the fingertips of her free hand. She could not believe that these hands would ever be raised in violence against her. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed it tenderly. When she looked at Sam, she was touched by the concern that she saw on his face.

“Sam,” she said quietly, holding his hand gently. “I thought that Richard really cared about me when I went out with him. We went to a very expensive restaurant in New York City. I knew at dinner that I had been wrong, but I just sort of got swept up in his determination and ended up at his apartment. I’ve

kicked myself over and over again for letting him take me there. I keep thinking that I should have done something to get away before anything happened.”

Sam watched her face silently and felt sadness and frustration clutching at his heart. He saw the pain on her face and heard the anguish in her voice. He sat down beside her on the couch, placed his free hand behind her at the small of her back, and drew her into his arms to hold her against him.

“Rachel, it wasn’t your fault,” Sam told her softly, his voice strong with conviction despite its gentleness.

“I tried to fight him,” she continued as if in a trance. “He was too strong. He hit me twice. He threw me down on his

bed.” She looked up at him and saw the pain in Sam’s eyes as he listened to her.

“Rachel,” Sam whispered, shutting his eyes at the thought of the violence that she had been subjected to.

“I scratched him. I hit him,” Rachel continued, wanting to tell him everything and unburden herself from the weight of the memory of the attack. “I was afraid that he would kill me, Sam, so I pretended to go along with what he wanted.” She couldn’t help it. She started to cry.

“That was a smart thing to do,” he told her quietly, leaning back to look at her.

“I hit him with his clock radio and knocked him out,” she whispered

between sniffles.

“Good girl!” Sam told her proudly.

Rachel laughed at his enthusiasm. She reached up and touched his face gently. “I was afraid to tell you. I didn’t want you to blame me for being so stupid,” she told him honestly.

“Of course I don’t blame you,” he told her, squeezing her hand tightly. “I’m proud of you. I’m also afraid for you. I don’t ever want you to go through anything like that again.”

“He can never hurt me again.”

“Damn right he can’t,” Sam said angrily.

The strength of his words surrounded her just as the power of his body enveloped her. He held her to him

tightly, making Rachel feel protected and cared for. She kissed his chest lightly and hugged him.

She could feel the anger leaving his body and smiled at the tender way that he held her and caressed her back. She looked up at him and found her lips captured in a gentle kiss. She didn't feel panicked, she felt protected. She pulled back and smiled.

"I haven't thought about Richard for a while," Rachel whispered, touching Sam's shoulder and brushing an imaginary piece of lint from his black T-shirt.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, Rache."

Rachel raised her eyes and saw the look on Sam's face. She knew down to her very core how sincere he was. Her eyes were filled with tears and her throat was tight with emotion because of his caring.

"Rachel, if I ever frighten you or hurt you when I touch you, please tell me," he whispered, leaning back to face her seriously.

"Sam, when you touch me, I can barely think at all."

"You like it when I touch you?" he asked her quietly, all anger gone. His eyes sparkled with mischief and passion.

"Can't you tell?"

"Maybe just a little."

Rachel laughed and wiped away the tears that were helping to wash away her ugly memories. She looked at him seriously then, searching his face and smiling at the devilish glint in his eyes.

“Do you like the way I touch you?” she asked him, running her hand down his chest to pull his shirt from his jeans and reaching underneath it to tenderly touch his body.

Sam covered her hand through his shirt and closed his eyes. “Rachel, if you only knew how your touch drives me crazy,” he told her honestly.

“I think the feeling is mutual.”

Sam opened his eyes and looked deeply into the brown softness of her

eyes. They held tenderness, caring, and passion. She was such a gift. His heart felt full with the happiness that she gave him.

“We’d better start getting ready for the dinner tonight. You can shower first,” he offered gallantly.

Rachel reached out to touch his lips softly with her fingertips, leaning forward to cover them with her own. They kissed gently for just a moment before Sam pulled away and looked at her intently, desire lighting his eyes.

“We could share the shower,” Rachel offered, smiling at the way Sam tightened his arms around her and hugged her against him.

“If we do that, we’ll never leave this

apartment,” he said finally, his voice husky. “I’ll keep you here forever, making love to you until they have to take me to the hospital due to exhaustion.”

“Promises, promises,” Rachel teased.

“Don’t tempt me, Rache,” he told her seriously.

Rachel smiled up at him and allowed him to pull her to her feet. He held her hand and guided her to the room that led to the right of the living room.

Rachel followed and found herself in his bedroom. Her eyes immediately traveled to the bed and couldn’t help but blush at the memory of the way that he had touched her just that morning. When

she faced Sam, she saw him watching her knowingly.

“I just may be the one who keeps you here making love, Sam,” she whispered, watching as his beautiful blue eyes sparkled with desire.

“You’re great for my ego, but bad for my control,” he said finally. “Go on and shower. I’ll go and get the rest of your things.” He kissed her lips quickly before turning to leave her alone in the bedroom.

Rachel smiled as she watched him leave then went to the windows and opened up the drapes to allow the room to be filled with the afternoon sunshine. She reached up, turned on the air conditioner, and stood in front of the

cool breeze as it blasted from it.

She was feeling better already, but she was tired. She looked at her watch and saw that it was nearly two o'clock. She gazed at the bed hesitantly then walked to it tiredly and sat down on it. She lay back, rested her head on Sam's pillow and closed her eyes.

"When Sam comes back, I'll take my shower," she whispered, relaxing against the softness of his bed.

When Sam returned to the room a few minutes later carrying Rachel's suitcase, he hesitated as he took in the sleeping form in his bed. He put down the suitcase and walked over to her quietly. Kneeling down beside the bed, he

placed his hand on her hip as she lay on her side facing him. She turned restlessly onto her back and his hand slid to cover her stomach.

The sweet scent of cinnamon and sugar filled the room. It was a familiar scent that soothed him immediately. He looked down at his hand as it was splayed across Rachel's stomach and he saw a flash of a vision that filled him with happiness.

He was touching her swollen belly and smiling as their baby moved within her body. It was just a slight wisp of a movement but it was there. He looked up at Rachel and saw her smiling in her sleep.

"You see our baby, too," he

whispered gently, leaning forward to lift her pink shirt to kiss the warmth of her skin. “I want you to be pregnant with my baby.” He hummed against her abdomen and smiled as she touched his head lightly and threaded her fingers through his hair. “Maybe we’ve already made our baby. I would like that, sweetheart.” He eased away from her stomach and settled his head against the pillow so that his chin rested on her shoulder. He kissed her neck lightly, nudging her ear with his nose. “What about you, baby? Would you be happy if you were pregnant?”

Rachel turned toward him and smiled as she slept. She didn’t have to answer

him. He could see her happiness at his whispered words. When she sighed softly and leaned into his arms, he knew that she wanted to be with him as much as he wanted her to be with him.

Pulling away from her carefully, he stood and walked toward the bathroom. He removed his clothes and stood silently in front of the shower stall. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Everything about his time with Rachel made him happy. The dreams he had about her and the life they would have together gave him complete peace and happiness. He was looking forward to making those dreams their reality.

He reached forward to slide open the etched glass shower door. Stepping

inside, he pulled the door closed and leaned forward to turn the water on. When it was warm enough, he turned on the shower and stood under it, allowing the cascading warmth to relax him.

It had been a long day. He had asked Gwen and Stan to keep an eye on things at the campground for him. The memory of the two of them smiling knowingly at him and Rachel as they had stood before him had made him realize that he was proud to have them think that Rachel was his wife. It would only be a matter of days before that would be true. He was looking forward to it.

The past week with Rachel had been nothing short of incredible. He had never

enjoyed spending time with and talking with a woman so much in his life. It was as if the time that they spent apart had disappeared. The easy friendship they had was still there and brought with it a comfort level that eased his sadness. She amazed him. She made him laugh. She impressed him with her knowledge and opinions. She made him crazy with desire.

Their shared intimacies each night in the camper were stuff fantasies were made of. Rachel was a giving and tender lover. He loved every touch, every caress, and every whispered word of affection that she gave him. He had never felt so completely in love before. He wanted to wrap his arms around her

and never let go. He wanted to possess her completely—body and soul. Her gentle love for him made him understand that what she felt for him, and what she gave to him, came from her heart and called to his soul. She was his. Soon, they would have a baby to share. He was looking forward to making that baby if they hadn't already created him or her.

He smiled as he dropped his head forward and allowed the warmth of the water to saturate his hair. Reaching for the bottle of shampoo on the shower ledge, he poured some into his hand then rubbed it into his hair, scrubbing it vigorously. Lathering his body with soap, he began to wash himself

thoroughly, only passing the cloth lightly over his hard cock and swollen balls. He should take care of that, but the thought of making love to Rachel and filling her body with his seed was too much of a temptation.

Memories of the way Rachel's body opened to him and took him deep made his breathing quicken and his cock harden even more. Desire flooded him, and he had to lean against the wall of the shower unit as his knees threatened to buckle underneath him, his body painfully excited.

"Rachel, baby, you have no idea how much I want you," he whispered to himself. "You have no idea how much I love you and the life you've already

given me.”

Chapter 28

Rachel opened her eyes slowly and smiled at the sight before her. Sam was standing in front of his bureau, clad only in a large navy bath towel that hung casually around his waist. His black hair was dripping wet and his body was glistening with water. His body was tight and muscled and screamed controlled strength. Her breathing quickened with intense desire at the sight of him. She couldn't help but want him desperately.

“You look nice,” she told him quietly.

He turned to face her in surprise then put down the clothing that was in his

hand and walked toward the bed to kneel down on the floor beside her.

“How’re you feeling?” he asked her, smiling as he reached out to brush away the silky brown tresses that had covered the side of her face.

“Much better,” she told him, her eyes twinkling. She reached up and held his hand, slowly turning her face toward it and kissing his palm lightly. She smiled at the intake of breath that escaped him and looked up at him devilishly.

“Keep doing that, baby, and I’ll be burying myself inside of you right now,” he warned her huskily.

“I think that’s a really good idea,” she whispered. Her gaze caressed his body, her eyes following the soft trail of black

hair that ran from his powerfully muscled chest to where her view was cut off by the towel.

Sam watched her eyes and saw them cloud with passion as she looked at him. He leaned forward to unbutton the soft pink shirt that she was wearing. He pushed back the material slowly and gently traced the outline of her lacy, peach bra.

He lightly ran his hand across her breasts, his breathing quickening at the feel of the hardening of her nipples. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her up toward him to embrace her. He kissed her gently, increasing the pressure of his mouth on hers as he pulled her

shirt off and reached behind her to unfasten her bra. He drew away from her slightly, bringing the bra with him and cupping her full breasts in his hands. Rachel gasped in excitement at his touch and found herself just as anxious to rid herself of her clothing as he was.

He stood then and drew her off the bed to carefully stand before him. He kissed her face, her neck, her breasts, her stomach, slowly lowering his body until he was kneeling before her. He unfastened the button at the waist of her jeans, unzipping them and carefully pulling them over the sexy flare of her hips. He drew them down the length of her exquisite legs, taking an excited breath as she slowly lifted each leg to

allow him to pull the jeans from her body and push them aside. He trailed kisses up her legs until he reached her hips, smiling as he heard the soft moan that escaped her.

He looked up at her as she reached for his shoulders and gently caressed his body. Rubbing his face against her hip, he kissed it tenderly before leaning back to view the incredibly sexy sight before him. He traced the outline of her very feminine peach panties, gently reaching beneath the lace to tenderly stroke the soft curls that beckoned him. He slowly and gently pulled the lace barrier from her body, kissing the feminine triangle of curls as he disposed of her panties. He

smiled as he felt her trembling and his heart skipped a beat as she opened herself slightly to accept his searching fingers. He kissed her intimately, slipping his finger into the warmth and wetness that promised him total joy.

Easing away from her, he looked up at her and saw her mouth was opened slightly and her eyes were closed as she gave in to the pleasure she was feeling and moaned. Her honest, passionate response to his touches served to excite him beyond belief. He removed his finger from within her body and kissed her intimately once more, pushing her gently back down onto the bed and spreading her legs before him. Pressing inside of her, he twisted his fingers

slightly as he searched for the spot that would push her over the edge of passion. His tongue circled the engorged nub of her clit, and he sucked at it gently, smiling at the gasp he drew from her.

He didn't let up, aroused by the intoxicating scent and taste of her wetness, and gave in to the urge to bury his middle finger deep within her. Moving in and out of her body to the same rhythm he intended to repeat with his cock once he was buried deep inside of her, he was overwhelmed with the need for his woman. He felt her body clench around his finger as the building explosion burst forward from deep within her. He moaned against her as she

found her release and smiled as she called out his name and her cream dripped onto his open palm. He licked the dew from his hand and couldn't keep the growl from escaping him at the intimacy he was sharing with her. He loved this woman more than his own life.

He trailed kisses up her body, through the soft curls, across her stomach, up the midline of her body, and across each breast to suckle at each nipple before nuzzling into the hollow of her throat. He reached up to frame her face with his hands. He leaned toward her slowly, finally claiming her mouth tenderly with his.

“I can't get enough of you,” he

whispered, looking down into her glazed eyes before he embraced her and kissed her deeply.

As her arms surrounded him, he felt the gentle stroking of her hands across his back. He was unable to contain the sounds of pleasure that her touch drew from him. She caressed him tenderly, slowly lowering her hands to follow the muscular contours of his body, cupping his buttocks tightly and drawing him closer toward her. He felt her hand reaching for the towel that was wrapped loosely around his waist and reveled in the feeling of the excitement she evoked as she tried to tug the towel from his body.

He released his hold on her to stand and pull the towel from his hips and throw it heedlessly across the bed. She opened her arms to him, inviting him to join her. He stood before her, fully aroused, looking down at the vision that lay before him. His heart was slamming against his chest as he knelt on the edge of the bed then leaned forward to lie beside her and engulf her in his arms once again. He breathed in the delicious scent of her as she wrapped her arms around him.

“I like touching you,” she whispered against his chest as he held her tightly to him.

He pulled back from her slightly and

looked down at her. She reached between them and took careful hold of his cock, stroking the hard length of him with such gentle tenderness that he thought he would die from the pleasure.

“I have never wanted a man so much in my life,” she told him honestly, rubbing her thumb gently across the tip of his erection. She liked the feel of him, the hardness, the wetness, and the softness of the spongy head. She wanted to feel him deep inside of her.

He kissed her hungrily, crushing her body to his own, molding her against him. When the kiss ended, they were both breathing heavily. She looked up at him silently. He could see the passion in her eyes and smiled.

The feel of his body pressed intimately against hers sent quivers of pleasure through him. He rubbed against her, smiling at her gasp of pure joy as the engorged and weeping length of him grazed her swollen mound. She reached down to guide him to the very center of her. He was helpless to deny her.

He rubbed his cock between her parted thighs to nestle between the soft folds of her body, gasping when she pushed up against him. The friction against his hardness was almost too much to bear. He reached down to hold her hips still, his breathing choppy and his heart pounding. Driving deep into the depths of her sweet body in one long,

slow push, he moaned her name as her wet heat surrounded him. Lifting her legs to spread them wider, he drew out of her slowly then plunged deep once again. He was weak. He could not deny his need to feel the warm wetness and silky smoothness of her sweet body as it tightened around him and pulled on his shaft.

“Rachel, I’m about to explode,” he told her, his voice strained.

She pushed him back against the bed, separating their bodies momentarily before she covered his body with her own and kissed him deeply, glad that he allowed her to have her way. A moan escaped him as Rachel trailed kisses down his neck to his muscled chest,

gently rubbing her face against the dark hair that covered it. She smiled as his hand caressed her back while she gently kissed and traced around his nipples with her tongue before taking each one into her mouth and sucking hard, lightly nipping at them with her teeth. She smiled against his chest as she heard the sharp intake of his breath. Trailing kisses down the tight muscles of his abdomen to the dark line of hair that led to the hard length of him, her heart pounded with excitement and her body clenched with the need to be filled.

When she took the fullness of him into her mouth, he moaned and raised his hips to push himself deeply into the

warm wetness of her mouth. Gently moving up and down the length of him, she murmured against him. She heard him call out her name with a moan and pulled back to smile up at him. When she saw the passion in his eyes as he watched her, she felt empowered. His groan of pleasure was a personal victory for her. She intended to make him make more of those sexy sounds.

She held on to the thickness of him with one hand, gently stroking the tender skin of his sac with the other. She licked her way around the heavy sac before sucking each oval delicacy within it into her mouth to tenderly roll it with her tongue before letting it fall free. She returned to kissing, stroking, and sucking

his shaft when Sam reached down to pull her from him, drag her up the length of his body, and settle her beside him, his breath heavy and labored.

“You need to stop,” he told her, perspiration covering his face.

When he looked at her there was an intensity in his eyes that excited Rachel. “No,” she whispered.

When she reached down to continue stroking him, gently pulling and petting, Sam thought he would lose his mind from the pleasure she gave him. She was a giving and exciting lover. He was looking forward to a lifetime of sharing these moments of intimacy with her.

In a move that made Rachel shriek in

surprise, Sam caught her beneath her arms and pulled her onto his chest, turning them both and covering her body with his. His strength made her desire spike and her heart pounded with excitement.

He spread her legs with his knees, plunging deep inside of her in an instant, moaning as the wetness of her body eased his passage. Her silky heat was incredible.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, barely able to speak as desire slammed through him.

“You won’t,” she told him. “Harder. Take me harder.”

His responding growl made her smile. He pulled back his hips and pounded

back inside of her harder and deeper with each plunge. He held himself up on his forearms as he looked down at her, gauging her reaction to his roughness, and was relieved to see that she was enjoying every moment of it. She was arching up to meet each of his thrusts and tipping her hips to take him deeper and faster.

“I’m going to come, baby,” he warned her.

“Me, too,” she told him, gasping as he pressed deeper. He angled her hips as he plunged deeper, dragging his cock across her G-spot and sending white hot stars shooting throughout her body as her orgasm overwhelmed her and made her

body throb with pleasure.

Sam held her tightly against him as her body convulsed around him. He couldn't prevent the growl that escaped him as he came and his seed exploded from his body. With each pulse of release, another spurt of the life-giving fluid filled his woman.

She kissed his neck, loving the feel of his racing pulse against her lips. Sam's body in ecstasy was beautiful. She loved the sexy growl that escaped him as he came. She loved the feel of his shaft deep inside of her. She loved the warmth of his seed that filled her. She loved *him*.

It was a while before Sam could speak. He kissed Rachel's forehead

tenderly, drawing her body closer to his and gently caressing her arms and torso. Her softness soothed him. She was the gentle soul that he needed to help him heal. Her tender heart was exactly what he needed to ease his pain and open his heart. His love for her was complete. She was his. He was never going to let her go.

“I think I need another shower,” he told her huskily, kissing her temple gently.

Rachel laughed gently. She kissed his neck tenderly, pulling back to look lovingly into his eyes. He made her feel so comfortable. The way he loved her body was beautiful. They lay together in

silence, gently stroking each other's bodies as time passed in the sweet beauty of their embrace.

"I hope you liked that as much as I did," Rachel told him finally, reaching her arms around him to hug him to her, smiling as she felt Sam's body moving as he laughed softly.

Closing his eyes and resting his face against her temple, he kissed the beautiful crescent birthmark at the corner of her eye. When he eased back and looked at her, she was smiling, her eyes bright with happiness.

"How is it possible to want a man so much?" she whispered.

He groaned into her mouth as he kissed her deeply. She held on to him as

he drew her into his embrace and held her tightly, not wanting their time together to end.

“If you want me even one tenth of how much I want you, I will be a happy man for the rest of my life,” he told her softly.

Rachel smiled at the feel of his cock growing hard within her once again. She lifted her hips and pushed against him to keep him inside of her. He groaned against her mouth.

“You’re a bad influence, Rachel Williams,” he scolded her, his voice tight with passion.

“It’s all your fault, Sam McCoy,” Rachel told him sincerely. “You make me need you more every time we’re

together.”

“Do I?” he asked her, smiling.

“Yes.”

He slowly eased from her body and kissed her lips lightly, hugging her gently before leaving the bed and tugging on her arms to draw her up to stand before him.

“You can have me any time you want me, baby,” he told her, leaning forward to kiss her lips tenderly, unable to keep himself from wrapping his arms around her and pulling her tightly against him as he intensified the kiss. He hummed softly against her lips as she opened to him and sucked on his tongue. Reluctantly ending the kiss, he eased back slightly to look down at her.

“Who’s the bad influence now, Sam?” Rachel whispered.

“Come on. We need to get ready for the banquet.”

Rachel watched him silently, her breath catching in her throat as she looked at the powerful maleness of him and the hardness of his body. He turned to walk away and her eyes drank in the sight of his naked, muscular backside as he left her. Goodness, but she loved that man!

She pulled on her pink shirt over her nakedness, cool now that Sam’s warmth wasn’t surrounding her, and walked to his bureau as Sam headed into the bathroom. That was when she saw it on

the bureau. The Dr. McCoy action figure that she had left for Sam with Joanna McCoy was displayed safely under a glass dome on a wooden pedestal. Her eyes filled with tears that he had thought her gift to him so special that he had it preserved under glass. Maybe he had thought of her as more than a friend without realizing it. Maybe Joanna McCoy had been right. Maybe he *had* come to realize Rachel's worth all those years ago.

* * * *

Forty-five minutes later, Rachel sat on Sam's bed putting the finishing touches on her makeup and brushing her hair,

leaving it unadorned to hang softly down her back. Spraying her neck lightly with perfume, she turned to pack away her things and straighten up Sam's bedroom. As she carefully stepped into the beautiful black chiffon dress that Paulette had lent her, she couldn't help but think about the last few minutes in Sam's apartment.

Sam had taken his clothes into the living room when he had re-emerged from the bathroom, winking at her before leaving her alone to shower and get ready for the banquet. She didn't know what she had expected to see when he looked at her, but she was glad to see happiness and desire when he stood

before her. Rachel had smiled at him. He lightly kissed her cheek then walked away. If it were possible, she fell more in love with him at that moment.

She pulled the dress into place and zipped the back as best she could. The black sequined bodice hugged her figure tightly, pushing up her full breasts to swell attractively within the halter neckline. Her shoulders were bare, exposing the creamy softness of her skin and making her feel excitingly feminine.

She picked up her small black clutch purse and stepped into the elegant black heels that she had just purchased. With one final check to make sure that Joanna McCoy's necklace was safely tucked within the bodice of her dress, she

sighed heavily as nerves assailed her. She walked out of the bedroom, the full chiffon skirt swirling slightly below her knees.

Sam stopped in mid-movement, halting the glass of water that he was raising to his lips, and looked at the gorgeous woman that had just entered the room. His woman. Rachel was a vision in the very feminine black dress.

“You look beautiful,” he told her quietly, putting down the glass and walking toward her slowly.

Rachel smiled, relieved that he was pleased with her appearance. As she looked at him, she realized that he was the most incredibly handsome man that

she had ever seen. He was dressed in a black tuxedo and bow tie, every bit at ease in the elegance of his formal garb as he had been in his cowboy hat, lumberjack shirt, and jeans back at the campground.

“So do you,” she told him appreciatively.

Sam smiled and reached out to touch her face gently then stepped back and swept his hand toward the door. He saw her hesitate and lowered his hand.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m a little nervous,” she told him quietly.

“You’ll be fine.”

“I hope so,” she said finally. “As soon as you zip the back of my dress, I’ll be

ready to go,” she told him, turning around to offer him her back. She lifted the thick tresses of her hair out of the way and waited.

Sam’s breath caught in his throat. He reached forward and zipped up Rachel’s dress. She released her hair and he felt the softness of it brush across his knuckles. He had to close his eyes to control himself.

“Let’s go before I drag you back into that bedroom,” he told her, walking toward the door and opening it to wait for her.

Rachel watched him silently, her own desires bubbling at the surface. She smiled and followed him to the

apartment door. The slightest touch from her had made him want her, and she was thrilled. She walked by him quickly and headed toward the elevators. If she had looked over her shoulder, she would have seen Sam close his eyes and swallow as she passed.

Sam leaned back against the door to his apartment and felt her softness pass him. He was lost in a cloud of her delicate scent and had to pull himself out of his thoughts to get moving. As he walked toward the elevators, he found himself wondering how he had existed without her for so long.

* * * *

Sam offered Rachel his arm and escorted her into the exclusive restaurant. She held on to him tightly, the only clue that she was not totally at ease. He looked at her and smiled at her gentle elegance. He knew that she was nervous, but no one else would ever have known it by the proud way that she carried herself.

She was beautiful. The dress complimented both her figure and her coloring. He found himself staring at her and smiled when she looked up at him and caught him.

“What?” she asked him, worried that something was wrong.

“Nothing,” he told her quietly. “I’m

just admiring you.” He turned away from her to walk her toward the entrance, missing the look of surprise that registered on her face before she smiled shyly at the compliment.

He reached into the inside pocket of the tuxedo to remove the invitation to the banquet and handed it to the hostess who stood waiting to greet them. Rachel watched him silently and was impressed by his impeccable manners.

“Your name, sir,” the woman asked discreetly as she looked down at the guest list before her.

“Sam McCoy and guest,” he told her, placing his hand on top of Rachel’s as it rested in the crook of his arm to squeeze it reassuringly.

“Mr. McCoy,” the woman began, hesitantly. “I don’t have your companion on my guest list, and I don’t have a place for her at your table.”

“Then please find a place for us,” he told her, looking at her intently.

“I’m sorry,” the woman began to protest. “I can’t do that. The seating has already been arranged, and all tables are full.”

“Dr. McCoy is Mr. Edwin McCoy’s son, Felicia,” a man’s authoritative voice interrupted her. “Please see that he and his guest are seated at the table closest to the dais.”

Sam viewed the man silently, tensing at his words. Rachel saw the clenching

of his jaw muscles and felt his hand tighten over hers.

“Yes, sir,” Felicia said quickly. “I’m sorry for the delay, Dr. McCoy,” she apologized. “Your table will be ready for you at your convenience. Table number one.”

Sam nodded and walked past the two staff members, fighting to control his anger. His father’s notoriety bothered him. The employee’s nervousness at having insulted Edwin McCoy’s son bothered him even more.

Rachel gasped softly as they entered the banquet room where the dinner was being held. It was incredibly beautiful. Ornate crystal chandeliers hung throughout the room. Each table held one

dozen white roses encased in crystal vases placed on top of light blue linen tablecloths of the finest quality. The linen napkins were white, folded into an elegant fan shape, and were arranged delicately on top of the beautiful bone china place settings. Crystal wine goblets and water glasses sparkled in the soft lighting. Quiet music drifted across the room from the small orchestra in the far corner of the elegant hall. If ever there was a place where you would expect royalty to appear, this was it.

Sam led Rachel over to the hors d'oeuvres and handed her a small china dish and a linen napkin. Rachel took them from him and reached forward to

select two small wedges of cheese, three crackers and a small branch of green grapes.

“This place is beautiful,” she whispered to him, unable to keep her eyes from roaming about the room.

“Not as beautiful as you are,” he whispered, picking up a plate and filling it with cheese and crackers. “I’m starving. Must have worked up an appetite somehow,” he teased her.

Rachel blushed and bit into a cracker. She winked at him playfully and was rewarded by his soft laughter.

“Do you want some champagne?” he asked when an elegantly clad server, complete with white gloves, offered him a tray of fluted glasses filled with

bubbling champagne.

“No, thank you,” Rachel declined. “I don’t drink. I’d rather have a glass of water.”

Sam smiled at her and sipped at the glass of champagne that he held. “Would you please get a glass of water for the lady?” he asked the young man pleasantly.

The waiter nodded, bowing slightly before departing. Sam watched him go then turned to look at Rachel.

“You don’t drink at all?” he asked her quietly, a little surprised.

“No,” she whispered. “I don’t really like the taste of anything, and I always get a headache after only one drink. I do

like Chambord with milk, though. It tastes like cotton candy. But even that gives me a headache after one glass.”

Sam smiled and took her hand to lead the way to their table. He didn't like the fact that they were so close to the head table and therefore close to his father. He put down his plate of food then pulled out the chair to his left for Rachel. When she placed her plate of hors d'oeuvres on the table, she made a move to sit down but was stopped by his hand. She looked up at him in confusion. He leaned toward her and gently kissed her cheek then released her arm and allowed her to sit down.

Rachel smiled up at him and settled herself in her chair, happy when he

pulled his chair closer to hers and placed his left arm across the back of hers. His hand touched her bare shoulder and caressed it gently. She felt him squeeze her shoulder lightly when the waiter returned and placed the crystal goblet of water in front of her.

“Thank you,” Sam said quietly, smiling at the young man.

“You are very welcome, sir,” the server replied, a little shocked by the kindness of the man.

Sam nodded and watched as the young man walked away. It always upset him when he went to social functions and saw the way the members of high society treated the servers. It was awful.

“What was that kiss for?” Rachel whispered when the young man had left.

Sam leaned toward her, his mouth close to her ear so that no one would be able to hear his words. Rachel’s heart beat a little faster at his closeness, and she found herself turning toward him to look directly at his lips.

“I was just thinking that I won’t have to worry about you feeling deprived that you won’t be able to drink when you’re pregnant,” he whispered, his eyes sparkling.

Rachel reached down and touched his hand that rested possessively on her leg. “I would be so thrilled to be pregnant, I wouldn’t mind what I would have to

give up,” she told him honestly. “Unless I had to give up making love with you.”

Sam thought his heart was going to come right out of his chest. The tenderness he was feeling right then was so intense, he wanted to take Rachel from this place and make love to her for the rest of the night and well into the morning.

“Baby, we have to talk about something,” he told her quietly, leaning in toward her so that their faces were inches apart. “I should have talked to you about this before.”

“What?” she asked, worrying at his sudden seriousness.

“We haven’t talked about birth control,” he said calmly. “Are you on the

pill?”

“No, Sam,” she whispered, blushing at the question. “I had no reason to be.”

Sam relaxed visibly and smiled at her, his chest tight with emotion as he viewed her gentle innocence. “Good,” he said finally. “I don’t want you to be.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I don’t.” He reached up and touched her cheek with the back of his knuckles as he sighed softly. “I wasn’t careful with you, honey. We didn’t use condoms.”

“I know. I was there,” Rachel said, laughing softly.

“I’m sorry I didn’t exactly give you a choice,” he apologized.

“Yes, you did,” she said quietly. “I was completely aware of what we were doing and that we weren’t using protection. I knew I wasn’t ovulating so you don’t have to worry.”

“Your cycle is pretty regular?” he asked.

Rachel blushed but looked at him seriously. “Yes. I got my period just after I was sick—although it wasn’t like my usual period.”

“That’s understandable, honey. You were pretty sick. Your body wasn’t up to having a normal flow.”

“Geez, Sam. This is a pretty intimate conversation.”

Sam smiled and leaned in to kiss her

cheek lightly before placing his mouth against her ear. “Baby, what we do every time we make love is intimate, and I love every minute of it, just like I love talking to you about this right now.” He eased back and smiled at her, his eyes sparkling at the soft expression she gave him.

“Birth control is your choice, honey. It will always be your choice.”

Rachel nodded, thankful for the fact that Sam acknowledged and accepted her complete control over her body and their future. “I appreciate that,” she told him softly. “What do you want?” Her voice was cautious, her insides nearly turning liquid at the thought that his desires just might match her own secret

wish.

“I’m ready to start a family,” he told her.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” he answered without hesitation. “What about you?”

“I’m sure too, Sam,” she whispered. “Are you happy now?”

“Baby, you have no idea,” he told her, smiling. He leaned closer to kiss her lips lightly. “Thank you.”

“For what?” she asked, laughing before she reached out to touch his cheek lightly.

“For wanting babies with me.”

“Babies, as in more than one?” she asked in surprise. She laughed, dropping

her hand from his face and finding it captured within his immediately.

He looked at her smiling, the twinkle in his eyes evident as he leaned away from her slightly to hold her hand tenderly against his chest. “Being an only child was very lonely, Rachel. I want our babies to have each other to help them through their lives. Is that okay with you, honey?”

Rachel felt an ache in her chest as she thought of Sam’s loneliness and nodded. “It’s more than okay,” she whispered, squeezing his hand tightly.

“Would you like to dance?” he whispered, staring at her lips intently.

Rachel looked at his mouth and smiled, wanting very much to kiss him

just then. "I'd love to," she whispered.

Sam stood and reached out to take her hand in his, then led her to the sparsely populated dance floor. She went into his arms willingly, holding him gently as his body swayed in time with the music, gliding her around the perimeter of the floor.

"This is nice," Rachel told him, looking up at him happily.

"Mmmm..." Sam agreed, leaning forward to rest his cheek against hers as he held her.

Rachel closed her eyes as happiness filled her. She loved the feel of his strong arms surrounding her. Dancing with him allowed her to openly enjoy his

touch, the way he held her, the gentleness of his hand against the small of her back, and the masculine scent of him. He was an excellent dancer and she found herself following him effortlessly. Joy radiated from her. As she looked up at him, she couldn't help but smile before she leaned into him so that her forehead rested against his cheek.

“You make me so happy,” she whispered into his ear, tipping her head back to look up at him.

His blue eyes sparkled as he looked down at her. He released his hold on her to capture her hands tightly within his own. The music stopped but they didn't move. Neither of them wanted to break the wonderful spell that surrounded them

as they danced. The music began again and Sam took Rachel within his arms once more to glide her across the dance floor.

Rachel smiled and closed her eyes with pleasure as Sam pulled her closer to him and led her in a perfectly executed waltz. He was a wonderful dancer. She could feel the rhythm and sensuality pouring from him, and she held on to him tightly, enjoying every minute of it.

“It’s beautiful here,” Rachel whispered against his neck.

Sam drew away slightly so that he could look down at her. “Yes, it is,” he told her quietly. “Only because you’re

here with me.”

Rachel smiled and leaned forward to kiss his neck lightly. She heard Sam groan at the contact and pulled away quickly.

“Sorry,” she whispered, looking up to see the passion in his eyes as he looked down at her.

“Don’t plan on getting out of bed for a week after the ceremony,” he told her seriously.

Rachel laughed softly and leaned against his chest to rest her head lightly against his shoulder. “I’m looking forward to it,” she told him honestly. In two days she was going to be Sam’s wife, and she was thrilled. She had loved him her whole life. Their marriage

was going to be her dream come true. Joanna McCoy had been right. He was meant to be hers.

His hand moved from the small of her back to surround her shoulders, hugging her to him tightly. The music stopped then and he stepped back to look down at her.

He looked as if he wanted to say something but he remained silent. Rachel followed him as he led the way back to their table, glad that his hand held hers tightly as they made the long walk across the dance floor. He waited for her to be seated before seating himself and pulling his chair closer toward her.

“You’d better eat something,” he told

her quietly.

He handed her a cracker and she took it, smiling. She took a wedge of imported cheese from her dish and offered it to him. He opened his mouth and allowed her to feed him then returned the favor by feeding her a grape. They smiled at each other, oblivious to their surroundings. Rachel didn't think she could be any happier.

"I wish it was already Saturday," she told him seriously.

Sam stopped chewing and swallowed slowly. "Me, too," he told her honestly.

He leaned toward her and kissed her lips gently, not caring where they were or who saw them. Nothing could ruin this moment for him. He loved being

with his woman and looked forward to spending a lifetime enjoying and loving her.

“Well, well, well. Isn’t this sweet,” a woman’s voice interrupted them.

Rachel felt Sam’s hand tighten over hers and knew that he was not pleased by the interruption. She pulled away from him reluctantly and looked up at the woman who stood at the opposite side of the table.

She was tall and beautiful. Her blonde hair was swept up into an elegant twist on the top of her head and soft ringlets cascaded down her back and at her temples. She screamed money, and Rachel felt intimidated by her

immediately.

Her strapless white evening gown had to be somebody's original. A string of rubies adorned her neck, matched by the earrings and bracelet that she wore. Her eyes were blue, but not the soft, kind blue that Sam's were. They were cold and distant, and they looked at Rachel with contempt and superiority. Sam didn't have to introduce her. Rachel knew that this woman had to be Allison.

Sam stood slowly, holding Rachel's hand to help her stand beside him as he faced his ex-fiancée. He stood slightly behind Rachel, his body secretly supporting hers as she leaned back against him. She was glad that his arm encircled her body and his hand rested

possessively on her waist. Rachel found the strength of him comforting.

“Rachel, this is Allison,” he introduced her reluctantly. “Allison, this is Rachel—my wife.”

“Your wife!” Allison shot back, losing her composure momentarily. “She is *not* your wife.”

“Yes. She is,” Sam told her quietly. “Behave yourself, Allison.” The warning in his voice was unmistakable.

Rachel held her breath as she watched the two face each other. She could feel the hatred flowing from Allison and the anger emanating from Sam. She wanted to hold him to calm him down. She was surprised that he had introduced her as

his wife, but it would only be a matter of days before that fact was true. If saying that they were married already would help him get through this night, it was fine with her. She already felt in her heart that they were married anyway.

“Samuel, I knew you wouldn’t let me down, son,” a deep, familiar voice said calmly, bringing Rachel’s thoughts back to the situation at hand.

She looked at the man who stood beside Allison and literally froze in fear at the sight of the one person who had so thoroughly changed her life the last time she had seen him. He was still a handsome man despite the gray that now dominated his hair. She felt Sam stiffen beside her and was concerned for him

when she saw his father looking at him without an ounce of warmth in his gaze.

“Dad,” Sam acknowledged his father, not bothering to extend his hand in greeting.

“I hope that your coming here is proof that you’ve come to your senses and will be returning to Denver Memorial,” his father told him sternly. “I’ve waited long enough for your decision, boy.”

“I came here because someone convinced me to honor your accomplishments, Dad,” Sam told him honestly, his voice strong and his body straight as he spoke. “That does *not* mean that I’ve agreed to come back to work here.” He emphasized the word

not as he faced his father stonily. “I’m going back to the mountains and will be joining a medical practice there.”

Father and son looked at each other silently for a moment. It was obvious that both were trying not to lose their tempers or make a scene. Rachel looked at one, and then the other, and found her heart breaking for Sam.

“Edwin, Sam says that this girl is his wife,” Allison told him coldly, touching his arm and indicating Rachel.

“Your wife!” Edwin McCoy hissed, making sure to keep his voice low so as not to draw any attention.

“My reaction exactly,” Allison said sarcastically, looking Rachel up and down, contempt obvious on her face.

Edwin McCoy's gaze bore into Rachel. She knew that it took him a minute to recognize her, knowing the exact minute when the realization finally hit home.

"Ms. Williams," he said slowly, stiffening slightly as he fought to control the anger that he found consuming him. "Our last conversation led me to believe that you would be living far from the mountains of Colorado. Was I mistaken?"

"No, Mr. McCoy," Rachel answered him calmly, angry at the way he had once manipulated her. "You were not mistaken. But things have changed. We've all grown and become

successful. Funny how life takes care of itself, isn't it?"

"Ms. Williams, you are and always will be insignificant," Edwin McCoy spoke with chilling coldness. "Old deals have a way of ending exactly as promised. If not in one way, then in another." He made a point of looking at his son and then back at Rachel. "How are your aunt and your cousin?"

"Don't threaten them again, Mr. McCoy," Rachel warned him. "I won't sit back and let you hurt them. I'm not the same girl you intimidated years ago."

"He what?" Sam asked her, his jaw clenched in anger.

"He made me promise not to see you, write to you, or influence you in any way

or he would make sure you couldn't complete medical school. He also said that he would see to it that no school across the country would take you in and no bank would guarantee your loans for tuition." Rachel's eyes never left Edwin McCoy's face. She felt great satisfaction at the surprise she saw there as she told Sam the truth. "He also threatened to ruin my aunt's ranch and Roy's future."

"Rachel," Sam started, so incensed with this knowledge of his father's cruelty that he could barely speak. She had carried the weight of responsibility for his success and the safety of her family all these years. No wonder he had barely heard from her.

Rachel finally tore her eyes from Edwin and faced Sam. She saw the horror on his face and felt his hand tighten on hers. She reached up with her left hand to cover his hand and rubbed it reassuringly. She could feel that things were getting out of control and knew that she had to try and diffuse the situation.

“It’s okay, Sam,” she told him sincerely. “Everything worked out for the best.”

Allison looked at the two of them with nothing short of pure hatred. She glanced at their clasped hands then looked up at Rachel and actually sneered at her.

“They’re lying,” Allison said sarcastically. “They aren’t married. She

isn't wearing a ring."

"You're right, I'm not," Rachel spoke up calmly, her voice strong and unwavering. "I was a little swollen today and it didn't fit." She looked up at Sam, beseeching him with her eyes to go along with her.

Sam looked into the brown softness of her eyes and smiled, the anger slowly releasing its hold on him. His eyes were warm and twinkled as he saw how straight she was standing and how determined she was to protect him.

"I guess you should have had the ring made a little bigger," she told him seriously, aware that both Edwin McCoy and Allison were watching her intently. "I'll never be able to wear it if we end

up having as many children as we plan on having.”

The tender look in Sam’s eyes as he gazed down at her told her that her words had made him happy. “I guess you were right,” he told her, smiling. “That’s why I had it made bigger today.” He reached into the inside pocket of his tuxedo jacket and pulled out a small, black velvet jewelry box.

Rachel’s heart pounded as she watched him take out the ring case. When he opened it and took out the platinum gold wedding band that was a ring of diamond baguettes that alternated between white and pink diamonds, she was shocked into silence. She had never

seen anything more beautifully feminine. It took her breath away.

Sam took her left hand in his and slipped the ring onto the third finger of her left hand. Drawing it toward his mouth, he kissed the ring tenderly then lowered her hand and smiled.

“How does that feel?” he asked her quietly.

Rachel looked down at her hand and tried to calm her racing heart. When she looked back up at Sam’s face, her eyes were sparkling with joy and filled with love for the man before her. He was looking at her tenderly, and she could barely breathe due to the myriad of emotions that were bursting within her.

“It’s just right,” she whispered,

smiling. "Thank you, Sam."

"Excuse me, Mr. McCoy, but they're ready to start the ceremony," the maitre d' interrupted them.

Sam turned and faced his father squarely. "Don't keep your public waiting, Dad," he told him coldly.

"I'm not through with you, Samuel," Edwin McCoy told him angrily, his voice low but threatening. "I'll deal with you later." He turned and looked directly at Rachel. It was then that he saw the necklace that she wore.

Edwin reached out to pull the necklace from Rachel's body. Sam's hand clamped around his father's wrist in an instant. For a moment, their strengths

collided but Sam's easily won out, fueled by his promise to his mother and his protection of Rachel.

"Don't, Dad," he warned him, pushing his hand away from Rachel. Despite Edwin McCoy's height, Sam easily towered over him. "Mom gave it to her and told me she wanted Rachel to have it. You will *not* take it from her."

It took every bit of effort for Rachel not to shrink back in fear at the cold hatred that faced her. Pulling strength from deep within her, she stood tall and proud, meeting Edwin McCoy's cold gaze without flinching.

"You will regret your interference, Ms. Williams," he told her angrily.

Sam pulled Rachel back toward him

and stepped in front of her as if to shield her from his father. “Don’t you dare threaten my wife,” he told his father angrily.

“I’m not threatening,” his father said calmly, his cold eyes never leaving Rachel’s face. “I’m promising.”

Sam stepped aside and took Rachel’s hand firmly, leading her away from the table. “I knew this was a mistake to come here,” he told her angrily. “He’ll never change.”

As they walked the great distance to the doorway of the banquet room, Rachel could hear Sam’s father being introduced to the more than two hundred or so people that were in attendance.

They were almost out of the room when Rachel pulled at Sam's hand.

"Sam," she stopped him. He turned to face her, and she saw how he was fighting to calm the anger he was feeling. "I left my purse on the table."

Sam hesitated and rubbed his neck tiredly. When he made a move to walk back to the table, Rachel reached out to stop him.

"No, I'll get it," she told him firmly. "I'll meet you at the door."

She didn't give him a chance to protest. She walked back to the table quickly and retrieved her purse, ignoring the hatred that dripped from Allison's gaze when she saw the diamonds on Rachel's ring flash as she reached for

her purse.

“He only needs you as a brood mare,” Allison nearly hissed at her. “He wants a child so desperately that he’ll settle for any warm body that’s willing.”

Rachel straightened and faced her, unable to keep the shock from her face. Allison looked at her calmly and shrugged indifferently. It amazed Rachel that a woman that beautiful could be so ugly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Allison said finally. “After you’ve given him the child that he wants, he’ll be back to the life that he deserves. That means he’ll come back to me. You aren’t good enough to give him what he needs. He’ll

be back. You'll see." She turned smugly, determined not to give any more of her time on such an insignificant creature.

Rachel was shaken by Allison's words. She stood straight and tall and walked with every ounce of confidence and pride that she could muster. The walk from the table to the doorway seemed endless. She forced herself to walk slowly, smile, and nod to people as she passed them. The doorway was her target, and she concentrated on that destination. Despite the panic that was welling up inside of her, she looked the epitome of elegance and culture as she traveled the short distance to freedom, all the while her brain screamed inside her head that she had to get out of there.

Once she was with Sam everything would be fine. She had to depend that his honesty would soothe her nerves and her fears. He would tell her the truth.

As she made her way to the doorway, she was aware of Edwin McCoy's voice droning on behind her in a speech as he stood at the head table with a microphone in hand. His words didn't make sense but that was probably because she was concentrating too much on what Allison had said to make much sense out of anything else.

She saw Sam standing in the doorway waiting for her and realized that he looked so at ease in his tuxedo at this elegant affair. Allison was right. He had

been born to luxury and privilege. He *did* deserve the kind of life that living in Denver and socializing with the upper crust could offer.

“I would like to thank all of you for coming out tonight and honoring me at this wonderful dinner,” Edwin McCoy’s voice continued, his words finally permeating her thoughts. “I would like to share my thanks with you and my happiness at the decision that my son Dr. Samuel McCoy has just shared with me.”

Rachel froze in her spot. She watched Sam’s face as he looked across the great hall at his father in shock.

“My son will be returning to Denver Memorial in September to head up the

wing for Pediatric Medicine that I have donated in his name.”

The burst of applause was instantaneous, but Rachel was barely aware of the commotion. She looked at Sam and saw the anger that was consuming him. His attention jerked away from his father and focused on her. There was such hatred in his eyes. Even though she knew that his anger wasn't directed at her, she couldn't help but draw back in fear.

“Let's go,” he hissed, grabbing for her hand and walking quickly toward the exit.

She had to run to keep up with him and found herself winded and unable to go

on because of the weakness in her injured ankle. "Sam, please stop," she called to him, pulling her hand free from his grasp as they stood in front of the elegant venue.

He turned to face her. "I have to get out of here," he told her angrily, desperation obvious in his voice.

"I know," she said quietly, reaching up to touch his face gently.

Her tenderness undid him. He reached out and pulled her to him, crushing her in an embrace that spoke of years of frustration and loneliness, and a childhood filled with the distance and uncaring of a cold father.

"It doesn't matter what he told everyone, Sam," she whispered to him

as she laid her cheek against his gently. “You still have a choice about what you’re going to do. He’s the one who will look like a fool. You won’t have to explain anything to anyone. Just live your life the way you want to.” She kissed his cheek tenderly as he held her and found herself stroking his back in an effort to comfort him.

“I can’t believe he threatened you, Kay, and Roy,” Sam said angrily, hugging her tightly to him.

“And you, too,” she reminded him.

“That doesn’t matter,” he dismissed it. He pulled back from her to look down at her. “You should have told me.”

“Maybe,” Rachel admitted slowly,

“but I really had no way to protect you or Roy or Aunt Kay back then. I was only twenty.” She touched his cheek gently with her hand, tenderly brushing her fingertips along his jawline. “It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not okay,” he told her angrily, holding on to her tightly. He tried to concentrate on the woman before him, taking calming breaths and taking in the feminine scent of her. It was a while before he was finally able to get his emotions under control.

“Sam, don’t let your father take up any more of your thoughts or waste any more of our time when we could be together,” she whispered, rubbing his chest lightly as she looked up at him. When he looked

down at her, the anger in his eyes slowly ebbed and she found herself looking into eyes that held pain and sadness.

“You’ve suffered for years because of him, Rachel. I’m so sorry,” he told her quietly as he touched her face gently.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she stopped him. “You can’t accept any blame for what your father has done to anyone, including me. You’re your mother’s son, Sam. You’re everything that is kind—just like she was.”

Sam’s eyes closed as he fought to control his emotions. He took a deep breath and looked down at the beautiful woman before him, smiling at the natural way that she leaned into him, touching

him gently. He could get lost in her.

“You have a way of calming me, Rachel,” he told her, his anger slowly easing as she tenderly caressed him. “Thank you.”

Rachel smiled and nodded. The lights of the parking area shone down on them, and she saw the ring that he had given her sparkle as her hand rested gently on his shoulder. She pulled away from him and looked down at her hand.

“This is a beautiful ring,” she told him quietly. “Are you sure you want me to have it?”

Sam smiled and took her hand in his to bring in to his chest and cover it with his own. He finally felt at peace and knew that Rachel’s tenderness was the reason.

“Yes, I want you to have it,” he told her quietly. “I got it for you this afternoon while you were shopping. I wanted to surprise you with it tonight, but my father and Allison forced my hand a little early. I’m sorry it wasn’t given to you in a more romantic setting. I wanted to ask you if you would accept me. I wanted to get down on my knees and ask for your hand, sweetheart.”

Rachel looked at her hand, seeing the ring sparkle between his fingers, and knew that she had to ask him something very important. Allison’s words had pierced through to her weaknesses.

She pulled her hands free to embrace him, reveling at the feeling of his strong

shoulders beneath her hands. She closed her eyes in pure joy as his arms automatically encircled her body and held her close. She could feel his heartbeat against her chest and leaned into his neck to breathe in the scent of him and kiss the area below his ear gently. She wished she could stay there in his arms forever, but she had to ask him the question that she most feared the answer to.

“Sam,” she began hesitantly. “Why do you want to marry me?”

“Because your body drives me crazy,” he teased.

“No. I’m serious,” she stopped him, stepping back to break the embrace. She looked at him with wide, searching eyes.

“Why?”

Sam looked down at her and hesitated only briefly.

“Because you make me laugh, you talk to me, you care about me, you’re gentle and caring, you’re strong and independent, and a million other reasons I’ll spend the rest of my life telling you,” he told her quietly. “Besides, I can’t think of anyone else I would want to be the mother of my children.”

Chapter 29

Rachel was quiet during the ride back to Sam's apartment. Sam stole occasional glances at her but remained silent. He could tell that she was doing some heavy-duty thinking.

"It's a shame to waste such a beautiful dress," he said quietly as he turned his truck onto his street and pulled into the apartment parking lot to park in his designated spot. "We can always go somewhere else. I'd enjoy dancing with you some more."

"That's okay," Rachel said absently. "I don't mind. I'm a little tired anyway and my ankle is starting to throb. It's

been a long day.”

Sam looked at her for a moment, then reached forward to turn off the engine and removed the key from the ignition. Before he could get out and open Rachel’s door for her, she had already unbuckled her seat belt and had opened her own door to step out into the darkness of the night.

She walked slowly toward the apartment house entrance, stepping back to allow Sam to key in the security code to open the foyer door. He followed her inside and pushed the button for the elevator.

“Are you okay?” he asked her quietly, holding the open elevator door until she passed by him and following her inside.

He pushed the button for the third floor, still watching her.

She turned to face him and made a halfhearted attempt to smile. He was a little concerned at her paleness. She looked tired but more than that, she looked defeated. He saw none of the usual strength and vitality that was normally so much a part of her character.

“I’m fine,” she told him quietly, her voice soft. “I just need some rest.”

Sam stepped back and held the doors to allow her to walk out of the elevator then followed her down the corridor to his apartment door. He noticed that she was walking slowly and was limping slightly.

He unlocked the door to his apartment then reached in to turn on the light for her. She went in silently and stood just inside the doorway, waiting for him to enter and lead the way. He stepped inside and closed the door behind them, locking it securely. He took off his tuxedo coat and threw it across the back of one of the couches then turned to face her.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Rachel looked up at him silently for a moment. “Not now,” she told him finally. “I need to work it out in my own head first.”

“Rachel, if you don’t tell me what you’re thinking I can’t help you get

through it.”

“I don’t want to talk now. I’m too tired. I don’t want to say anything until I think it through and I’m sure of what I want to say.”

Sam hesitated a moment then nodded. He could tell that whatever it was that she was thinking about wasn’t good, and he had a sick feeling that things between them were falling apart. He didn’t want to lose Rachel because of something he couldn’t even figure out or understand.

“You’d better get some sleep,” he told her finally, concerned. “I’m going to stay up for a while.”

Rachel nodded and walked toward the bedroom. Entering the adjoining bathroom, she pulled off her party

clothes and scrubbed her face clean of the makeup. When she finished up in the bathroom, she listened to make sure that Sam was not in the bedroom before going in and putting on her new nightgown and sitting down on the bed tiredly. She lay down on the soft pillow and closed her eyes.

The apartment was quiet. All she could hear was the sound of her own breathing and the hum of the air conditioner. She turned onto her right side and tucked her hands under her cheek, opening her eyes at the contact of the ring against her skin. She looked down at her finger and smiled sadly at the exquisitely beautiful diamond

wedding band. The moonlight that peeked through the bedroom curtains made it twinkle magically, and the sight of its beauty made her throat constrict with pain.

“Everything would be so different if you had just said that you loved me,” she whispered, fighting back the sadness that was choking her.

Chapter 30

Sam sat in the living room on one of the couches, his feet up on the mahogany coffee table before him. There was a bottle of beer in his hand and he was staring off absently into space. So many thoughts crowded his mind.

He was furious with his father for announcing that he would be coming back to the hospital, but that type of inconsiderate behavior was typical of him. Allison's treatment of Rachel was also fueling his temper. She had been her usual, coldhearted self. He wondered how he had ever thought himself to be in love with her. It was obvious that

Allison had shown him a personality that had been false in order to get what she wanted. He was glad that he had seen through it before he had ruined his life. He knew the real Allison would have come out soon after their marriage. Luckily, he had realized in time that she would not want the future, the home, or the children that he wanted.

Only his Rachel wanted those things with him. Rachel was the one who gave him unconditional love and acceptance. She was the one who made him laugh, listened to him, and helped him work through his thoughts. She was the one who understood his need to work in the mountains instead of at Denver Memorial Hospital. Rachel was the one

he ached to hold and make love with. She was the one he wanted to protect and care for. She was the one he loved.

The realization that Rachel had been threatened into staying away from him for the last ten years also ate at his gut. It was her concern for him and her family that had kept them apart. Who knows how different their lives might have been if he had been aware of the threat. He could have taken care of all of them and his father wouldn't have had any control over any of them. It was senseless and frustrating to have lost so much time.

He looked down at the phone in his hand. Calling Frank Niemen, his mother's lawyer, had been a good

decision. Their conversation was very thorough, lasting more than an hour. Because of it, some very important legal matters had been settled. He needed to take care of everything to protect the people he cared most about in the world. He would meet with Frank in the morning to sign the necessary papers to cement the protection of his true family.

The second phone call he had made was to Jarod, the man who had really raised him. Jarod was the only man he looked to as a father. Even though his hospital schedule was hectic and consuming, Sam had never forgotten his weekly phone calls to him and had visited him as often as he could. Jarod had always been supportive and caring,

and Sam looked to him often for advice and encouragement over the last ten years, just as he had in his youth.

Joanna McCoy had made sure that Jarod was comfortably taken care of after her death. Sam was glad that Jarod had retired and had moved into his own modest home shortly after his mother's funeral. He was thankful that his friend no longer had to serve his father. Over the last ten years, Sam had spent all of his off time with Jarod in his new home whenever he was able to come back to Denver. Between Jarod, Roy and Kay Monroe, and Rachel whenever she was around, Sam felt that he was a part of a loving family. He was determined to

keep all of them safe—especially now that he knew the true reason Rachel had kept herself away from him.

He talked to Jarod for nearly half an hour, telling him of the threat his father had made to Rachel all those years ago. It was the first time Sam had ever heard Jarod lose his temper.

“Don’t you worry, Master Samuel,” Jarod had told him sincerely, his anger finally under control. “Everything will work out for the best. You are, and always have been, far better than the McCoy Empire. Your mother would have been very proud of you.”

Sam choked up at his words and knew that he had been given the great gift of an adoptive family. They had always been

there for him. By the end of their conversation the two of them had come up with a plan to take care of their family. Jarod had agreed to go to the Monroe Ranch and stay with Kay until Sam was able to get there. He trusted that his old friend would make sure that Kay remained safe.

Sam rubbed his eyes tiredly and leaned forward to hang up the phone and place the barely touched bottle of beer on the coffee table. Drinking it was not helping him. After all that had happened tonight, the only thing that concerned him was the fact that Rachel had pulled away from him. He had hurt her somehow, and he was wracking his brain to try to

figure out what he had done.

He couldn't think of a thing. Everything was going so well between them. Even the confrontation with his father and Allison had not brought about the change. It was when they were standing in the parking lot of *Chez Pierre* that she had pulled away from him. After he had told her that he wanted her to be the mother of his children. He didn't understand it. They had discussed having children just minutes before and there didn't seem to be a problem then. She had told him she wanted kids to be a part of her future just as much as he did. What had he done to change that?

He stood and slowly walked into the bedroom and saw that she was already

in bed. Quickly entering the bathroom, he removed his clothes and cleaned up, sadness weighing upon his chest as he thought about the woman asleep in his bed.

When he returned to the bedroom, Rachel had turned onto her back. Her left hand was resting on her stomach and she was sound asleep. Very gently, he pulled back the covers on the opposite side of the bed and climbed in beside her.

His heart pounded and a tingle ran through his body at the sight of her under the blankets. She was wearing the same white nightgown that he had seen his pregnant wife wearing in his dream.

He settled against her carefully, covering her belly with his hand and resting his mouth against her temple. He kissed her softly, closing his eyes and sighing. Lying beside Rachel and holding her within his arms calmed him.

“Baby, please don’t give up on me,” he whispered. “I don’t know how I hurt you, but I’m sorry that I have.”

Sam knew she couldn’t hear him, but he had to say the words. He would be sure to repeat them when she was awake.

“I hope you can forgive me, Rachel,” he continued. “I want us to be together. I want you as my wife. I want my baby growing inside of you.” He kissed her

temple once again then nuzzled against her ear as he caressed her belly lightly. “Maybe we’ve already made our baby, honey. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Rachel’s silence made his heart hurt. He held her tighter, glad when she snuggled against him and leaned her head against his shoulder. He said a silent prayer that he could somehow heal whatever hurt he had caused her.

All he knew was, he wasn’t going to stop hurting until she was able to forgive him and love him again.

Chapter 31

The ride back to the campground seemed to take so much longer without the happy banter that had accompanied them on the trip into Denver. Sam looked down and saw that Rachel was still wearing the ring that he had placed on her finger the night before. That, at least, gave him hope that things could be worked out.

When he woke up she was once again cuddled against him, content to be in his arms. He savored the moment, kissing the top of her head carefully so as not to wake her. He reluctantly removed himself from the natural embrace she

held him in, showering and dressing quickly so he could head out to meet with his mother's lawyer. It was a necessary meeting to protect all their futures. With one last look at her peacefully sleeping form, he closed the bedroom door behind him and left the apartment with one purpose in mind—saving his family.

When he had returned nearly two hours later, Rachel was awake, dressed, and seated at the breakfast table. She had made him black coffee and frozen waffles since not much else was in the apartment in the way of provisions. They had spoken little and had packed quickly to begin their journey back to the campground.

“Have you changed your mind about marrying me?” he asked her seriously, looking at her briefly before returning his eyes to the road ahead of him.

“I’m not sure,” she told him honestly.

“I hope you won’t, Rachel,” he said sincerely. “I know we could have a really terrific life together.”

“Do you think so?” she asked him quietly, turning to face him. Her chest constricted at the emotions she felt when she looked at him.

“I really do,” he said honestly.

“I think we could, too,” she agreed, smiling sadly at the unspoken words that screamed within her heart.

He reached out and tenderly took her

hand in his. Bringing it to his lips, he kissed her fingers gently then kissed the ring that she wore.

“Once I put this ring on you during the wedding ceremony on Saturday, you’ll be mine forever. I don’t ever want you to take it off,” he told her seriously, his eyes mirroring the tenderness that he was feeling. “Promise me.” His voice was stern, demanding her agreement.

Rachel smiled and reached out to cover his hand with hers. “I promise,” she told him softly, unable to be as certain as she knew he wanted her to be.

“Good,” he said, lowering her hand to the seat but never letting go.

* * * *

Stan and Gwen greeted them warmly when they arrived at the campground. Rachel couldn't help but smile at the two of them as she stepped out of the truck and walked toward them.

"How was your trip?" Gwen asked brightly.

"It was good," Rachel told her, doing her best to be positive as she faced the older woman.

Gwen looked at her warily, sensing the sadness in her. She reached out to draw Rachel into her arms and tenderly hugged her. She felt as if Rachel was one of her own daughters needing comfort.

“You can tell me all about it later if you want to, honey,” she whispered to her so that neither Sam nor Stan could hear her.

Rachel nodded and pulled away from her reluctantly. She smiled bravely and walked toward the camper, leaving Sam to stand with the Fletchers.

“We never should have gone,” Sam told them, watching Rachel walk away from them to make her way down the incline toward the rushing stream below.

“What happened?” Stan asked him worriedly, taking the suitcase from Sam and walking with him to the camper.

Gwen lifted the shopping bags out of the back seat of the truck and followed

the men, keeping an eye on Rachel as she walked along the streambed. Something was certainly troubling the girl.

Sam unlocked the camper door then took the suitcase and bags of groceries from the elderly couple and placed them inside the doorway of the camper. He turned and faced them, seeing the worried looks on their faces. He was touched by their concern. They were kind people who were already true friends to both him and Rachel.

“My ex-fiancée was at the dinner for my father,” he told them, looking off into the distance as he spoke. “She must have said something to Rachel that I don’t know about because Rachel has been distant since she saw her. To top it off,

my father told Rachel that he refused to accept her as my wife.”

“Oh dear,” Gwen whispered. “How awful!”

“Now you listen here, Sam,” Stan told him angrily, poking his index finger into Sam’s chest and demanding Sam’s complete attention. “What anyone else says doesn’t matter. You two decide what you want to do and then, by jingle, you’d better stick to your decisions. No one has the right to tell you how to live your lives or who you should be married to. You tell them all to go to hell, and you stick with that pretty little miss you’ve already picked out for yourself.”

Sam was touched by the emotion Stan

displayed and reached up to grab the finger that was jabbing painfully into his chest. “I hear you, Stan. You don’t have to beat me up,” he teased, smiling for the first time since last night.

“Well, maybe I should,” Stan told him, standing up taller and straighter as he stepped away from Sam to stand beside his wife of forty years. “You young people need a good swift kick in the behind to get you moving in the right direction.”

Gwen looked at her husband with adoration on her face. She reached out and took his hand in hers to squeeze it tightly.

“Feisty old coot, isn’t he?” she told Sam, winking at him. “He’s right, you

know.”

“I know,” Sam agreed, smiling at the two of them.

Chapter 32

Gwen walked along the stream, searching for the young woman she knew was hurting. When she saw Rachel sitting on the side of the rushing water, she stopped and breathed a sigh of relief. She had been worried about her. Seeing her sitting there so sad and alone made her heart ache for her.

“Mind if I join you?” she called out to her when she was close enough to be seen and heard.

Rachel looked up, startled, and smiled sadly at the elderly woman. “Not at all,” she told her quietly.

Gwen walked to her slowly and gently

eased herself down onto the grass next to her. “Sam seems to think you’re pretty upset,” Gwen told her, hoping she would open up to her.

Rachel drew her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on top of them. She turned her head and looked at Gwen, smiling sadly at the sweet woman.

“Honey, you go on and have yourself a good, heartbreaking cry if you need to,” Gwen told her, reaching forward to pat her hand reassuringly.

Rachel laughed softly. “I’m upset, but I’m too pissed to cry,” she said honestly.

“Good for you, Rachel,” Gwen told her, reaching out and holding her hand to squeeze it tightly. “Hang on to that

anger.”

Rachel laughed softly. “It’s all that’s holding me together,” she admitted.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Sam’s ex-fiancée was at the dinner,” she told Gwen quietly after a moment. “She said Sam only wanted me because he wants children. She said I could never give Sam the life that he needs and deserves.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

She looked up at Gwen, worry in her eyes. “If you could have seen how at ease Sam was at such an elegant dinner you would have seen how much he belonged with those people. He could be the head of the pediatric wing at Denver

Memorial and socializing with some of the richest and most influential people in the state. Allison may be right. Maybe I'll just hold him back."

"Oh, pooh," Gwen told her, disgustedly. "Sounds to me like that old girlfriend of his is full of sour grapes. She just got to you where she knew she could."

"But Sam would be so prestigious and powerful back in Denver," Rachel protested.

"Well then, he'd be there if he wanted to be, wouldn't he?" Gwen pointed out. "Just because you're his wife, it doesn't mean he can't work where he wants to, does it?"

"No, I wouldn't care where he worked

as long as he was happy,” Rachel admitted slowly.

“See there,” Gwen told her calmly. “You can’t be holding him back. You’re willing to go wherever he wants to go.”

“But what about him wanting me only because he wants to have children,” Rachel pointed out sadly. “I couldn’t bear to stay with him if he didn’t love me.” She looked up at Gwen and sniffed. “I love him so much, Gwen, it would kill me inside to know that he didn’t love me.”

“Rachel, I see the love in his eyes every time he looks at you,” Gwen told her honestly, her voice gentle as she spoke. “Some men can’t seem to say the

words so they show you their love in the way that they talk to you and tease you and take care of you and hold you and show you kindness. Stan never once said he loved me until I was in labor with our first child. He was so scared I was going to die. When he said it, he cried his heart out all the while.” She reached out and touched Rachel’s chin to turn it to face her and saw the deep sadness in her soft brown eyes. “Besides, honey, even if his wanting a child was part of his reason for marrying you, and I’m not saying that it is or it isn’t, mind you, there isn’t anything more special and beautiful that two people can share. I can see the kind of man Sam is and I know he would be a gentle and loving father. His love for his

child would equal the love he had for his child's mother. Love grows, honey. Sam will love you more and more each day that your lives grow together. You're the one he chose to live his life with. You're the one he wants to wake up to every morning and go to sleep with every night. You're the one he is building a future with. When you finally hold that precious little baby in your arms, nothing else will matter except how much you love each other and the child you've created together from that love."

Rachel looked at Gwen seriously and nodded slowly. She sat there silently for a while, happy that Gwen sat beside her while she tried to sort out her feelings.

The sound of the rushing stream soothed her, and she found herself relaxing. Both Mother Nature and Gwen had helped her get through her sadness. It was only a matter of minutes before she took a cleansing breath and felt the anger and pain easing from her body. She stood and reached down to help Gwen stand beside her. She hugged her new friend tightly then kissed her soft cheek.

“Thank you, Gwen,” she whispered, finally able to smile. “I hope you’re right.”

Walking back to the camper, both women smiled at the two worried faces of the men that were waiting for them. Gwen leaned toward Rachel and spoke so that only she could hear.

“Look at his face, Rachel,” she told her quietly. “That’s the face of someone who cares.”

Rachel looked at Sam, seeing the concern in his blue eyes. He had to care about her even if it was just a little. Maybe he would grow to love her as deeply as she loved him.

She knew she had no choice—she had to spend her life with him. Love may not be a part of Sam’s decision to marry her, but it was certainly a part of hers.

Chapter 33

Paulette giggled from her comfortable position lying on her overstuffed peach couch. Roy sat on the floor by her shoulders, leaning back as he threw his head back in laughter. Sam smiled at the two of them as he sat on the recliner across from them, rubbing Rachel's back as she sat on the arm of the chair, her body very close to his.

"Mom!" Roy blurted out, laughing. He wiped his eyes to remove the moisture that filled them. "You didn't!"

Kay Monroe laughed despite her resolve to stay serious. There was no way she could stay serious and tell the

story about the day Sam had entered her home completely naked in the middle of her afternoon tea with the ladies from her church.

“Roy, I swear to you, Sam didn’t even bat an eye,” Kay promised her son. She smiled at the members of her family, settling her gaze on the man who sat beside her on the comfortable loveseat.

Jarod sat quietly next to her, ever straight and tall, smiling slightly. Despite his casual clothes and comfort level with this family, there was always an elegance and formality about him.

“Master Samuel, I always wondered where you obtained that china plate,” he said formally, sending them all into convulsive laughter once again.

Jarod couldn't help but chuckle softly. He looked around the small living room and counted his blessings to have been a part of this wonderful family for so many years. His friendship with Joanna McCoy was one that he would always cherish. He had promised her that he would look after her son, but it was a promise that he never needed to make. His love for his young charge was genuine and strong. He felt as if Sam was his own son.

Kay leaned over and reached for Jarod's hand, squeezing it gently. "Jarod, you always make me laugh," she told him sincerely, smiling at him broadly.

Sam smiled as he saw the slight blush that covered Jarod's cheeks. He looked up at Rachel and inclined his head toward the elderly couple then looked at Roy and Paulette and did the same.

Roy looked at Paulette and winked, sending Paulette into another fit of giggles. Only they knew that they had already discussed getting Kay Monroe and Jarod together—just as they had discussed getting Sam and Rachel together.

Rachel looked at her cousin and his wife and saw their conspiratorial grins. Turning to Sam, she saw him looking at Roy and Paulette in confusion. When Paulette's giggles turned to laughter, she

was sure something was going on that she and Sam weren't aware of.

“Okay, Paulette, what's up with you?” Rachel asked her suspiciously. “Have you been sneaking into the wine?”

“No, I've been a good girl,” Paulette promised, raising her hand to swear to her honesty.

“She has,” Roy agreed. “She's been resting and letting Mom take care of us.”

He turned to grab hold of the hand that rested on his shoulder lovingly and kissed it lightly. He smiled at his wife, relief filling him at the healthy and happy look of her.

Rachel smiled as she got up from the chair, reluctantly leaving Sam's touch to face the group. “I've got to get going to

the mall to see if I can find a dress for tomorrow,” she said reluctantly, not wanting the family evening to end.

“I want to go,” Paulette said quickly, sitting up with some difficulty.

“No, Paulette,” Roy protested.

“Oh, please,” Paulette begged. “Kay, tell them how much I rested today.”

“She really did rest all day,” Kay admitted. “But, Paulette, I don’t know if it’s such a good idea. You would have to do a lot of walking and that wouldn’t be good for you.”

“How about if we rent a wheelchair where you can rent the baby carriages? That would be okay, wouldn’t it, Sam?” she asked him, her face turning toward

him with an expression of pleading that tugged at his heart.

“Well,” he began. “Let me check your blood pressure first.”

He stood to go to his truck to retrieve his medical bag. Pulling his truck keys out of his pocket, he was about to walk out of the house when Rachel grabbed for his keys and brushed past him to go and get his bag. He smiled and looked at Paulette.

“I think Rachel wants you to go, too,” he told her laughing.

Rachel was back quickly and set the black bag on the coffee table next to the sofa. She knelt on the floor next to Paulette and waited while Sam sat at the edge of the couch and took out the blood

pressure cuff and stethoscope. She waited patiently while Sam placed the earpieces of the stethoscope in his ears, wrapped the cuff around Paulette's arm, and set the stethoscope in the hollow of her arm. He pumped up the cuff and released the air slowly, concentrating on the gauge before him and the sound of Paulette's heartbeat in his ears. When it was almost deflated, he pulled at the closure of the cuff and removed the stethoscope from his ears.

“Not bad,” he said seriously. “How has the baby's movement been?”

“Constant,” she said simply, smiling when Sam reached forward to touch her stomach just as the baby moved within

her.

Sam smiled, leaving his hand on her belly as he turned to face Rachel. "I guess she can go with you as long as we push her around in the wheelchair."

Rachel took his medical instruments from him and placed them in his bag, smiling as she snapped it shut and looked at her cousin. "I guess we're all going shopping," she said happily.

"We can go in my car," Jarod said as he stood. He tugged on his sport coat to straighten it and buttoned the middle button.

Kay looked up at him and smiled. She stood slowly and touched his arm as Jarod looked down at her. The tender smile that they shared was not lost on the

rest of the family. They watched Jarod step back to allow Kay to pass as he held the front door open for her, waiting patiently while she exited the home of her son, her purse tucked neatly under her arm. He couldn't help but smile softly at her as he saw the happiness on her face.

“Let's go, children,” Kay called over her shoulder as she and Jarod led the way outside.

Sam laughed as he watched them go. “Let's go, children,” he echoed Kay's words, winking at Rachel as he helped Paulette up from the couch.

With the aid of Sam, Roy, and Rachel, Paulette was carefully guided from her

home and was safely buckled in Jarod's car within minutes. Sam sat in the back seat with Roy and Paulette, while Rachel sat in front, with Kay sitting in the middle next to Jarod. Rachel smiled when she saw how totally at ease Kay was sitting by Jarod's side.

Once at the dress shop in the neighboring town mall, Kay, Rachel, and Paulette insisted on shopping alone. The men were ordered to keep themselves busy and stay away from them for at least an hour. Once Paulette was safely seated in the available mall wheelchair, Sam allowed her to leave his sight.

"Paulette, my cell phone is on if you need me," he told her worriedly.

Paulette nodded and took his hand

gently. "I'll be fine. Really, Sam," she told him, smiling. "Go play with Roy and Jarod. This is your last night as a bachelor."

Sam straightened and reached out to pull Rachel to his side. "Don't I know it," he whispered against her cheek.

Rachel laughed softly and kissed his lips quickly. "Go," she told him. "I have shopping to do."

Sam released her reluctantly and turned to face Roy and Jarod. "We have our orders, men," he told them, smiling.

Roy was about to say something when Jarod stepped forward and placed his hand on Sam's shoulder. "I believe the nearest tavern is this way, Master

Samuel,” he told him formally.

Sam laughed and faced the elder man squarely. “Jarod, when are you going to stop calling me Master Samuel?” he asked him in exasperation.

“I believe after the second drink, sir,” he answered seriously.

Sam laughed loudly and clapped him on the shoulder. “Jarod, you always made me laugh,” he told him with obvious enjoyment in his voice.

“I’m glad, sir,” Jarod answered dryly. He turned to face the women and bowed slightly. “Ladies. We shall return in two hour’s time.” He turned and walked away, followed by a laughing Sam.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be the designated driver tonight,” Roy promised as he

kissed his wife quickly. He turned and quickened his steps to catch up with Jarod and Sam.

The women couldn't help but laugh. The happiness they were feeling was mostly because of the incredible love they shared for the men who had just walked away.

“Ready?” Kay asked Rachel, excited to be with her in her quest for the perfect dress.

“Ready,” Rachel told her, turning to step behind the wheelchair to carefully push it and its precious cargo in the direction of the formal dress shop.

They were inside *Jean's Dress Boutique* for nearly twenty minutes when

Rachel spotted a flash of white on a rack that had mostly dark dresses hanging on it. She walked to it slowly and reached forward to pull it out, gasping at the beauty of it as she held it up to view. The entire dress was made of white lace over taffeta with a delicate webbing that cast a mother-of-pearl shine. The long sleeves were tight fitting, coming to a point at the wrist, with a loop that would encircle her middle finger to hold it in place. The bodice was tapered, and she knew it would hug her body like an old-fashioned corset, coming to a point at her navel before flowing out into a beautifully full, floor-length skirt.

“Look,” she whispered, turning to face Paulette and Kay excitedly.

“Oh, Rachel!” Kay barely whispered at the beauty of the dress.

“It’s beautiful,” Paulette told her, reaching out to touch the delicate dress. “Go try it on.”

They smiled broadly at her as they watched her hurry into one of the vacant changing rooms. She nearly ripped her shirt as she hurried to unbutton it and take it off. Next came her sneakers and jeans. She stood unmoving in her bra and underwear as if in a trance. She found herself just staring at the dress for a minute, unable to take her eyes off the gorgeous creation. Very carefully, she removed the dress from its hanger, slowly stepped into it and pulled it up

the length of her body. When it was in place, she buttoned the buttons as far as she could reach and tucked her bra straps under the material that hung slightly off her shoulders. She turned to look in the mirror and gasped at the beauty before her.

It was as if the dress had been made for her. It fit her perfectly and made her feel absolutely beautiful. The off-the-shoulder style made her feel delicate and sensual, and she knew that she would never find another dress to outshine this one.

She stepped out of the changing room to stand before Paulette and Kay, holding her breath nervously. Paulette looked at her silently then smiled with

tears in her eyes at the vision before her. Kay couldn't speak.

"I feel so pretty," Rachel whispered, spreading her hands across the skirt before looking up to see the two women watching her.

"You're a vision of beauty," Kay said when she was finally able to talk. She stepped forward to embrace the young woman who had been her daughter since she had come to live with her at the age of five.

Rachel felt Paulette's hand squeeze hers. It was settled. They had found the one dress that was made for her. There was no need to look further. Now all they needed to do was to find some

shoes, nylons, a full-length slip, and her special gift for Sam. For that she would ask Kay and Paulette to allow her time to shop alone. She didn't want anyone to see what she wanted to purchase for Sam before he did.

It was something that was going to show him exactly what he meant to her. He would always know how much she loved him.

Chapter 34

Paulette sat on her bed, rubbing her stomach contentedly as she watched Rachel place a single sprig of baby's breath with a small bow made with a single pastel blue ribbon in her hair. She smiled widely when her cousin-in-law turned and faced her.

"How do I look?" Rachel asked breathlessly. She held her hair up so that her Aunt Kay could finish buttoning the long row of silk buttons.

"You look absolutely beautiful," Paulette told her sincerely.

"Gorgeous!" Kay added, stepping back to admire her niece.

Rachel smiled, released her hold on her hair to allow the soft curls to cascade down her back, and smoothed the tight-fitting corset of satin and lace across her torso. She settled the long gold chain down the front of the bodice, smiling at the sparkle of the single ice blue stone against the precious white material of her dress. She turned to view herself in the full-length mirror that hung on Paulette's closet door and smiled nervously.

The reflection that stared back at her stunned her momentarily. She was a beautiful bride if she did say so herself. It was a gorgeous wedding gown. She wouldn't have picked a different one

even if she had all the time in the world instead of the two-hour shopping spree of the night before.

“What a beautiful bride you are,” Paulette said softly, her words bringing Rachel’s focus back to her.

Rachel turned and faced her, smiling. She sat down beside her on the bed and reached out to tenderly touch Paulette’s very swollen belly.

“What a beautiful mom you are,” she told her, gently rubbing her hand across her stomach.

Paulette laughed and touched Rachel’s hand. “You will be, too. Very soon, I bet,” she teased.

Rachel smiled at the thought, but found herself worrying again that she was

doing the right thing. She knew without a doubt that she loved Sam, but she wondered if she could live with him, knowing that he didn't love her in return. Maybe Gwen was right and love would grow between them. She hoped and prayed that it would.

“Do you think Sam loves me?”

“Of course he does,” Paulette answered, shocked. “Hasn't he told you that he does?”

“No, he hasn't,” Rachel answered quietly.

“Oh, Rachel. He loves you,” Paulette insisted. “You can tell.”

“You can?”

“Absolutely!” Kay answered, shocked

that it was even something that was being questioned.

Rachel looked at Paulette and her aunt quietly. She reached out and held their hands, squeezing them slightly.

“Rachel, Sam isn’t a man who is comfortable saying what he feels,” Kay told her sincerely. “He shows what he feels.”

“Gwen said the same thing,” Rachel whispered.

“Roy has told me some of the tough times Sam has gone through,” Paulette added. “He’s been alone since his mom died. His dad put a lot of pressure on him. Roy tried to be there for him, so did Kay and Jarod, but Sam didn’t want to burden anyone. He’s pretty much done

everything alone without anyone to help him get by,” Paulette told her sadly. “Give him time.”

“Rachel, search your heart,” her aunt told her quietly, touching her cheek gently. “Sam keeps the people he loves very close to his heart. Look at the way he is with Jarod. They have never spoken the words, but you know how deeply they love each other.” She waited until Rachel looked her directly in the eyes. “And you know how much he loves me and Roy and Paulette.”

Rachel nodded.

“He has never once said the words but every one of us can tell you without a doubt that he loves us,” Kay told her

emphatically.

“Absolutely,” Paulette assured her. “It’s just his way. Can’t you tell how Sam feels about you by the way he treats you?” Paulette asked worriedly.

Rachel smiled at Paulette, blushing slightly. “He is kind and caring and affectionate,” she admitted quietly. “But I need to hear the words, Paulette.”

“I know,” Paulette said, understanding completely. “You will, honey. I know you will. Give him time.”

“We’d better get going,” Rachel said, taking a deep breath to calm her nerves. “Sam will be waiting for us at the church.”

She turned, picked up her small bouquet of white roses with tiny pink

rosebuds mixed in the arrangement and offered Paulette her hand. Kay offered her hand as well and, between the two of them, they managed to pull Paulette up off the bed awkwardly. Rachel smiled down at her cousin then turned and led the way from the bedroom to the living room.

“Are you sure you’re feeling up to this, Paulette?” Rachel asked her worriedly as they reached Roy.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Paulette said with determination. “Let’s go, Roy, before she changes her mind.”

Roy leaned forward and kissed his cousin’s cheek tenderly. “You look beautiful, Rache,” he told her, smiling.

“Sam is one lucky guy.”

“By the way, Rachel,” Kay said quietly as she walked behind her. “I won the bet.”

“What bet?” Roy asked as he helped Paulette maneuver her way through the living room.

Rachel laughed and smiled. “She made a bet with me that Sam was going to marry me.”

“When did she do that?” Roy asked, surprised.

“When I was fourteen,” Rachel answered, laughing. “She bet me a quarter.”

Roy laughed and led the way out the door. “Come on, Rache,” he urged her. “The groom is waiting for his bride.”

Rachel blushed, a nervous flutter racing through her stomach at Roy's words. She walked out the front door to Roy's truck, smiling when she saw the clean blanket that Roy had spread across the back seat for her. She turned to watch him as he helped his wife into the front seat and carefully buckled her seat belt.

"Make sure you be good for your mother during the ceremony, tiger," he said, speaking directly to Paulette's belly, leaning forward to kiss it lightly before closing the door. He reached in to place Rachel's overnight bag and his digital camera onto the back seat before holding Rachel's hand to help her into

the truck. He carefully tucked the length of her wedding dress inside before closing the door. Going to the opposite side of the truck, he helped his mom climb up into the truck and waited for her to get settled before closing her door. Climbing in behind the steering wheel, he looked at Paulette to smile at her as she looked back at him.

“When I saw Sam this morning at the camper, he said to tell you that Stan and Gwen will be at the ceremony,” Roy called over his shoulder as he buckled himself in, started the engine, and pulled out of his driveway to head toward the church. “He told them you two were renewing your vows in church because the first time you got married it was by a

justice of the peace and none of us were there.”

Rachel was stunned into silence. She was so touched by Sam’s surprise for her. She had mentioned to him the night before that she had wished that Stan and Gwen could be at the ceremony. He never gave her a clue that he would try to arrange it for her. What a beautiful gift for her wedding to have her close friends and family there.

They arrived at the church twenty minutes later, and Rachel found herself holding back as fear gripped her. Paulette took her hand and gently pulled her along into the church. Rachel saw Jarod standing in the doorway and

smiled at the way the elder gentleman stepped back to allow them entrance, automatically placing his hand at the small of Kay's back as she took her place beside him. They exchanged a soft look before turning to face them.

They looked perfect together. He was handsome in his formal black tuxedo with the satin gray Windsor band tie held with a diamond stickpin. Kay was beautifully dressed in soft blue chiffon, tears already filling her eyes as she looked at her niece.

"Rachel," Jarod said as he bowed to her formally. "I am so glad that you are marrying Samuel. Miss Joanna would have been very happy."

"Thank you, Jarod," Rachel

whispered, accepting his good wishes, her heart fluttering with love at the mention of Sam's mother. The fact that Jarod addressed her and Sam without the formal titles he usually used spoke volumes. He was officially comfortable with being a part of this new family.

"I'm going to head down to stand with Sam," Roy interrupted them.

Before he could ask for help with Paulette, his mother stood on one side of his wife and Jarod stood on the other, offering their arms in support. Paulette held on to each of their arms and smiled warmly. She turned to smile at Rachel and nodded to the two elderly people. Rachel couldn't help but laugh as she

saw the wheels turning and knew a plan was being hatched. She had no doubt that her aunt would be a married woman soon.

Rachel laughed and stood tall to straighten her dress. "I guess I'm ready," she said nervously.

Paulette reached out to hug Rachel tightly. "Don't be nervous," Paulette whispered to Rachel, squeezing her hand. "Sam is the one we all picked out for you. We're pretty particular, you know. We would only want the best person for you, and you have him."

Rachel smiled at Paulette, Jarod, and her aunt, then looked up at Roy and saw him staring down at her. The tender expression on his face touched her

deeply.

“Your mom and dad would have been so happy for you,” Roy told her quietly.

Rachel smiled at the mention of her parents. She wished that they were alive to share this wonderful day with her. Deep down, she truly felt that they were beside her at that moment and had the most incredibly peaceful feeling of contentment as she felt their love encircling her. The love was there. It was warm and it carried a scent of warm cinnamon rolls. It was a familiar feeling and a familiar smell that permeated her senses often throughout her lifetime.

“Thank you so much,” she finally spoke, her emotions strong. “I probably

would have bolted if you hadn't let me stay at your house last night."

Roy leaned forward and kissed her cheek gently. "I know you'll be happy, Rachel," he told her quietly.

Rachel nodded and turned to walk into the church. It was then that she saw Sam waiting for her at the end of the aisle. He was standing tall and proud and looked incredibly handsome in his black tuxedo. There was something different about him though. She had seen him wear that tuxedo before, but today he looked happy in it—not at all like the previous time that he had worn it. Stan and Gwen were seated in the first pew and the priest was standing next to her future husband. Everyone else seemed to melt

away as she walked the distance toward him.

Sam watched Rachel silently, stunned by the vision that approached him. Her dress was shimmering in the candlelight of the church, and he felt as if she were coming to him on a cloud of beauty.

“You look beautiful,” he whispered to her, leaning forward to rest his cheek against hers. “I missed you lying beside me last night.” His voice was soft as he spoke, ensuring that no one could hear him except her.

“I missed you, too,” she whispered back, smiling up at him and blushing lightly.

When Sam placed the diamond

wedding band on her finger and the priest said the words that joined them as husband and wife before God, Rachel could feel her body relaxing. She reached up to remove the ring that she wore on the index finger of her right hand, took Sam's hand in her own, and placed the wide gold wedding band on his finger, kissing it gently and smiling up at him when she saw the surprise on his face. It was her gift for him.

“Thank you,” he whispered, kissing her lips tenderly.

They were actually married. She found herself being taken into her husband's arms and kissed with such aching tenderness, she knew in her heart that she had made the right decision.

* * * *

The rest of the afternoon was a blur of activity and picture taking. The bride and groom, along with their guests, dined at the town's most elegant restaurant, and spent the afternoon laughing and sharing their happiness. By eight o'clock, Roy could see the strain on Paulette's face and called a halt to the activities.

"You take good care of her and treat her right, Sam," Roy told his friend seriously, a lump of emotion filling his throat as he looked at his cousin.

"I will," Sam promised, shaking his

best friend's hand. Pulling Roy toward him, he hugged his best friend tightly, laughing softly as Roy's arms tightened around him before they released each other.

"Sam, you've always been a part of our family," Kay Monroe told him seriously, love evident in her voice. "We're glad that you've finally made it official."

"Thanks, Kay," Sam answered, genuinely touched by her words. "I am, too."

Sam turned and smiled as Rachel walked toward him with Paulette. Stan and Gwen were close behind them. His heart beat faster at the realization that she was now his wife.

“Ready to go home?” he asked her, drawing her to him and placing his arm around her shoulders to hug her gently.

Rachel smiled as she looked up at him. Sam had suggested that they spend their first night together at an elegant hotel but Rachel had declined. She had come to know the camper as home just as Sam had, and she found herself wanting to be there right now.

“I’m ready.” Turning, she hugged Paulette, Roy, Jarod, and her aunt tightly. “Thank you for everything,” she told them gratefully.

“Be happy, Rachel,” Paulette whispered to her before turning to take hold of her husband’s hand and walk

slowly away from the restaurant.

Rachel watched them silently and smiled. She was so lucky to have such wonderful people as family. They had been kind to her and had supported her through so much in her life. She turned and saw that Stan was shaking Sam's hand.

"You made the right decision, my boy," Stan told him seriously. "I'm glad for you both."

"Me, too," Sam told him happily.

"I'm so glad you're here," Rachel told them both.

Gwen turned and encircled Rachel within her arms. "Thank you for letting us share in this beautiful day with you," she told her quietly, tears in her eyes as

she spoke. She leaned her cheek against Rachel's. "I told you it would all work out. Love him always, honey. He'll do the same to you. I believe it with all my heart."

Rachel nodded and leaned back to smile down at her. "I will. Thank you, Gwen," Rachel promised, kissing Gwen's cheek. "I would never have been able to stay with him if you hadn't helped me sort through my feelings."

Gwen smiled and hugged her one last time before letting her go. Stan stepped forward to hug her tightly and kiss her cheek lightly. Gwen leaned up to kiss Sam's cheek quickly before turning to leave, the tears falling unchecked down

her face. Stan took his wife's hand and walked away, not trusting himself to speak.

Sam watched them leave then faced Rachel and smiled at her. "Let's go home, wife," he said quietly.

His voice was soft but filled with emotion. Taking her hand in his and tucking it securely within the crook of his arm, he led her through the arched doorway. They walked from the restaurant and stood beside his truck for a moment while Sam fumbled with his keys. Rachel smiled at his nervousness and reached out to cover his hand with her own.

"Don't be nervous. I'll be gentle," she teased him.

Sam looked up at her in surprise then laughed at her words. Stepping toward her, he embraced her gently and drew her toward him to kiss her tenderly. Rachel held on to his arms, loving every minute of the kiss. When he pulled back from her, his eyes were clouded with passion.

“So will I,” he promised, his voice husky.

Chapter 35

The ride back to the campground seemed endless to Sam. He couldn't wait to be in the privacy of his camper and hold Rachel in his arms.

When they pulled into the dirt road of the campground, Rachel found it difficult to catch her breath. She loved Sam so much. The decision to marry him had been the only one she could have made. Her future would be nothing without him. Despite the surety of her decision, she found herself aching as she worried that he didn't feel the same way.

All thoughts left her as her door was suddenly opened and Sam was reaching

in to lift her into his arms. She placed her arms around his neck and leaned her head against his chest, pushing aside her fears. She was determined to accept the beauty of his gentleness and caring. Nothing mattered except that they were together and had committed themselves to each other.

He stood in front of the camper door and hesitated. Rachel reached out and unlocked it with Sam's key. She turned the handle of the camper door and pulled it open, allowing him to carry her up and over the threshold to stand in the center of the camper.

He looked down at her and slowly lowered her to the floor. He took the bouquet from her hand and carefully set

it on the table, his eyes never leaving hers. Very slowly, he reached up, framed her face with his hands, and leaned forward to kiss her with exquisite gentleness. When his lips pulled away from hers, he found himself not wanting to leave her for the few seconds it would take him to retrieve her suitcase from the truck.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispered, leaving her reluctantly.

Rachel watched him go and smiled. Sam’s kiss nourished her love and gave her courage. His tenderness nearly made her heart stop beating. Every touch, every glance, and every caress spoke of his caring.

She reached out to light the lantern that was set on the table and lowered the flame until only a soft glow illuminated the camper. She turned to face the bed that they would share and smiled when she saw that the blankets were already turned back, waiting for their return.

Sam re-entered the camper and placed the small suitcase on the floor next to the table. He turned and closed the camper door behind him and locked it securely.

Rachel found that her heart was pounding in anticipation as Sam walked the two steps to stand in front of her. When he placed his arms around her and drew her close to him, her arms went around his neck immediately. She kissed

him gently then nuzzled the side of his neck as she cuddled into his embrace. The groan of pleasure that escaped his lips made her smile.

He reached up to touch her chin and turn her face up toward his then brought his lips down to meet hers. The kiss was gentle and coaxing, and Rachel responded to it without hesitation. Her arms surrounded his waist, and she couldn't seem to get close enough to him as the kiss continued, their lips gently meeting and teasing.

Sam groaned and pulled her slowly toward his body. He kissed her thoroughly, his tongue probing her mouth deeply, unable to hold back his passion any longer.

Rachel held him tightly to her as she opened her mouth to his and met his tongue with her own, passion and desire driving her need to get as close to him as possible. Touching him and loving him was all she could think about. She wanted him fiercely.

Sam could barely contain the joy that he felt at her response. He pulled back reluctantly and looked down at her, relieved to see only happiness and excitement on her face.

“Are you happy, wife?” he asked her quietly, reaching up to remove the baby’s breath from her hair.

“Very, husband,” she whispered, gasping with excitement when his hands

reached around her to slowly unbutton the long row of buttons at the back of her dress.

She smiled as he pulled the dress from her body gently, slowly. Seeing her undressed before him a little at a time was the sexiest damned thing ever. Rachel slipped off her white satin pumps and lifted her legs to carefully step out of the dress. Sam placed it reverently on the opposite bed and turned his attention back to her. Leaning down, he placed a soft kiss on each breast just above the material of the strapless white lace bra that she was wearing.

Rachel threaded her fingers into the thick softness of his black hair and held his head tenderly, arching her body

toward his mouth. He rubbed his thumbs across the sides of her breasts as he straightened to look down at her with such tenderness in his eyes, her heart melted at the sight of him. Her hands left the silkiness of his hair to slide into his jacket, running her palms across the taut muscles of his shoulders to travel down his arms as she slid the formal coat from his body.

“Just a minute,” Sam stopped her, taking the coat from her before it landed on the camper floor to retrieve the papers from the inside pocket. Tossing the jacket next to Rachel’s dress, he smiled at her and took a quick kiss before leaning back and touching her

cheek tenderly.

“I want these kept in a safe place,” he said as he showed her the legal documents that proved that they were married. He looked around for a safe place to store them and decided to place them in her laptop case that was still on the bench seat beside the table.

He turned to face her and reached up to remove his Ascot tie, throwing it onto the table. His cummerbund and shirt quickly followed. Rachel reached out to caress his incredible chest and run her hands down his shoulders, sighing at the muscles that bulged in his arms. The pure beauty and strength of him excited her beyond comprehension.

Sam kissed her gently, reaching to

slide her slip from her hips to let it fall into a heap at her feet. He reached behind her to unhook her bra, pulling the lacy undergarment from her body and letting it fall to the floor unheeded as his hands reached up to cover her full breasts and caress them tenderly. He slowly circled his thumbs around her nipples, raising them to hardened peaks. Bending forward, he took one into his mouth to suck on it tenderly. When Rachel gasped in pleasure, he smiled and suckled at the other breast before raising his mouth to her lips and kissing her hungrily.

“Rachel,” he whispered between kisses. “You make me crazy with

wanting you.”

Rachel tugged at his T-shirt, and he raised his arms to allow her to pull it from his body. She leaned forward to kiss his biceps, growling softly at the pure sexiness of him. She loved how his breathing grew ragged as she kissed her way to his chest, finding his nipples and licking at them and sucking on them lightly. She smiled at the gasp that escaped him and continued to kiss the well-defined muscles of his chest, biting down on his pectoral muscle lightly.

He pulled her to him tightly, gasping in excitement as her naked chest touched his. Reaching down, he slid his hands into the back of her panties and pantyhose and drew them down across

her hips. He knelt before her to slowly draw them down her long legs, watching her with a soft smile on his face as she lifted each foot to allow him to remove them.

His soft black hair tickled her stomach as he knelt before her and he leaned forward to kiss her intimately. Rachel gasped at the contact, her knees nearly buckling as his mouth did wicked things to her. His tongue played with her clit, circling it repeatedly before pressing against it with just the right amount of pressure. Pulses of pleasure raced through her. He drew the swollen bud into his mouth and sucked on it while flicking at it with the tip of his tongue.

She thought she was going to explode.

When he slipped his hand between her legs and pressed his fingers deep into her pussy, she lost control of her body. Her legs lost their strength as her orgasm raced through her. She moaned as white sparkles of pleasure ignited behind her closed eyelids. The pressure of his fingers inside of her made her throb with the need to feel his cock deep inside of her.

“Sam,” she whispered. “Please stop.”

He stopped at once and looked up at her in concern. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“Nothing at all. It feels good. I just need to hold you. Please.”

She reached down and touched his shoulders to draw him up to stand before

her. He looked down at her quietly, closing his eyes in pleasure as she reached forward and unfastened his pants, then reached around his back to slip her hand into the waistband of his clothes and push them down to drop them to the floor. He bent down to remove his shoes and socks and pushed aside the pile of clothing. He stood naked before her, his cock pointing hard and proud at her. The illumination of the lantern bathed their naked bodies in a soft glow. Sam watched her silently, wanting to take her in his arms to love her until she screamed with pleasure.

Rachel smiled at him silently then reached out and took his hand in hers. As

they stood beside the bed she leaned forward to kiss him tenderly. She felt the warmth of his breath against her lips and smiled at the soft hum of pleasure that escaped him.

“Rachel,” he whispered, kissing her lightly and touching her face gently. “I need you like I need to breathe.”

Taking his hand from her face, she placed it on her breast and covered it with her own hand. Sam gently caressed her full breast, bending down to kiss it lightly. With each kiss, each touch, each movement Sam made, her excitement heightened with the anticipation of his next touch. She wanted him beyond reason.

She pulled him toward her, gently

raking her nails across his back as he held her tightly against him. Her hands caressed his back, reveling in the strength of his body as she gently slid her hands over the well-formed muscles of his buttocks and pushed him intimately against her.

“I love touching you, Sam,” she whispered huskily, leaning forward to kiss his chin lightly.

As her arms wrapped around his waist and he felt the gentle stroking of her hands across his back, he groaned into her mouth. Her tender caresses inflamed him.

“I’ve loved you almost my entire life. I can’t get enough of you,” she

whispered against his chest as he held her tightly.

He murmured something against the top of her head that she couldn't hear. She forgot about asking him what he had said when he reached to tilt her chin up to meet his kiss. It was gentle and tender, and she loved the way his lips teased hers. When she leaned back to look into his eyes, she saw the passion that was meant only for her.

“Rachel,” he groaned as she wrapped her hand around his swollen shaft and squeezed gently, pulling slightly to slide up the length of him.

Rachel smiled and kissed him deeply, loving how he held her face between his hands as he moaned into her mouth.

“I want you,” she whispered against his lips, her voice soft with passion.

Sam kissed her gently then lifted his head to accept her kisses against his neck and chest. Her hand continued to stroke him and he nearly fell apart when she cupped his sac and squeezed lightly. The tenderness of her touch was driving him wild.

She turned his body and gently pushed him back onto the bed, climbing up to lie beside him, never stopping the gentle gliding of her hand over his hard shaft. The incredible pleasure he felt intensified as she kissed him, beginning with his lips, traveling down his neck, his chest, his abdomen, and following

the path of the hair on his body to take his cock into her mouth.

He gasped at the intensity of the pleasure that raced through him. She licked the length of him slowly, running her tongue along the top of his shaft to the tip and along the underside of its thickness. When she took him into her mouth fully and sucked gently, he thought he would come right then. It took all of his determination to stay his orgasm.

Her hand gently surrounded his sack, tugging slightly as she lifted it and lovingly placed it into her mouth to suck it carefully, loving the feel of the delicate orbs inside rolling against her tongue. The moan of pure pleasure that escaped him made her heart beat faster

in excitement. She released him from her mouth and licked a path up the underside of his shaft, following the thick vein that ran its length, until she gently circled the flared head and stopped at its tip to carefully press her tongue against the slit to lap up the pool of fluid there before she took him into her mouth fully once again. She pressed forward, taking him deep and swallowing, smiling when his hips rose to meet her. She felt powerful at that moment. The slow bobbing of her head continued as she took him over and over again. She loved the feel of him. She loved the softness of his velvet skin and the hardness of his excitement for her.

Sam couldn't handle any more. Her mouth was wicked. Each press to draw him deeper inside of her made him gasp in pleasure. When she nuzzled against his pubic hair and swallowed repeatedly, he knew he wasn't going to last. This incredible woman gave him so much. The pleasure of her touch was equaled by the beauty of her love. He needed to be inside of her. He needed to love her and spill his seed deep inside of her womb.

He reached down and pulled her up by the shoulders to wrap his arms around her while his mouth ravaged hers. The way she went willingly into his waiting arms filled him with happiness. He

could feel her heart pounding against his chest and knew that she was enjoying the way his strength surrounded her.

He kissed her hungrily, passionately, pulling her to him and holding her tightly. She found herself being swept along in a wave of pure passion as he laid her back onto the softness of the bed and covered her body with his own. Her body opened to him without hesitation. She couldn't help but moan as his hand reached down to tenderly touch the intimate folds of her body.

Sam gently separated her swollen lips, slipping his fingers into her sweet pussy to gather the cream that was already dripping from her body. He spread the wetness slowly around the pink lips that

beckoned to him, growling softly as his fingers pressed deep inside of her warmth—warmth that was meant for him and only him for the rest of their lives.

He looked down at her silently as he touched her and saw that she was looking up at him with desire and pleasure. He leaned forward to kiss her lips lightly, pressing harder as his middle finger pressed deeper into her core. He smiled against her mouth as she arched her body upward to take him deeper.

“Let’s just make sure your body is ready for me,” he told her, smiling as he looked down at her face.

He kissed her neck, her shoulder, her

breast, her abdomen, and the soft curls at the juncture of her legs, then murmured against her thigh as he reached both hands beneath her hips to pull her up toward his face as he lay prone between her legs. He nudged her legs open wider with his shoulders and smiled at the easy way she spread herself for him without hesitation.

He kissed her intimately then, loving the taste and scent of her desire. When he separated the delicate folds of her body, he smiled at her moan of pleasure as he found the hidden button he was looking for, circling it with his tongue and sucking it gently into his mouth. He hungrily lapped at the wetness that awaited him. He licked from the

welcoming softness of her beautiful pussy to the throbbing nub that sent shock waves through Rachel's body as he moaned into it and suckled until her hips nearly shot off the bed with the explosion of another orgasm.

"Sam," she moaned, pulling at his head to draw him back into her embrace.

He wasn't so easily manipulated though. He took his time to return to her mouth, licking his way up her body, alternately placing gentle kisses and slight nips up her body, nuzzling her breasts and her neck before returning to her waiting mouth to kiss her gently despite the passion that was rushing through his body.

“I think your body is ready for me,” he teased, looking down at her glazed eyes and smiling.

“You think?” she asked breathlessly, laughing despite the pulsing of her body as aftershocks of her orgasm continued to ripple through her.

Sam chuckled and kissed her lips quickly, reaching up to slowly caress her body. “I do,” he told her, suddenly very serious.

“Do you think your body is ready for me?” she whispered, smiling lazily up at him and laughing softly at the snort of laughter that escaped him.

“Baby, I’m so hard I could break a brick,” he told her seriously, closing his

eyes in pure pleasure as her hand took gentle hold of his shaft and began to guide him toward her body.

“Do you want me inside of you?” he whispered.

“Not at all,” she answered, closing her eyes and sighing at the joy she was feeling when she heard Sam chuckle softly against her neck.

He leaned against her, molding his body to hers, loving the feel of her naked body beneath his. He raised himself above her, nearly groaning with joy as she opened her legs wider and hooked them around his thighs, seductively rubbing the calves of his legs. He settled himself between her legs and waited as she gently guided him into her soft and

welcoming body. He loved the soft moan that escaped her as he slowly entered her.

“Baby, look at me,” he whispered, holding himself still. He smiled when she opened her eyes and looked up at him at once. He watched pleasure transform her features as he slowly pushed deeper into her.

The night was so quiet. They looked at each other silently, unable to speak. Sam moved carefully, a little at a time, making sure that her body was ready to accept every inch of his thick shaft. He felt her tighten around him as he entered her slowly. He pulled out gently, only to return deeper. He couldn't contain his

possessive growl when she moaned as he buried himself inside her as far as he could go, and his pelvis was flush against hers.

He felt the head of his cock press against her womb and sighed with complete satisfaction. This was where he was meant to be. He stopped all movement and looked down at her. She was tight and wet and hot around him. It took every effort not to move.

“Are you okay, baby?” he asked her gently, his voice ragged, his body held still while her body adjusted to take all of him.

Rachel nodded and smiled up at him tenderly, unable to speak. She reached up and caressed his chest lightly, then

gasped as pleasure surged through her when Sam started to move. Her hips moved upward to match his movements, and she found herself becoming lost in the beauty of their lovemaking.

Time stood still. She was aware of nothing except the pleasure that she was feeling, the hardness that was deep inside of her, and the man who held her heart. She moved with him, loving each thrust and each pull, as he entered her body, pressing deeply into her then slowly pulling out. She gasped as she felt the loss of him only to have him surge back into her slowly, the thickness of his cock sending shockwaves of intense pleasure through her as he thrust

to the very core of her and dragged across her G-spot with each plunge. She surrounded the back of his thighs with her legs, preventing him from pulling out of her. He stopped his movement and she saw the smile that spread across his face.

“Enjoying yourself, wife?” he asked her, leaning down to gently kiss her lips.

“Yes,” she whispered, tipping her hips slightly before reaching down to pull his hips toward her, sending him even deeper inside her. She moaned in ecstasy and looked up at him with adoration in her eyes.

Sam kissed her lips softly then pulled back slightly to watch her as he began moving deep within her again. He

smiled as he saw her close her eyes and moan with pleasure. When she opened them, he was mesmerized by the love and passion that gazed up at him. His chest constricted with the emotions he felt as he made love to his wife.

She stroked his body lovingly as he pumped into her, loving the hardness, the wetness, and the thrusting that was increasing in tempo and depth with each plunge. She was nearly crazy with the incredible feel of his body deep within her.

Sam groaned as her wet heat pulsed around his cock. Making love without a condom was something he was glad that he had only shared with his Rachel. Only

Rachel—his wife.

She met each of his thrusts as the steady rhythm of them raised them both to unbelievable heights. She arched against him, holding his hips to press him deeply within her as the most incredible feeling of pleasure burst throughout her body. The moan that escaped her was filled with passion and wonder. She called out his name as she climaxed.

When she calmed a little, she opened her eyes and saw that Sam was smiling down at her and his face was tight as he fought to hold off his own orgasm. He leaned down to kiss her gently and she clung to him tightly.

When she loosened her hold on him,

he began to move inside her slowly once again. The pleasure that she felt was equaled only by the happiness that she experienced when she saw the look on Sam's face. The tenderness in his eyes turned to smoldering passion as he began to move faster within her, bringing her along with him in the pleasure of their bodies becoming one.

She moved with him, gasping as his pubic bone dragged across her clit with each plunge and retreat. Another wave of pleasure exploded within her, the muscles deep within her tugging at his shaft and demanding his pleasure. When she looked up at him, she saw the intensity on his face as he felt her

contract around him.

He called out her name softly as he pressed his hips against her pelvis and held still, a moan of ecstasy escaping him as his body found its release and his life's essence poured into her. She could feel him throbbing inside of her, filling her with his warm seed. She held him tightly as he moaned her name against her neck, his body twitching with residual pulses of his orgasm.

It was a while before either could speak. He could only kiss her temple and hold her gently against him. After a moment he looked down at her, then kissed her cheek gently, his body still joined with hers.

“Are you doing okay, baby?” he asked

her, his breathing still labored.

“Mmmm...” she answered lazily, nodding and reaching up to brush back the lock of black hair that had fallen across his forehead. “How about you?”

Sam laughed and looked into her eyes, his own eyes twinkling. “I’m much better now,” he teased.

Rachel laughed and hugged him to her. When she looked up at him there were tears in her eyes.

“Oh my God. Did I hurt you, Rachel?” he whispered urgently, upset by her tears. “I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you tell me I was hurting you?”

He made a move to pull out of her but Rachel stopped him by tightening her

legs around him so he couldn't move. "Sam," she told him quickly. "You did *not* hurt me."

"Then why are you crying?" he asked her worriedly, gently stroking her cheek with the back of his hand, his knuckles caressing her face lightly.

"Because I'm so happy," she whispered.

Sam relaxed as relief filled him. He kissed the tear that had escaped her eye, nuzzling the crescent moon birthmark that he had always found so endearing.

"Me, too," he whispered into her ear, sending shivers through her body.

Sam kissed her once again and held her gently while he slowly withdrew from her body. She couldn't help but feel

a sense of loss as his body separated from hers. When he lay down beside her and drew her into his arms, she molded herself to him. He reached down and placed his hand behind her knees to pull her legs over his as he turned toward her, holding her in his lap as he lay beside her and snuggled against her as closely as he could.

He pulled the covers around them, tucked her into the softness of his embrace, and then kissed her temple lightly. Rachel lifted her face to his and kissed his lips gently.

“Did you enjoy yourself, Sam?” she asked him quietly. She kissed his chest lightly and laughed softly against him.

“Baby, you have no idea,” he told her, smiling down at her. “I love the way you touch me. Feel free to do anything you want to do to me anytime you want.”

Rachel laughed and snuggled against him. “You were right, Sam,” she told him quietly, stroking his forearm lovingly as it rested across her stomach.

“About what?” he asked softly, all energy drained from his body.

“Your bedside manner did leave me weak and satisfied.”

Sam smiled and took her hand in his to lift it and place a gentle kiss on the wedding band that she wore. The beauty of that ring didn’t compare to the beauty of his wife.

“I always keep my promises,” he whispered, releasing her hand and tucking the quilts around the both of them.

He gently rested his hand on his wife’s breast, settling into the warmth that they shared beneath the blankets. He heard her sigh contentedly and kissed the top of her head. He couldn’t help but smile as she reached out and rested her hand upon his chest and gently stroked his body. They both fell asleep contented and happy, the sweet smell of cinnamon and sugar surrounding them.

Chapter 36

“Are you sure you can’t stay for a few more days?” Rachel asked Gwen sadly, reaching out to touch her friend’s hand.

Gwen squeezed her hand and smiled at her with tears in her eyes. “I’m sure,” she told her quietly. “Stan and I have to get back home for a family reunion at our oldest son’s home in Wyoming. I feel as if you and Sam should be there too, now that you’re our youngest daughter.”

Rachel smiled at Gwen’s words then reached out to hold Gwen tightly within her arms. “I’m going to miss you so much. Thank you for everything.”

Gwen rubbed Rachel’s back then

stepped out of her embrace and turned to face Sam as he stood beside their camper. “You’ve got our address,” she told him, sniffing slightly. “When you and Rachel are settled in your new home, you give us a call and we’ll come by and say hello. If you two decide to live around here we’ll practically be neighbors.”

“I will, Gwen. You take care of this card shark, here,” he said, indicating Stan before he leaned down to lightly kiss her cheek.

Stan smiled at last, relieved at the humor that helped him say good-bye without making a darn fool of himself. “You take good care of each other, you hear?” he told them, reaching out to

shake Sam's hand firmly.

He turned toward Rachel and opened his arms to her. Rachel embraced him and hugged him tightly. When she let go, they both had tears in their eyes.

"You're a jewel, Rachel," Stan whispered to her before pulling away.

Rachel smiled through her tears at his kindness. She remembered those exact words used by Joanna McCoy so many years ago. She felt choked by the emotions that filled her heart. She looked at the elderly couple and smiled. She was going to miss them so much.

"I hope you keep in touch," Stan told them, truly hoping that their friendship would not disappear with the memories

of summer as most often happened.

“We will,” Rachel promised.

She stepped back and found Sam beside her. She put her arm around his waist as he encircled her shoulder with his arm to hug her against him. They stood there silently and watched Gwen and Stan climb into their SUV and drive away. Stan honked the horn in good-bye and Gwen waved out the window.

Rachel waved until she could no longer see the SUV then turned to Sam. “I’m going to miss them,” she said quietly.

“Me, too,” Sam agreed. “But we’ll keep in touch. As soon as we decide where we’ll be living, we can write them and let them know. Maybe we’ll be

close enough to visit.”

“Where do you want to live, Sam?” Rachel asked him seriously. In the past three days they hadn’t talked much about specifics of their future. They had been too busy enjoying each other’s company and making love.

“Wherever you are,” Sam told her, smiling, his eyes twinkling with a devilment that Rachel was beginning to know so well.

“I’m serious, Sam,” she told him, smiling as she lightly touched his stomach.

“So am I,” he whispered, taking her in his arms and kissing her deeply.

When he pulled his lips from hers, she

was smiling as she looked up at him. He realized that he lived for that sweet smile and that loving look. Rachel gave him such honesty and caring, he knew he would never take her love for granted.

“Sam, I want you to live where you’ll be able to do your job best. If you want to work at Denver Memorial and live in the Denver area, that’s fine with me. If you want to join a practice here in the mountains and live here, that’s fine, too. I can write anywhere. So where we live is going to have to be your call.”

Sam smiled at her tenderly. He didn’t know what to say. Her generosity had made him speechless. Rachel made everything perfect. He knew that it was because of her that he was so happy. She

made everything in his life right. He also knew that her offer was sincere, and she would be happy living with him wherever he wanted to live and be supportive of him in whatever he wanted to do. That thought made him realize how incredibly blessed he was to have her as his wife.

“What do you want to do?” she asked him seriously.

Sam smiled down at her and pulled her into his arms. “I want to make love to my wife,” he whispered, kissing her tenderly.

Rachel’s arms went around him immediately. “Sounds good to me,” she told him, laughing softly.

The passion in his eyes was obvious. He was looking at her very seriously, his breathing becoming labored as his body hardened in anticipation.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to hold back, Rachel,” he whispered, placing her hand over his chest to feel the slamming of his heart.

“Me either,” told him, smiling. “I don’t think we should hold back. I think we should have a down and dirty experience. Race ya!”

Sam laughed as Rachel bolted from him and ran toward the camper. She threw open the door and raced up the two steps to beat him inside. He ran after her and made the leap into the

camper in one jump, pulling the door shut behind them and locking it securely.

His heart was racing and his breathing was already labored as he looked at the incredible sexiness of his wife. His breath left him in a soft whoosh when Rachel threw herself into his arms and kissed him furiously. He was aware that she was pulling at his clothes and did his best to help her get him naked.

He met her passion with his own, kissing her feverishly, and pulling her clothes from her body. They were naked in no time and barely made it to the bed before he entered her quickly, moving with such intensity and power that Rachel moaned his name in ecstasy within seconds. He thrust into her hard

and deep, gritting his teeth as pleasure raced through his body. He knew he wasn't going to last.

When her body clamped down around his cock, he gave up trying to hold back. His balls pulled up tight against his body and his cock exploded with his release. He pulsed within her over and over again, loving that she took all of his seed deep within her every time they made love. He truly hoped they would be blessed with the miracle of their child's conception. He wanted to have a baby with her. He wanted to have lots of babies with her.

When the pulsing of his shaft finally subsided and every drop of his seed was

released into his wife's body, he sighed with satisfaction. Carefully easing his cock from her warmth, he fell beside her onto the bed, careful not to crush her. All his strength left him at that moment.

“Holy hell,” he whispered against her neck.

Rachel laughed and touched his face weakly. “I agree,” she told him quietly.

With extreme effort, she pulled the blankets over them. Sam smiled at her nurturing efforts and reached beneath the blankets to pull her toward him. He looked into her eyes and smiled at the raw emotions that he saw there. He leaned down to kiss her gently then deepened his kiss, reaching down to the warmth between her legs and touching

her intimately.

Rachel's breath came in short gasps as she looked up at him to search his face. He was so serious as he looked at her. His eyes had misted to a cloudy blue and his breath was labored as he worked his magic on her with his finger. She grabbed for his hand and held it to her body as she found her release again.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the throbbing of her body against his hand, thrilled to have given her such intense pleasure. Her body sagged against him as he lay beside her facing her. He gathered her in his arms once again, pulling her legs over his to cradle her in his lap, lifting her hips slightly so that

they were not lying flat on the bed.

She was so exhausted she couldn't have moved if she wanted to—not that she wanted to. She was content to remain exactly where she was.

“Nice?” Sam asked her, smiling down at her.

“Very nice,” Rachel answered happily. “I don't think I'll get my strength back for a while. I need a nap.”

Sam laughed and pulled her closer to him. “Sounds good,” he whispered, his hand gently massaging her hip then reaching up to settle over her breast as she rested so comfortably against him. “Go to sleep, Rachel. I intend to make love to you again after we wake up.” His voice was soft as lethargy surrounded

him. He yawned then smiled down at his woman. “Besides, I don’t want you to move yet.”

“You don’t?” she whispered. “Why not?” She kissed his chest lightly, smiling when she heard his contented sigh.

“We should stay put to give your body a chance to begin our baby,” he told her, kissing her temple lightly.

Rachel opened her eyes and looked at Sam. At her quietness, he opened his eyes and looked down at her. He was very serious. He searched her face, waiting for some sign of emotion.

“Our baby?” she whispered, unsure what to say. Reaching up, she touched

his hand as it held her shoulder and traced the wedding ring that he wore.

He nodded, looking down at her intently. “Our baby,” he whispered, covering her stomach tenderly with the wide expanse of his hand. He looked down where his hand rested and felt a pull in his chest at the miraculous possibility of their developing child. He had a profound feeling that they had indeed just made a baby together. He wasn’t sure if it was a real knowledge that he had or just his desire. He hoped it was the former.

Rachel didn’t speak. She didn’t know what to say. As much as she wanted it to be true, she was afraid. Allison’s words replayed in her brain. She leaned against

Sam and was glad that he enveloped her within his embrace. She couldn't speak—didn't want to speak. She just wanted him to hold her.

They slept holding each other, unaware of the other's thoughts.

* * * *

The comforting smell of cinnamon and sugar filled the camper. Sam and Rachel snuggled closer to each other, smiling softly as they felt the gentle warmth that surrounded them.

“Do not fear what is happening,” the angel Bernadette whispered to them. “You are meant to be together and have

a family.”

“Does he love me?” Rachel whispered, reaching out to touch the beautiful angel with the sparkling pink wings.

“Yes, Rachel,” Bernadette answered. “You are his heart. You hold his love. Do not worry. He does not even realize that he has not used his words to tell you that he loves you. Search your heart, dear one. You know that he holds you within his soul and surrounds you with his love.”

“I don’t know,” Rachel whispered. “I hope that he does. I love him very much.”

“Yes, child. That is as it should be. Do not question his feelings. They are

there, and they are deep.”

“I hope so,” Rachel whispered. “I understand his desire for a child, but I can’t be with him if that’s the only reason he wants me.”

“Samuel wants you for far more than that, dear one,” Bernadette told her gently. “Give him time to understand that he must tell you what he feels.”

Rachel snuggled closer to Sam, sighing contentedly as he tightened his arm around her waist and pulled her closer. She smiled at the soft kiss he placed against her temple and drifted back to sleep.

The familiar and soothing scent of cinnamon and sugar eased her worries,

and she settled within her husband's embrace.

Bernadette fluttered closer to the loving couple, bathing them in her love as she watched over them. Kissing Rachel's birthmark, she could not help but giggle sweetly as Rachel laughed and reached up to try to touch her.

"You cannot touch me, Rachel, but I will always touch you," Bernadette whispered before leaning toward Sam and kissing his temple lightly. "I am here for you, too, Sam. Value your mate. You must tell her how you feel about her. She is destined to be yours forever. Always cherish and love her. The two of you will have a happy life together filled with friends and family—and lots of

babies.”

“Bernadette?” Rachel whispered as she slept.

“I am here, Rachel,” Bernadette told her gently. “I will always be here to watch over you.”

Bernadette faded away, the sight of the sleeping couple a beautiful memory that she would hold in her heart forever.

Chapter 37

Rachel watched Sam from the side of the stream where she sat at the picnic table and worked on her book. He stepped down from the camper and eased his way down the steep hill then walked toward her slowly. He looked so ruggedly handsome with his cowboy hat pulled low over his eyes. The black T-shirt he wore hugged his body tightly, showing off every muscle from his broad shoulders and finely sculptured abdomen to his slim waist.

She swallowed with difficulty as her gaze lowered to the formfitting jeans he wore that outlined the strength of his

thighs and the bulge of his generous package. The boots just finished the perfection of him. How could any woman stand to have her husband look so incredibly handsome and sexy?

He smiled at her and reached out to touch her cheek lightly. "What?" he asked as she looked up at him.

"Nothing," she said quickly, laughing and blushing at her thoughts.

He smiled at her seductively. "Thinking about me?" he asked her, winking.

"Sam!" she said quickly. "Not everything is about you, you know!"

"Liar!" he told her, laughing as she blushed again. He leaned forward to kiss her lips lightly and pulled her up to stand

before him so he could embrace her gently.

Sam looked at Rachel quietly, a soft expression in his crystal blue eyes. “You need to come back into the camper and lie down,” he told her quietly.

Rachel looked up at him, her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Why do I need to do that?” she asked him, humor in her voice.

“Because I want you to be comfortable when we make love,” he told her as he pulled her body tightly against his, reaching out to tug at the loose tendril of hair that hung at the nape of her neck before stepping back slightly as if to allow her to pass and follow his

direction to go back to the camper.

“Oh, so now you think we need to make love,” she said as she leaned back, a full smile on her face. She looked up at him with a sparkle in her soft brown eyes. “And what makes you think I would want to do that?”

“Because you like me,” he stated simply, smiling slightly.

“You think so?” she asked, amused.

“Mmm,” he answered, nodding his head slowly.

“What makes you think that?” she continued, knowing she was unsuccessfully attempting an air of indifference.

“Because I’m adorable,” he answered. Rachel bit her lip to keep from

laughing. “Are you?” she asked finally.

“Yes,” he told her, trying not to laugh. He stepped closer to her and leaned forward until his lips lightly touched hers.

Rachel closed her eyes at the sheer joy of his mouth touching hers. She reveled in the softness of his kiss and the gentleness of his lips moving tenderly against hers.

“You know, I have to admit it. You *are* one hot cowboy,” she told him quietly. “And I’m a sucker for cowboys.”

“Yeah?” he asked, smiling down at her.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “I don’t think

I'll be able to ever get you out of my system."

He pulled her toward the camper, walking backward as he held her hand and tugged her along. "Did you know I have the hots for romance writers?" he asked her seriously as he stepped up into the camper and pulled her in behind him, reaching around her to lock the door behind them securely.

"Do you?" she asked, laughing softly.

"Absolutely," he said softly, picking up one of her novels off the table. "I intend us to do what you wrote on page 247 of this book."

"And what did I write on page 247 of this book?" she asked, laughing as she took the book from him, quickly flipping

to page 247, and reading her own written creation.

Her breath caught in her throat and her pulse raced with excitement as she read the words before her. She had never in her wildest imagination ever expected to have her own fantasy play out before her.

“So how about it, baby?” he asked her huskily, reaching out to remove the book from her hand and toss it gently onto the table before taking her two hands in his and pulling them to his chest. “You game?”

Rachel stepped back, pulled her hands from his, and began unbuttoning her shirt. “Okay, cowboy,” she whispered.

“Take off everything but your hat.”

He smiled in triumph, his breathing quickening as he fought to rid himself of his clothes as he watched Rachel slowly strip before him. He was only successful in removing his shirt and boots before he had to stop to watch his wife seductively pull each piece of clothing from her body, touching herself erotically in the process.

He watched in fascination as she traced her nipples slowly, touching and squeezing her breasts as she removed her bra. His breath hitched in his throat when she pulled her underwear from her body, stood up slowly, and reached down to touch herself to open the delicate folds of her body. In that

moment, he found that he could barely breathe. She moved closer to him, lifted her foot up onto the mattress behind him and offered him a peek as her finger delved into the already wet recesses of her body. That was when his butt hit the mattress and his hands were useless in removing his own clothes.

“Need some help, cowboy?” Rachel asked him huskily. She lowered her leg and stood before him, tugging him up to stand before her. She smiled as she saw him swallow with difficulty and was empowered by the passionate gaze that pinned her and the heavy breathing that was emanating from him.

“Sam,” she whispered, laughing a

little. “Breathe, honey.”

“Oh, God,” he whispered before he reached out and framed her face with his hands.

He pulled her toward him to kiss her with such exquisite tenderness that she thought she would die from the pure pleasure of his touch. She reached out and unbuttoned the top of his jeans but had some difficulty pulling down the zipper. The hardness of his body left no room in his jeans to allow the zipper to be lowered.

“Sam, honey,” she whispered, her voice raspy with passion. “You have to help me. I can’t get this open because you’re too excited.”

Sam looked at her seriously. “Baby,

you have no idea,” he told her quietly, reaching down to cup himself and shift the hardness of his shaft to try to ease the constriction in his jeans as he stood before her.

It took a minute, but he was finally able to release the zipper. Rachel wasted no time in pulling the jeans from his body. As she knelt before him to discard the pants, she reached up without ceremony and pulled him into her mouth, sucking and stroking with a fury that left him gasping.

When he was close to exploding, she released him and stood quickly to push him back onto the bed so that his legs hung off the side. She climbed on top of

him to straddle him, reached down and grabbed hold of his engorged shaft, brought it to her dripping opening and impaled herself on him, her moan mingling with his at the connection.

She rode him hard and furious, unable to stop, not wanting to stop. She could feel him touching her womb he was so deep, but still she wanted him deeper. He lifted his hips and thrust against her as if he knew exactly what she wanted and needed, making her scream out his name as she burst with an explosion of completion just before he found his own—the groan that escaped him nearly as loud as hers.

She fell forward and landed on his chest, their bodies wet with

perspiration, both of them fighting for breath. She could feel the pounding of his heart beneath her ear, and she knew that hers was beating just as quickly. She closed her eyes and smiled as his arms heavily surrounded her. It was as if he had no strength in his body, but he needed to hold her to him. It was wonderful.

“Baby, you are better than any scene you can ever write,” he whispered, almost in awe.

After a moment, Rachel was able to get her breath back. She looked up to face him. His eyes were closed and there was a smile of contentment on his face that shot straight to her heart.

Goodness, but she loved this man.

“Sam,” she whispered, smiling as he lazily opened his eyes and looked at her. Her eyes caressed him and showed him just how much she cared about him, but she was unable to say the words that were in her heart.

He reached out and touched her jaw tenderly, tracing it before lightly touching her lips. “I know, baby,” he told her, pulling her up his chest, smiling at her moan when he slipped out of her body.

He settled her onto the bed and turned his body so that he could lie beside her, then pulled the blankets over them both. Rachel lay silently in his arms, soaking up his tenderness.

“You’ve worn me out, honey,” he whispered, kissing her temple lightly as she snuggled into his embrace.

“Sam, you’re still wearing your hat,” Rachel told him sleepily, laughing softly at the way his hat was tipped awkwardly against his head as he rested beside her.

“You told me to, ma’am,” he teased her with his best cowboy drawl.

He smiled at her giggle, then took off his hat and threw it across the camper. He turned to her then and tucked his arm under the covers so they were both warm and cozy. His hand reached up to rest on her breast, the way he always seemed to fall asleep.

“Get some rest, Rachel,” he

whispered. “When you wake up we’re going to do page 355.”

“What’s on page 355?” Rachel asked, yawning.

“Oh, honey, you are gonna like it.”

Rachel laughed and snuggled in closer. As she drifted off to sleep, she began to dream.

Sam was holding her in his arms as they lay peacefully in bed. His hand was gently caressing her breast. She sighed contentedly as she felt his hand travel down her side to rest possessively on her belly. She covered his hand with her own and pressed it closer to the life that was growing inside of her. As if knowing that her

mother and father covered her with their love, the wee babe stretched to push up and touch them.

Rachel smiled at the movement, hoping Sam was able to feel his child moving within her. She opened her eyes and looked at him, seeing that he was looking down at their hands and smiling. Yes. He had felt it, too.

“Our baby is moving,” he whispered, leaning forward to kiss her stomach before trailing kisses up her body to end at the crescent moon birthmark at the corner of her right eye.

“Sam,” she whispered, pushing his hand against her swollen abdomen. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, baby,” he told her with such intense seriousness, her breath caught in her throat.

She looked up into the crystal blueness of his eyes and began to cry at his admission. It was what she needed to hear. When he surrounded her with his arms and covered her mouth with his, she pulled him to her with such fierceness that he moaned in pure joy. She opened her legs as he settled between her softness, already hard and throbbing as he entered her welcoming body.

Sam stirred in his sleep as Rachel turned restlessly within his arms. He

watched her pull his hand from her breast to place it over her stomach and press it tightly against her. He held his breath and waited—for what he didn't know, but he wasn't about to stop her from doing what she was doing even if it was in her sleep.

“Sam, I love you so much,” she mumbled, reaching up to tug his body to her.

“Rachel,” he whispered, kissing her mouth tenderly as she pulled him until he was settled intimately between her legs. “Wake up, honey.” He kissed her lightly and smiled down at her as she roused from her dream to look up at him with clear eyes that were filled with pain. At the sight of her pain he pulled back and

touched her face in concern. “What’s wrong, honey?”

Rachel’s heart was pounding as she looked up into Sam’s eyes. She wanted more than anything to hear him speak the words he had spoken to her in her dream. She couldn’t tell him. She needed him to tell her those words on his own. If she had to pull them from him, she could never trust the honesty of them.

“I need you inside me,” she whispered instead, opening her legs to the hardness she felt pressed against her.

He hesitated a moment before lowering his mouth to hers to kiss her tenderly as he entered her slowly, gasping at the warm, inviting wetness

that welcomed him. “Whatever you need, baby,” he whispered as he moved within her, stroking deep and long and pulling moans of pleasure from both of them.

She groaned at the fullness of him, loving every push, every touch. She was lost to him. Her life would never be the same. She had gone beyond what she had ever thought loving someone could be. And it broke her heart to know that Sam might not feel the same.

Chapter 38

Sam walked around the front of the camper with his clipboard in his hand. His rounds this morning with Roy had been quick, each man wanting to get back to their wife, each knowing that the other understood the lack of conversation. The distant sound of Roy's truck pulling out of the campground was the last thing he saw before he turned and froze in place.

His breath hitched in his throat. He saw Rachel's body lying still by the rushing stream at the bottom of the small hill beside the camper. He threw his clipboard down and started to run, his

boots sliding as he hit the dusty incline.

“Oh, my God,” he whispered as he skidded to a halt next to Rachel. She was lying there, still as could be, her eyes closed and her hands resting across her stomach.

He had to force himself to take in a cleansing breath as he reached forward to touch the pulse at her neck. When he felt the steady beat of her heart he relaxed a little, but panic still gripped him.

“Rachel. Can you hear me, honey?” he asked her, touching her shoulder lightly.

He saw her stir and relief flooded his body. When she turned her head toward him and opened her eyes, he could see that she was fully aware even if she

looked somewhat confused.

“Sam?” she asked tiredly. “What’s wrong?” She reached out and touched his arm, holding on to the bulging muscle of his forearm as he knelt down beside her, his face pale.

“Thank God,” he whispered, turning his body to sit beside her with a thump, taking his cowboy hat off and rubbing across his forehead with the back of his forearm.

Rachel sat up beside him quickly and draped her arm across his back. “What happened?” she asked him worriedly, touching his chest lightly as she leaned into his body, her breasts rubbing against his arm as she snuggled closer.

He turned to look at her, his ice blue eyes settling on her soft brown ones and closing briefly before opening them to stare into the warm depths of hers once again. He dropped his hat beside him and covered the hand she held against his chest with his own.

“You scared the living daylights out of me,” he told her honestly.

“Me? Why?” she asked, surprised.

“When I saw you lying on the ground, not moving, I thought you had fainted, or something worse.”

“I’m fine,” she assured him, smiling as she snuggled into his shoulder, kissing it lightly.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. I was just resting. It’s so nice by the water. The sounds of the rushing stream always relax me.”

“You’re tired, honey?”

“Yes. I’m tired. Something has been using up all my strength lately,” she teased.

“Something, huh?” he asked, his voice dropping seductively. He reached out and touched her cheek lightly then traced a line down her neck, across her shoulder to her full breasts, cupping one lightly and squeezing before leaning in for a slow kiss.

Rachel moaned into his mouth, causing the familiar tightening in his body. When she lowered her hand from his chest to

the swelling in his pants and squeezed lightly he couldn't help but groan into her mouth.

“Rachel McCoy, you get your pretty little backside up into that camper right now before I rip all your clothes off right here and bury myself deep inside of you,” he told her huskily, looking down at her with such intensity that she had no doubt that he would do just that.

She smiled at him shyly, leaned forward to kiss his parted lips briefly, and stood beside him. Backing her way up the small incline, watching him as he rose from his seated position, she couldn't help but laugh softly as she watched him bend down to retrieve his hat, place it on his head, and walk

slowly toward her to follow her up the hill. She couldn't help feel a rush of excitement as she realized the power she had over her husband. She loved it.

She never broke her gaze from his. By the time they reached the top of the incline his shirt was completely unbuttoned and pulled from the waist of his jeans. He took off his cowboy hat and threw it into the camper, stepped up behind her and reached out to pull open the material of her soft pink shirt. Buttons flew everywhere unheeded. His deft hands made short work of removing her bra until it joined the ripped material of her blouse on the floor.

He turned and locked the camper door

securely behind them then turned back to face her, reaching out to remove the last piece of clothing that shielded her body from him. Before he could touch her jeans, she reached out to halt his hands. She turned her back to him, unbuttoned her jeans and pushed them and her underwear down her hips all the way to her ankles, giving him a nice view of her naked backside. She smiled at the intake of breath she heard behind her. Just what she had hoped for.

As she toed off her sneakers, stepped out of her clothes, and kicked the garments aside, she could hear his own jeans being unzipped and pulled from his body. Before she could turn around, his strong hands grabbed her hips and his

body bent hers forward over the table.

He kissed her neck, her shoulders, her arms, trailing his lips down her back to the beautiful ass that teased him with every movement she made. She had no idea how much he loved her ass. As he knelt behind her, he pulled her toward him and kissed each cheek, tenderly sucking at each one before spreading them and finding the throbbing moisture that awaited him.

She moaned as his tongue delved into the waiting wetness of her already dripping pussy, gasping as she felt him push two fingers into her while his other hand found the swollen nub that was already pulsing in anticipation.

Spreading her wetness across the sensitive spot, he circled it slowly before pressing into it and demanding her release.

When her knees buckled beneath her, he stood and rested her weight on his thickly muscled thighs. He took hold of his aching shaft and guided it into the dripping valley that awaited him, groaning in pure pleasure as he buried himself deeply inside her body. Her soft whimpers of pleasure encouraged him, and he started moving within her, slowly pumping in and out at first then quickening until he thought he would burst from the sensation.

Rachel gripped the table, wanting to move against him but unable to find the

strength in her limbs to do anything but lie there. He leaned into her neck and bit down lightly.

“I want to take your ass, baby,” he whispered.

Rachel gasped at his words, her eyes flashing open in surprise. Her body clamped down on his cock as desire raced through her. She wanted that, too.

“Yes,” she whispered, smiling at the sudden growl that left him and vibrated against her shoulder.

He leaned back, slowly pumping in and out of her body as he spread her ass cheeks and circled her puckered star with the pad of his thumb. He smiled as she moaned her pleasure, never stopping

the gentle pressure against her back hole.

“I’ve been wanting to do this for a while,” he told her gruffly.

“You’ve got to work on telling me things, Sam,” she told him, smiling when she heard his soft laughter.

“I promise I’ll tell you every one of my desires,” he said after a moment, pulling his hand away and reaching for the bottle of lube that he had placed on the sink.

Rachel heard the soft snick of the bottle and smiled, thinking about the day Sam had bought the lube and brought it home. She had been wondering when it was going to be part of their lovemaking experience. She wasn’t going to have to wait any longer.

Sam poured a healthy dollop of lube over Rachel's puckered star, rubbing it around the small opening with the pad of his thumb. He continued circling the entrance, pouring more lube and pressing it deep into her body with his two thumbs, opening her and stretching her carefully.

"Am I hurting you, baby?" he asked when he heard her moan.

"No. More," she told him on a groan.

Sam smiled and poured more lube onto the partially stretched opening, adding one finger, then two, pressing deep until her muscles relaxed and allowed his four fingers entrance. Pressing his hand deep, he groaned as

his fist entered her slowly and her body took him to his wrist. The erotic picture of it and the tight constriction it put on his cock as it was pressed deep within her pussy made him moan.

“Tell me you’re okay, baby,” he begged her.

“I’m good,” she whispered. “So full.”

Carefully pumping his hand deep, he pulled it out of Rachel’s body slowly. Easing his hips back, he looked down at his cock that was glistening from Rachel’s desire. He poured a healthy amount of lube down its length, wrapping his hand around his thickness to spread the viscous fluid evenly. Taking firm hold of his shaft, he placed it at Rachel’s back entrance. He pressed

forward and groaned as her body took him deep and swallowed him to the hilt.

He breathed heavily as he leaned forward and kissed her shoulder lightly. He could feel her body relaxing, and he waited a moment until the stranglehold on his cock eased. Pulling his hips back slowly, he dragged his cock from her tight hole and pushed back in, smiling at the moan that left both of them.

“Okay, baby?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

Rachel’s voice was soft, but he could hear the passion in it. He pulled out again and pressed forward, beginning a slow plunge and retreat. Reaching beneath Rachel, he wrapped his right

arm around her body just below her breasts and pulled her up to hold her tightly against his chest.

He continued to pump his hips slowly, reaching down with his left hand to gather Rachel's juices and circle her throbbing clit. He bit down on her shoulder as he pumped harder into her body, pressing firmly on her clit and groaning as he heard her gasp and call out his name as she came apart.

He pumped into her three more time, holding tight against her as his orgasm raced through him, his cock jerking within her with each pulsing release, and he filled her ass with his hot seed. He held her tightly as each throb of his cock sent more cum deep inside of her. He

felt the firmness of her clit beneath his palm and cupped her tightly, knowing any movement against her swollen button would be too much.

It took a while before their breathing wasn't so labored and their bodies had stopped shaking from the intensity of their orgasms. Easing his cock out of Rachel with tender care, he smiled as he saw the seed that dripped from her body. He felt almost primal in his satisfaction. He wanted his seed filling his woman all the time. He wanted his seed creating life within her body, and he wasn't ashamed for his possessive feelings at all. Rachel was his.

He eased her forward to help her lie

flat on the table. Taking a soft cloth from the counter, he wet it thoroughly and wiped Rachel clean, smiling at the hum of pleasure he heard escaping her. Once he was satisfied that she had been taken care of, he quickly cleaned his cock and dropped the cloth into the sink before turning Rachel to pull her into his embrace.

“Feel good, honey?” he asked as he saw the lazy smile that she gave him.

“That was interesting,” she said softly, laughing when she saw the grin on Sam’s face.

“Do you think you might want to do that again?” he asked gently. He traced the delicate arch of her eyebrow with the pad of his left thumb to gently caress the

crescent birthmark at the corner of her eye.

“Yes,” she whispered, turning into his hand and kissing his palm lightly, blushing slightly as she smelled the scent of her sex on his hand.

“Why are you blushing, baby?”

“Because I can smell myself on your hand,” she told him.

Sam smiled and leaned forward to rest his forehead against hers. “You smell good and you taste good, wife,” he whispered. “I’ll never get enough of you.”

Sam felt Rachel’s hands sliding through his hair at his temples and smiled at the tender kisses she was

trailing across his jawline and cheek. When he lifted his head to look down at her, he couldn't help but smile. He kissed her mouth lightly, unable to speak.

Rachel gazed up at him, happy to see the warm tenderness that his eyes held for her. Maybe someday he would be able to speak the words to tell her that he loved her. For now, she was content that he showed her every day just how much he enjoyed her and cherished her.

Being married to Sam was the best thing that had ever happened to her. The times they shared were fun, caring, and loving. It was a good life. Hell, it was a great life!

Chapter 39

“Rachel, where are you off to?” Sam called to her as she stepped down from the camper and was about to turn the corner toward the campsites.

Rachel turned to face him and smiled at the sight of him wiping his sweaty chest with a towel. He had been cutting wood all morning and was covered with a sheen of perspiration.

“Hey, handsome,” she said to him, smiling as he stood before her. Her gaze swept his body appreciatively before they sought out his laughing eyes. “Thanks for the show this morning.”

“Show?” he asked confused.

“A pretty awesome show, Sam,” she answered, her own eyes dancing with merriment. “I’ve been watching you from the camper all morning while you were chopping wood.”

Sam laughed and threw the towel into the open camper door. “So you like what you saw?” he teased.

She stepped toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist. She breathed in the scent of him, closing her eyes with pleasure as she licked at his sweaty chest and circled his nipple with her tongue before clamping down on it gently with her teeth. She squeaked with surprise as his arms tightened around her and pulled her to him.

“Rachel,” he warned. “If you keep that up we’ll have to go shopping for clothes for you because I’ll be ripping everything from your body.” He looked down at her, his eyes holding promise despite the twinkle of teasing that was there.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she challenged him, laughing.

“Try me,” he told her huskily, reaching up to hold her face between his two hands, weaving his fingers into the silky tresses of her hair and leaning forward to kiss her gently.

She pulled back from him slightly and smiled up at him. “Any time,” she promised, winking, laughing at the groan

that escaped him. “I have something to do first.” She pulled out of his embrace reluctantly.

“What?”

“I’m going to go and close up my tent and pack up all my things. Now that Stan and Gwen are gone, we shouldn’t be wasting a site with my stuff. When I get back you better lay down and get comfortable because you won’t have any strength left when I finish with you,” she teased, more serious than not.

Sam could feel his heart race and his body tighten with anticipation. He pulled Rachel back into his embrace, aware that her heart was racing just as fast as his was. When he looked down into his wife’s eyes, he saw the love and passion

that she had for him. Happiness and desire filled him as he thought about making love to her all afternoon.

“I’ll help you with your tent,” he offered.

“It’s probably best that I do it myself,” she explained gently and a little embarrassed. “I’ve been missing Stan and Gwen, and I think I just might cry a little. Besides, I’m more than capable of doing things myself. Or haven’t you learned that yet?”

“I’ve learned,” he told her, smiling. “And I’ve taught some things, too.” He winked at her, making her blush deeply at the memory of the things that he had taught her.

“Yes, you have,” she whispered, her voice betraying the desire and the need she was once again feeling.

“Okay, you go on and clear your site. When you’re finished I’ll be waiting for you at the camper. After I finish ravishing your body, or you can ravish mine, we can go shopping,” he told her, winking devilishly at her.

Rachel couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, what do we need to shop for?”

Sam reached out and pulled her into his embrace. “We need groceries,” he told her, kissing her neck. “And gas.” He kissed her cheek. “And clothes for you.” He kissed her temple.

“I don’t need any clothes,” she

protested, giggling sweetly as his mouth finally claimed hers.

“Yes, you do,” he whispered against her ear. “You need some maternity clothes.” He leaned back to look down at her very seriously, smiling sweetly at the stunned expression on her face.

“Sam, you can’t possibly know that yet,” she stammered, a blush creeping up across her cheeks.

“It’s only a matter of time, honey,” he told her seriously. He watched her face as a series of emotions crossed it.

“You think so?” she nearly whispered. The tender expression on his face as he looked down at her stole her heart.

“Yes, baby, I think so,” he whispered, leaning down to kiss her lightly.

“Excuse me,” a man’s voice called to them.

Sam turned toward the voice, not letting Rachel go. “What can we do for you?”

“We were hoping you could give us some directions,” the man told him, putting his arm around his ten year old son’s shoulder.

“Sure,” Sam said, looking at Rachel and smiling softly. “Later, honey.” He kissed her temple as he whispered the words against her ear.

“It’s a date,” Rachel answered, kissing his jaw tenderly.

He kissed her lightly on her forehead and reluctantly released her from his

embrace before walking toward the father and son. Rachel watched him walk toward the packed truck that the man drove, smiling at the kindness that Sam always showed.

With a sigh, she turned to head toward the farthest campsite where her things were still set up. It seemed like an eternity ago that she had camped there and had begun her vacation. So much had happened to her.

She smiled as she reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out her keys to unlock her car. She opened all the windows to air it out while she began to empty her tent. It took her only twenty minutes to load her things into the car. She leaned against it and looked at

her tent for a moment, then reached for her hammer and walked toward it to start pulling up the stakes.

She quickly flattened the tent and began to fold it systematically. She found herself thinking about Gwen and Stan and started to cry a little at the sadness that she felt. She hoped that they would be able to keep in touch with them. Sam had promised that they would, and he said that he would always keep his promises. At least she knew that he had kept every promise that he had ever made to her.

She smiled at the thought of the way that Sam kept his promises. She loved the way he touched her. She loved the

way he laughed with her. She loved the way he talked so seriously about his work. She loved the way he made love to her. She loved him so totally that her heart ached at the very thought of him.

She rolled up the tent and tied it securely to keep it from unfolding then hefted it onto her shoulder and carried it across the site to quickly place it beside the other supplies that were already packed away in the back of her car. She headed back to fold up the ground tarp, walked back to her car and placed it beside the tent. As she straightened the supplies and made sure that everything was secure, she heard the sound of a truck driving into the campground.

She turned to look and smiled when

she saw that it was Roy's truck. She looked at her watch and saw that it was after eleven. Roy usually got there before eight in the morning. She closed up her car and locked it then started to walk the distance to the camper. She hoped everything was okay. As she got closer she found herself getting a little nervous that something had happened to Paulette to make Roy so late.

She almost started to run when the doors of Roy's truck opened and Roy stepped out on one side of the truck and a woman stepped out on the other side. It was Allison. And from the looks of it, she was dressed to kill. She wore a white silk shirt, black capri pants, and

black high heels. Who the hell wore high heels at a campsite?

Rachel stopped where she was and waited until the pain in her heart lessened. She brushed her sweat-dampened hair back from her face and tried to wipe off the dirt from her hands. She suddenly felt exactly like the hick from a small town that both Richard and Allison had accused her of being.

* * * *

Sam had just finished reading a chapter in one of his medical texts when he heard the sound of Roy's truck. He closed his book and stood, tugging on his black T-shirt that he had thrown onto the

picnic table. He walked up the small incline where he had been sitting on Rachel's lounge chair, hurrying as concern filled him. When he got to the top, his smile of greeting for his best friend disappeared when he saw the one person he had never expected to see. Allison.

“This is lovely. Very cute,” Allison said sarcastically, her voice cold as she walked toward Sam and looked into the camper. Turning, she faced Sam and smiled.

“Sorry, Sam,” Roy apologized. “She showed up at my house last night and refused to leave until I brought her here today so she could talk to you. I didn’t

know what else to do. I should have called you.”

“That’s okay, Roy,” Sam told his friend sincerely. “I’m sorry she imposed. I’m sure she never thought to thank you for your hospitality.”

Allison looked at him with fire in her eyes. “I thanked them for their precious little bed and their bland food,” she told him angrily.

Sam looked at Roy and was about to apologize when Roy lifted his hands and shook his head. He knew how Allison could be. There was no need for Sam to feel responsible for her actions.

“I’ve come to bring you this,” Allison said, drawing his attention back to her. She reached forward to hand him the

folded papers that she had carried with her all the way from Denver.

Sam took them slowly from her. “Well now you’ve delivered them, so you can leave,” he said, the papers dangling, unheeded in his right hand.

“I’m not leaving until you’ve read them,” she told him defiantly.

“Always changing the terms, right Allison?” he asked her quietly, blissfully aware that she no longer held any emotional power over him. “One vacation changed to two vacations. One diamond ring changed to two ruby rings. One child changed to no children. You just can’t seem to figure out what you want, and you think it’s just fine to

change the terms at your discretion.” He watched her silently, seeing that she was getting angry and glad that he didn’t really care. “All right, one last concession then you get back in that truck and get the hell out of here.”

He unfolded the papers and read them quickly. They were legal documents from his father’s lawyer. The documents changed the stipulations of Edwin McCoy’s will to include a clause that would remove Sam from his will if he continued to remain married to Rachel. It went on further to say that any and all children resulting from their marriage would not be recognized as heirs to his estate when he died. The legality of the brief droned on but basically kept the

same tone. If Sam remained married to Rachel, he would not receive a penny from his father nor would he be privilege to the elite social circle of influence that he was a part of. His career in Denver would be finished. No one would go against the wishes of Edwin McCoy and help or hire Sam. The legal document was dated the day after the banquet that he and Rachel had attended.

Sam looked up at Allison and folded the papers. She was looking at him smugly, sure that she had won and he would be coming back with her to Denver.

“You’ve wasted your time and Roy’s

time by coming here, Allison. This doesn't change one thing," Sam told her finally, lifting the papers in his hand.

"You can't mean that you would actually throw away all that money and prestige for some mountain girl!" she sputtered, laughing cruelly. "Does having a child mean that much to you?"

"Having children *is* very important to me," he admitted, folding his arms across his chest.

"How will you live with no money?" she sneered.

"Rachel can support us. She's an accomplished writer and has already published several novels," he said, shrugging. "She's got plenty of money to take care of us."

“She’ll never be able to give you this,” Allison said seductively, walking toward him and reaching out to unfold his arms. She wrapped her body around his and kissed him. She kissed him deeply, passionately, with her mouth open and her tongue probing his mouth, demanding that he open his to accept her. She pressed her hips against his and moved them seductively against him, waiting for the arousal that would prove that he still wanted her.

Rachel gasped and covered her mouth. Roy looked behind him and saw her standing only an arm’s length away from him. He saw the horror in her eyes and knew that she had heard every word.

This was going to be one hell of a situation for Sam to explain. He wondered if his friend would be able to fix this problem. The hurt in Rachel's eyes spoke volumes. She had been hurt before, and Roy knew that Sam's actions were destroying what little confidence she had in herself or in their marriage. Roy knew that she was not going to accept any explanation.

“Rachel,” Roy called to her, reaching out to take hold of her arm.

Rachel pulled back from him. She didn't want anyone to touch her. She knew what she had heard and what she had seen. Nothing was going to change that.

Sam heard Roy call Rachel's name

and reached up to pull Allison's hands from around his neck. He looked at her angrily then turned to face his wife.

"Oh, it's the mountain wife," Allison said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, bored with the situation already. "I have something for you, too." She reached out to extend the envelope that she held. It had Rachel's name written across it.

"You have nothing for my wife," Sam said angrily, pulling the envelope from her hand.

Allison pulled it back from Sam. "Yes, I do," she insisted, throwing it in Rachel's direction. The envelope fell to the ground. Rachel made no attempt to get it, and Sam was too angry to deal

with anything except getting Allison away from his campground.

“Rachel, I’m going to take Allison back to Roy’s and then to the nearest bus terminal and make sure that she’s on her way back to Denver,” Sam told her quietly. “I’ll be back before dinner. We’ll talk about this when I get home.”

Without waiting for Rachel to reply, Sam pulled Allison by the wrist and walked angrily to his truck. Opening the passenger door, he pushed Allison into the seat and slammed the door shut. He walked around the other side, reached into his front pocket for his keys and opened the door to climb inside.

Rachel watched them silently, not moving as the vehicle was started and

pulled away. She watched it leave the campground then turned and faced her cousin.

“Sam didn’t mean it the way it sounded,” Roy tried to defend his friend’s actions.

“It doesn’t matter,” Rachel stopped him.

She looked across the campsite to the rushing stream that glistened in the sunlight. She felt as if someone was sitting on her chest. She could barely breathe and she couldn’t swallow.

“It does matter,” Roy insisted angrily, stepping forward and taking hold of her arm in a tight grip.

Rachel looked up at him silently, not

even aware of the pressure his hand had on her elbow. She was numb. She could barely think. Pain engulfed her and it was all she could do to take one breath after another.

“Rachel, please don’t do anything until Sam comes back and talks with you,” Roy told her quietly, seeing the way that Rachel’s body seemed to crumble.

“Roy, no matter what, you have to promise me that you won’t give Sam my phone number or address,” she told him finally, turning to face him. Her eyes were dull and lifeless as she looked up at him. “When I work this through in my head, I’ll get in touch with him at his apartment in Denver.”

“Rachel, don’t jump to conclusions.

Allison is manipulating the situation. You should listen to what Sam has to say,” Roy told her firmly.

“I already did listen. I already heard what he had to say. Now you listen to what *I* say. I don’t want Sam to contact me. Don’t give him my phone number or my address.”

“Rachel, this is wrong,” Roy interrupted her.

“No, Roy,” Rachel told him, her voice steel and void of emotion. “Promise me.”

Roy looked at her sadly. He had no choice. “Okay, I promise,” he said finally.

Chapter 40

Rachel bent down and picked up the envelope that was addressed to her that was still on the ground and opened it slowly. Whatever was in it couldn't be good, considering who brought it and who it was probably from. She unfolded the formal letter and read it quickly. Her heart ached as she read it. Everything she had done in her life was for nothing. Everything she had hoped for didn't matter. This letter just sealed her fate.

Ms. Williams,

As you are reading this letter I will be in a meeting with the CEO of the

First National Bank of Denver. I will have already purchased the mortgage for the Monroe Ranch and will begin proceedings to evict its current tenants. I will also have purchased the mortgage for Roy Monroe's home and will have called in favors in the Department of Parks & Recreation that will ensure that the position of employment currently held by Roy Monroe will be eliminated, and any further job opportunities within the department will not present itself. These actions are as a direct result of your going back on our agreement of ten years ago. Any further contact with my family members will result in further action against your family

members. It is your choice, Ms. Williams. Walk away now and none of this will come to fruition.

Edwin McCoy

Rachel folded the letter slowly and returned it to its envelope. The raw ache in her heart made her lose her strength. She dropped her hands in total defeat. The letter only served to strengthen her decision. If she hadn't walked in on what she had seen and heard, she might have tried to work the situation through to save her family, but there was little point in putting her family through any further pain or anguish. She didn't have to fight anymore now that she knew how

Sam felt about her. The letter dropped from her hands and fell to the ground.

Very calmly, she walked toward the camper to retrieve her clothes and personal belongings. She packed everything into her suitcase quickly. She looked at the garment bag that held her wedding dress and touched it sadly. Tears began to slip down her face but she ignored them as she carried the garment bag and suitcase across the campground and placed them in the back seat of her car.

She climbed in and started the engine then drove the distance to Sam's camper. She shut off the engine, got out of her car and ran down the small incline to retrieve her lounge chair and put it in the

back of her car with her other camping gear.

Going back inside the camper, she found her laptop case and opened it to make sure that everything was inside of it. She straightened the notes she had made to herself about her edits and stopped suddenly when she saw the marriage certificate. She looked at it for a moment then sat down at the table and covered her face with her hands and cried.

All her pain came out in heart-wrenching sobs. Anyone who might have heard her would know the pain that was engulfing her. Her time with Sam had been a sham. Her heart hurt. Her body

hurt. She was one giant wound that would never heal.

When she was unable to cry another tear, she wiped her eyes and blew her nose. She looked down at her hand at the wedding band that Sam had placed there. She had promised him that she would never remove it. She could not honor that promise any longer. Reaching for it with her other hand, she slid it off slowly and placed it in the middle of the table. She would not write him a note. There was nothing she could say.

Getting up, she picked up her laptop case and glasses. Taking one last look around the place that she had experienced such happiness and love during the last few weeks, she did her

best to push the ache and sadness aside. Turning, she walked away from the camper and out of Sam's life.

She climbed into her car and placed her laptop case and glasses on the seat beside her. Buckling herself in and starting the engine, she drove out of the campground slowly, carefully winding her way down the mountain road. When she finally arrived at the highway, she drove mindlessly, robotically, knowing only that she had to get back to her home in Connecticut and as far away from Sam McCoy as quickly as she could.

* * * *

Sam drove like a maniac back to the campground. He was furious that Allison had caused such trouble for him. After the way he had yelled at her all the way back to Roy's house, he didn't think that she would ever bother him again. She had said that he was crazy and she was right. He *was* crazy. The anger that consumed him was equaled only by the fear that Rachel had been hurt. Allison had done more damage in her few minutes at the campsite and at the banquet than he could have ever thought possible. He had had enough of both her and his father.

The threats that his father had made were laughable. None of those things

mattered to him and it was time his father knew it. All that mattered to him was Rachel. He had to get back to her and tell her that.

He didn't know why he had let Allison kiss him like that. Maybe he had to prove to himself that he didn't want her anymore. Maybe he had to know that she couldn't excite him like she used to. Whatever the reason, he was sorry for letting her kiss him the moment it happened. He knew the only woman he wanted to kiss was Rachel—his Rachel—his wife. He had to get home to her and tell her so.

He pulled his truck into the campground and practically ran from it when he turned off the engine. He didn't

see Rachel by the stream so he went to the camper and opened the door to step up inside it quickly. His heart began to pound when he realized that none of Rachel's things were there. He looked around quickly and froze when he saw her wedding ring on the table.

He walked toward it slowly and reached out to pick it up in his hand. He crushed it in his fist and rushed from the camper to race across the campground with angry, powerful strides that were spurred by his fear. He froze when he saw that the far site was empty and Rachel's vehicle was gone.

The emotions welled up in his chest, and he couldn't stop the growl of fury

that escaped him. He fell to his knees in the dirt in front of the vacated campsite and hung his head. The sound of his growl echoed across the mountain, blending with the sounds of the birds and the rushing water. His chest rose and fell painfully as he struggled to maintain his composure.

Despite his outward calm, his eyes betrayed his emotions. The empty campsite before him was blurred by the haze of pain and anger that consumed him. Sadness and frustration gripped his heart with a terror that took all strength from him. In that instant, he knew he had lost the best friend he had ever had. His foolishness had driven away the woman that he loved with all his heart.

“Rachel,” he finally whispered. But no one was there to hear him.

Chapter 41

Inside the high-rise office building, the elevator doors opened slowly and Rachel quickly stepped inside. Roy entered silently behind her. She turned and faced the doors as they closed before her and reached forward to push the button for the fifth floor. She looked at her watch and saw that she still had fifteen minutes before her appointment with Nancy.

She brushed down her navy skirt and tugged at her tailored jacket nervously. Although she needed to attend this meeting with her agent, she was terrified of being in New York City again. Her

court date for her case against Richard Damian was also that afternoon, and her nerves were stretched tight. She didn't know how much more she could take. Her stress level was beyond high. She just wanted this day to be over.

“You okay, Rache?” Roy asked her quietly, watching his cousin worriedly.

Rachel nodded and concentrated on the floor buttons lighting up as they raced up the flights. She was glad that Roy was with her now and was glad that he had stayed with her for the past two days. She needed him. She needed his strength to bolster her as she went to court to face the man who had assaulted her.

“It'll all be over by tonight,” Roy

assured her, taking her hand and squeezing it gently.

“It’ll be fine,” Rachel answered with false bravado, as much to convince herself as her cousin.

The elevator dinged, startling her, stopping and opening up to admit them to the fifth floor. They stepped out quickly, and Roy followed Rachel as she walked toward her agent’s office. She looked confident and professional as she opened the office door and stepped inside.

Her grip tightened on the handle of her briefcase, guarding her newest creation with every bit of strength she had. In it was the printed beginning pages of her

latest novel that was a story of love and dreams that came true. If only those things could happen in real life, she thought sadly as she faced Kelly-Anne, Nancy's assistant.

Roy stood beside her, dressed in his black tailored suit. Rachel smiled at the man beside her. He looked a little uncomfortable in the formal attire but presented a strikingly handsome figure. She smiled sadly at him, realizing that she was taking him away from Paulette and their new baby.

She felt an overwhelming sense of warmth spread through her chest as she looked at her cousin. He had always been there for her. Him being with her while she faced her demons in court

made her feel calm and protected. She had to push aside the face of the man with the beautiful blue eyes who would forever haunt her thoughts. She had grown accustomed to his protection and warmth, too.

“Good morning, Miss Williams,” Kelly-Anne greeted her warmly. “How was your trip to the mountains?”

Rachel smiled sadly, her heart pounding slightly at the innocent question. “It was very nice,” she told the petite woman politely. “I’ll wait over here until Nancy is ready to see me.” She sat down on the chair that was the farthest away from Kelly-Anne’s desk and looked out the window to the City

below.

Roy sat down in the chair beside her and watched her silently. He was worried about her. She looked pale and tired but it was her quietness that disturbed him. She had withdrawn into herself and refused to talk to him or anyone about Sam or what had happened the day she had left Colorado.

She called and spoke to Paulette and Roy often and enjoyed talking about the recent birth of their son but would not talk about the situation with Sam. No amount of Roy's advice or persuasion would make her budge in her decision not to call Sam. She also made sure that Roy kept his promise to her to keep her phone number and address from Sam

until she was ready to make contact. He had given up trying. She would only talk to him about Paulette, their new baby son, or his mom. Nothing else.

Rachel was lost in thought when Kelly-Anne called to her a short time later. When she touched her arm, Rachel jumped in fright.

“Sorry, Miss Williams,” Kelly-Anne apologized, pulling back quickly at Rachel’s reaction. “Nancy is ready for you.”

Rachel nodded and smiled. “Thanks, Kelly-Anne. Sorry I scared you.”

“That’s okay. You looked like you were a million miles away,” she told her, smiling.

Rachel nodded and stood, picking up her briefcase and smiling sadly at the kind woman before her. “Not quite a million,” she whispered, thinking about the miles that separated her from the mountains of Colorado.

“I’ll be a little while,” Rachel told Roy quietly as she began to walk away from him.

“I’ll be here,” Roy answered, his voice strong.

Rachel smiled down at her cousin then reached out to touch his shoulder and nodded silently, appreciating his kindness and his constant support. Roy touched her hand gently and squeezed it lightly.

“Rachel, welcome back,” Nancy greeted her warmly, coming around her desk and shaking her hand.

“Thanks,” Rachel said quietly. She shook her hand briefly then sat down in the chair in front of Nancy’s desk. She placed her briefcase on the only corner of the desk that wasn’t cluttered by stacks of manuscripts, opened it and removed the manuscript that she had just completed.

“Do we have another winner?” Nancy asked her brightly as she took the manuscript from her.

“I think so,” Rachel told her, smiling.

“Great,” Nancy said, taking a seat behind her desk and placing the

manuscript before her along with the flash drive that contained the file. “You didn’t need to come to my office, Rachel. You could have sent me the file online.”

“I know. I just needed to talk to you and show you this,” she said, reaching into her briefcase and taking out a large manila envelope that was stuffed with the pages of the book that was pulled directly from her heart. She handed it to her with confidence. She knew it was good, but she was hesitant to share the very real and broken heart that she displayed within the pages.

Nancy pushed aside the completed manuscript and reached for the envelope. It was then that she saw the

signs of fatigue on Rachel's face.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Rachel insisted. “Just a little tired. I finished the rewrites last week and I just started this new book three days ago. Will you look it over while I'm here and let me know what you think?”

“Sure,” Nancy told her quietly, looking at Rachel worriedly as she opened the envelope and pulled the stack of pages from it carefully. She swiveled in her chair and leaned back to begin reading it.

Twenty minutes later she turned that last page of the work that Rachel had given her. She looked up and saw that

Rachel was watching her closely.

“So, what do you think?” Rachel asked her quietly.

Nancy’s blue eyes were misted with tears as she looked across at Rachel. “I think I want to read the rest of this right now.”

Rachel sat back in her chair, smiling sadly. “That good?” she asked.

“That good,” Nancy told her honestly. “Do you think the rest of it will be as good?”

“Yes,” Rachel answered without hesitation.

“I think so, too,” Nancy said quietly. She put the pages back in the envelope and handed it back to Rachel. “This is terrific work.”

Rachel smiled sadly as she took the envelope from Nancy and placed it gently into her briefcase. She stood slowly and brushed a lock of hair from her face.

“I’m going home this afternoon,” she said tiredly. “I won’t be coming back into the City for a while, but I’ll keep in touch.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Nancy asked her worriedly, standing and walking around her desk to stand beside her.

Rachel reached out and held Nancy’s hand for a brief moment before letting go and picking up her briefcase. “I’m just worn out. I think I’ll hibernate away the

fall and winter and, hopefully, be back up to speed by spring.”

“Take care of yourself, Rachel.”

“I will,” Rachel told her, smiling sadly as she left the office.

Roy stood the minute he saw Rachel walking toward him. He was really worried about her. She insisted that she was fine, but he could see that she was working hard to hold herself together. He walked toward her and smiled when she looked up at him.

She smiled back, feeling better already now that he was beside her. They made their way out of the building and hailed a cab to head toward her court date.

The ride to the courthouse was too

quick for Rachel even though it took nearly twenty minutes to get through the busy City traffic. Roy sat beside her silently, not knowing what to say. He wished that he could take away his cousin's fear. This was very hard for her. He was worried that she would finally crumble when she was facing Richard.

As they walked up the steps to the courthouse and headed toward the courtroom assigned for her case, Rachel found herself walking closer to Roy and holding his arm for support. She was more nervous than she had ever been in her life. She prayed that she could stay strong until this whole thing was over.

Her lawyer MaryAnn Roberts met her outside the courtroom. She was a tall woman with short brown hair and soft brown eyes. She stood ramrod straight and conveyed a sense of strength and competence that relieved Rachel's fears immediately.

"Rachel, how are you?" she asked, reaching out to shake Rachel's hand.

"Hanging in there," Rachel answered, smiling slightly. "This is my cousin Roy Monroe."

Roy extended his hand and shook MaryAnn's hand, relieved at the strength that met his grip. "Nice to meet you," he said quietly.

MaryAnn nodded and turned to face

Rachel. “We’ve had a change in plans,” she told her quietly. “Let’s find a room to sit in to discuss the situation.”

Rachel looked at Roy nervously, but followed MaryAnn without a word. Once they were settled in a small meeting room away from the noise of the busy courthouse, she sat down with Roy beside her to listen to what MaryAnn had to say.

“Mr. Damian’s lawyer and the assistant district attorney have arrived at a plea bargain regarding the charges,” MaryAnn explained calmly. “Mr. Damian has dismissed his charge of assault against you. The assistant district attorney is willing to accept a misdemeanor charge with aggravated

harassment and agreement to counseling. Any future incidents will be dealt with harshly now that this is on his record. He will also be given two years probation and one hundred hours of community service. The restraining order you have against him will stand.”

Rachel looked at Roy, realizing that she had to come to terms with this ending before she could put closure to this horrible event in her life. Roy faced her and reached up to cover her clenched hands as they rested on the wooden table.

Rachel nodded and looked at her lawyer. “So that’s it then?” she asked, unsure.

MaryAnn nodded. “Yes,” she answered simply. “You did the right thing by pressing charges, Rachel. At least now Mr. Damian will get counseling and these charges are on his permanent record. Hopefully, it will deter future assaults. If not, this will help seal his fate.”

Rachel nodded and reached out to touch MaryAnn’s arm and squeezed it tightly. “Thank you for all your help.”

MaryAnn nodded and stood, reaching out to shake Roy’s and Rachel’s hands one final time. “You take care of yourself,” she told her client sincerely, then turned to leave the quiet meeting room.

Rachel turned to face Roy. "It's over," she said quietly.

"Yes," Roy answered.

"Let's go home," Rachel said tiredly.

"Sounds good to me," Roy agreed quickly, smiling. He took the briefcase from his cousin's hand and led her out of the meeting room. He helped to get her through the busy courthouse to stand before the elevators. He wanted to get her home as quickly as he could.

Rachel allowed Roy to lead her through the building. She didn't have the energy to do anything but follow him, and that was just fine with her. She was glad it was over. She knew that she had to be strong and get on with her life. She

was more than capable of taking care of herself. She didn't need any man to make her feel complete or worthwhile, but she was glad that Roy was with her.

The elevator doors opened and she found herself staring straight into Richard Damian's face. He was tanned and as handsome as ever, but she found herself looking at him from a new perspective. She saw the shock and then anger that was evident on his face. It was almost laughable. His expression was probably meant to intimidate her, but it served only to disgust her. How could she have ever been attracted him? When she looked at him now, she saw only a cruel and sadistic man.

"Richard," she said softly, leaning into

her cousin's side as exhaustion swamped her. She was not in the mood for this right now.

She hesitated a minute, then stepped back to allow Richard to get off the elevator. Instead of stepping forward to get on the elevator, she turned to face the man who had attacked her. Richard took a step toward her but found his path blocked by Roy's very strong and very tense body.

"Back off," Roy warned him quietly, his voice nearly a growl.

Richard stepped back in surprise. She had realized how cruel and insincere he was, but until that moment she hadn't realized how much of a coward he was.

She smiled, looking him directly in the eyes. He held no remorse for what he had done to her. He was actually angry with her for defending herself. How sad that he could be so twisted in his behavior that he wasn't even able to realize that what he had done to her was more than wrong. It was sick and twisted. How sad it was that he never took responsibility for his actions.

She faced him squarely and held her ground. "Richard, you're pathetic," she told him calmly, her voice displaying the contempt and disgust she had for him. "Do you honestly think that I'm going to waste any more of my time dealing with you?" She looked up at him without an

ounce of emotion. “You aren’t worth it.”

Richard looked at her viciously, hesitating when she didn’t react the way he had expected her to. He took another step toward her and reached out to grab her.

Roy took hold of his wrist, preventing the sick fuck from touching his cousin. The strength with which he held Richard Damian’s arm was such that even the tiniest twist would snap the bone easily. Roy really hoped the bastard would continue with his attempt at intimidation so he could do just that.

“Try it, buddy, and you’ll lose your hand,” he promised.

Richard stepped back immediately, rubbing his wrist as soon as Roy

released him. He had no doubt that this man who stood beside Rachel would carry through with his threat.

Rachel reached out to push the button to ring for the elevator. “If you knew what was good for you, you would back off and slink back to your disgusting corner of the world,” she told Richard tiredly, not even bothering to look at him. She turned to enter the elevator that was open in front of her. Roy followed her into the elevator and turned to face Richard evenly. She saw the unmistakable hatred on Richard’s face. Rachel watched him disappear as the elevator door closed between them and shook her head in disgust.

He would never change. How could she have ever blamed herself for his behavior? She was not responsible for his actions. She was not the reason for his brutality. She reached forward to push the ground floor button and leaned against the wall tiredly. Roy put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her tightly against his side. She leaned into him as all her strength left her. She couldn't hold it together any longer. She'd had enough.

Roy held her up as he ushered her out of the elevator. It was the first time he could ever remember Rachel looking so defeated. Even the time they had gotten hurt on the mountain trail when she had

been twenty hadn't caused her to give up. She had done her best to help him and Sam get her down the mountain. He didn't see any of that strength now. He hated that she had reached the point of saturation.

Roy led her from the courthouse and hailed a cab for them. She just wanted to go home. When the cab stopped beside them, she watched with no emotions as Roy leaned forward to open the door. She climbed in, leaning against her cousin as he sat beside her. She watched the many people they passed as the cab made its way to Grand Central Station. She had a sense of detachment that should have frightened her, but she was too numb to care. She needed to get

home and rest.

She thought about the new novel that she had begun. Nancy saw the possibilities in it. It was hard not to. It was filled with incredible love and incredible loss. This book would be special to her. She hoped it would help her to get over her broken heart.

She needed to write a happy ending to her love affair with Sam. She needed to see Sam and Rachel live happily ever after—even if it was only in one of her novels.

* * * *

The angel Bernadette looked down on

the sadness that consumed Rachel as she slept. She leaned forward to whisper words of hope into the young woman's ear, concerned when Rachel resisted her comfort. She could feel the pain in her young charge's heart and tried her best to ease her worry, but it was difficult. The level of despair that Rachel had sunk into was one that was deep and strong. Bernadette had her job cut out for her, but she was a determined little angel. She hadn't failed in any of her missions yet.

Rachel snuggled under the covers of her bed, turning toward the gentle voice she heard in her head. The dream was so real. She tried to make sense of what she was hearing and what she was feeling.

She was warm, and calm, and she could hear the voice of a young girl whispering to her softly. She could smell the mouthwatering scent of baking cinnamon rolls and smiled as she saw the beautiful angel before her. The angel's wings were spread wide and were emanating a soft white and pink aura.

“Rachel, do not give up,” the angel told her quietly, her sad eyes watching her intently.

“Who are you?” Rachel asked the tiny angel. “Why are you here?”

The little angel flew closer, reaching out to touch her cheek tenderly. “I have

always watched over you, Rachel,” she spoke softly. “Do not be afraid. Love will always be with you. Your family will help you. Sam needs you, sweet child. He loves you. You belong with him.”

With those final words, the angel backed away, slowly fading from Rachel’s gaze. Rachel wiped at her cheeks and found them wet with tears. Snuggling deeper into her covers, she fell deeper into her slumber. As much as she wanted her dream to be a real vision of her future, she knew that it was just a dream. One that had very little hope of coming true.

Chapter 42

Rachel parted the white lace curtains to look out the big picture window in the front of her home. A snowstorm was raging outside. It was the first one of the season. She was glad that it had waited until after Thanksgiving. First snow on the twelfth of December really was a blessing. Despite that, she knew it was going to prove itself to be a very long and very snowy winter.

She tucked her pink fluffy bathrobe closer around her body and buttoned the top button to try and ward off the chill that had seeped into her bones. The robe's bulkiness surrounded her with

layers of warmth, just what she needed now that the weather had turned so bitterly cold. She was glad that she was inside where it was safe and warm.

The sound of her printer stopping its printout drew her attention. She turned toward it and walked over to sit before it. Turning off the power switch, she reached forward to remove the finished work. Putting the pages in order and punching holes in them, she inserted the pages into the notebook that was already bursting with previously printed work. She snapped the rings shut and flipped the pages to get to the first page of the manuscript. Turning her attention to her computer, she saved her work then went through the routine of shutting the

computer down.

She looked at the open notebook that was opened to the first page of the thick manuscript and smiled sadly. Normally, she edited on her laptop, but there was something about this novel that made her want to hold it in her hands when she read through it. She knew it was because she needed to have tangible proof that this story existed. She would begin proofreading it tomorrow. Right now she craved something hot to drink.

Standing, she walked into her kitchen and opened the refrigerator to take out a carton of milk. She opened it and poured some into a pan and set it on the stove to heat. She turned on the burner and stared

into the low flame, flinching as memories of past campfires came back to her, flooding her mind with a vengeance.

She saw Sam's face. She remembered his laugh. She remembered his touch. Everything about him haunted her, day and night. She kept seeing his eyes, feeling his hands on her body, tasting his kisses. She would never be able to get him out of her mind or her heart.

She had thought that writing the book that was open on her desk would help cleanse her of her desire for him, but it hadn't. She still thought about him constantly and kept going over things in her head, wondering if there was any way that things might have ended up

differently.

She tore her gaze away from the flame and looked up at the refrigerator door, smiling sadly as she looked at the recent picture Roy had sent her of his new son. Paulette looked absolutely radiant in the picture as she held the precious bundle. Roy's face was alive with happiness as he held his tiny son's hand in his. Rachel wished that she could have been there when he had been born.

She always got an earful from Paulette when she talked to her every Sunday, but she would not be convinced to let them give Sam her address. She needed to take her own time to contact him. She didn't think she was up to confronting

him about anything just yet.

She thought about Roy and Paulette and their son often and wished that she could visit them. Maybe she could get out to visit them when the weather cleared a little. She would have to make sure that Sam wasn't around before she made the arrangements for the visit. She would not risk running into him.

The simmering milk drew her attention and pulled her away from her thoughts. She spooned some hot chocolate mix into a mug and lifted the pan to carefully pour the hot milk into it. The sound of the doorbell and knocking on her front door made her jump in surprise, causing her to spill some of the hot milk across her left hand. She gasped in pain and

dropped the pan into the sink. Reaching forward, she turned on the cold water and plunged her hand beneath the cool stream of water. Tears of pain welled up in her eyes. She leaned forward to lay her head on the counter as weakness threatened to take hold of her.

The knocking began again, this time louder. She reached forward slowly and turned off the water. Taking a deep breath, she stood up straight and walked toward the front door of her home. Despite the fact that she was a little woozy from the burn, she yanked the door open angrily. Her words of anger died in her throat as she faced the person who had knocked so persistently. It was

Sam.

He stood there, bundled in a navy parka, his black hair wet with snow. He faced her silently, looking at her so intently that she found herself becoming angry at the hurt and rejection that she had felt since she had left the camper that morning nearly five months before.

“What do you want?” she asked him coldly, ignoring the throbbing pain in her hand but unable to ignore the constant pain in her heart.

“I’m coming in,” he told her sternly.

“Like hell you are,” she told him angrily.

She tried to shut the door but his hand stopped her. She pushed against the door futilely. Her strength was no match for

his. She knew that it was foolish to waste her energy.

“Please, Rachel,” he asked her quietly.

Rachel released the door and walked away. The throbbing in her hand was too much to ignore. She left him at the door and walked back into the kitchen to turn on the cold water and stick her hand under the cool running stream once again.

She heard him come into her home and close the door behind himself. After a moment, he came into the kitchen and stood by the refrigerator to watch her.

She stole a quick glance at him then looked back at the sink. He was more

handsome than she had remembered him to be—if that was even possible. He had removed his parka and boots and was standing beside her dressed in jeans and a maroon sweater. His hair was damp from the snow and it reminded her of how he had looked after he had come out of the shower in his apartment in Denver.

Rachel felt fear and pain at being so close to him again. Her anger and pride allowed her to calm herself enough to concentrate on the cold water that was bathing her burn.

“I’m not interested in anything you have to say, so save your breath,” she warned him, not taking her eyes off the stream of water that rushed over her

hand.

“It’s nice to see you, too,” he said quietly, smiling sadly.

Rachel looked at him quickly then turned away, the raw ache too evident in her eyes to look at him for too long. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her sadness. She had to stay angry. That was the only way she would be able to survive this moment with him.

“What happened?” he asked her, indicating her hand.

“None of your damned business!” she snapped at him angrily.

Sam watched her silently and looked around the kitchen. He saw the cup of hot chocolate and the spilled milk on the

counter and put the clues together. Without speaking, he turned to open her freezer, hesitating slightly when he saw the picture of Roy, Paulette, and their son Domenic, then took out the tray of ice cubes to place them on top of the counter. He began opening cabinets until he found a deep bowl. Taking the bowl down from the shelf, he cracked the ice cube tray and emptied it into the bowl then gently pushed Rachel aside to fill the bowl halfway with cold water. Taking her hand in his, he placed it gently into the bowl.

Rachel almost pulled her hand out just to spite him, but the coolness of the ice water was too good to ignore. She looked up at him silently then picked up

the bowl with her good hand and carried it with her into the living room. She sat carefully on the edge of the couch and placed the bowl on her lap.

“What’re you doing here?” she asked him finally as he walked into the living room and sat down beside her.

“I came to talk to you,” he told her quietly.

“I heard everything you had to say back at the campground,” she told him coldly. “You’ve wasted your time coming here.” She turned away from him and shook her head in disgust. “I’m going to kill Roy for giving you my address.”

“Roy didn’t give it to me,” Sam told

her. He watched her silently, knowing that he wasn't getting through the wall of mistrust that separated them. "His son is beautiful, you know. Paulette did just fine. She wished you were there though. We all did."

Rachel looked down at her hand, unable to say a word.

"I hired a private investigator to find you," he said softly, finally breaking the silence. "It took him this long to locate you. You're very difficult to find."

"You shouldn't have wasted your money," she told him, looking away from him.

"I have plenty of money to waste," he told her calmly.

Rachel looked up at him, her eyes

bright with anger and betrayal. “So you went back to your father, after all. I’m sure Allison was very persuasive.” She stood and placed the bowl on the coffee table, drying her hand on her fluffy robe and grabbing at its many folds as she walked to the front door and pulled it open. “Get out. I don’t want to hear any more.”

“I’m not leaving,” Sam told her angrily. “I’m staying right here.”

“Get out!” Rachel screamed.

“No!” Sam yelled back.

Rachel’s chest heaved with fury. The pain of having him standing so close to her, and seeing the wedding ring that he still wore, was too much for her to deal

with. She could feel the bile rising in her throat and knew that she didn't have much time. Leaving the front door open, she ran from the room to her bedroom, slamming the adjoining bathroom door shut behind her.

She barely made it to the toilet before her stomach heaved. As spasm after spasm grabbed her, she was unaware that Sam had come into the bathroom until she felt his hands on her shoulder and forehead. He waited with her until she was through the spell then flushed the toilet and helped her to lean back against the bathroom wall.

He sat on the edge of the tub, reached under the sink to retrieve a washcloth, wet it with cold water, and held it to

Rachel's forehead. She accepted it silently, but made no attempt to move. She leaned her head against the wall and rested for a few minutes. Her emotions had drained what little strength she had. Getting sick just then put her beyond exhausted. She started to stand and found that Sam's hands were there immediately to support her. He stood next to her, holding her arms gently as she leaned forward to brush her teeth, brushing her hair back from her face while she wiped at her mouth with the small towel beside the sink. Guiding her back to her bedroom, he led the way to her bed and steadied her while she eased forward to sit on the soft mattress.

“You need to rest,” he said quietly. “I’m staying right here until we can talk in the morning.” His voice was gentle but firm.

“You’re not staying here,” she said angrily, pushing his hands away from her body.

“Rachel, there’s a blizzard outside,” he told her calmly. “I am not leaving the warmth of this house.”

“There is no warmth in this house,” she told him angrily, each word a struggle to speak. “There’s only coldness here for you.”

Sam smiled down at her sadly. “We’ll talk about it in the morning.” He stood and went into the bathroom then returned

quickly with a glass of water and two pills. “Here, take these.”

“What are they?” Rachel asked tiredly.

“Aspirins,” he told her. “They’ll help with the pain in your hand.”

“I can’t take them,” she refused.

“Why not?”

Rachel hesitated a moment. “They’ll upset my stomach,” she told him finally.

Sam nodded and walked back into the bathroom. She could hear him opening the medicine cabinet and saw that he came back with two different pills.

“Here,” he told her.

She looked up at him and took the non-aspirin pills from him, accepting the glass of water that he offered. When she

swallowed the pills and handed him back the glass, he set it aside on the bedside table.

“I’ll be in the living room if you need anything,” he told her, reluctant to leave her. At her silence, he gave up any idea that he might have had to try to talk to her right then. Turning finally, he left her bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Rachel stood slowly and kicked off her slippers. Pulling back the blankets, she climbed into bed and lay down wearily, resting against her pillow and hugging her robe tighter around her to ward off the night chill. She pulled the covers over her and snuggled deeply

into their softness. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and willed the tears not to come. She refused to shed one more tear over Sam McCoy.

She turned restlessly onto her back and tried to relax. She couldn't stop thinking about him. He had touched her. His gentleness had drawn out the old feelings that she had tried so desperately to bury.

She tucked her right hand under the blanket and beneath the heavy robe she wore to touch her swelling stomach tenderly. She caressed her unborn child as it rested peacefully within her and smiled despite the tears that filled her eyes.

"I love your daddy," she whispered to

her baby sadly.

* * * *

Sam walked into the living room and stood in front of the picture window. The storm was still raging outside just as his insides were raging with emotions. Seeing Rachel and touching her again made him more determined than ever to make things right between them. He wanted her back. He needed her with him. Loving him.

Grabbing his coat and boots, he walked through her house to the attached garage and opened the outside door. Putting on his boots, he threw on his coat

and walked out to his rental car, starting it quickly and pulling it into the empty space in the large garage. He turned off the car, pulled out his suitcase, and closed the garage door.

He kicked the snow off his boots and pulled them off to set them next to the door that led back into Rachel's house. He blew on his hands trying to warm them. It was bitterly cold outside. He hung his damp coat on the back of a kitchen chair and made his way to the living room. He stopped and looked around, appreciating the hominess of Rachel's house. He could see her in every piece of comfortable furniture and beautiful piece of art.

He turned and saw the opened

manuscript that sat on top of her computer desk and walked over to it curiously. What he saw before him gripped at his stomach and clenched at his heart. In black and white, on the white crisp computer paper, he saw three words that sparked hope in him. As he read the title page, a sad smile crossed his face. Maybe he would have a chance after all.

My Mountain Love

by

Rachel Williams

He was stunned. Picking up the notebook that held the thick manuscript,

he brought it with him to the couch and sat down slowly. He began reading, devouring each page as if it gave him life.

He read continuously through the night, unable to tear himself away from the love and tenderness of the story. It was nearly dawn when he turned the last page. He closed the manuscript gently, almost reverently, and returned it to the desk.

He walked to his coat and removed the stack of papers that he had brought with him from Colorado and walked into Rachel's bedroom. This whole mess was going to be settled. Right now.

He walked toward her determinedly and turned on the light next to her bed.

He hesitated when he saw that she was sleeping soundly. He wanted to climb into bed beside her, but he knew that she would become enraged, and he knew he would never get her to listen to him then. Slowly, he knelt down on the floor beside her bed and reached out to touch her shoulder lightly.

“Rachel,” he called to her softly.

Rachel moved slightly, turning toward Sam restlessly. Sam was concerned when he saw the dark circles under her eyes. She did not look well at all. He knew that he was the cause of it. After just having read her book, he knew exactly how she felt about him and the fears that had made her leave him. He

knew that the words he had spoken to Allison with sarcasm that day at the campground had been the catalyst to everything.

“Rachel, please wake up. We have to talk,” he called to her gently, touching her shoulder to carefully shake her once again. He could feel the bones of her shoulder through her thick robe and grew concerned over how much weight that she had lost.

Rachel opened her eyes slowly and looked up at him then closed her eyes again. “Go away,” she told him, her voice weak. “I’m too tired to fight with you now.”

“I don’t want to fight,” he told her, smiling. “I want to explain everything to

you. This has gone on long enough. I want you to come home with me.”

Rachel opened her eyes and looked at him. She sat up slowly and pulled the blankets around her body as she leaned back against the headboard, rubbing at her eyes tiredly and brushing her hair back from her face.

“This ought to be interesting,” she said, yawning. “Maybe I’ll be able to use some of your story in one of my novels.”

Sam stood and looked down at her for a moment before sitting on her bed, close to her legs. “You’ve already written about us,” he told her quietly. “I just finished reading your manuscript.”

“You have no right,” Rachel stammered, blushing that he was now privy to her deepest thoughts and feelings about him.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized sincerely. “I couldn’t help it.” He watched her silently for a moment, then rubbed his neck tiredly and faced her once again. “I’m glad I did, Rachel. I would have never known how you felt.”

“It was very obvious how I felt about you,” she said slowly. “I didn’t let a day go by without telling you and showing you how much I loved you. Don’t give me that crap.”

Sam smiled sadly. “I know that you loved me. It was obvious in everything

you did. What I mean is I didn't know that you were convinced I was going to let you support me for the rest of my life." When Rachel merely stared at him, not speaking, he reached out and touched her right hand gently. "I also wrung the truth from Allison. I know that you think I married you so that I could have children by you."

Rachel pulled her hand out of his and looked away. She couldn't face him. It hurt too much.

Sam looked at the pain that was evident on her face. "That's not true, Rachel," he told her quietly. "All that talk about babies was started by the Fletchers thinking that you were pregnant. I'm sorry that I enjoyed teasing

you so much about it. After a while I found that I really was thinking about having children with you. I found myself feeling for you what I've never felt for any other woman. I would love it if we were blessed with a house full of children, but I want you, not your ability to have children. I miss talking with you, being close with you, and I miss us caring about each other. When you were at the camper I felt like I was coming home every day because you were there.”

He looked at her, waiting for her to respond, but she didn't say a word. She was not going to give in. She was not going to allow him to hurt her again. He

knew that. And he was sorry for it.

“We have something that many couples don’t have,” he continued. “We were friends long before we were lovers. All those years we spent together growing up created a bond that can’t be broken. We care about each other and we love each other.”

Rachel looked at him in surprise. He had never said that word before.

“I love you, Rachel. I want you to come back home with me to Colorado.”

“That sounds very nice,” Rachel told him coldly. “But words can be used to convince very easily. I ought to know. I use words every day to create make-believe worlds.”

“You’re right,” he admitted. “But

they're not just words.”

“Sam, I can't live a life with someone who doesn't love me,” she told him quietly.

“Couldn't you tell every time I touched you and every time I looked at you, just how much I loved you?”

Rachel just stared at him blankly. She would not be suckered in to going back to a relationship just because she wanted it to be real.

Sam watched her carefully for a moment. He realized how deeply he had hurt her. He wished with every ounce of his being that he had never put her through such pain.

“I brought these for you to look at,” he

told her finally, unfolding the papers in his hand and handing her the first set. “This is a legal document from my father cutting me out of his will. If you’ll notice here, it states that I will forfeit all inheritance and future claim on his estate as long as I remain married to you.” He indicated a specific spot on the page to draw her attention to the words there. “It also stipulates that any children that we have together will not be considered heirs to his estate.”

Rachel looked down at the document, doing her best to control her pain as she saw the threat before her. “I see,” she told him softly. “I have the marriage papers. You can take them with you to get the marriage annulled. I’ll sign

anything you need me to sign. Are you finished now?" She looked up at him defiantly, determined to hold her head up and retain her dignity throughout this ordeal.

Sam shook his head and handed her the second set of papers. "As you can see in these legal documents drawn up by my lawyer, my father is now in receipt of a restraining order to protect you, as well as myself and any children that may result from our marriage. Basically, this document tells him to go to hell." He pointed to the date stamp on the document. "I had my lawyer draw this up the day after Allison came to the campground. I had to protect you from

my father. I will never allow him to threaten you ever again.”

Rachel looked down at the paper in shock. Her eyes devoured the document hungrily, wanting to read for herself what he was telling her. She wanted desperately to believe that he was telling her the truth.

“This document is a copy of my bank accounts and material assets, including stocks, bonds, T-Bills, and real estate. My mother was a smart woman who set up trust accounts for me as soon as I was born with money that came from her family. My father had no knowledge of these accounts. Neither my mother nor I found any reason to enlighten him. He was not exactly the model husband or

father, and my mother and I learned very quickly that we had to protect ourselves from his control. You will note that the total value of my assets guarantees that I won't ever have to worry about our future. My father's threats to cut me off from my inheritance from him hold no weight. I can support us just fine. By the way, this can be checked at your convenience. I have placed your name as co-owner on all of these holdings as of the date of our marriage."

Rachel took the papers from him in shock. She looked them over carefully, barely able to believe what she was reading. Joanna McCoy was a smart woman and a loving mother who had

certainly looked out for her son.

He took out more papers from the envelope and opened them to place them in her hand. “These documents verify that the mortgage for the Monroe Ranch has been paid in full and your aunt is the sole owner. The mortgage for Roy and Paulette’s house has also been paid for and they are the joint owners. Your family is insistent on paying me the balance of their mortgages over time and I understand and accept their decision to do so. I would do the same.”

“How did you know?” Rachel asked, confused.

“When we were at the dinner for my father, you mentioned how he had threatened your family. When we got

back to my apartment I made some phone calls while you were sleeping. I'm glad I did because my father was one step behind me all the way." He looked at Rachel's face and saw that he was cracking her resolve to remain distant from him. "When I got back to the campground I found the letter my father had written to you. It was all bullshit, Rachel. There was no way he could do any of the things he threatened to your aunt or your cousin. I had already taken the steps necessary to protect them."

"I don't know what to say," Rachel said honestly, still keeping her heart from him. "Thank you for helping my family."

Sam nodded, acknowledging her appreciation. “I also called the department that Roy works for and spoke to the person in charge who happened, by sheer luck, to have been the father of a little girl that I had treated last year at the hospital. This man would not fire Roy despite what my father threatened. His daughter’s healthy life has made him very loyal. I spent a lot of nights with her when she was going through her illness. She was an adorable kid. Luckily, she has recovered completely and has a long life ahead of her.” He looked at Rachel and smiled.

Rachel could feel herself relaxing as she realized that her family was safe.

She lay back against her pillow, unable to sit up any longer. She was exhausted and weak.

“This document verifies all my holdings as of yesterday morning when I found out where you lived and had my lawyer document everything before I flew out here to show you the truth.”

Rachel looked at the last piece of paper through a blur of tears. When she looked up, Sam was watching her carefully.

“I’m so sorry that I hurt you, Rachel,” he apologized sincerely. “If I could take back all the hurt, I would.”

“I appreciate what you’ve done for my family, Sam,” Rachel told him quietly, handing him back the papers. “I’m even

glad you don't need me to support you." She looked up at him seriously, her eyes still distant and guarded. "But I'm not glad that you felt you needed to kiss Allison that day at the campground." She moved back in the bed, trying to get as far away from him as she could. "Don't tell me that she started it, I saw that she did. But I also saw that you didn't push her away."

She saw that Sam cringed at her words but was determined to tell him exactly what she felt. She made sure to pull away from him when he reached out to try and take her hand in his.

"I'm not the kid you hung out with all those years ago, Sam," she told him, her

voice strong and determined. "I have and always will love you, but I won't stay with you if you question what you feel for me. You say now that you love me. Why didn't you ever say it before? If you loved me as you now say you do, then why did you allow that kiss to continue?" Her eyes were boring into his, waiting for his response. "I obviously didn't give you what you needed to keep you faithful."

Sam winced at her words. "No, you give me exactly what I need. I don't think of you as that young kid, Rachel. I haven't for quite a while, actually." He hesitated, taking a breath and closing his eyes as if in pain. "I don't really know why I never said I loved you. I guess I

thought I did.”

“You didn’t.”

Sam nodded, accepting what she said as fact. “I do love you, honey.”

“What about the kiss, Sam? You must have wanted it. You didn’t make Allison stop.”

“You’re right, Rachel, I didn’t push Allison away. I wish I had. There are no words to take away your pain from seeing that. You have to remember that she had me fooled for a very long time. But I knew back in Denver, before I even came to the campground, that my life with her was a sham. When she kissed me I realized that I had no feelings for her except disgust. I let it

continue longer than I should have, but I was honestly relieved that I felt nothing for her. Nothing. I'm sorry."

Rachel just looked at him, unsure what to do. She wanted to let it go. She wanted to understand.

"And I'm an idiot," he added.

Rachel couldn't help but smile. "Yes. You are," she agreed.

Sam smiled at her. He was hopeful to see the tiny crack of her emotions beginning to peek through.

"Do you remember the day on the mountain when you broke your leg?" he asked her quietly.

She looked up at him, not sure what to say. She finally nodded. "I remember," she answered, barely whispering.

“So do I,” he told her, the intense blueness of his eyes boring into her. “When you passed out from the pain and my body was pulled forward and covered yours, I was totally aware that you weren’t a child anymore. It was a good thing that we were both injured and Roy was there because all I wanted to do was bury myself deep inside your softness.”

The gasp that escaped her brought a smile to his lips.

“No way!” she whispered.

“Oh, yes, way!” he told her, laughing softly. “I felt every curve of your body and every soft breath that you breathed against my face. I had to say the times

tables in my head to calm down or Roy would have probably beaten the hell out of me if I had done what I wanted to do to you at that moment.” He raked his hand through his hair in frustration as he looked down at her. “I told myself that you were too young. You were Roy’s cousin. I told myself a million things that prevented me from taking you in my arms and kissing you senseless.”

The smile left his face as he looked at her. There was a sparkle in his eyes as he searched her face for some glimmer of hope. At her silence, he knew that he had to tell her more. She needed and deserved to know it all.

“The years have been hard on both of us, Rachel, but don’t ever doubt that you

were in my thoughts and were tucked in my heart. When I saw you again at the campground, all the old memories of you and the times we shared came back full force. I thought I could keep things under control and step back to give you the freedom that you deserved, but life seemed to keep throwing you into my arms.”

Rachel’s eyes were staring up at him with guarded feelings of hope and desire. She was afraid to talk. She didn’t want to interrupt what he was finally admitting to her.

“I kept trying to keep you away from me, but that stopped the minute you sat and had dinner with me in my camper the

second day you were in the campground.” He was dead serious as he spoke to her. “You hold a place in my heart that no one else could ever have. When I think of you, or dream of you, you are all woman, and you are mine.”

There was a huskiness to his voice as he spoke, and he could see the flicker of something ignite in Rachel’s eyes as he finally opened his heart and spoke his feelings for her. He did nothing more than tell her the truth.

“Please forgive me. I should have told you how I really felt. If I had let my guard down and told you how much you meant to me and how much I loved you, Allison’s words would never have convinced you that I only wanted you to

give me children. I love you, Rachel. I love you as my friend, my wife, and my lover. So much that my heart hurts—because I lost you.” He reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled something out to grip it in his hand tightly. “One more thing.” He opened his hand, palm up. “This belongs to you.”

Rachel looked at the wedding band that she had worn what seemed like forever ago. She wanted to reach out and take it, but she was afraid.

“Please take it, Rachel,” Sam whispered to her. “And take me with it.”

Sam watched her silently, seeing the indecision in her eyes. He could tell that she was battling with her thoughts. An

eternity passed and his heart hurt when she made no move toward him. He almost closed his hand in defeat when she reached forward hesitantly to take the ring from his hand. He watched in silence as she placed the ring on the third finger of her left hand and brought it to her mouth to kiss it tenderly.

He reached out to her, and she came into his arms willingly. He had to hold himself back as he covered her lips with his own and kissed her with deliberate caution, waiting for her to return the warmth and tenderness that he offered her. He groaned when she moved her lips against his, hesitantly licking at them with her tongue. He pushed her back against the bed and deepened his kiss,

glorying in the urgency that her lips returned against his. His hurt and loneliness was easing. He felt a surge of relief in his chest. He had to pull back from her to laugh in relief.

“I do love you, Rachel. With all my heart,” he whispered, suddenly very intent in the words he had to tell her.

He looked down at her so seriously that Rachel’s heart began to pound in anticipation. He reached out and touched her face lovingly. She drew him to her and hugged him tightly. He kissed her tenderly as if she would break if he loved her too hard. His hands caressed her back as he held her to him tenderly. His kiss remained gentle, but she could

feel the pounding of his heart against her chest as he held her so tightly to him.

He pulled back and reached up with both hands to hold her face tenderly within his hands, gently weaving his fingers into her hair to hold her beautiful face as he leaned forward to kiss her once again. He pulled back slightly, his lips just a fraction of an inch from her mouth. She could feel the warmth of his breath against her lips.

“Please don’t ever leave me again,” he whispered against her mouth. “Talk to me. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

Rachel looked up at him as he stared into her eyes. His own eyes were glistening with tears as he looked down at her, and her love for him swelled.

“I’m feeling that I want to make love to you, husband,” she whispered, smiling shyly.

Sam smiled and let go of her briefly to wipe away the tears from his eyes. He reached down and held her hand tenderly, bringing it to his mouth and kissing her wedding ring gently.

“See how much better things are when you tell me what you’re feeling?” he teased, reaching forward to take her into his arms once again.

Rachel laughed as he held her. She kissed his mouth slowly, her lips light against the warm wetness of his. She caressed his face lightly, reacquainting herself with the pure joy of touching him.

Sam lay beside her with the rumpled blankets bunched between them. They annoyed him, and he wanted to push them aside so he could pull her against his body.

“I’ve missed you, Sam.”

Her voice made him hesitate. He leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers. He sighed as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

“You can’t imagine how empty I’ve felt without you with me,” he whispered honestly.

Rachel let him go suddenly and he allowed her to pull away from him. He didn’t know what she needed to do, but he wasn’t going to stop her. He wanted

to work everything out tonight so they could begin their lives together without any questions or fears. He watched her as she sat up beside him to kneel on the bed. He faced her, worried by the serious look on her face.

“Sam,” Rachel whispered, pulling the thickness of her robe around her legs as she tucked it beneath her body.

“What?”

“I need to know something.”

Sam looked up at her and waited. He reached up, brushed her hair back from her face and touched her cheek gently with the knuckles of his right hand.

“What?” he whispered.

“If we couldn’t have children, would

you hate me?" she asked him, looking down at him to see the truth when he answered her.

He hesitated a moment while the question worked its way into his mind, knowing he had to be true to his feelings. There was no contest. This woman had captured his heart and he couldn't stand to be apart from her. Nothing else mattered.

"Rachel, I would be disappointed if we couldn't have children, but I could never hate you for it. I want to be with you and love you for the rest of my life. With or without children, I want us to make a life together."

He watched her face and saw that she was thinking over his words. He could

tell she wasn't truly convinced.

"It could be my fault, too, you know," he told her quietly.

"What could?" she asked, confused.

"Us not being able to have a baby," he explained. "Would you hate me if I was the reason we couldn't conceive?"

"No, I wouldn't," she told him honestly. "I would be disappointed, but I could never hate you."

Sam smiled and touched her leg gently. When Rachel reached out and caressed his face, he was lost to her. He knelt before her on the bed, pulling her closer toward him. Very slowly, he began to unbutton the long row of buttons on the front of her oversized robe. By the

time the last button was released, his excitement was barely containable.

“I love you, Rachel,” he whispered as he leaned forward and kissed her neck, nuzzling into her and breathing in the scent of her. God, he missed her.

Rachel smiled, her heart light at the words that he spoke so sincerely. She reached up to stop his hands as he began to push the robe from her shoulders.

“Sam, I have to tell you something,” she whispered, leaning up to kiss his lips lightly and pulling back before he could crush her to him.

“I’m listening,” he whispered.

“Lie down next to me first,” she told him, pulling at his hand to guide him down onto the bed beside her.

Sam followed willingly, allowing her to settle herself comfortably. He leaned up on his left arm to look down at her as she lay on her back beside him. She looked positively glowing. She radiated happiness, and he knew that he had to be mirroring her exact feelings.

“Okay, what?” he asked, leaning forward to kiss her forehead gently. He leaned back and watched as Rachel reached for him.

Very slowly, pushing her robe aside, she took his right hand and guided it across her hip to rest it lightly on her belly. His gaze followed the path his hand was taking. When he felt the definite bulge beneath his hand he nearly

forgot to breathe. Her abdomen was very round and very hard to his touch. She was carrying his child. At least five months along, he figured by his quick calculations. He could hardly believe that he hadn't noticed it before. Between her fluffy robe hiding her shape and his attention directed at her face in order to judge her emotions, he had totally missed spotting her pregnancy.

Rachel pushed his hand gently against her stomach, feeling total joy that his large hand was covering their baby. "Sam," she spoke softly.

"Rachel," he whispered, looking up at her in awe.

"I'm pregnant," she told him, smiling.

"I know," he whispered, stroking his

hand across the baby that was growing inside his wife's womb. His heart slammed against his chest as he realized that he knew the exact moment when their child had been conceived. He remembered every touch, every moan, and every feeling they had shared during their time together that had resulted in the creation of this wonderful life inside of Rachel.

He looked at her with such tenderness and love, Rachel knew no better moment. Tears of happiness filled his eyes. She watched him lean forward and kiss the swelling of her abdomen gently.

"Hello, baby," he whispered against her belly happily.

Rachel smiled down at him, touching his soft black hair as he spoke to his child. Tears slipped from her eyes as she saw the happiness and awe on his face as he tenderly caressed her body. He kissed her belly once again then trailed kisses up her body until his mouth once again met hers.

“I love you so much,” he whispered, taking her into his arms and holding her tightly against his body.

“Are you glad about the baby?” she whispered.

Sam’s blue eyes sparkled with tears as he lifted his head to look at his wife. He reached down to touch her belly and smiled at the beautiful changes that had

already happened to her body.

“Yes. Are you?” he whispered.

“Very much.”

Rachel smiled as Sam reached up to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye. She loved him so much. She touched his face tenderly and smiled when he closed his eyes with pleasure at her touch and turned into the palm of her hand.

“Thank you for such a beautiful gift, sweetheart,” he whispered against her hand.

She stared into his eyes for a moment, seeing the total happiness there. “Are you sure you want to spend the rest of your life with us, and no one else?” she asked him seriously.

“Absolutely,” he answered without

hesitation. “You will never have cause to question me ever again.”

Rachel reached out and took Sam’s hand in hers, then brought it to her swollen belly. Sam looked down at her and smiled at the contact of his hand over their growing child.

“We believe you,” Rachel told him, pushing his hand against her belly to feel the slight butterfly movement of his life inside of her.

Sam gasped and leaned up to stare at his hand on her abdomen. He waited a moment until the movement stopped then leaned down to kiss her belly tenderly. He looked up and covered her body carefully with his then kissed her long

and deep, caressing her body as he held her tightly in his embrace.

“How do you feel, Rachel?”

“I feel fine. I’m just tired.”

“Do you like being pregnant?”

“Most of the time,” she answered, laughing softly.

“Do you want to be my wife again?” he asked her seriously, his gaze intent and serious as he looked down at her.

“Do you want me to be?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Please.”

Rachel looked up into his eyes and saw the love that she hoped for. There was no choice but to say yes. He had captured her heart.

“I would love to,” she whispered.

He smiled, relieved, and kissed her

lips lightly. "I want to make love to my wife," he whispered, his breathing a little ragged.

A seductive smile lightened her face as she reached out to pull at his sweater. He leaned back to ease the effort and smiled when the sweater hit the floor beside the bed. His black T-shirt soon followed, baring his chest to her gaze and her caressing hands.

His breath hitched in his throat when she leaned forward to kiss his chest and her hands found the sensitive areas beneath his arms. When her mouth covered his nipple and licked seductively, he thought he would die from the pure pleasure of enjoying her

touch once again. He couldn't help the moan that escaped him when she bit down gently.

"I need you naked, now," he nearly growled down at her.

He pulled at her robe, pushing it from her body gently, then leaned down and grabbed the hem of her nightgown to slowly pull it up the length of her torso. His hands followed the contours of her hips, her waist, and her breasts as he pushed the annoying barrier of flannel over her head and away from their bodies. He saw her reach for the sheet to pull over her nakedness and captured her hand in his to halt her movement.

"Don't, honey," he whispered. "I want to see all of you."

“Sam,” she whispered nervously. “I’m embarrassed.”

Sam smiled and leaned in to kiss her tenderly. “Why?” he whispered against her temple as he nuzzled her face lovingly.

“Because my body is so different,” she whispered, holding him against her so he couldn’t look down at her nakedness.

He reached up and caressed her face gently. Taking her hand that held his hip so tightly, he pulled it gently away so he could ease her back onto the bed to open her to his gaze.

“Rachel, you’re beautiful,” he whispered, running his hand lightly down her neck, across her shoulder, and

down her side to cup the soft cheeks of her bottom. “You can’t imagine how much I want to touch every part of you.”

“Really?” she whispered, looking up at him with searching eyes.

“Baby, you have no idea how much you make me want you,” he told her seriously. He saw the question on her face and smiled, leaning down to kiss her gently, deepening its intensity as he ran his hand over her body. He caressed her belly lovingly before reaching for her hand and pulling it toward him to press it against his groin.

He smiled at the gasp Rachel released against his mouth as she felt the huge bulge of his erection through the confines of his jeans. He pushed her hand against

him, rubbing it against him erotically, and moaning into her mouth at the contact. He pulled back to look down at her and fought to control his breathing. He released his hold on her hand, smiling as she continued to hold him intimately, closing his eyes in pleasure as she rubbed and squeezed his hardness. He opened his eyes and reached out to her. He traced the areola of one breast, smiling at the way it was darkening due to her pregnancy. He was careful not to hurt her as he tightened his grasp on her breast and leaned forward to take her nipple into his mouth and suck tenderly at it.

“Are your breasts sore?” he asked her,

pulling away from the sweetness of her to look down into her face worriedly.

She smiled up at him, taking her hand from his body to reach up and replace his hand over her breast once again. “Not so much anymore,” she told him honestly. “And I miss falling asleep with your hand here.”

Sam smiled and squeezed the fullness of her breast very gently. “Oh, honey,” he told her, his voice hoarse with passion. “I have no intention of falling asleep right now.”

His intense look of pure desire took her breath away. “That’s good,” she whispered. “I would really like to make love with you.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he teased her,

laughing softly as she smiled brightly. He trailed his hand down her arms and swallowed almost convulsively at the incredible feeling of happiness he felt as he touched his wife's naked body.

Sam's mouth blazed a trail from her temple, down her face, into the crevice of her throat, to the swell of her full breasts. He hesitated at the gold chain that rested between the beautiful mounds and leaned back to touch the blue stone before looking up to gaze into his wife's eyes. He smiled in pleasure at the sight of the necklace that once belonged to his mother still worn securely around her neck.

"I'm glad you're still wearing this," he

whispered, kissing her temple lightly as he hugged her to him tightly.

“I never take it off,” she told him quietly, taking his hand in hers and bringing it to her lips to kiss it slowly.

He closed his eyes in total joy at the feel of her after being parted from her for so long and sighed contentedly when he felt her run her hands across his chest. Her eyes never left his as she reached down to tug at his belt, trying to release the buckle.

“Help me get you out of these jeans,” she told him huskily.

He released his hold on her to back off the bed and stand beside it. Reaching down, he slowly unbuckled his belt, pulled at the button at the waist and

lowered the zipper. He smiled as he saw how Rachel watched his progress and remembered how wonderful it was to watch her undress before him not so long ago in the camper every time she drove him wild with desire. He was determined to create the same frenzy in her tonight. He needed her to want him as much as he wanted her.

He pushed the jeans down his long legs, stepping out of them and standing before her with just his black boxer briefs on. He reached down and cupped the bulge that was evident beneath the thin cotton, squeezing slightly and moaning at the jolts of pleasure that shot through him.

He smiled at the needy noise that escaped Rachel as she watched him and reveled in the look of pure passion that filled her eyes as he pushed the briefs down his body, freeing his thick, fully engorged shaft. He stood before her, erect and throbbing, liquid leaking from the tip of his cock. When Rachel sat up, reached out and gently lifted the drop of moisture with her index finger and drew her finger to her mouth to slowly suck the moisture from it, he nearly exploded at her erotic action. Before he could regain his breath, Rachel moved onto her knees and came to him, grabbing his hips to steady herself as she took him into her mouth and slowly eased him into the

warmth and wetness that awaited him.

“Oh, God,” Sam moaned, reaching to hold her head in his hands, gently caressing her hair as she moved him in and out of her mouth, alternately sucking and swirling her tongue around his shaft.

The feel of her hand reaching out to encircle his sack, squeeze and pull at it gently, was almost too good to bear. He sucked in a breath and groaned with pure pleasure. He knew that if he allowed her to continue he would lose control. He wanted, no he needed, to bury himself deep inside her and claim her once again.

He pulled her from him gently, drawing her up into his arms and surrounding her in his embrace before

crushing her to him and kissing her deeply. He gasped at the sheer pleasure of their naked bodies touching. She reached her arms around him to gently stroke the muscles of his shoulders, pulling him tighter against her as her lips crushed his, passion and desire evident in her kiss.

He smiled, relieved, and met her passion with his own. "I want to make love to my wife," he whispered, his breathing ragged, his voice a deep growl.

Rachel kissed his chest and smiled, happy and contented that her life was finally filled with such tenderness and love. Sam crushed her to him and kissed

her deeply.

“I need you to lie down,” he told her with a shaky voice. When she looked up at him and smiled, he closed his eyes and tried to take a deep breath.

“Are you okay, Sam?” she asked him quietly.

“Rachel, honey,” he whispered. “If we don’t lie down soon my legs are going to give out. It’s taking all the strength I have to hold back.”

Rachel smiled and leaned away from him, letting go to back away from him and lie down on the bed. She opened her arms to him and waited, her face filled with desire and love. Sam leaned down into her embrace and smiled, breathing heavily as their bodies met, gasping at

the sheer pleasure of the joining.

“Baby, I don’t think I’ll be able to wait,” he whispered against her neck.

Rachel smiled and kissed his forehead lightly. “We’ll take our time next time, Sam,” she told him seductively, licking the sensitive skin below his ear and biting into his neck lightly, sending shivers throughout his body.

Sam covered her mouth with his and kissed her with such passion Rachel could barely breathe. She met his intensity with her own, sucking on his tongue as it ravished her mouth. When he reached down to touch the intimate folds of her body, she opened her legs and helped guide his hand to the wetness that

awaited him, gasping when his finger entered her and sank into her depths.

“Rachel,” he moaned against her mouth. “You’re so wet.”

“Just for you, Sam,” she whispered, pulling at his hips until he was settled intimately between her legs, his erection pressing against the wet curls of her body. She reached down and took him gently into her hand and guided him into her, moaning as he buried himself slowly inside of her.

He pushed in gently, leaning back to watch her face as her body took in every inch of him until his hips were pressed tightly against her core. Her eyes closed in the pure pleasure of him filling her completely.

“Are you okay, baby?” he whispered, his movements stilled as he looked down at her, his brow covered with perspiration from the effort.

“Yes,” she told him quietly, her face a mirror of the pure joy she was feeling.

“Rachel,” he whispered, waiting until she opened her eyes to look up at him.

“You belong to me.”

The intensity with which he looked down at her made her stop breathing.

“What?” she whispered.

“You’re mine,” he nearly growled.

“You’ll always be mine.”

Rachel looked up at him in silence. The seriousness with which he had spoken those words of possession made

her heart pound. His vehement claim of her matched exactly how she felt about him. It was beyond possession. It was a binding of two destined souls.

“If any woman ever tries to come near you ever again, I’ll kick her ass,” Rachel told him seriously.

Sam laughed with pure joy. He hugged her to him and rubbed her back gently. Leaning back, he reached up to tenderly trace her jaw with his index finger.

“Rachel, I love you with my whole heart and soul. Never doubt that,” he told her, his voice barely above a whisper.

She smiled up at him and reached up to touch the black curl that fell across his forehead. “I love you,” she whispered,

pulling his head down so that she could reach his lips to kiss them lightly.

Very gently, she reached down to pull his hips toward her, opening her legs further and angling her hips slightly to pull him even deeper inside of her. Her inner muscles clenched, and she pulled on him with such intensity, he gasped with surprise and moaned with sheer pleasure.

He leaned up on his arms, careful not to crush her then slowly pulled out until only the tip of his cock remained inside of her. Looking directly into her eyes, he pushed to sink back into the warm, wet depths of her. His heart was racing and his body reacted when he felt Rachel

wrap her legs around him and pull him tighter against her body.

His need for her broke his resolve. He pumped into her then, unable to hold back any longer, needing to complete this act of love that claimed his wife and his child forever.

Rachel called out his name, biting into his shoulder as the excitement coiled from deep within her to explode with shards of colors behind her eyes.

He knew only the happiness of her orgasm, and the total joy of giving her the release she needed. The tightness in his body intensified until the tension exploded in a release that burst from him, sending the warmth of his seed deep into his wife's body in agonizing,

sweet, torturous spurts.

“Are you okay,” he whispered after a moment, careful not to crush her with his weight as he kissed her temple as he fought to control his breathing.

“I’m wonderful,” Rachel answered, smiling, petting his arm languidly.

He stayed seated deep within her, not wanting to leave her body. He kissed her lips lightly, then her chin, nuzzling into the crook of her neck below her right ear to breathe in the scent of her soft hair.

He withdrew slowly from her body, smiling at the moan that escaped her, and lay down beside her to gather her into his arms. He wiped the perspiration from her brow and smiled as he looked

down at her. Very slowly, he reached down and covered his baby with his hand and caressed Rachel's body tenderly.

"I love you, Rachel," he whispered, kissing the top of her head.

"Take off your wedding ring," Rachel told him quietly as she sighed contentedly.

"Why?" he asked.

"Read the inscription," she told him.

Sam pulled the ring from his finger and angled it toward the light of the bedside table lamp to read the inscription.

My One and Only Love was beautifully etched in the yellow gold.

Sam felt his throat tighten with

emotion. He placed the ring back on his finger and leaned over to kiss his wife with aching tenderness. When he pulled back and looked down at her, she was smiling up at him with tears in her own eyes.

“Baby, I love you,” he whispered, kissing her lips lightly.

“I love you, Sam,” she whispered back.

He pulled her into his arms and settled his hand on her breast. Rachel smiled in contentment at the familiar embrace and leaned into his chest. She settled her hand on the bulging muscle of his bicep, breathing in the wonderful scent of him as she slipped into a contented sleep for

the first time in months.

Just before sleep overtook them both, Rachel realized just how lucky she was. She had it all. A successful career. A baby on the way. And, most important of all, Sam's love.

Chapter 43

There was a bounce to Sam's step as he walked up the front steps of the big white house that he and Rachel called home. It had been a hectic day at the office, but the beautiful spring weather had lifted his spirits, and the thought of coming home to Rachel made him take the front steps two at a time. The past four months with Rachel had been the best of his life. He loved his wife and the life that they had together.

He opened the front door and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. The house was quiet. He didn't see Rachel anywhere. Passing by the living room, he

looked in quickly to see if she was lying down on one of the overstuffed couches that had once occupied his apartment in Denver. The room was empty.

He turned and headed toward the stairway, walking up the stairs quickly, straightening the painting of the lavender and pink sunset that his mother had painted as he made his way to their bedroom door. He opened the mahogany door and walked inside the bedroom, but it, too, was empty. He was about to walk out when the adjoining bathroom door opened and Rachel walked out, dressed in her long white nightgown. He walked toward her quickly and drew her into his arms, kissing her tenderly.

“Hi,” he whispered against her mouth,

smiling.

“Hi, yourself,” she answered, hugging him tightly.

He released her and stepped back to reach up and gently caress her fully rounded belly. She covered his hand with her own and pressed it to her belly just as the baby moved beneath his hand.

“Hello to you too, baby,” Sam whispered, laughing as he leaned down to place a loving kiss on her belly. He smiled at the strong movement of his child beneath his hand. “I think our baby is happy I’m home.”

Her hands touched his head gently, lacing her fingers through his hair to caress him tenderly. He looked up at her,

his blue eyes sparkling with love.

He stood to kiss her once again. He rubbed her belly one last time before moving upward to cover her very full breast and brush his thumb across its nipple gently.

“How about my baby’s mommy?” he whispered as his lips covered hers to accept the gentle moan that escaped her.

“Sam, what you do to me,” she groaned into his mouth.

“I would love to do more, baby,” he whispered, pulling his lips from hers to nuzzle against her neck. “How’re you feeling?” He was concerned as he leaned back to look down at her, brushing her hair from her face as she looked up at him, her lips parted and her

eyes filled with the passion he had grown to know and love.

She smiled up at him, her heart squeezing in her chest as she looked at the handsome man before her. The man she loved with all her being. The man who made her happy and who made her feel desired despite her very pregnant body.

“Good enough to play,” she teased.

He pulled her to him with a groan. “Baby, I wish,” he whispered, laughing as he kissed her with increased passion.

“How can you still want me?” she whispered, stepping back and rubbing her hand over her huge stomach.

“Never doubt how much I want you,”

he whispered, reaching out to take her hand from her belly and bring it to the front of his pants so she could feel how much he desired her.

She gasped at the feel of the evidence of his want and smiled up at him, relief evident on her face. She rubbed her hand against him, gripping him gently as she leaned into his body. Sam pulled her against his chest and hugged her to him tightly.

“God, baby,” he gasped. “I want you so much I hurt.”

“Well, we can’t have you hurting,” she told him, giggling as she pushed him toward their bed.

“No, honey,” he stopped her. “We can’t.”

Rachel stopped and smiled up at him with exquisite tenderness. “Yes, we can,” she told him, reaching up to touch his face gently. “Now help me get undressed, Samuel McCoy.”

Knowing there was no stopping his wife when she had something set in her mind, he gave in without further protest and reached forward to pull her nightgown up and over her head to remove it from her body. She stood before him completely naked, and he found that his heart was beating so fast he had to take a steadying breath. He loved to look at her body. He loved to touch her body. The beauty of her very pregnant form made him desire her

beyond reason.

He traced his index finger over her breasts to lightly circle the darkened nipples. Leaning forward, he latched on and suckled gently, loving the sound of her moan at his touch. He reached down and found the dark curls that beckoned his touch. He lovingly teased at them until she parted her legs to give him access to the warm depths of her body. His fingers slid between her delicate folds to find the prize waiting for him. He couldn't stop the gasp that escaped him as he felt the heat and the wetness that welcomed him.

“Stop, Sam,” she whispered, reaching down to still his hand.

He faced her worriedly. “Are you

okay?" he asked, concerned as he looked at her flushed face.

"Baby, you need to take off your clothes," she told him quietly. "I would help but I'm a little shaky."

Sam smiled down at his wife and stepped back, waiting for her to be steadier on her feet before releasing his hold on her. He reached up and unbuttoned his shirt, his gaze filled with desire as she reached out to help him pull it from his body. When she helped him remove his pants, he gasped as she cupped him and squeezed gently.

"Something wrong, Sam?" she asked him sweetly as she watched the passion consuming her husband's face.

“Nothing you can’t fix,” he told her seriously, pulling her back onto the bed with him, lying back and settling her on top of him so she could straddle his hips.

He held his breath as she reached down and took hold of his hard shaft and slowly guided him into her body. She opened herself to him, allowing him to sink deep within her. He groaned at the incredible feeling of her body joining with his. When he was settled as far as he could go, his eyes closed in pure pleasure at being so deep inside the welcoming warmth of his wife’s body.

She began to move, slowly at first. He held her carefully, easing her movements so as not to hurt her or their child. The

look she had on her face as she gazed down at him spoke of pure love and tenderness. He couldn't even begin to believe how lucky he was to have found such a wonderful wife who was his true friend. He knew they were destined mates, and he counted his blessings for the gift of her.

She leaned forward as best she could to rest her hands on his shoulders, moaning as his hands cupped her breasts and tenderly caressed them, pulling gently at her already hardened nipples. Her breathing quickened as his hips thrust up against her body, sending him deeper into her. She quickened her movements, sliding up and down the length of him, unable to do anything but

give in to the passion that she was feeling.

Sam could feel the intense pleasure coiling within his body and knew that it would take very little to cause the eruption of his release. He smiled at the sound of Rachel's moan and knew that she was close, too. Angling her back just slightly, he made sure to graze her G-spot with each move of his cock within her. He moved his hands to her sides, carefully holding her hips as her body clenched around him and pulled him tightly into her warmth.

"Sam!" she called out, grabbing his hands to steady herself as she found the release he gave her, wringing his own

from him with a groan of pure joy.

He held her body still as he released into her, unable to move or endure any more stimulation. When she looked down at him, she was covered with perspiration and a smile of pure pleasure was on her sweet face.

“How was that, cowboy?” she whispered.

Sam laughed and reached up weakly to touch her cheek. “Real good, ma’am,” he told her softly as he fought to control his breathing.

“Yeah, it was,” Rachel whispered, a soft smile on her face as she gazed down at him.

She started to move off him but he stopped her. “Wait, honey,” he told her,

smiling. “I want to stay inside you for as long as I can.”

Rachel smiled and reached down to take his hand from her hip and draw it up to her lips. She kissed his wedding ring then turned his hand over to nuzzle into his palm.

He smiled up at her, his breathing slowly returning to normal as she stroked his forearm tenderly as he held her hips. Reaching up, he tenderly caressed her belly, loving the feel of his baby beneath his hand. When his hand gently touched her breast, he sighed and smiled up at her.

He sat up, groaning slightly as he slipped from her body before claiming

her nipple with his mouth and suckled gently. He looked up at Rachel and smiled at the look of tenderness that she gave him. He pulled away from her breast to accept her mouth as she leaned forward to kiss him. Her hands caressed his shoulders. She wrapped her arms around him and drew him against her tightly.

He encircled her body with his arms then stood, smiling as she wrapped her legs around his waist, and carried her into their bathroom. He settled her gently to stand before him as he slid open the shower door and reached in to turn on the water. When it was warm enough, he stepped inside and pulled her gently in beside him.

She stood under the warm spray and closed her eyes, loving the feel of his hands over her body as he washed her hair, gently massaging her scalp and making her moan with pure pleasure. When he poured soap onto the cloth he grabbed from the ledge and started to rub her body, she leaned against him as all strength left her at his ministrations. She loved the feel of his hands washing her body, tenderly circling her abdomen, carefully stroking her breasts and gently rubbing her back.

She spread her legs to allow him to wash the intimate folds of her body, shuddering as the cloth he washed her with was suddenly dropped to the floor

of the shower and his hand replaced it, his fingers gently tracing the softness of her until they reached in to disappear deep inside of her.

She held his hand against her as he drew his fingers out to rub against her swollen nub, alternately reaching in to gather the wetness from deep inside her, pumping his fingers, and bringing her toward a building pleasure. When her breath caught in her throat and she reached to push his hand against her, she couldn't help the soft moan of ecstasy that escaped her as she quickly reached the peak of the orgasm he was determined to give her. She could hear him chuckle behind her, but she could do nothing but lean against him weakly.

“That’s my girl,” he whispered against her face, loving the throbbing of her body that pulled against his fingers.

He turned her to face him to embrace her once again before leaning down to kiss her tenderly. He held her gently as he leaned forward to turn off the shower then squeezed the water from her hair before stepping out of the shower and pulling her along with him. He wrapped her hair in a towel and twisted it on top of her head then wrapped another towel around her body and slowly wiped the moisture from her. She leaned against him with her eyes closed and allowed him to take care of her. It was a wonderful, safe feeling.

Taking the towel from her hair, he took the brush from the counter next to the sink and carefully brushed the long, thick tresses free from tangles, pausing occasionally to kiss her temple. She faced him and leaned against his muscled chest, wrapping her arms around him. He leaned forward to take the hair dryer from the counter and turned it on, allowing the warm air to blow against the both of them as he ran his fingers through her hair. When it was mostly dry and newly brushed, he tugged at her hand and brought her back into their bedroom, standing her beside their bed and reaching down to tip her chin up with his index finger.

“Feeling better?” he asked, kissing her lips lightly.

“Mmmm,” was all she could say, closing her eyes and leaning against his naked body.

Sam smiled then reached up to take her by her shoulders and gently push her away from him so he could pull the wet towel from her body. He wiped her body one last time, enjoying the moan that escaped her when he took his time stroking between her legs. When he looked into her eyes, she was smiling up at him.

“You little devil,” she whispered, laughing at the twinkle in his eyes as he looked up at her and smiled.

He just chuckled and leaned forward to pull back the covers of their bed and help her to lie down. He stepped back and smiled at her, his body reacting noticeably to his wife's naked body.

“Need some help with that, cowboy?” Rachel smiled, reaching up tiredly to touch him gently, wrapping her hand around his hardness.

“Baby, you need to rest,” Sam told her, pulling away from her reluctantly. “We’ll have plenty of time to play after you take a nap.”

“Come to bed with me, Sam,” she told him, yawning tiredly.

Sam laughed softly and walked around the bed to climb in beside her. When he

was settled next to her, she turned to snuggle against him. He searched for her breast with his right hand as he closed his eyes and held her to him. They were both asleep within minutes—content, happy, and very much in love.

* * * *

Sam woke up suddenly. Something was not right. He reached out for Rachel and realized that she was not in bed beside him. He bolted upright and was about to jump from the bed to find her when the bathroom door opened and Rachel stepped into the bedroom, her nude body bathed in the light of the doorway.

“Are you okay, baby?” he asked her quietly, pulling back the blankets for her as she slowly walked toward the bed and climbed in beside him.

She snuggled against him and nodded, relaxing a little as he pulled the covers over them both and settled beside her. Her face was tight with worry, and he knew something was wrong. He looked up and brushed the hair from her face, worried by her serious expression.

“Rachel, honey, what’s wrong?” he asked her. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine,” she told him. “I just feel a little restless.”

Sam passed his hand across her forehead, trying to ease the tension he

saw on her brow. “Are you having any pains?” He kissed her cheek gently then ran his hand down her body to rest it gently against her abdomen.

“No,” she said tiredly. “I have been a little crampy though.”

“How often have you been having these little cramps?” he asked her seriously, his hand splayed wide across her belly, rubbing it soothingly. He could feel the tightness of the muscles as a contraction began and gently stroked her abdomen to calm her. He looked at Rachel’s face to gauge the intensity of the pain.

“It started about five hours ago,” she said, gasping a little at the strength of the last cramp.

“Rachel, honey, you’re in labor,” he told her quietly.

“Do you think so?” she asked, stunned. “I thought it was too weak to be labor.”

“Was that last cramp weak?” he asked.

“Actually, that one kind of hurt,” she admitted.

“When did the last one kind of hurt?”

“About four minutes ago.”

“Sweet Jesus!” he nearly yelled, jumping from the bed to stand beside it. He turned and grabbed for the already packed suitcase that was nestled beside their bureau and placed it quickly by the doorway.

When he turned back to face Rachel,

she was smiling at him. He was stunned by her reaction. How could she remain so calm? He was ready to scream with panic. He had to get them to the hospital as quickly as he could without worrying Rachel.

“What are you smiling at?” he asked her, his voice desperate.

“You’re naked,” she told him.

“So are you,” he reminded her, stepping closer to her and kneeling down beside the bed to reach out and grab her hand. “We need to get dressed and get you to the hospital or I’m going to have to deliver our child right here.”

“That would be nice, Sam,” she told him calmly, reaching out and touching his face gently.

“No. It wouldn’t, Rachel,” he told her seriously. “I don’t know enough about obstetrics to trust your life and our baby’s life in my hands.”

Rachel smiled and pulled at Sam’s hand to bring him closer to her. When his face was close to hers, she leaned forward and kissed him tenderly.

“I trust you,” she told him simply.

She pulled the covers back from her body and was glad when Sam’s hands were there to help pull her up from the soft mattress. When she was standing beside him, she leaned into him, her naked body fitting against his body comfortably.

“Woman, you drive me crazy!” He

looked down at her and smiled tenderly.

“That’s my job,” she teased him, laughing softly.

“Have I told you lately how beautiful you are pregnant?” he asked her quietly, kissing her forehead tenderly and laughing despite his worry.

Rachel smiled up at him, reaching up to touch his arm gently. “Have I told you lately how much I love being your wife?” she asked him, smiling.

“Rachel, I love you so much,” he told her quietly, taking her into his arms and closing his eyes, his throat suddenly tight with emotion as he held her to him.

Walking with her to the closet, he helped her put on her underclothes and one of her maternity dresses, zipping it

quickly and kissing her neck in the process. He pulled on his boxer briefs, his jeans, and a T-shirt quickly, tugging on his socks and boots while she brushed her hair.

Once she stepped into her black canvas shoes, she turned to face him again. She was about to tell him she was ready to leave when another pain grabbed at her. She reached for her stomach and gasped at the intensity of the contraction.

“Breathe with me, Rachel,” he told her calmly, holding her hand as she leaned into him, rubbing her stomach in soothing, circular motions and taking even breaths with her until the

contraction subsided.

Rachel held his hand tightly, tears filling her eyes as fear began to take hold of her. “We’d better get going,” she whispered.

“You know it,” Sam answered, grabbing for the suitcase and guiding her out of the house as quickly as he could. He helped her climb into the front seat of his truck and buckled her seat belt carefully.

He threw the suitcase into the back seat, then jumped into the driver side and started the engine. It was then that he felt Rachel’s hand on his arm. He turned to face her worriedly and saw her smiling up at him.

“Sam, you’re better than I could ever

have made up in any novel,” she told him lovingly.

He smiled and touched her face gently. “Try and remember that when you’re in the transitional stage of labor, honey,” he told her nervously as he pulled out of the driveway and drove toward the hospital, his heart pounding all the way.

Chapter 44

Sam sat next to Rachel on her hospital bed and watched as she nursed their beautiful daughter. He held her tiny feet in his hand and marveled at the two miracles before him—his beautiful child and his loving wife.

“You know, when I saw you again at the campground last summer, I had a dream that I was nursing our daughter in our backyard,” she whispered, not taking her eyes off of their baby.

Sam smiled, leaning forward to kiss the top of her head. “Nice dream,” he whispered, smiling at the beauty of his daughter suckling at his wife’s breast.

“I think so, too,” she said quietly, looking up to face him.

“I had dreams about you, too,” he told her, smiling devilishly.

Rachel laughed and tenderly stroked the soft black hair of her daughter’s head. She leaned back, smiling as the baby pulled away from her breast and stretched contentedly.

Sam reached down to lift the baby from Rachel’s arms to hold her against his chest. He patted her back gently, winking at Rachel as she covered her breast with her nightgown.

“I’ll just bet you did,” she said quietly as she laughed softly. She eased back against the raised mattress of the

hospital bed and watched the tender scene before her. “You were wonderful during the labor and birth.” Her voice was gentle as she spoke so softly.

“So were you,” he answered.

“It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” she admitted.

“I know, honey. I don’t know how you were able to do what you did,” he told her honestly.

“Me either.” She looked at Sam as he cuddled their daughter and was filled with love for the both of them.

“I’m glad you only hated me for a little while,” he teased.

“I did not!” Rachel protested, laughing as she nudged his leg gently.

Sam smiled down at her and suddenly

became very serious. “I was afraid, Rachel,” he told her honestly. “I couldn’t bear it if something had happened to you.”

She placed her hand over his as he held their baby. Words were unnecessary.

The baby burped softly, breaking the silence and making them both smile. Sam kissed her tiny head then placed her gently within her mother’s waiting arms.

“We have to name her,” Sam reminded Rachel as she tucked the baby into the crook of her arm.

“I know,” Rachel said quietly. “What do you think about naming her Joanna—after your mother?” She looked up at

Sam and saw the surprise on his face.

“I think that would be a great name,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

He cleared his throat and knelt down beside the bed to place his head directly beside his sleeping daughter. She was the most beautiful little girl he had ever seen—and she belonged to them.

“I’d like to have her middle name be Bernadette,” Rachel said after a moment.

“Okay, honey. Where did you get that name from?”

“I’m not sure. I remember dreaming about a beautiful little angel whose name is Bernadette.”

“Well, this little one is certainly our little angel, so it fits,” Sam said as he

leaned in toward their little girl.

Rachel smiled as she touched their little girl's head. "She *is* a beautiful little angel," she whispered. "You make beautiful babies, Sam."

"We made her together, sweetheart," he reminded her, kissing Rachel's temple lightly.

"Yeah. We did."

She reached out and touched Sam's face tenderly. "Love you," she whispered.

"Love you back," he answered her, leaning in to her touch.

Rachel watched silently as Sam reached out and touched their daughter with utmost care. He brushed her cheek

with the back of his knuckles and smiled as she turned toward his touch.

“Hello, Joanna Bernadette McCoy. Welcome to our family,” he whispered, leaning forward to kiss his daughter’s tiny hand.

Rachel’s eyes filled with tears. She reached out to touch Sam’s face and smiled at him when he looked up at her, his blue eyes sparkling brightly with happiness.

“You *are* a charmer, Sam McCoy,” she told him happily.

“If you feel up to it, there are six members of our family out there in the waiting room waiting patiently to see you and our baby,” Sam told her quietly.

“Who?” Rachel asked, confused.

“Roy, Paulette, Kay, Jarod, Gwen and Stan,” he told her, smiling at her surprise.

She looked up at him with tears of joy in her eyes. She didn't think she would ever be this happy in all of her life. She looked at the man who had given her so much and reached out to draw him closer, kissing him tenderly and hugging him to her with her free arm.

“I can't wait for them to see her. They all had their hand in creating her, that's for sure,” Rachel told him, smiling.

Sam laughed and stood beside the hospital bed. His eyes devoured the two loves of his life. Reluctantly, he turned and left the room to go and get the rest of

their family. Rachel watched him go and smiled down at her daughter as she slept so peacefully within the cradle of her arms. Love swelled in her chest. Life was indeed wonderful.

She pressed the button on the controller to lower the mattress so that she could lie flat. She looked down at her beautiful baby as she snuggled against her chest. She carefully placed her arm around Joanna possessively as she settled her daughter carefully beside her on the bed and closed her eyes to rest. She was so very tired.

It had been a long night. She would relax for just a bit until everyone came in to visit. It was only a matter of seconds before she was sound asleep,

her tiny bundle tucked protectively against her. The delicately tiny hand of her daughter reached out as she stretched contentedly and came to rest lightly against her face, a mere whisper of a touch that met the warmth of her face at the angel's mark.

Rachel sighed contentedly as she felt the warmth of love and contentment surround her. The distinct smell of cinnamon and sugar wafted through the room. A small sparkle of light kissed the tiny crescent moon birthmark at the corner of her right eye, and she was gifted with another dream.

She was outside in the backyard of

their home. Her baby was nursing contentedly at her breast, and she reached up to touch the tiny face gently. She heard a small child laughing, and she looked up to see Sam pushing a beautiful little girl with silky black hair and eyes the color of the sky in a baby swing.

“More, Daddy!” the little girl squealed delightfully.

Sam pushed her to swing back and forth a few more times then reached out to lift her out of the swing and throw her up into the air to catch her and hug her to him lovingly. He kissed her rosy cheek and cuddled her against him.

“Time to rest, Joanna,” he said, laughing softly. “Daddy’s tired.”

Rachel smiled and watched as the two headed toward her, their little girl cuddled against her daddy's chest. Sam sat down next to her on the blue quilt and smiled at Rachel as their eyes met. He reached out and caressed his son's tiny hand then lifted his hand to touch his wife's cheek tenderly. Rachel kissed his palm lovingly.

"I want to kiss Mommy and my baby brother, too," Joanna said happily, squirming off her father's lap to give love to the other two members of her family.

Rachel smiled in her sleep. She had no doubt in her mind that she was seeing the

beautiful future that she and Sam would share. She stirred slightly and opened her eyes to find her husband beside her. She blushed slightly and reached out to hold the hand that was gently touching her cheek.

“I’m sorry, I fell asleep,” she mumbled apologetically.

Sam smiled and sat down beside her on the bed, careful not to wake the tiny sleeping bundle beside her. “Everyone is here to see you and the baby. Are you too tired?” he asked her worriedly.

“No, I’m fine. I want everyone to see her,” she told him, smiling. “I have to tell you about a dream that I just had. It was so incredibly real. I saw you playing with our daughter, and I was

nursing our son.”

Sam laughed quietly. Her words touched him. He could envision his life with her and their growing family. Her dream just echoed his own desires. He looked up at the smiling faces of his adopted family.

Roy stepped forward, tugging on Paulette’s hand as they stood beside Rachel’s bed. Kay reached out to touch the baby’s head while Jarod placed a gentle hand on Sam’s shoulder and squeezed it lightly. Stan and Gwen took their place on the other side of the hospital bed, taking Rachel’s hand and kissing it lightly.

Sam looked at the people who

surrounded them with their love and wasn't embarrassed to let them see the tears of joy that were filling his eyes.

"I'm the last person in the world to argue with dreams," he told Rachel quietly, leaning down to kiss her lips gently.

* * * *

Heaven's Blessings

Peter stepped back quickly as the angel Bernadette soared happily toward the heavenly Father. He couldn't help but smile at the adorable angel's excitement. Her pink wings fluttered quickly and surrounded her Father as she

embraced Him tightly, kissing His smiling face with joy.

“Oh, Father,” she told Him happily. “What a beautiful baby Sam and Rachel have given birth to!”

“Yes, my child,” God agreed. “She is a blessing indeed.”

“Thank you for allowing me to help them,” Bernadette told Him gratefully. She looked up at the kind face that smiled down at her. She reached up and twisted her tight brown curls around her little fingers then touched her chin thoughtfully.

“You are thinking very hard, Bernadette,” Father spoke knowingly, His eyes sparkling as He watched the

little angel prepare her next request.

“Yes, Father,” Bernadette answered very seriously, her brown eyes becoming very large with caring and emotion. “There is another baby that I would like to watch over—with your permission.”

“I am not surprised, my child,” Father said with humor in His voice. “I am not surprised at all. Go to this baby, Bernadette. Make sure you watch over her and let her know how much she is loved.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynnette Bernard is a fan of Broadway, the ocean, science fiction, romance, music, movies, books, and babies. She has two babies of her own that were the perfect children, who have turned out to be outstanding adults. She is a staunch advocate of “happily ever after” and changes the endings of any movie that she sees or book that she reads that doesn’t follow that rule. She has the hots for cowboys, shifters, vampires, and really nice guys and lives

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