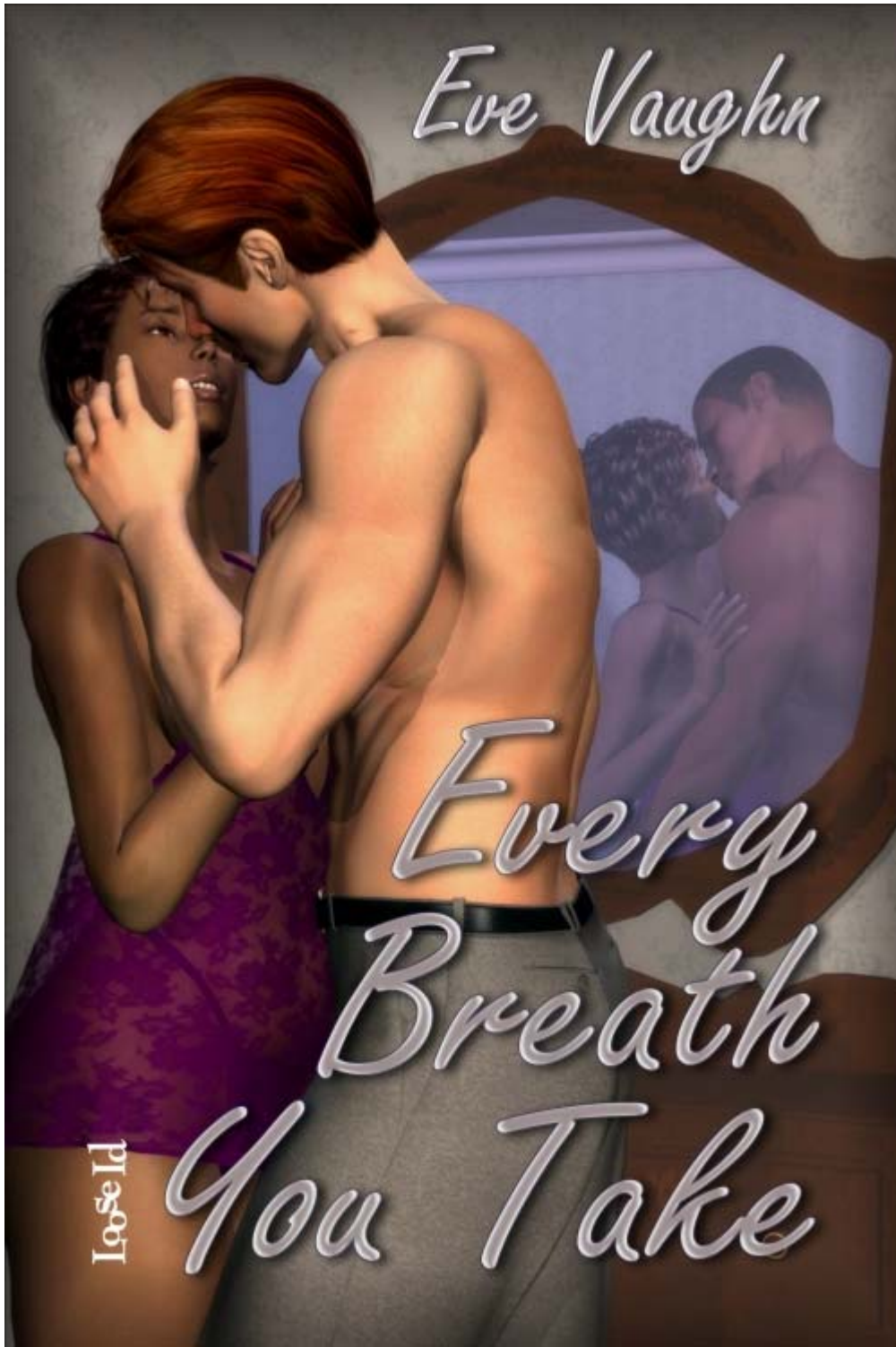


Eve Vaughn



Loose Id

*Every
Breath
You Take*

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Blood Brothers: GianMarco's Muse

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Blood Brothers: GianMarco's Muse is now available from Loose Id.

EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE

Eve Vaughn

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Every Breath You Take

Eve Vaughn

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this story to Gary. He was more than just a pet -- he was my friend.

Prologue

Derrick and Rodney sat in their patrol car watching cars go by; there wasn't much going on right now. Derrick hated working nights because he didn't get to see the kids off to bed, and Brandi was usually asleep when he got home. He knew he'd have to wait until morning to get some more of her sweet pussy.

"Man, I can't wait until next month. We're going on the Walt Disney cruise. The kids have been talking about it for a long time." He sighed.

"Doesn't sound like much fun for you and Brandi," Rodney commented, his eyes glued to the window.

"Oh, it will be. They have a lot of activities for adults, and with the kids so busy, maybe we'll make them another sibling." He grinned, thinking about his wife again. He loved her so much that it hurt sometimes.

Derrick frowned. He thought he'd heard Rodney curse. Before he could ask, Dispatch announced a domestic disturbance, and they were on their way. They saw these types of cases all the time, so it would probably be routine.

As he knocked on the door, however, a woman screamed and a gunshot rang out from inside the house. Rodney called for backup while Derrick kicked the door in, fearing that someone had been injured.

"This is the police! Come downstairs with your hands up!" he shouted. Rodney was covering the backdoor to make sure no one escaped that way. Just then, from upstairs a large grizzly bear of a man appeared on the landing. He held a little girl who was crying and didn't look to be more than four or five years old. He held a gun against the child's head.

"I swear, I'll fuckin' kill her, just like I did that bitch wife of mine if you don't let me out of here," the man threatened. He had a wild look in his eyes.

Derrick's gun was firmly trained in his direction, adrenaline flowing through his veins. He knew he couldn't shoot in case he harmed the child. The man seemed drunk or high and looked desperate enough to take anyone and everyone out.

Suddenly, there was another shot; a bullet caught the man's head. His gun and the child dropped to the floor, the girl screaming hysterically. The perp was dead before he even hit the floor.

Derrick turned angrily on his partner. "Rodney! You could have shot the girl. That was reckless, man."

Rodney walked past him, ignoring Derrick and the crying child.

"Did you hear me? You could have killed the kid. LT is going to flip her lid when she gets wind of this." Derrick followed his seemingly unconcerned partner up the stairs and watched, stunned, as Rodney crouched and used the dead man's hand to lift the perp's gun. In an instant, his partner turned toward him with a strange look in his eyes.

"What was I supposed to do? He shot my partner." A chilling smile spread across Rodney's face.

It was a moment before understanding dawned on Derrick. "No!" He dodged to the side of the stairs, but it was too late. The gun fired before he could avoid it and the force of the bullet ripping through his flesh sent him reeling down the stairs. Rodney, his partner for seven years and the man he'd thought was his best friend, had inexplicably turned on him.

Backup arrived just as Rodney stalked toward him, probably to finish the job. Derrick could only lay helplessly as the life slowly drained out of him. His throat was clogged, rendering him speechless. There was so much blood. He could feel someone trying to stop the flow of blood gushing from him.

Rodney was yelling, "He shot Derrick. I had to take him out. Someone save him! Please!" The piece of shit gave the performance of a lifetime. Then Rodney knelt down next to him. "Hang in there, buddy," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Derrick glared up at him and saw the face of true evil. The triumphant look in Rodney's gaze chilled him further. He wished more than anything that he could erase the satisfied expression on Rodney's face.

"Don't worry, *friend*, I will take very good care of Brandi and the kids for you." As the paramedics loaded him onto the stretcher, once again his partner leaned over him, but this time he made sure no one heard what he said. "Too bad you're going to miss out on that family vacation." He paused. "Brandi Mitchell has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?" Derrick had always known that his partner had had a crush on his wife, but he'd never thought the man was obsessed to the point of murder!

No! He couldn't let that bastard get to Brandi and the kids! Derrick tried to speak, but he could barely breathe, and his body was so numb that he knew death was close. Doctors were working to revive him, but he knew it wasn't any use.

The next thing he remembered was looking down on himself from above. He would never hold his wife again, and he wouldn't be there to see his children grow up. He felt an ache stronger than any physical pain he had ever experienced.

Then Brandi burst into the ER in hysterics. One of the nurses turned to escort her out of the room. He followed them to the lobby where Rodney was waiting. Derrick watched helplessly as his former friend comforted his wife.

"Brandi! Stay away from him," he shouted, but she couldn't hear him. He swung at his enemy, but his blows would not connect.

Then Derrick found himself engulfed in a bright light.

Chapter One

“Don’t tell me to calm down when that bastard is going to marry my wife and raise my children! I can’t let that happen!” Derrick yelled in frustration.

“I feel for you, man, but there’s nothing you can do about it.” Paul touched his friend’s shoulder in a sympathetic gesture.

“So you say.” Derrick hung his head in despair as the sheer sense of futility swept through him.

“Just because they’re engaged, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the marriage will happen. Brandi is a perceptive woman. She’ll soon realize what kind of man he is.”

Derrick found those words comforting, but it wasn’t enough. He looked at his friend and sighed. In the short time they had been Watchers together, the two men had become close. They had a lot in common. Both had done a lot of volunteer work in their respective communities, which was why they had been chosen to be Watchers, or what the living referred to as guardian angels; and both had once had challenging careers. Paul had been a firefighter and Derrick a police officer.

Some of the other angels had even commented that they looked alike, which Derrick found amusing because their physical similarities ended at them both being tall African American men. Something else they both had in common was the fact that they were still madly in love with their wives, but it was love they had to suppress, because on top of everything else, they were both dead.

Paul had been a Watcher longer than Derrick, and he’d had more time to adjust to the fact that his wife had moved on to life with a new husband and family, but there was no way that Derrick could get used to the fact that his wife was going to marry the man who had murdered him.

He could remember that fateful night as if it had just happened yesterday rather than two years ago. There wasn't a day that he didn't think about it, and he felt raw and empty inside every time the details played in his mind.

Now he was here, watching his wife at her engagement party. For nearly two years he'd had to sit back and watch Rodney ingratiate himself into her life, stalk her, and finally seduce her. It just wasn't right.

Paul broke into his thoughts. "I sense your pain, but what's done is done."

"Why? My family doesn't deserve this. Please!" Derrick pleaded. If it were possible, he would have cried to release some of his pain, but he was spitting mad.

"I think I might know of a way," Paul said hesitantly.

"What? Tell me!"

"I have to talk it over with Peter first but ..."

"But what?"

"There are certain conditions you would need to agree to first."

* * * * *

"You look beautiful tonight." Rodney came up behind his fiancée, pulling her soft body against his. The smell of freesia and honeydew filled his nostrils. His pulse quickened. She'd always had this effect on him, from the first time he had ever seen her.

Rodney found everything about her appealing: the way the corners of her eyes crinkled when she smiled, her soft husky voice, and the tiny cute gap between her front teeth. Her chocolate-brown eyes slanted upward, giving her an exotic, feline look, and her closely cropped hair accentuated her perfectly shaped head and high cheekbones. She was an ebony goddess in a pint-sized package. No woman had ever made him react as strongly as she had.

He loved to watch her. It didn't matter what she did; he enjoyed looking at her beautiful face while she slept, ate, and showered. Of course, Brandi didn't realize that he watched her all the time, but that was just fine. He loved her, so that gave him the right. His love meant he could clip souvenir locks of her hair while she slept, take articles of her clothing to hold close to him when he went to sleep at night. It also gave him the right to be with her by any means necessary. He would kill for her -- and had.

Rodney bent down to press a soft kiss on the nape of her neck, reveling in the feel of her silky skin beneath his lips. He felt as if he had waited forever to hold her in his arms like this. In his heart, he knew Brandi belonged to him and only him. It did not matter that she had been someone else's wife when they met. When she had smiled at him so sweetly, he knew he had to have her.

New to the police force, his partner had invited him to dinner at his house. He hadn't expected to fall head over heels in love. Brandi had been waiting for them at the door with a huge white smile lighting up her entire face, encompassing him in the magic created by her

very presence. She was a pocket Venus: gorgeous and tiny, but curvaceous in all the right places. She had the darkest, smoothest skin he had ever seen, and more than anything, he'd wanted to touch it.

The fates had dealt him an awful hand. For seven agonizing years, he had watched as she gave all of her special smiles and kisses to Derrick, and he'd had to pretend that it didn't bother him. Rodney endured the pain of watching her belly grow large with his partner's children, children who should have been his. Instead he'd had to play the doting godfather to the two brats.

As his love grew for Brandi, his hatred for Derrick gained even more strength. Images of Derrick holding, kissing, and fucking her gnawed at his insides until he could barely think straight. Brandi belonged to him! He knew her husband couldn't possibly love her as much as he did. The final straw came the night Derrick had had the nerve to brag about the family vacation they were going on. Unable to take any more, Rodney did what he should have done from the start: he got rid of the obstacle standing in his way.

Now, holding her in his arms, her body so warm against his, he didn't regret what he had done to possess her. He would do it again, if only to see the shocked look on that bastard's face when he'd pulled the trigger. Rodney only wished that he'd done it sooner so the children she bore would have been his. Better yet, had he claimed her in the beginning as he should have, there would have been no children.

He wanted her all to himself. As it stood, the little brats were monopolizing way too much of her time, but that was okay for now. He would pretend to care if that kept her happy, but when she was his wife, there would be changes. No one stood in the way of what he wanted. People had learned that the hard way, some a little too late, just like Jeffrey. That was in the past though. Now what mattered was being with Brandi.

Brandi turned around in his arms and smiled up at him. "Thank you for the compliment, kind sir. You look pretty good yourself."

His heart skipped a beat when she smiled at him like that. "What are you doing out here on the balcony and looking so pensive?"

She had the expression of a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar before turning her head away. His eyes narrowed. He didn't like it when she got that far away look in her eyes, because it usually meant she was thinking about *him*.

"You can tell me anything, Brandi. You know that, don't you?" He lifted her chin with his fingers, and his gaze bore into hers.

"It's just ... I wonder if Derrick's watching us from heaven. I can't help but feel his presence somehow." She shivered.

"Of course, he's looking down on us, and I believe he's happy. Derrick didn't have a selfish bone in his body. He would never begrudge us our happiness. Before he died, he told me to look out for you and the children. I kind of suspect he wanted us to be together."

“Do you really think so?”

“Knowing the kind of person he was, do you really need to ask?”

She paused for a moment, face uncertain. “I guess not. You have been wonderful to me and the kids.”

Rodney leaned down to kiss her full lips. Although she wrapped her arms around his neck to return his kiss, he could sense that she was holding back. He lifted his head. “Is everything okay?”

She sighed. “Yes, of course. I guess I needed some air. Could you do me a favor?”

“Anything for you, baby.”

“Would you mind very much if I have a few minutes alone?”

Unable to help himself, his grip tightened on her shoulders. “Why? This is our engagement party, and you’re standing out here like a recluse. People are asking where you are. You should be in there by my side.” Why did it always seem as though she was trying to find excuses to be away from him? This was supposed to be their night.

“Rodney, your fingers are digging into my skin. Let go.” She frowned at him, backing away when he released her. She rubbed her shoulders. “I have been by your side all night. I just need a moment alone, and I don’t really think it’s too much to ask considering you sprang this party on me at the last minute.”

Rodney steeled himself to present the very picture of contriteness, although he was bristling inside. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was holding you so tight. Forgive me.”

Brandi pursed her lips to show her displeasure, but he knew she wasn’t the type to stay angry with anyone for long. “I forgive you, but you need to watch it,” she warned.

“Of course, baby, but you can’t hold it against me for wanting to show off my beautiful fiancée. I want the world to know that you belong to me.”

“I think they already know because of this huge rock you bought me.” She laughed, holding up her three-carat diamond ring.

“Okay, I’ll go back into the party, but if you’re not back in ten minutes, I’ll come out to get you.”

“All right, I’ll be in shortly,” she promised, turning around again.

When she heard him walk off she looked up to the stars. They were so bright tonight. Everything was perfect. The food was excellent, everyone at the party seemed to be enjoying themselves, the twins were on their best behavior, and she was engaged to a man who adored her. She should have been happy, but something didn’t feel right. She gazed at the stars.

“Oh, Derrick, am I doing the right thing? I know you wanted Rodney to take care of us, but I guess somewhere along the line he and I became closer. He is so good with the kids

and DJ needs a man in his life. You should see him now. He looks just like you, and he's growing like a weed. He's nearly as tall as I am. I think he's going to be tall like you, and Mya is eight going on thirty. She's so smart, but, boy, she sure has a mouth on her you just wouldn't believe." Brandi paused for a moment, tears filling her eyes again at the thought of her children growing up without their father. This same thought had plagued her from the night she saw Derrick's lifeless body lying in the hospital emergency department.

When Derrick was killed, Brandi had been devastated. They had been college sweethearts. From the time they were thrown together as partners for chemistry lab, they'd found that the chemistry between the two of them was far more interesting. They got married after they had graduated.

Her husband had been her best friend, her lover, the father of her children, and the man she loved beyond all others. Their love had always been strong, and with the arrival of the twins four years into their marriage, their love had grown stronger still. Brandi was so proud to be seen with her strong Nubian prince. Many women had eyed her with envy whenever she was out with her hunky husband. She also missed the nights he would make her body sing as he stretched her pussy walls so forcefully with each confident stroke of his masterful cock. He would drive her wild when he talked dirty to her. It was one of her weaknesses where he was concerned.

Like most married couples, they had shared their ups and down, but their love had been the kind that made people wish for what they had. Their lives together were the best ten years she had ever experienced. Derrick had been one of life's givers, deciding to become a police officer for the city of Philadelphia to make a positive impact on people's lives. Even without his uniform he had touched so many people in their community with his warm, generous nature. His job had kept her up most nights with worry, but when the call came that fateful night, she still had not expected it.

Leaving the children with a neighbor, she had rushed to the hospital hoping for the best but expecting the worse. Ignoring the security guards and Derrick's fellow officers who had tried to stop her, she'd burst into the emergency department as a team of doctors and nurses tried to revive Derrick. A hysterical mess, she vaguely remembered being led to the lobby. It was her worst nightmare come true when they had pronounced him dead.

Derrick's death had left a hole in her heart that she didn't think could ever be filled again. She hadn't wanted to go out, hadn't wanted to see anyone, and didn't care how she looked anymore. If she hadn't had the children to look after, Brandi probably would have crawled under her bedcovers and never poked her head out again, but DJ and Mya were only six. They didn't understand why their daddy was never coming home again, and although she put on a brave face for the twins when they were around, she would find herself crying uncontrollably when she was alone.

"I miss you so much, Derrick, but being the kind of person you were, I know you wouldn't want me to mourn you forever. Rodney has been such a rock." She knew that if

she'd had to, she would have been able to make it through, but having Rodney around had helped a lot. She believed he would raise her children as his own, but it wasn't the same. Still, she owed him so much.

"Please give me a sign, Derrick. Tell me that I have your blessing." Brandi waited, hoping to see a star twinkle or some unusual celestial arrangement, but there was nothing. She was torn because she cared very deeply for Rodney, and she supposed she loved him, but her feelings for him didn't come close to what she had shared with Derrick. To be fair, she had told Rodney the first time he proposed that she couldn't imagine loving anyone as much as she had loved Derrick, but it didn't seem to have bothered him.

It was Rodney who made her realize that Derrick would not have wanted her to go on that way. As Derrick's good friend and partner, Rodney had become a fixture in their lives, but after Derrick's death he had taken more upon himself. He came to dinner every night, went to all the kids' school functions, and took them on outings. After six months, he'd proposed. Brandi had been taken aback not only because it was too soon, but because she'd never thought of Rodney romantically. So she had refused him. Despite her rejection, he had not stopped being a part of their lives, and Brandi appreciated that.

It was one weekend when the kids had been with their grandparents that they had drifted into a real relationship. Brandi wasn't even sure how it had happened, but she realized that she could do a lot worse. Rodney made her laugh, he was good company, and he was a very attractive man by anyone's standards. If she were to be completely objective, Rodney drew more stares from women than even Derrick had. Some may have even called him a pretty boy, but Brandi had always preferred dark-skinned black men to Rodney's golden-brown skin and hazel eyes. She had nothing against light-skinned black men like Rodney, but she found something very sensual about running her fingers along smooth coffee-colored skin.

Regardless of his looks, Rodney made her feel good about herself again. He gave her the strength to move on with her life, and for that she loved him. He had asked her to marry him quite a few times, but something always made her say no. The last time, however, had followed a night of partying and too much champagne. She'd woken up to find herself naked in bed with him. It was only when the twins had burst in on them asking questions that she had realized the enormity of the situation. Rodney had been very calm about it, reminding her that she had consented to be his wife the night before. To drive the point home, he'd lifted her left hand to reveal the large diamond she wore.

There had been no turning back. She had made her bed, so to speak. Despite her one slip up with him, Brandi asked him to wait until they were formally married before they went to bed again. He had not been happy about it, but reluctantly agreed. From that moment, Rodney had insisted that arrangements be made immediately, but Brandi wanted to give the children some time to adjust to the idea, so they had compromised, deciding to wait at least a month to set a date.

She cared deeply for Rodney, but Brandi couldn't help but think she was betraying Derrick's memory somehow. Some of Derrick's family had hinted as much, but the majority of her friends and family were supportive. Rodney was a good man. She should have been counting her blessings, so why these doubts?

Furthermore, Brandi was a little annoyed with him. He had sprung this surprise engagement party on her, but she figured his heart was in the right place and it was hard to be mad at someone who spoiled her incessantly. Her thoughts strayed back to Derrick. Was it possible to be in love with two men, especially when one of them was dead? She searched the stars again, but there was still nothing.

Rodney had not left her alone. Instead, he stood behind some bushes listening to everything she had said. So she was still hung up on Derrick was she? It tore him apart that no matter what he did, it always came back to Derrick. If it was the last thing he ever did, one day he would be the only man she thought about. She needed a sign? He would give her one.

"Hey, Brandi, ten minutes are up."

She turned around with a sheepish expression. "I'm sorry. I guess I wasn't paying attention to the time."

"If you give me one of those smiles, I can forgive you anything."

"You're a big flatterer." She smiled at him.

"I'm only speaking the truth." He pulled out his ace. "You know what? When I went back into the party, the strangest thing happened."

"What?"

"I thought I saw Derrick."

Brandi's eyes widened. "What are you talking about?"

"I know it sounds weird, but I think I caught sight of his spirit and he seemed happy. It was as if he was sending me a sign or something. Last night I even had a conversation with him."

Confusion was etched on her beautiful face. This would be easier than he thought. "I know it sounds silly, but sometimes I talk to him. I know he's no longer with us physically, but it's like I feel his spirit now and then, and I always feel better when I talk to him."

"Really? I feel that way too. Does ... does that bother you?" She bit her lip.

It bothered him like hell, but he smiled down at her. "Of course not. How could it bother me when I'm guilty of the same thing? I loved Derrick very much. He was like a brother to me. Last night I asked him for a sign because I wanted his blessing. I believe in my heart that he's just given it to me."

"What was the sign?"

He hesitated for the briefest of moment before, he said, “When I was watching the lottery drawing after the news, the winning number was Derrick’s badge number.”

Brandi looked amazed. “Really? I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say you’ll be happy. It’s what Derrick would have wanted. He wants us both to be happy.”

A tear slid down Brandi’s cheek. “That sounds like Derrick. I’m sorry I gave you a hard time earlier. I hope you know that I’m committed to you and will try very hard to make you happy.”

“You already make me very happy. More than you know.” He hugged her close to him.

Gotcha! That’s right, Brandi, just keep believing that I give a damn about what Derrick would think or want. For all I care, he could be in hell, which is exactly where he deserves to be for being with my woman.

I hope you are watching us, Derrick, and I hope you see that Brandi is where she belongs. She’s mine now!

Chapter Two

Derrick opened his eyes to find himself in an unfamiliar bed. An attractive blonde slept soundly beside him. What in the world? His head spun. He hadn't felt like this since he was in college, which was why he had never touched alcohol again afterward.

Scrambling out of bed, he noticed his luxurious surroundings and wondered where the heck he was. Bringing his hand up to wipe the sleep from his eyes, he froze. He slowly examined the pale hand. In a panic, he rushed over to the full-length mirror by the bedroom door. Staring back at him was the image of a redheaded, green-eyed white man! He looked like Howdy Doody. This had to be some kind of sick joke!

His body felt solid, so this guy obviously worked out. Derrick was almost too scared to feel himself between his legs, but curiosity got the better of him. Not believing what he felt, Derrick looked inside the silk pajama bottoms he wore. Holy shit, the white boy was packing! His cock wasn't even hard and it looked to be at least a good seven inches in its limp form. He might have been a little jealous if he had not been such a well-endowed man himself when he was alive. Wait a minute. He was alive!

"Are you having fun?"

Derrick turned around to see his friend Paul standing behind him. "What the hell is going on? Why am I here? I thought when I came back, I would come back as me!"

"Oh, come on, you should have known better than that. Now, don't you think you would have freaked people out if you walked around in your old body? Besides, Peter did say there would be conditions and you agreed to them."

"But couldn't I have at least come back as a brother? I look like Opie Taylor and Danny Partridge had a baby!"

"You're exaggerating, man. Besides, the ladies apparently find Matthew Collins quite appealing." Paul grinned widely. "I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing here."

“Well, it did cross my mind. Aren’t you supposed to be watching the Fox family?”

“I have someone taking care of them for me. I think you probably need me a little more than they do right now.”

“Well?”

“Okay, man, here’s the deal. You are Matthew Collins. He always went by Matthew but call yourself Matt if it makes you more comfortable. You’re forty-two, divorced with one son, and you own this home, a couple of car dealerships, and five other properties. You --”

“Wait a minute. Are you telling me I’m that obnoxious car salesman on TV? Brandi and I used to make fun of this guy and his tacky commercials, and now I’m supposed to be that cheese ball?”

“Hey, beggars can’t be choosers, man. So, are you going to let me finish?” Paul glared at him.

Derrick sighed.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why *this* guy, right?”

“I have to admit I’m very curious.”

“Matthew was due for a massive heart attack last night, which he would not have survived. He was going straight to, well, you know where. I think Luc is going to be upset that he didn’t get his clutches into this one. Anyway, this guy’s grandmother is a Watcher. You know Amanda Collins, don’t you?”

“This is Amanda’s grandson?”

“Yes. A really sweet lady, isn’t she? She couldn’t stand the thought of one of her flesh and blood spending eternity with the Dark One, so she has been campaigning Peter to bend the rules a little ... although if anyone deserves to be downstairs, it’s certainly Matthew Collins.” Paul shook his head.

“I’m still confused.”

“This is where you come in. You are going to redeem him. Right now his spirit is in limbo. You have to right the wrongs done by him while he was alive. He’s been a bad boy so you have your work cut out for you.”

“I have to redeem him? Isn’t it up to the individual to redeem themselves?”

“Normally, yes, but this was what Amanda chose as her reward. The thing is, even when he is redeemed in the eyes of the people he once hurt, Matthew is still going to serve a long time in purgatory, and even then he might not make it upstairs. Still, purgatory is better than sharing time with Luc, and those are the breaks.”

“What if I don’t redeem him?”

“You have to come back, but you lose your Watcher status.”

“How am I going to do this and win Brandi back?”

“Well, my friend, you can’t get something for nothing, not even in heaven.”

“Look at me! Brandi might not even want me. I don’t think her preferences run to pasty white boys.”

“I’m sure any woman you loved cares more about the person inside than the surface, but like I said before, you’re seeing your new self from the eyes of a man. Seen through the eyes of a woman, you’re actually quite attractive. Now, let me finish telling you the rest of your conditions.”

“There’s *more?*” Derrick asked in disbelief.

“Yup, but remember, this is what you wanted. You can’t tell Brandi who you were and you can’t tell her what Rodney did. She has to find out for herself. If you break one of these rules, you will be summoned back immediately to spend some time in purgatory with our friend Matthew before the big guy lets you back in.”

“What happens if I redeem this guy, but I fail to win Brandi back?”

“You’ll be stuck in this body until it gives out.”

“Didn’t you say this guy was on the verge of a massive heart attack?”

“He was.” Paul winked.

“Ah. Some strings were pulled.”

“You could say that. Look, I have to get out of here before your little friend wakes up and wonders who the heck you’re talking to. See you later ... Matt.”

“Wait! How do I go about redeeming this guy? What exactly has he done?”

“I’d tell you, my friend, but I have a feeling you’ll soon find out. Remember, from now on you’re Matthew Collins. Derrick Evans no longer exists. You’ve been given just enough of his memories to function as Matthew, but you’ll have to learn more on your own. Call me in case of an emergency. Good luck.” Paul disappeared.

“Hey, wait!” Derrick -- Matt -- called back. Damn. He obviously had his work cut out for him. First, he had to think about winning his family back from that maniac.

“Matthew, who are you talking to? I want to play.”

Matt turned around: the blonde was sitting up in bed. “Uh, I wasn’t talking to anyone.”

Paul had mentioned a divorce, so who the heck was this? She didn’t look older than sixteen. *God, please tell me that you didn’t put me in the body of a pedophile.*

“Don’t you want to come back to bed? It sure is awful cold between the sheets without you.” She pouted and dropped the bed sheet to her waist, revealing the largest man-made breasts he had ever seen.

His eyes nearly bulged out of his head. How in the world did she walk with those gigantic jugs? His thoughts drifted to Brandi’s small but well-formed breasts and couldn’t help but harden at the thought of her little brown nubs in his mouth. Brandi had this woman beat hands down.

The blonde giggled, obviously thinking that the erection he now sported was for her. “I see you want to play, too. Now come back to bed, lover.” She crooked a finger at him.

This was the last thing he needed. “Well, I ... I think I’m pretty worn out from last night, sweetie. How about hopping into the shower and I’ll make us some breakfast.”

The blonde’s eyes widened in surprise before she burst into tears.

What was wrong with breakfast? He walked over to the bed and sat next to her, uncomfortable to be around a strange naked woman whose name he didn’t know and who might not be legal. Matt took her hand in his.

“Why are you crying?”

“I didn’t please you and now you’re going to fire me! I cheated on my boyfriend for nothing.” She sobbed uncontrollably.

What in the world? Matthew Collins had threatened this woman’s job if she didn’t sleep with him? What a slimy bastard. How was he going to wiggle his way out of this?

“Umm, I didn’t mean to give you that impression. Don’t worry. Your job is safe.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Now how about that shower? I’ll fix you something to eat.” He left the room as fast as he could. While walking down the stairs, he took in his surroundings. The house was huge. Matthew Collins was certainly loaded. Wait, *he* was now Matthew Collins. This would be a hard adjustment to make.

He remembered the tiny apartment he and Brandi had started out in. It could have fit five times over in this living room alone. The house looked like something straight out of “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.” Brandi and the kids would love it. It needed a homier look, but that could easily be rectified.

Thoughts of his family brought him crashing back down to reality. How was he going to woo his wife in this body? He knew he would have his work cut out for him.

When he found the kitchen, he saw a note next to the answering machine, which was blinking. Matt picked up the note.

I quit! Clean your own damn house. You are a heartless bastard, and I hope you burn in hell. And I’m not Mexican! I’m from Peru. Luisa.

This was certainly another interesting start to his new life. It seemed he had pissed off the housekeeper. Matt was almost scared to listen to the messages on the answering machine, but he knew he’d have to eventually.

The first message was from yet another very irate woman. “You son of a bitch! You have screwed with us for the last time! Ben was up all night waiting for you to show up. You forgot you promised to spend the weekend with him, didn’t you? I bet you were with some bimbo, you pathetic excuse for a father!

“You only want him around to shoot your crummy commercials, but enough is enough. I suppose you won’t be bothered to show up to Parents’ Night next week at his new school, either. If you can’t keep your commitments to your own son, then stay the hell out of his life.” *Click.*

The more he was finding out about the old Matthew Collins, the less he liked.

The next message began. “Dad, it’s Ben. I don’t care what Mom says. I know you had a good reason and that I’ll see you at my soccer game this week. The coach is going to start me at goalie. I’ve been practicing really hard. Okay, I gotta go. I hear Mom coming. Bye, Dad. I sure do miss you.” *Click.*

Beep “Mr. Collins, this is Don Keaton at the Sunny Brook Nursing Home. I’ve left several messages about your past due payments. I regret to have to say this, but if payment is not received within five days, we’re going to have your mother removed, at which time you will either need to come get her or she will be moved to a state-run facility ... provided there is any space.” *Click.*

Matt raked his fingers through his hair. He had to agree with Paul; Matthew Collins’s soul belonged due south.

He rummaged through the kitchen cabinets trying to find something to make for breakfast as he thought of a game plan to tackle the problems ahead. By the time the blonde sauntered into the kitchen, the meal was ready. He had found enough ingredients to make blueberry pancakes and scrambled eggs. She gave him an uneasy smile as he pulled out her chair at the table.

When he sat down across from her he gave her a long, hard stare. He couldn’t have breakfast with someone whose name he didn’t know.

“Uh ... I know I’m going to sound like a jerk but what is your name? I’m feeling a little forgetful this morning.”

She blushed. “Gina Scott. It’s okay.”

“No, it isn’t okay. I really have to apologize for putting you through this. I must not have been myself.”

“Oh, but ... I kind of wanted it to happen.”

“You did? So you’re saying you would have slept with me if I hadn’t threatened your job?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. The girls in the office were telling me how ... oh, dear, I’m babbling.”

“Please finish.”

“The girls around the office say how well endowed you are and I suppose I was a little curious to see if it’s true. I justified sleeping with you because you did threaten me, but now that I know you were bluffing, I’m feeling really guilty.”

“Don’t. The blame is completely mine. It won’t happen again.” There was an awkward pause. “Gina, exactly how old are you?”

“Twenty ... almost. In two months.”

He was really relieved that she was of age. “You said that you cheated on your boyfriend. Are you going to tell him? How do you think he’ll react?”

She paused before answering. “I don’t know. We’ve been having problems lately. He’s very hard to please. I got these implants to make him happy, but it wasn’t enough. All I’ve gotten is a backache and his temper whenever we go out. Ever since I got these things, I get a lot more attention.”

“I can imagine.” His eyes strayed to her chest again. In most circumstances, he would have been like any other man, ogling them like an idiot, but they really were too big for her frame. He decided to steer the conversation to safer territory.

“What exactly do you do for me at work?”

“I’m one of the receptionists.” She looked confused. He knew she must be thinking that he was asking questions he should already know the answers to.

“Are you content with being a receptionist?”

“I guess so.”

“Isn’t there anything else you would like to do?”

“Well ... I haven’t really thought about it. No one’s asked me that before. I wouldn’t mind going to school to earn a degree.”

“Doesn’t the dealership have some sort of tuition reimbursement program?”

“Umm ... You got rid of that.”

“Oh. I forgot.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m just having some trouble remembering things. I haven’t really been myself lately. Now, how about that breakfast?”

The road to redemption was sure going to be a long one.

* * * * *

On the bus ride to school, DJ Evans was having a hard time trying to bring his sister around to his way of thinking. He scowled at her in exasperation. She just didn’t seem to get it.

“How many times do I have to tell you? If Uncle Rodney marries Mom, we’re going to be miserable.”

“I don’t think so. He’s not so bad. He always buys us ice cream, and he bought me that Barbie doll I wanted.”

“Don’t be such a dummy! He’s just being nice to us because of Mom.” DJ fought back the urge to shake some sense into his twin.

“I am not a dummy. You are a cretin!” Mya tossed one long braid over her shoulder.

“You don’t even know what that word means. I know you got that from the movie you weren’t suppose to watch.” He smirked.

“I do so know what it means.”

“What does it mean, then?” Why were girls always pretending they were so much smarter when they weren’t?

“It means you’re a fathead. You always give Uncle Rodney such a hard time. You’re just jealous.”

“That’s not true. I just don’t like him. Anyway, he’s not as nice as Dad was.”

“No one is as nice as Daddy was, but Uncle Rodney makes Mommy smile.”

“If Mom marries him, I’m going to run away.”

“Now you’re just being crazy. Where would you go?”

DJ hadn’t really given it a lot of thought up until now. “I’m not sure, but somewhere warm. I can get a job and a nice apartment.”

Mya rolled her eyes. “You don’t know anything.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“You shut up! You’re not the boss of me just because you’re ten minutes older. I like Uncle Rodney and I don’t care what you say.” She turned away from him to stare out the window, an angry expression on her face.

He sighed, hoping she wouldn’t tattle when they got home.

At the next bus stop, another group of kids got on. The one with a mop of bright red hair caught his glance. DJ had seen him around the playground by himself and felt a little sorry for him. He turned to Mya. “Hey, there’s that new kid Ben. We should talk to him,” he whispered.

“Why? He’s icky. Look at all that red hair.”

“So what? He seems cool.”

“Whatever. You talk to him then.” She turned back toward the window with apparent disinterest.

As the redhead walked by, DJ called to him. “Hi, Ben.”

The boy paused, a look of surprise of his face. “Hi.”

“Why don’t you sit with us? Move over, bubble butt.” He shoved his sister over.

“I don’t have a bubble butt!” she retorted with righteous indignation.

“Come on. Have a seat,” DJ offered, scooting over.

“Thanks.” Ben gave him a shy smile as he sat down.

“I saw you on the playground yesterday. I’m Derrick but everyone calls me DJ. This is my sister Mya. She’s a bit of a pain, but she’s okay for a girl.”

“Hi, Mya.” Ben gave her a slight wave.

“Hi,” she mumbled without even turning around to look at him.

“Ignore her; she can be really moody sometimes. You must be in Miss Cartwright’s class. Is she as mean as they say she is?”

“She’s okay.” Ben shrugged.

“So what are you into? Do you like transformers or Yu-Gi-Oh? I like them both.”

“I’m not really into either. I like sports and my Playstation.”

“Hmmm, my mom won’t let me have a game system yet. She thinks it will rot my brain or something. I like sports, though. My dad took me to an Eagles game when I was little. Do you like the Eagles?”

“Yes. I bet it was nice going to the game with your dad. I don’t see mine that much, but that’s because he’s really important and he’s usually busy.”

“Oh. That’s too bad. Still, at least you have a dad. Ours died when we were six.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to it now. You know what? I think we should be friends. I’ll introduce you around on the playground. What do you think?”

“I would like that a lot.” Ben’s wide smile revealed two missing front teeth.

“Good. You can join our football game at recess. I think we’re going to be awesome friends.”

Chapter Three

As Matt drove to Parents' Night, he thought about the past two weeks.

Living as a white man was certainly an eye opener. He had gone into a department store to buy Ben a present and hadn't been followed or looked down on by a snooty salesperson. On his way out of the store, he had accidentally bumped into a little old lady, and she hadn't clutched her purse or looked at him suspiciously. It was a shame that just because he was now a different color, he was treated differently. He had experienced plenty of racism in his prior body, but the differences hadn't been as apparent to him then as they were now.

Being Matthew Collins was another story. It was harder than he could have imagined. The man almost made Charles Manson look like a decent human being. Through Paul and tidbits he had heard from people who had known Matthew well, the new Matt knew a lot more than he wanted about the fine example of human waste the old Matthew was.

He had been born to a wealthy family in the Philadelphia suburbs. His father, a self-made millionaire, owned a couple of fast food restaurant chains and car dealerships.

It was an all too familiar story. As the only child of parents who had tried to have children for nearly twenty years, he was spoiled and overindulged. Throughout his life, he had been denied nothing and took what he wanted to the detriment of others. When Matthew was in college, he used his money to bribe professors and deans. He had used women as mere playthings, discarding them when his use for them wore out. He had only married his first wife when his parents had threatened, in a last-ditch effort to get him to toe the line, to cut him out of his inheritance.

Poor Becky Joseph hadn't stood a chance. Not married a week, he had cheated on her with her best friend. Becky had been raised in a strict Irish Catholic home and did not believe in divorce, so she had stood by her man through the verbal abuse and public

humiliation. After a while, Matthew hadn't bothered to hide his affairs. With no family to offer support and unable to withstand her husband's forceful personality, Becky had downed a bottle of sleeping pills chased by a bottle of whiskey.

After a night and day with his mistress, Matthew had found her body the following evening. He had been more upset that she had died sitting in his favorite chair than that she had died at all.

By the time he was thirty-two, he had complete control of the family business, taking power of attorney over his parents' finances when his father was struck with prostate cancer. By then, he had met Karen, a pretty blonde flight attendant who had refused to have sex with him without a wedding ring.

After several frustrating months, he had married her, but not without an iron-clad prenuptial agreement. She had been so young and naïve, willing to sign anything to be with him.

He had become bored within five months of their marriage. Besides, she had gained weight and her body had disgusted him. It didn't matter that she had been pregnant with their child. It had taken Karen three years of putting up with his indifference and his affairs before she had taken their son and left him. She had tried to sue for alimony, but the pre-nup was so clearly designed for his benefit that she had lost before she'd even begun.

Matthew had rarely seen his son, telling himself that he hated children, so he didn't see why he should make an effort when he didn't want the kid in the first place. He only paid the minimum amount of child support despite having so much money of his own.

Yes, Matthew Collins had been one of the biggest sons-of-bitches around. To top everything off, when his father had passed away after a long fight with cancer, Matthew had sold his family's house and put his mother in an inferior nursing home. How the man had slept at night was a mystery to Matt. He knew redemption would be hard, but he hadn't realized how dammed evil this guy had been. It was a good thing he had a guardian angel as a friend, or he wouldn't have known how to sort out this man's twisted life.

Matt's first order of business had been to take his mother out of the nursing home and put her in temporary accommodations because she had refused to come home with him. She would barely look at his face and Matt could hardly blame her considering what had been done to her.

He could tell that Brie Collins had once been a regal, gracious woman, but now she was just an empty shell, barely acknowledging him when he walked in the room. The poor woman. His heart went out to her. Matt had hired a private nurse to take care of her and vowed to bring a smile to the woman's face again. It was the least he could do.

As Derrick Evans, he had always taken an interest in his children's education, so he next set out to establish a relationship with his new son. Karen had not been forthcoming with much information, but she grudgingly informed him about Parents' Night at their son's new school. After their recent move to Bucks County, Karen had decided to put Ben into

public school because now they were in one of the best school districts in the state. It was a start. He pulled up to the school.

He got out of his car, a football in his hand for Ben, and walked up to the main entrance. The moment he entered the building, he froze. Only a few feet ahead of him were a recognizable boy and girl leaning against the wall, looking bored. He nearly dropped the football.

The children turned around with identical chocolate brown-eyes as if feeling the weight of his stare. They examined him curiously. Of course. He remembered now that Mya and DJ attended this school as well. His thoughts had been so focused on seeing Ben tonight that he hadn't taken note of the school's name before. Of all the schools in the Philadelphia area, Ben attended the same school as the twins? It must be true that things happened for a reason.

He slowly walked over to them, longing to pull them into his arms and never let go. When he had died, the thought of never being with his babies again had hurt as much as not being with their mother. Just as he was about to speak to them, he felt a tug on his jacket.

"Dad! You came! Mom said not to get my hopes up, but I knew you would be here." The little redheaded boy threw his arms around his waist. This was obviously Ben. Matt had found it strange that there were no pictures of the boy in his home, but then again the kind of person Matthew had been made it unsurprising.

"Hi, kiddo. I brought you something." Matt handed Ben the football. He felt awkward meeting the child like this for the first time and tried to conjure up the feelings for this love-starved child that he already felt for the two onlookers.

"Wow! This is neat. Dad, this is my new best friend DJ and his sister Mya." Ben couldn't seem to take his eyes off him. The Matthew of old certainly didn't deserve this type of devotion.

Matt turned to look at DJ. His heart swelled in his chest and tears filled his eyes. The boy looked so much like the man Derrick used to be, and Mya was beautiful, the very image of her mother.

"Hi, DJ, it's nice to meet you, son." He held out his hand to the little boy.

DJ gripped his hand in a firm handshake. "Nice to meet you, sir."

"And Mya, what a pretty name for a pretty girl." Matt smiled at her.

She gave him a little smile. "Hi."

Unable to help himself, he patted her on the head, wanting to touch her to reassure himself that he wasn't dreaming.

"My, my, my, if it isn't the great Matthew Collins, gracing us all with his exalted presence. Where are the cameras?"

Matt turned around to see a tall blonde glaring at him with a great deal of hostility. It was amazing he didn't fall dead that instant. This had to be Ben's mother.

“Hello, Karen. It’s nice to see you,” he answered as pleasantly as he could under her angry stare.

For a moment, Karen looked taken aback by his response, as if she had been expecting him to return her scathing remark. “She’s a little young even for you, isn’t she?” Karen sneered, shooting a glance in Mya’s direction. She had obviously seen him pat the child on the head.

Matt’s eyes narrowed. Whether he had done her wrong or not, it was not right for her to make disgusting innuendoes in front of the children. He didn’t bother dignifying her nasty comment with a response.

She seemed annoyed when he didn’t rise to her dig. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“It’s Parents’ Night.”

“And when has that ever mattered to you?”

“Perhaps we can have this conversation another time,” he said, his nod indicating that the children were staring apprehensively. Ben was especially tense.

Karen had the good grace to look embarrassed. “Come on, Ben. Let’s go see your homeroom teacher.”

“Can’t I stay with Dad? I want to show him the picture I drew in art class.”

Karen’s lips were pursed together in a thin white line. Matt intervened. Karen looked as if she didn’t want to share her time with Ben, but he couldn’t let the little boy down.

“Why don’t you show both of us your picture after we visit your homeroom teacher,” he suggested diplomatically. What he really longed to do was to stay out here and spend some time with DJ and Mya. He also desperately hoped he would catch a glimpse of their mother.

Karen threw him one last glare before taking Ben’s hand and pulling him with her. “Well, if you’re coming, then come on.”

Matt turned to the twins before he followed mother and son. “It was very nice to meet you both.”

They gave him a little wave before turning to talk to each other. He was about to walk off when Brandi came out of a classroom. His breath caught in his throat. Watching her from above had been one thing, but being this close to her again was another.

It took every inch of willpower in his being not to reach out and pull her into his arms. Brandi looked as beautiful as she had the day he met her. He ached to run his hands over her smooth dark-chocolate skin. Facing her, he flashed her a big smile as he held out his hand. “You must be DJ and Mya’s mother.”

She looked up at him, curiosity gleaming in her eyes. “Guilty as charged. I’m Brandi Evans, and you are?”

“Matt Collins. It seems that our sons have become fast friends.”

As she took his hand, an electric shock went through his body. Brandi’s eyes widened before she hastily pulled her hand from his. He knew that she must have felt it, too.

He widened his smile, not sure what she thought about his new package but confident that the magic between them was still there. Now he just had to figure out how to make her love Matt Collins.

“You have two fine children. My son was singing your son’s praises earlier. Perhaps they can get together for a play date some time,” he suggested.

“Well, I don’t see why not. What do you think, DJ?” She looked down at her son, who was watching them silently.

“Sure. That would be cool.”

“Great. Let me give you my phone number.” He reached into his breast pocket.

“Dad, are you coming?” Ben tugged on his arm. Matt looked behind him to see Karen’s eyes narrowed and her arms crossed.

“Maybe we’ll just have the boys exchange numbers at school. I think your wife is waiting.” She smiled at him.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. Well, it was nice meeting you, Brandi. I hope we can talk again soon.”

“Likewise.”

He started to walk away, then turned around. “By the way, I’m divorced.”

She didn’t reply. He couldn’t tell from her polite expression what was going through her mind, but at least the groundwork had been laid.

Brandi watched the tall redheaded man walk away, not taking her eyes off his retreating back until he was gone from sight. What had just happened? In most circumstances she wouldn’t have given a man like Matt Collins a second glance. It wasn’t that she was prejudiced or found white men unattractive, but she had never been as drawn to one as she had been just now.

He definitely warranted more than a second look. A long straight nose set in a classically chiseled face made him quite handsome. He had the greenest eyes she had ever seen, which went well with his dark-red hair. He had a full lower lip that gave his already attractive face a certain sexiness.

On top of that, his tall sinewy frame in itself was enough to make any woman’s pulse race, but it had not been his looks that had made her so aware of him as a man. She had seen men who were so physically beautiful that it ached to look at them but none of those men had intrigued her this way.

When they touched, she felt as if a jolt of lightning had gone through her. The feel of his hand holding hers had felt so familiar and when their eyes locked she could have sworn that they had already met. There was something in the depths of his green gaze that made her want to find out more about him.

Snap out of it, girl! You are an engaged woman and that man should mean absolutely nothing to you. Brandi stood there for a moment, trying to convince herself that it had just been her imagination, but she had a nagging feeling that she had seen him somewhere before.

Somehow she made it through the rest of Parents' Night without thinking about Matt, but on the car ride home he popped up in her thoughts again.

"Mom, why were you staring at Mr. Collins like that?" Great. Leave it to her daughter to not beat around the bush.

"I thought he looked familiar. I guess I was wrong," It wasn't exactly a lie.

"He's got yucky red hair like Ben." Mya tossed her nose in the air in disdain.

"That's not a very nice thing to say. What do you have against redheads?"

"Missy Reynolds told her that all redheads have bad breath and she believed it. She believes everything that dummy tells her," DJ chimed in.

"That's not true, and Missy is not a dummy. She's the third grade spelling bee champion." From the rear view mirror, Brandi caught Mya sticking her tongue out at her brother.

"You're the only one who likes Pissy Missy," DJ taunted.

"What did you say, young man?" Brandi's eyes locked with DJ's in the rearview mirror. *Lord, save me from strangling my kids tonight.* Being the mother of two active eight-year-olds wasn't easy. At times they were angels and they could do no wrong, but other times she wanted to send them both off to boot camp, especially when they argued as they were doing now.

DJ had the look of a deer caught in the headlights. "Mom, she's always having accidents, and that's why all the other kids call her that."

"Just because everyone else does, it doesn't mean that you should join in. If everyone else jumped off a building, would you do that, too? Don't roll your eyes at me, mister, unless you want to lose them. I had better not hear you talk like that again." Her expression softened when she caught sight of his contrite expression.

"Look, baby, this girl may have a medical condition that she can't help. If there was something medically wrong with you that made you different, would you want people to make fun of you?"

"I guess not. I'm sorry."

"Okay, but the next time I hear you talk like that, it's no television for a week," Brandi warned.

“Yeah!” Mya smirked.

“Mya, I don’t need comments from the peanut gallery. I’m a little disappointed in you, too, young lady.”

“What did I do?”

“Your comment about Mr. Collins’s hair wasn’t very nice.”

“She said that about Ben, too!” DJ seemed glad that the heat was off him, but apparently saw no problem with throwing his sister into the line of fire.

Brandi shot her son a glare before turning back to the road. That silenced him.

“I know, but I don’t like redheads,” Mya said.

“Why not?”

“They all have gross freckles and their breath stinks.”

Brandi sighed. Unlike her son, her daughter sometimes didn’t know when to stop.

“See! I told you she was listening to Missy Reynolds.”

Brandi ignored DJ’s comment. “Don’t you think judging someone on a something they can’t help is just as bad as making fun of someone with a health condition?” She addressed both of them. “Remember that movie we watched about Dr. Martin Luther King? How would you feel if someone didn’t like you because your skin is brown? I didn’t teach you kids to treat people that way. What do you think your father would have said if he were here?”

Both children were silent for a moment, before DJ spoke first. “He would say we should treat people like we want to be treated.”

“Yeah,” Mya agreed. There was another long silence.

“I miss Dad,” DJ said.

“Me, too,” said Mya.

“We all miss him.” Brandi sighed and her eyes filled with tears. She wore Rodney’s ring, but she couldn’t stop thinking about Derrick. She didn’t have the heart to put Derrick’s wedding ring away, so she now wore it on her right hand. She wondered again if she was doing the right thing by marrying Rodney when her heart belonged to a dead man.

Later that night when the kids were in bed, Brandi flipped on the TV. She surfed through the channels until she came across a commercial with a familiar face: Matt Collins. She *knew* she had seen him somewhere before! He was the slick car salesman that Derrick used to laugh at. Judging by his flashy commercial, he seemed more cocky, brash, and totally unappealing. She would never have guessed that she would be drawn to someone like Matt. What made him so different in person?

As she lay in bed, she still wasn’t satisfied about the enigma of Matt Collins. Brandi just couldn’t shake the feeling that she knew him better from somewhere else. Her dreams that night were filled by the images of a handsome man with startling green eyes, red hair ... and Derrick’s face.

Chapter Four

“Mom, I think this is the place.” DJ pointed out the large stone mansion.

Brandi gaped as she slowed down to take in the magnificent structure. She glanced at her directions. 218 Crawford Road. She already knew Matthew Collins was probably wealthy since he owned a couple of car dealerships, but she still had not expected such splendor. Turning in to the driveway, she gave her son *the* speech.

“Remember what I said when you go in there. You will thank Mr. Collins for having you over and you will behave yourself. If I hear that you’ve misbehaved, no more sleepovers. Do you understand, mister?”

“Yes, Mom. This place is sweet! I bet Mr. Collins is really rich.” DJ echoed her earlier thoughts.

“I would imagine so if he lives in a place like this,” she agreed, bringing the car to a halt. When her son had come home earlier in the week to say that his new friend had invited him for a sleepover, Brandi could hardly say no. DJ was a good kid who always got good grades, but she felt wary about seeing Matthew Collins again. There was something about him that nagged at her. Since the night they had met, she couldn’t get him out of her mind; it was disturbing.

Whatever it was, she had to tread carefully. She didn’t need any more complications in her life right now. Rodney was mad at her because she didn’t want to set a wedding date yet. The sullen silences and petulant side glares were unnerving whenever she was with him. The more petulant he became, the less she wanted to set a date. She didn’t know what had gotten into him lately, and Brandi didn’t like it one bit.

She and DJ got out of the car and walked up to the imposing door. The little redheaded kid she remembered from Parents’ Night answered the bell, a big smile on his face.

“Hey, DJ. Come in. I’m playing Madden 2005 on my Playstation. Hi, Mrs. Evans.” Ben beckoned them inside.

Ben Collins was a cutie pie with his bright red hair and deep-green eyes. She knew he would be quite the heartbreaker when he grew up. Already he looked the image of his sexy father.

Sexy? Where did that come from? *Get a hold of yourself, girl.* Just then, the object of her thoughts appeared.

“Hi, DJ. I’m glad you could make it. Why don’t you put your stuff down and Ben can show you his new game.” Matthew spoke to her son, but his intense green eyes never left her face.

DJ looked up at his mother. “Go ahead, baby. Be good.” She leaned over to kiss his cheek.

When the boys ran off, leaving the two adults alone, Brandi suddenly felt nervous. Matthew smiled at her with even white teeth.

“Thanks for bringing your son over. Ben has really been looking forward to this.”

“So has DJ. He’s been talking about this nonstop.”

“So, Brandi ... I mean, Mrs. Evans --”

“Please call me Brandi.” She smiled at him.

“And you must call me Matt. Where’s your daughter tonight?”

“She’s at my mother’s house. Well, I should be going, but please call me if DJ gives you any trouble. He can be quite a little rascal when he wants to be.”

“Boys will be boys. I’m sure it won’t be anything that I can’t handle, but do you have to leave so soon? Stay and have a drink.”

“Well ...”

“That is, unless you have plans, in which case I understand, of course.”

She had promised Rodney that she’d call him after she dropped DJ off so they could make plans for the evening, but the way he’d been acting lately, she wasn’t crazy about seeing him tonight. She knew it probably wasn’t a good idea to stay for a drink with Matt either, but for some strange reason, she couldn’t walk away.

“A drink would be nice, thank you.”

“Come to the living room. What would you like?”

“Do you have white wine?”

“Yes. Let me get it for you. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back.”

Brandi took a seat on the big white sofa. The house was magnificent and obviously the work of an interior designer. Despite the fact that everything was tastefully done, it seemed cold.

A picture caught her eye. It was of Matt standing in front of his car dealership. He looked as handsome as he did in person and yet not the same somehow. Brandi scanned the rest of the room. She found it odd that there were no pictures of Ben or anyone else around. The only pictures on display were his. He hadn't struck her as a narcissist.

"Here is your wine, Brandi." Matt's voice interrupted her thoughts.

She took the glass he offered and had a sip. "Mmm, this is good wine. Thank you."

"I noticed you were looking around. What do you think?" he asked as he sat down next to her.

Brandi's mouth went dry. He smelled so good and she could feel the heat of his body. Self-consciously, she scooted over. "Umm, your house is very nice."

"But not your cup of tea?" His shrewdness took her by surprise.

"Well, you have to remember, I live with two active eight-year-olds, so our house looks a little more lived in than this," she said as diplomatically as she could.

"I know -- I mean, I can imagine. This place does look a little like a mausoleum. I was thinking of redecorating. A woman's opinion would be nice." He smiled at her.

"Are you asking me? You don't even know me."

"Maybe not yet, but I'm sure you're a woman of good taste. I bet you decorated your own house." His mesmerizing eyes seemed to be looking at her to her very soul. Her body tightened in reaction. Why was this man affecting her this way?

"I did decorate my own place, but that was different. For a place like this, I really think you would be better off with a professional."

"Let me at least show you around and you can tell me what you think."

"Okay. Why not?" She placed her drink on the coffee table.

Matt stood up, taking her hand in his. Brandi shivered; she felt that same spark she had felt when they had first shaken hands. Snatching her hand from his she backed away.

"Umm, you know what, Matt? I think I should head out."

Disappointment seemed to wash over his face. Damned if she didn't want to throw her arms around him.

"What's wrong? At least let me give you the tour first. I'll make it the quick tour."

There was something in his eyes that she just couldn't say no to. "Okay, but after that, I need to run."

He gave her a dazzling smile. "Great. Follow me." He took her hand in his again. This time, she didn't try to release herself.

His house was really something else. It was hard to believe that people actually lived like this. As they went from room to room, she made polite comments. The house was beautiful but it was missing a little soul. She and Derrick had made do on their combined salaries, but as a cop Derrick didn't make much, and they had had two young children.

They stopped when they reached the first room at the top of the stairs. "This is my bedroom. I will understand if you don't want to see it."

"I don't mind."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. It's not like you're going to try something, right?" She laughed, but in the back of her mind, she wondered how she would react if he were to make a move on her.

He opened the door, and she had to cover her mouth. It looked like a tropical nightmare. There were tall potted plants all over the room, a leopard-print bedspread, and scenes from a rain forest painted on the walls. "Pretty cheesy, huh?" he smiled sheepishly.

"If you don't mind my being so blunt, it is a little over the top," she admitted.

"I'm not sure what was going through Matth-- my mind when I had this decorated."

Unable to contain herself any longer, she cracked up. He smiled at her with an indefinable expression in his eyes. "You have a great laugh." He stood in front of her.

Brandi stopped laughing. She looked up into his eyes and this time his expression came through loud and clear. Desire.

"Matt --"

"Please don't say it. I know what you must be thinking, but I didn't bring you into my bedroom to hit on you."

"I know you didn't."

"Yet, I see the wariness in your eyes. You don't have to be frightened of me. I would never do anything that you didn't want, but I really have to get something off my chest."

"What?" She knew they were treading on dangerous ground.

"At Parents' Night, when we saw each other, there was an instant attraction. Don't deny it! I saw it in your eyes."

"We shouldn't be having this conversation. I'm engaged to be married." She turned to leave, but he grabbed her arm and spun her back toward him.

"Do you love him?" Matt demanded.

"You have no right to ask me that. Now, I will thank you to take your damn hands off me so I can leave."

"Why are you pretending that you're not attracted to me, too?" he demanded.

"I don't even know you!" she protested, trying to pull her arm out of his grasp.

"That can be remedied." And with that he tugged her into his arms. His mouth crashed down on hers with a hungry desperation that took her breath away. Brandi was stunned at first. She tried to twist away from him, but her body betrayed her. She felt tension build up from the pit of her stomach. His tongue thrust forward and her lips instinctively parted, allowing him to deepen the kiss.

Matt's hand gently cupped her face and Brandi felt herself melting against him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, returning his kiss, matching it with an intensity of her own. Her nipples stiffened against the hard wall of his chest. Her pussy clenched, aching for his touch.

As if sensing her need, he cupped her ass in his hands, lifting her up against him, his mouth never leaving hers. She could feel the hardness of his cock grinding against her, and it was driving her crazy. Before she realized it, her back was against the wall and Matt's body was pressed against hers.

He ripped his mouth away from hers to place hot kisses against her throat. Brandi's fingers threaded through his dark red hair.

"Oh, God, Brandi. You have no idea how much I've missed this," he muttered against her neck. What did he say? She couldn't think about it right now. The feel of his hands roaming over her body drove all rational thought away.

Matt's hands went under her blouse and Brandi cried out in pleasure as he squeezed and kneaded the sensitive mounds. "Oh," she moaned as he lowered his head to nibble on her earlobe. Her body trembled as he kissed her behind her ear. Somehow Matt knew exactly where and how to touch her. She felt like jelly beneath his expert hands. While one hand fondled her breasts, his other hand fumbled with the button of her jeans.

Brandi knew she should have told him to stop, but she couldn't; she was too damn horny. When he slid his hand inside her damp panties and cupped her throbbing pussy, she thought she would lose her mind. His fingers glided against her slick, swollen entrance.

She pleaded as he squeezed her labia, "Yes, oh, please." But he didn't touch her where she wanted it the most.

"You like that, honey?"

"Yes!"

"Good. I like touching you like this. You're so hot, Brandi; hot for me."

Brandi could only nod, not trusting herself to speak.

"I want you to tell me, Brandi." His green gaze was insistent.

"I can't," she whispered. In the back of her mind she knew this wasn't right, but her body was telling her otherwise.

"Yes, you can." He gave her a knowing smile as his middle finger slid between her folds, touching her clit.

Brandi gasped. Holy shit, what was this man doing to her? Matt rolled the blood-engorged button between his thumb and forefinger. The exquisite torture made her yearn for more. She wanted his fingers inside her, stretching the walls of her needy cunt.

His lips lightly brushed her. "Brandi, you're so sweet. Let me make love to you," he whispered.

She moaned her acquiescence. There was nothing she wanted more at this moment than to be with him. Matt wasted no time in carrying her to the king-sized bed, laying down her in the middle. He stood over her, looking at her with unashamed passion. When he sat down next to her, his thumb glided gently over her bottom lip, before sliding it into her mouth. She could taste herself on the probing digit. The flavor of her on his finger was delicious. Oh, how she wanted this man.

She quivered helplessly as he pulled the jeans down from her hips. When she was free of them, he slid down the length of her body. Matt planted kisses on her belly, and Brandi could feel her insides go soft. His kisses were making her lose all rational thought.

“You’re so beautiful. I can’t believe you’re here with me,” he whispered against her heated skin.

Matt dipped his tongue in her navel and Brandi moaned again. She threaded her fingers through his hair. She squirmed at the delicious sensations his tongue was creating. His tongue traced patterns on her skin as she oohed and ahed in delight. The way he touched her, held her, and kissed her felt so familiar. It almost seemed like he knew exactly what to do to make her melt for him.

“Matt, that feels so good.”

“It’s not as good as I’m going to make you feel,” he muttered. With that, he tugged her underwear down with his teeth and pulled them down her thighs before using his hands to do the rest.

Brandi bit her lip in anticipation. The feel of his breath against her pussy was sending jolts of pleasure up and down her spine. More than anything, she wanted to feel his mouth on her pussy. She was so wet she could feel the dampness on her thighs. “Please, Matt, please,” she begged, wanting him to stop teasing her.

Matt pushed her legs apart and parted her labia with his middle finger before leaning forward to give her a deep kiss inside her pussy. Brandi cried out. “Oh, God, Matt!”

He kissed her clitoris and then licked it. Brandi bucked her hips against his face, wanting more. His tongue swirled around her clit with a precision that any skilled lover would be jealous of. Brandi looked down and her breath caught in her throat. The sight of his dark-red head between her thighs was so erotic that another wave of passion whipped through her.

“Do you like this, Brandi?”

“Yes!”

“Do you want me to eat your pussy? Because I want to eat it. It tastes so good, smells so good.” He gave her clit another kiss before capturing it between his teeth, gently nipping at it.

“Oh!” she yelped.

Matt lifted his head. "Did I hurt you?" For the first time, a note of uncertainty entered his voice.

"No. You just took me by surprise. That feels wonderful, Matt. Please don't stop." Brandi grabbed his face, grinding her aching cunt against his lips. He inserted two fingers inside her as lips latched onto her clit once more.

It had been so long since she had felt this way. Although she found him sexy as hell, Brandi never would have imagined that Matt could make her feel this good. His tongue, mouth, and fingers were making her feel things she hadn't thought she was capable of feeling again.

She writhed beneath him, unable to lie still under his hungry mouth. He continued to finger fuck her, then lifted his head. "Open your eyes, Brandi."

She looked down at him; his green eyes were full of lust.

"Tell me that you want me. Tell me that you want this."

"I do," Brandi moaned.

"You're so damn wet for me. Do you want my cock?" His words were insistent. "I want to hear you say my name again. Tell me you want me."

"I want you, Matt. Please."

"Please what?"

"Please fuck me."

"You want me to fuck you with my cock, like this?" He thrust his fingers inside her, making her gasp in pleasure-pain. Matt slid another finger into her pussy and thrust again.

"Yes! Give it to me."

"I will, but first I want to play some more. I want you to ache like I do."

Matt gripped her hips tightly before diving for her wet hole. His tongue stabbed into the entrance of her pussy, and Brandi squirmed and jerked uncontrollably at the delicious torment. He fucked her with his tongue until her body suddenly seized up. She felt as though she had exploded and cried out with a mind-shattering climax.

"Now, it's my turn," he said, rearing up on his knees and sliding off the bed to strip off his pants. Brandi's eyes never left his. When he stripped down to his boxers she saw the head of his cock peek out of the slit. It was straining eagerly to get out.

"Do you like what you see?"

She nodded. His body was magnificent. He was well muscled without being overly bulky.

A serious look entered into his eyes. "You know you don't love your fiancé, don't you? If you did, you wouldn't want me the way you do."

It was as though a bucket of ice water had been thrown over her. Brandi sat up. What the hell was she thinking, letting a practical stranger kiss and touch her the way he had? They had nearly fucked!

Worse yet, their children were downstairs! What if one of the boys had come looking for them?

“How dare you!” was the first thing she could think to say as she scrambled off the bed.

Matt threw her an incredulous look. “How dare I? You want this as much as I do!”

“You ... you seduced me.”

“You were begging me for it only minutes ago. Why won’t you admit that your fiancé doesn’t do it for you?”

Brandi’s hand flew up and connected with his face. She gasped in horror. She had never hit anyone in her life.

Matt’s eyes narrowed as he rubbed his injured cheek.

“I’m sorry, but you know nothing about my feelings for my fiancé.”

“I know that if you really love him, you wouldn’t respond to me the way you do.”

“This was a mistake.”

“The only mistake we made was getting carried away while the boys are nearby. I apologize for that because it truly was not my intention to touch you, but when you’re so close to me, I can’t think straight.”

“This conversation is over. I’m taking my son, and getting the hell out of here,” she said, quickly throwing her clothes back on before storming out of the bedroom.

Matt reached out to stop her. “Don’t punish your son for something that happened between you and me. Ben and DJ like each other a lot and my kid doesn’t have a lot of friends.”

She knew he was right, but she wasn’t in the mood to be rational. “We can’t see each other again, and I would rather our sons not see each other outside of school.”

“Brandi, why are you being so selfish? It’s not like you.”

“Stop talking to me as if you know me. You don’t!”

He pulled her against him and gave her one long hungry kiss. She tried to twist away only to find herself responding to the insistent pressure of his lips. His body was warm and hard against hers. When he lifted his head there was a feral gleam in his eyes. “But I want to get to know you.”

This man must have cast a spell on her because she wanted to get to know him, too. *You are thinking crazy, girl. Get out of here now!* She wrenched out of his arms. “No!”

Brandi ran down the stairs. “DJ! Get out here now!”

“Brandi, don’t.” Matthew raced after her.

“DJ!”

Her son came running up from the basement with Ben behind him. “Mom, what’s wrong? What are you still doing here and why are you mad? Am I in trouble?”

“No, you’re not in trouble, but we’re leaving. Go get your things.”

“Why?” She tried to steel her heart against his stricken expression.

“Dad, I thought DJ was spending the night.” Ben also looked upset. Seeing both children’s faces brought her back to her senses. It wasn’t their fault she had lost control of herself, and it certainly wasn’t their fault that since Derrick no man’s touch had driven her to such an aching need.

She couldn’t deny she was fiercely attracted to Matt Collins even though she was promised to someone else. Which was exactly why she needed to leave.

“Mom. Do I really have to go?” DJ’s big brown eyes held unshed tears.

“Brandi, let him stay. Please.” Matt put his hand on her shoulder. She flinched away.

“Okay,” she conceded. The boys didn’t need to know what an ass she had just made of herself in Matt’s bedroom. “I’m sorry I called you away from your game, honey. Mommy was just being silly. Have fun, and I will see you tomorrow.” She leaned over and kissed him goodbye.

A wide grin spread on his face before he turned to his friend. “Come on. My team is going to win.”

“No way! I was coming back,” Ben protested as he raced after DJ.

Brandi watched the boys leave the room again. When they were alone she turned to Matt.

“Don’t say a word. This never happened.”

When Matt looked as though he wanted to say something, she held up her hand. “Not a word. Have my son ready at noon.” Collecting her purse, she did what she should have done the minute she had stepped foot into his house: she got the hell out of there.

Chapter Five

“Smooth move, Casanova.” Paul laughed at him.

“Dammit, Paul. Where the hell have you been this past week? I’ve been calling out to you.” His friend was floating around the room, grinning cheerfully.

“I had some things to take care of, but you were doing quite well without me.”

Matt snorted. “I screwed up. Brandi hates me, and I don’t know if I’ll ever get another chance with her.”

“Well, you did come on pretty strong, my friend.”

“I couldn’t help myself. Whenever she’s near me, I can’t keep my hands off her. It’s been so long. You’ve forgotten what it’s like to be away from the woman you love, not being able to touch her, or hold her.”

“The hell I have! You at least have another chance. My wife has moved on. I’ll never get to touch her or make love to her again.” Paul’s eyes flashed with anger.

Matt felt instant contrition at Paul’s rage and pain. He hadn’t stopped to consider how his friend must have felt to see his wife remarry and have children with another man. Had Brandi found another man worthy of her love, he knew he would have had to let go as well. Even as he thought of her being with someone else, he ached.

“Paul, I’m sorry. I was only thinking of myself.”

“All right.” Paul took a deep breath. “Brandi doesn’t hate you. She’s just confused. She hasn’t gotten over your, er, Derrick’s death and Rodney ingratiated himself into her life when she was most vulnerable. She feels an overwhelming sense of gratitude, which he naturally has no problem exploiting. It won’t be easy for you to break the hold he has unless he messes up.”

“How am I supposed to get close to her now? There’s only so much time I have in a day and lately it’s all been spent on trying to right all these wrongs of the old Matthew. I seem to be making some headway with Ben at least. He’s a great kid. I can’t see how any man could have neglected his son so shamefully. When I think of the times I watched DJ growing up without me, I can’t help but feel that this guy should be exactly where he was going in the first place.”

“Well, I agree with you about that. He’s lucky he had some heavenly connections, but on the bright side, now that you’re Matthew Collins, it will make all the difference in the world to Ben.”

“I hope so. I’m not doing so well with my mother though. She seems so hostile to me. I offered to bring her home with me, but she won’t even speak to me. She looks at me like she doesn’t see me. I sit with her for a couple hours each visit and tell her about what’s going on in my life and how Ben’s doing and what’s going on at work. She only shows any interest when I mention Ben’s name.”

“Well, you have to remember the raw deal she received when her husband died. I think she has the right to be upset at being placed in that dump of a nursing home when she expected support from her only child.”

“I know, but I wish she would talk to me. That reminds me, I have an appointment with the director of another facility. That place is much nicer. More of a country club than a nursing home. Hopefully, she will like it better.”

“It’s a start, but you still will have to keep putting in time with her. Money isn’t going to solve all of your problems,” Paul pointed out.

“Probably not, but it certainly helps. You know, it’s funny. I always dreamed of a place like this, but it all means nothing without Brandi and the kids. You’ve got to help me, Paul. What am I supposed to do?”

“How about getting your teeth cleaned?”

Matt stared at Paul. What the devil was he talking about? “As cute as that idea is, I have more pressing things on my mind.”

Paul gave him a sad look, and Matt felt a sudden wave of alarm. What was that about? “What?”

“It’s happening already,” Paul answered.

“What is? What are you talking about, man?”

“You’re starting to forget. I knew this would happen when you came back.”

Now Matt really felt panicked. “Forget what? Would you stop talking in riddles?”

“The longer you’re down here, the more you may forget bits and pieces of Derrick Evans’s life. You won’t completely lose all of his memories, but as you make new ones as Matt, you’ll lose some of Derrick’s.”

“What?! You never mentioned this!” Matt raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. He didn’t want to forget. He didn’t want to forget the day he met Brandi or the first time they had made love or the day she gave birth to the twins.

“You knew there was a price you had to pay for coming back. I’m sorry, but this is how it works.”

“But what about Brandi and me?”

“I’ll try to help you as much as I’m allowed, which isn’t much, unfortunately, as far as winning Brandi back, but your first responsibility is to redeem Matthew Collins. To be honest, I had only recently learned of the memory thing myself or I would have warned you. You have to remember no one’s come back before; this is as new to me as it is to you.”

“So I’ll eventually forget how I felt about her? When I agreed to this, I didn’t know the price would be so high.” Tears of frustration filled his eyes.

“Look, I can’t say what will happen to you and Brandi as you begin to lose some of your old memories, but like I said, you won’t lose all of them.”

“But I could lose the important ones?”

“Maybe. I’m sorry, man. In the meantime, I suggest you make a dental appointment with Dr. David Cross in Horsham for a cleaning.”

“How will going to see the dentist help me?”

“For one thing, it will keep that white smile of yours healthy, and since Brandi is a dental hygienist in that office, it will give you an opportunity to see her again.” Paul winked.

“You’re a sly devil. I thought you weren’t going to interfere where Brandi and I are concerned.”

“I’m not a devil, just a devious angel. Besides, I said I wouldn’t interfere; I didn’t say I couldn’t give you a couple of helpful ... suggestions.”

“Well, you certainly --”

“Who are you talking to, Dad?”

Matt turned around. His son was looking for signs of another person, but Paul was gone. “No one, sport. I was just talking to myself. Where’s DJ?”

“He’s downstairs playing the game.” Ben grinned. “Mom says that talking to yourself is a sign of craziness.”

“Did she now? What else does your Mom say?” He smiled indulgently, ruffling the child’s bright red hair.

“She said that you’re probably being nice to me lately because you probably need to shoot another commercial and you want me in it,” Ben said solemnly. His big green eyes looked at him as if he were trying to figure out whether it was true.

Matt's heart went out to the child although he had only known him for a short time. It was really a shame that until now there hadn't been a better relationship between father and son.

He also found it disconcerting that Karen would tell Ben something like this, regardless of whether it had been true in the past or not. Involving children in adult squabbles was not cool. He made a mental note to talk to Karen when he dropped Ben off at the end of the weekend.

Matt knelt down in front of Ben, taking the child's chin between his fingers so that their eyes met. "Do you feel that a commercial is the only reason I want to spend time with you, son?"

Ben shrugged. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do. You can tell me the truth."

"Well, you didn't come to my party and you promised me you would, and the last time you took me out, you brought that woman with you. She wasn't very nice. She told me that my freckles were ugly and that I would never be handsome like you." A tear slid down the boy's cheek, which he hastily wiped away. Pain coursed through Matt's body at what this child must have gone through.

"Listen to me, Ben. I'm sorry things were the way they were before, but I promise to make it up to you. You're my son and you're very important to me." He pulled Ben into his arms. Ben wrapped his thin arms tightly around his neck.

"I love you, Dad," the boy whispered against his neck.

Matt's heart swelled with pride. He felt a strong connection to this boy. "And I love you, too." Strangely enough, he meant it.

Ben pulled out of his embrace and he had a huge smile on his face. "DJ challenged you to a game of Madden. He beat me, but I think you can take him."

"Hmm, I think I should be able to give him a challenge. He's going down."

Matt smiled as Ben tucked his hand into his and led him downstairs to the game room.

* * * * *

Pulling up into her driveway, Brandi still couldn't get over what had happened between her and Matthew. How could she have let him kiss her like that? It defied all reason. She hadn't even looked at a white guy in a sexual way before, let alone allowed one to take such liberties with her body. But his touch ... Dammit, why did Matt Collins have to come into her life and complicate things? The sexual charge between them was too explosive to deny, which was why she knew she couldn't have anything to do with him.

Her breasts tingled when she remembered how his hot mouth had felt against her skin and when he had touched her pussy. Brandi had thought she would explode right then and there.

Get yourself together, girl. You have your children and Rodney to think of.

Rodney!

Holy crap! She had forgotten about him. He had never made her feel so wild, nor had he filled her with a passion that threatened to possess her very soul. His kisses were pleasant, but they didn't make her feel as Matt's kisses had.

To be fair, she and Rodney had never had sex aside from that one time the night before they had gotten engaged. Even then, she couldn't remember what had happened. She knew he wanted to have a more intimate relationship with her because he had mentioned it a number of times, but she was usually able to put him off by telling him she wanted to wait until after the wedding. After Matt's embrace she realized how lacking in passion her and Rodney's relationship was. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to marry him when a practical stranger could make her delirious with lust with just one stroke of his finger. *Damn you, Matt.*

As she got out of her car, she noticed Rodney's SUV parked on the side of the street. Almost on cue, he got out. Brandi waited anxiously as he approached. How could she look him in the eyes after what she had done tonight?

"Brandi, I thought you were going to call me." He didn't look happy.

"As you can see, I'm just getting home. I told you I would call after I dropped DJ off."

"But did it have to take you so long to drop him off? We spoke nearly two hours ago. Where else did you go? Were you out with someone?" His voice was insistent, demanding.

She took a step back, hands on hips. "First of all, I never gave you a specific time as to when I would be back. Second, I didn't realize I had to report my comings and goings to you. Don't start with me, Rodney, because I am not in the mood."

Something that looked feral flashed in his eyes before it quickly disappeared. He smiled. "I'm sorry, baby. I got worried, is all. You can't blame me for being a little concerned, right?"

Brandi sighed. "I'm sorry, too, but I would really appreciate it if you didn't interrogate me as if I were one of your suspects. Anyway, I dropped off DJ and waited till he settled in. Mr. Collins offered me a drink and showed me around his house."

Rodney's eyes narrowed. "Was his wife there?"

"He's divorced."

"You never mentioned that before."

"So what? It wasn't important. I was just dropping my son off for a sleepover with his friend. End of story."

"Obviously not if you're having drinks and getting the grand tour." Rodney sneered. Brandi had never seen him like this, and she didn't like it one bit.

“What’s wrong with you tonight? This behavior is ridiculous. As a matter of fact, I would rather be alone if you’re going to act like this. Goodnight.” She turned around to walk toward her house, but he grabbed her and hauled her back around. His mouth came down on hers.

Brandi pressed her hands against his chest. He was suffocating her with his insistent mouth. His grip tightened on her petite body, making it nearly impossible for her to move. She stopped struggling. Maybe if she let him kiss her this way, she would respond to him as she had with Matt.

Rodney’s tongue stabbed forward as he pressed her against her car. His mouth explored hers, and she felt absolutely nothing except a mild disgust. Why would she feel this way about someone she was engaged to? It made no sense to her. She willed herself to respond to him, but she couldn’t. Brandi twisted her head away.

“No. Let me go, Rodney.”

He grasped her chin. “Brandi, I need you so badly. Let me take you inside and love you.” Rodney bent to kiss her neck.

“I said no, dammit!”

He didn’t look as though he wanted to let go, but he did. “I’m sorry. Let’s go inside and talk this over,” he pleaded.

“No. I want you to go right now.”

“But --”

“Now!” She walked to her front door, unlocked it, then slammed it behind her.

When the door closed, Rodney saw red. She had actually slammed the door, making it clear that he wasn’t wanted. He couldn’t remember a time when he had not been welcome in her home. Something wasn’t right. She had even turned away from him when he had tried to kiss her.

In fact, Brandi had been a little cool toward him lately, as though she were having second thoughts. He would not allow her to get out of the engagement. He had fought too hard to win her and no one would get in his way.

He was sure her behavior must have something to do with Matthew Collins. She had seemed evasive when talking about him. He didn’t like the idea of his woman having drinks with an unattached man. He should probably check out this Collins character and make sure nothing was going on.

If there wasn’t anything, then that was fine. Rodney was sure he could talk some sense into Brandi. But if something had happened, he wasn’t above wiping out the competition ... by any means necessary.

Chapter Six

“You can’t just keep burying your head in the sand, girl.” Lisa Morgan took a bite of her pizza as she eyed her sister.

“I know, but I can’t break things off with Rodney just like that. He’s been so good to the kids and me. He’s stood by me since Derrick died and it would be shitty of me to say, ‘Hey, Rodney, despite everything you’ve done for me, I don’t want to be with you.’” Brandi sighed, pushing her unfinished slice of pizza away from her. She had been agonizing over what to do about Rodney since Friday night.

He had called several times, but she had refused to answer the phone. By the end of the weekend, he ended up calling more times than she could count. That was disturbing enough, but she was even more preoccupied by thoughts of Matt. Unable to face him, she had sent Lisa to pick her son up that Saturday afternoon. Her sister had been curious, but she hadn’t asked questions until today.

“Gratitude is not a good reason to marry someone. Besides, I’ve told you what I thought about you and Rodney. It’s just not there, babe,” Lisa said around a mouthful of cheese.

“What do you mean?” Brandi asked, although she knew exactly what Lisa was talking about.

“You know damn well what I mean. The sparkle isn’t in your eyes. When you were with Derrick, you always had a smile on your face and a twinkle in your eye. It was always Derrick this and Derrick that. Ugh! It was disgusting to see two people so in love, especially after all those years. Shit, all the romance I get from Ed is if he doesn’t fart at the dinner table. Lord knows he does it freely everywhere else.” Lisa rolled her eyes.

Brandi giggled. She knew her sister and brother-in-law were happily married after fifteen years of marriage and three beautiful girls. “You know as well as I do that Ed is a sweetie. Why do you always say stuff like that about him?”

“Hey, he’s my husband. I know his faults, but if anyone else says anything about my baby, I’ll scratch their eyes out. Now stop trying to change the subject. You are not in love with Rodney, so I think the kindest thing to do would be to give him back his ring before a date is set. It will hurt him more in the long run if you keep stringing him along like this.”

Brandi let out a deep breath. She knew her sister was right. When Rodney had kissed her and she hadn’t felt a spark of passion, she should have known that they weren’t meant to be together. His kisses had left her feeling empty and she certainly wasn’t happy with how he had tried to force his attentions on her. She’d been fooling herself when she thought she could learn to love him. Brandi supposed she would never love him as anything more than a friend.

“I hate to hurt him though. Maybe I should wait a couple of weeks.”

“Why? Call him tonight. What’s the point of waiting?”

“I feel bad.”

“So what? You’ll feel worse if you end up married to someone you don’t love. You never did like to hurt people’s feelings, did you? God, I remember that asshole you dated in high school. You didn’t want to break up with him, either. Instead, you avoided him like the plague.” Lisa chuckled.

Brandi smiled back. “Oh, yeah. He was something else, wasn’t he?”

“He was a piece of shit. I would bet my last dollar that he’s in jail right now.”

“Well, if you can remember me having a hard time breaking up with that ‘piece of shit’ in high school, then how do you think I feel about breaking off an engagement? He’s decent guy.”

“Would a decent guy do some of the things you told me he did Friday night? I’m a little concerned. I’ve always felt uncomfortable around him.”

Brandi frowned. Lisa was usually very outspoken so it was surprising that she hadn’t mentioned anything earlier.

As though reading her mind, her sister said, “You don’t remember, do you? I did try to tell you, but you thought I was imagining things.”

“What? When?”

“When Derrick was alive, you guys used to have barbecues. Rodney was always there, and he was always watching you ... it was a little unnerving. I mentioned it to you then, but you laughed it off. And at the engagement party, he seemed to go berserk when you were out of his sight. It was a little creepy.”

What could she say? He *had* become a little more possessive of her time and attention once she had accepted his proposal, but she had dismissed it as a sign of his eagerness to get married and into her bed. Now certain little incidents played in the back of her mind ... like how he would always show up unexpectedly where she was and how he seemed to want to know her comings and goings.

Could her sister be on to something? Lisa took her hand. "Sweetie, only you can make the best decision for you, but I will say this: whatever you decide will affect your children as well."

"You're right."

"I know. I usually am."

Brandi rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

"You know, you never did tell me why you wanted me to pick up DJ when you were home all weekend. Matt was very nice and pretty darn good-looking for a white guy. He seemed pretty disappointed when I showed up at his doorstep. Did something happen between the two of you?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"Aha! So something did happen. All you had to do was say no. I didn't know your taste ran to vanilla. Hmm, I wonder what Daddy would say. You know when it comes to some of his social views, he makes Archie Bunker look like Martin Luther King, Jr."

"Daddy won't say anything because there's nothing to say. Now, can we drop the subject?"

Lisa gave her a knowing smile. "Hey, I don't have a problem with him being white, and he's obviously rich. Hmm, if I were single, I would date him."

Brandi thought it would be best if she didn't answer or she might end up decking her sister. She had never felt more relieved than when her lunch hour was over.

* * * * *

Matt was sitting in the waiting room when Brandi walked through the door. She didn't notice him as she walked to the back of the office. God, she was beautiful. More than anything he wanted to get out of his seat and pull her into his arms. He couldn't stop thinking about the kiss they had shared on Friday. She had tasted so sweet, just as he had remembered.

He remembered.

He was still trying to come to terms with the fact that he might forget some of his most precious memories. Matt only hoped that he could win her back before that happened. Perhaps he wouldn't have the old memories, but he could at least make new ones with her. It was a good thing he had made this appointment with Dr. Cross or he didn't think he would have been able to come up with a good excuse to see her again.

It had upset him on Saturday when Lisa came to pick up DJ. He'd had his apology ready and had hoped she would be open to them seeing more of each other after she'd had some time to think about it, but she hadn't even showed up.

“Mr. Collins, you can go in now.” The dental assistant peeked through the door. His heart raced as he walked to one of the back rooms. He took a seat in the dental chair and let the woman arrange a bib around his neck.

Matt knew Brandi wasn’t the only hygienist in this office, but he hoped he got her. Even if he didn’t, he would find her.

“Someone will be with you shortly.” The pretty assistant smiled at him and gave him a little wink as she sashayed out.

When he had first discovered himself in this body, he hadn’t found it very appealing, but it seemed like the ladies did. Go figure. Anyway, there was only one woman’s interest he wanted to capture.

Dr. Cross entered the room. He was a small man with thinning black hair and thick bushy brows. He had been Brandi’s boss since she had graduated from college.

“Hello, young man, how are you today?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

Dr. Cross looked at his chart. “You’re here for a cleaning, I see. Well, let me take a look at those choppers and make sure you don’t have any cavities and that your gums are healthy. Then I’ll send in one of my hygienists to take it from there. Okay?”

“Sure.”

He had always hated going to dentists, not liking the intrusion of someone messing in his mouth, but he had always taken good care of his teeth. He hoped that the old Matthew Collins cared about his dental hygiene as well.

“Open wide.”

Matt complied, hoping that it would be over soon. He endured the poking and prodding of his teeth for what seemed like a very long time. The things one did for love. Relief took over when Dr. Cross finished his examination.

“Well, I saw what could be the beginnings of a cavity, but if you brush and floss regularly and use the correct toothbrush, you should be fine. Do you have any questions?”

“None. Thanks, Dr. Cross.”

“My pleasure. Someone should be in here shortly to see you.”

Matt waited anxiously when he was left alone again. He heard soft humming as someone entered the room and instinctively knew it was Brandi.

A stunned look appeared on her face when she saw him. “What the hell are you doing here?” Anger flashed in her eyes.

“This is a dentist’s office and I’m here for my six-month cleaning.”

“Ha, ha, very funny. Now tell me why you’re really here.”

“I told you. I need to get my teeth cleaned. What a coincidence that you work here.” He feigned surprise.

She placed her hands on her hips and pursed her lips. He knew she wasn't buying it. "Uh-huh, pull the other one. You just happened to make an appointment at this office for the first time after we met? It might have been a coincidence, if you didn't live a half-hour from here. I'm sure there are closer offices to you."

"I'm sure there are, but this office is close to one of my dealerships." When he saw her eyes narrow, he knew it would be prudent to confess. "Okay, so I found out you work here and made an appointment. I had to see you."

"I told you. I don't want to see you again. I don't appreciate being stalked."

"I'm not stalking you. I wanted to see you and this was the only way I knew how. Why didn't you pick up DJ?"

"You know why. What we did was wrong."

"How could it be wrong when we wanted it? Is it because I'm white?" As far as he knew, she had never shown any interest in a white man before, but he knew she was attracted to him.

"It's not because you're white. I already told you, I'm engaged," she hissed.

His eyes strayed to her left hand. The large diamond she had been wearing on Friday was missing. Was this a good sign? "You're not wearing your engagement ring."

"I don't wear it when I work."

The hope that had been building up in his chest was instantly crushed.

"Brandi, you may be willing to deny what's between us, but I'm not. From the minute I saw you, we clicked. I know it's not one-sided because you wouldn't have responded to me so wonderfully if you didn't feel it, too." Matt hopped out of the chair and shut the door.

"What are you doing?"

"I want your full attention when I talk to you."

"Open the door right now!" she demanded. Her brown eyes flashed fire.

"No. I won't until you hear me out," he said stubbornly.

Brandi grabbed one of the tools on the table. "I have a drill and I'm not afraid to use it, buddy. Open the door or you'll end up like Swiss cheese," she threatened.

The absurdity of the situation struck him. Here he was trying to woo her by trapping her in a dentist's office and the pint-sized Brandi was defending herself with a drill that didn't look as though it was plugged in. Matt started laughing.

Brandi scowled. "What's so damned funny?"

"You are. This whole situation." She paused as though realizing how silly she must have looked, and she snickered, too. It warmed his heart to hear her laugh like that again. The thought brought him back to realty.

"Brandi, please let me say what I have to say. After I've said my piece, you can tell me to go to hell," he said solemnly.

“And would you stop bothering me?” she asked with a raised brow.

“If that’s what you want.” His fingers were crossed behind his back.

“Okay. Speak.” She crossed her arms across her chest and leaned against the counter.

He could see the wary expression in her eyes and knew this wouldn’t be easy. “Look, I can tell you how attracted I am to you until I’m blue in the face, but that won’t do me any good, will it?”

She shook her head.

“So, the only thing I can say is that I think you should have sex with me to get me out of your system.”

Her eyes widened. He was sure she hadn’t expected him to say that. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, come on, Brandi, you heard me. Have sex with me. Think about it. You want my body, and I’m willing to let you use me. I’ll be your boy toy for as long as you like.”

“Are you out of your mind? I already told you that I didn’t want to get involved with you at all. What makes you think I would have an affair with you?” She had an incredulous expression on her face.

“Because I know you’ve been thinking about me the way I have been thinking about you.” He took slow deliberate steps toward her as he spoke.

She backed up until she was wedged between the counter and his body. “I have not,” she denied hotly.

“You’re lying, sweet Brandi. You’ve been thinking about my touch and how my tongue felt against your skin and how my cock got so damn hard when you were close to me. I bet you were thinking how your pussy throbs for my touch. You were so wet and ready for me that I could have easily slid between those delectable chocolate thighs of yours.” He paused. “Do you know how I know?”

Her eyes were wide and her breathing sounded stilted. Matt grinned down at her, knowing that his words were affecting her senses. “Do you know how I know?” he repeated, caressing her full bottom lip with his thumb.

She shook her head as if she were hypnotized. “I know because I couldn’t stop thinking about you, either, about how delicious you tasted. Your pussy smelled so sweet. Do you know what I would do if you let me make love to you?”

Again, she shook her head as he lightly caressed her cheek. His hand spanned her throat and he could feel the erratic beating of her pulse. “I would slowly kiss every inch of your beautiful body, taking my time on you and your big, hard nipples. I would suck them into my mouth and make you moan for me. Then I would play with your sweet cunt, slipping my fingers inside of you, getting you so wet that you’d beg for my cock. I would be so damn hard for you, but I promise, I’d go slow.” He lowered his head to lick her earlobe.

She shivered at the contact. “This isn’t right,” she whispered unconvincingly.

Matt lifted his head to gaze into her dark eyes. “You’re starting to repeat yourself, Brandi. Besides, if this is wrong, I sure as hell don’t want to be right. Sorry to sound so clichéd, but it’s how I feel. If you let me make love to you, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed. Can you say the same for your fiancé? Does he make you feel this way?”

“No,” she confessed.

Triumph raced through him. He knew he had her in the palm of his hand now.

Chapter Seven

His words had her so hot and bothered that she thought she would cream her panties right then and there. It was almost as if he knew dirty talk was her weakness. When Derrick used to speak to her like that, she was putty in his hands. In that moment, with Matt standing so close to her, his breath warm against her ear, she couldn't think of one good reason not to give in to temptation.

It would only be sex, right? After lunch with Lisa, she'd realized that she would need to break things off with Rodney, so it wasn't as though she was doing anything wrong by giving in. It had been so long since anyone had made her body feel quite like this, and she had needs, dammit!

Brandi looked up into his piercing green eyes; she could feel herself melting against him. He was so damn sexy. Why did she have to be so fiercely attracted to this man of all people? It was on the tip of her tongue to verbalize some kind of protest when she was cut off with the touch of his finger on her lips.

"Don't say anything, just feel what you do to me." He took her hand in his and dragged it down the length of his body, using her fingers to unzip his pants, stopping at his throbbing erection. He was so hard, so big. She gently cupped the bulge in her palm and he let out a soft moan.

"Yes, like that."

Her hand rubbed and squeezed him. "Turn around," he commanded.

"Why?" she asked in confusion.

"You'll see." The savage gleam in his eyes made her shiver. She did as he asked, wondering what he would do next. Brandi found herself pushed over the counter with his cock grinding against her.

“Oh, God,” she groaned. His hand reached around to grasp her breasts, squeezing them roughly in his palms. Matt kissed the back of her neck and she thought she would go insane with desire.

His hands felt so good against her. The steady movement of his cock against her ass stimulated her from her head to the tip of her toes. “Your breasts are perfect. They fit in my hand as if they were made just for me,” he whispered against her ear.

She could only moan in response. Matt’s hands moved lower to slip under her top. Brandi arched her back against him, aching to feel his hands against her bare breasts. The fingers slowly inched up her ribs until they stopped to rest just below her waiting mounds.

“Please,” she heard a voice whisper.

Was that her crying out helplessly for him to make his caress more intimate? It must have been because as he gently grazed her neck with his teeth, he asked, “Please what, Brandi? Do you want me to touch your tits? I want to touch them, too, but you have to ask nicely.”

“Please touch me there,” she whispered. Why was he torturing her when she needed him so badly?

“Touch you where, Brandi? I want to hear you say the word.” Matt nibbled on her earlobe.

“Touch my breasts-- tits, please.”

“My pleasure.”

His fingers slid beneath her bra, capturing her hard nipples. She bit her lip to stop herself from crying out at the exquisite sensations coursing through her body. He rolled her aching peaks between her fingers. “I love your nipples. I like how they get so stiff for me. You have such a beautiful body. I can’t wait to see all of that beautiful dark flesh exposed to my gaze. Do you know what I did last night as I imagined your sexy black body beneath mine?”

“No,” she moaned, wiggling her bottom against his rock-hard cock.

“I rubbed myself while I thought about us. My dick was so fucking hard that I couldn’t sleep. I wrapped my fingers around my cock and imagined that I was sliding between those sexy thighs of yours. In my fantasies you were wet and ready for me, just like you were on Friday and just like you are now. I want to fuck you so badly, darling. Say you’ll let me.” His voice was harsh with desire. It excited her that he was as sexually frustrated as she was.

“Yes. I want you, too.” Maybe if she allowed him to fuck her, she could get him out of her system, just as he suggested.

“When? I don’t know if I can go that long without getting some of that sweet pussy.”

“This weekend. I’ll come by your place.” She found it hard to speak with Matt still playing with her nipples.

“What time?” he demanded, tugging the turgid peaks.

“I ... I have to ask my mom if I can drop the kids off first, but I think it will be okay. If she says yes, I can be there by eight.”

“Not a minute later.”

She whimpered when he released her breasts. He turned her around in his arms, bringing his mouth down on hers. Her body was on fire as a tide of passion swept over her.

Her tongue thrust forward to meet his. Matt tasted so hot, so male, and so good. Brandi's fingers threaded through his hair. She reveled in the rich silky texture of his dark-red locks. He cupped her face to deepen the kiss. Somewhere, deep down inside, she felt as though this was where she belonged.

Matt pulled back, then lifted her up and set her on the counter.

“Matt, what are you doing?” Brandi asked breathlessly.

He grabbed the edges of her pants to yank them down to her ankles. He pushed her legs apart. “Your pussy smells way too good for me to resist. I just need one little kiss -- one little taste,” he sighed, kneeling in front of her.

Brandi realized they shouldn't be doing this in the office when anyone could walk in at any minute, but as she felt Matt push her panties aside and his warm breath linger against her pussy, she threw her head back and surrendered to the gentle persuasion of his mouth. His tongue grazed over the slit of her damp opening, making her groan in the back of her throat. Matt's tongue darted inside her labia to lick her throbbing clit.

“That feels wonderful, Matt.”

“You taste wonderful. Your pussy is so wet and fragrant I could stay between your thighs like this forever.”

He swirled his tongue around her little button, making her shiver in reaction. She felt a strong erotic charge shoot up her spine. Brandi threaded her fingers through his dark-red hair to clutch him tighter to her hot cunt. His lips latched onto her clit before sucking voraciously as though this was his most favorite activity in the entire world.

Brandi arched her back and squeezed her eyes tightly. If someone would have told her this morning that she would be sitting on the counter letting a man she hardly knew eat her pussy in the dentist's office, she would have thought they were out of their tiny little minds. Matt inserted his middle finger inside of her wet channel, causing Brandi to cry out in open pleasure. She raised her lids and looked down at him.

Matt lifted his head with a smile on his face, his finger still buried deep inside of her. “You like that, don't you?”

“Yes,” she moaned, unable to lie to him when the evidence of her arousal was smeared on his lips. She hadn't been hot like this for a man until she had been at his place.

“Good, because I like doing it to you.” He added another finger and Brandi had to bite her lips so she wouldn't scream out too loudly. He gently fucked her with his fingers, sliding

them in and out of her. She wanted more, but knew they couldn't go much further than this; otherwise, she would be totally lost.

Just then, there was a sharp knock on the door.

"Hey, Brandi, what's taking you so long in there?" Christa, her coworker and the other hygienist at the office, was on the other side of the door.

Holy shit!

It felt as though a bucket of ice water had just been thrown over her. Matt stood up abruptly and withdrew his fingers before helping her off the counter. In a frantic hurry, she pulled her pants up. She realized she probably looked a mess, but it was better to look a mess than if Christa had walked into the office to see Matt's head planted firmly between her thighs.

"Excuse me!" The door burst open and they jumped away guiltily. Christa stared open-mouthed at the two of them.

"Christa, what ... what do you want?" Brandi asked, adjusting her clothes. She was mortified.

"Well, I wondered if you needed my help, but I can see you are handling things just fine on your own. Umm, Mr. Collins, your fly is open." Christa left them alone again, closing the door behind her.

Matt's face turned a bright red that nearly matched his hair. "I'm sorry, Brandi. I didn't mean to get you in trouble." He looked so contrite it was hard to be angry with him. Besides, it was as much her fault as it was his. It wouldn't have happened if she hadn't wanted him as badly as she did.

"I won't get in trouble. Christa may use this incident to blackmail me into a few free lunches, but she's not a blabbermouth. I guess we both got a little carried away."

"That's the understatement of the year. And don't trivialize what happened."

"I'm not. I was just making a statement."

He visibly relaxed. "You'll still come see me on Friday night, then?"

"I said I would, but Lord knows why." She stared at him, trying to figure out what hold he had over her. "What the hell have you done to me?"

"The same thing you've done to me. Brandi, this was meant to be."

"Don't talk like that, Matt. It's just going to be sex, okay?"

"It's more than sex. Much more."

"No. Let's get something straight. I'm not in the market for a relationship right now. Things are too crazy in my life already, and when I do decide to involve myself with someone romantically again, it will be with a black man."

He took a step back as though she had just slapped him. “I didn’t realize you had a problem with my being white. It sure as hell didn’t seem that way when you were begging me to touch you.”

She could feel a headache coming on. Why was he giving her a hard time when she had gone against all her principles and agreed to sleep with him? He had been the one to suggest a fling in the first place.

“Look, I’m attracted to you. Hell, I haven’t felt like this since my husband died, but my children come first. My son especially will need the influence of a strong black man in his life. No offense, but if we have this affair, I don’t want my kids to know about it.”

“Don’t give me that crap about race. When you’re in my arms, do you see a man or do you see a white man? Are you ashamed of me?”

“I don’t care what race you are, but there are other factors to consider.”

“Obviously you do care since you brought it up. As for your son needing a black male influence in his life, do you think he really cares about race, either? When he made friends with Ben, do you think he saw a color? I don’t think so.”

“Why are you being so difficult? It was your idea to just have sex.”

“And we both know I just said that so you would agree to see me again. I’m not going to pussyfoot around the issue and tell you that I don’t want our relationship to extend beyond the bedroom, because that wouldn’t be true.”

“Well, sex is all I’m willing to offer.” That sounded cruel to even her own ears, but if she conceded anymore of herself to him, she didn’t know what would happen.

“Fine,” he said through clenched teeth. “I’ll see you Friday.” He made it a statement.

She wanted to tell him no, but her traitorous body wouldn’t let her. “Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll see you then.”

She watched him walk away. He was still wearing the bib. “Umm, Matt ...”

He turned around with an expectant look. “Yes?”

“You left your bib on.”

His face fell. Ripping off the paper bib, he threw it to the chair before stalking away.

What was she letting herself into?

* * * * *

He wished he could shake some sense into her. Matt wanted much more than a physical relationship with Brandi, but he supposed he would have to settle for what he could get from her. For now. At least he was making some progress.

Matt dreaded going back to the car dealership. When people weren’t kissing his ass trying to get into his good graces, they were cowering in fear when he walked by. One thing he knew for sure, working at the car dealership wasn’t his cup of tea.

As he pulled the Mercedes into his reserved parking space, he took a deep breath before getting out.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Collins.”

Gina smiled at him as he walked into the building. “Good afternoon, Gina. Any messages?”

“One from your ex about a function your son is having at school, and one from the manufacturer,” She handed him two handwritten messages.

“Okay. Thanks. By the way, have you had a chance to start looking at schools?”

“I have! I think I may enroll at Arcadia. It’s so great that you reinstated the tuition reimbursement program.” She paused. “I ... I broke up with Peter.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“It was for the best. He wanted to keep me dumb and dependent on him, so I have you to thank for giving me a better opportunity.”

“No. You have yourself to thank. I’m glad you’re taking advantage of the program. Good for you.” He took his messages and headed to his office.

“Matt, can I talk to you for a minute?” Bill Nixon intercepted him just as he walked through the door.

“Sure, what can I do for you?” Matt sat in the big leather seat behind his desk and stared at his sales manager. Bill took the seat opposite his.

The man looked nervous about something. What little Matt knew about Bill was positive. He seemed very trustworthy and dependable. “Well, spit it out,” Matt said impatiently when Bill didn’t say anything.

“It’s about Dylan.”

Matt frowned. If he remembered correctly, Dylan was one of the salesmen who ran the other way when he saw Matt coming. “What about him?”

“You wanted me to let you know if he didn’t make his quota for the month again.”

“And since you’re here, I’m guessing he didn’t.”

“That’s right, but I have the figures with me. If you take a look at them, he’s made a steady improvement. The kid is working really hard.” Bill pointed to some numbers.

“I see the marked improvement, but he didn’t make the quota, right?”

“No, but I’ve told you already that the quota you set is a little on the high side. Dylan isn’t the only one struggling, you know.”

“When someone continually doesn’t make the quota, what happens?”

“You know what I’m getting at. I’m asking you to give the kid a break. I’ve seen his type before. If you give him a chance, he blossoms, becomes more confident, and you get better result, not to mention company loyalty. He tried so hard, and he only missed this month’s quota by a very slim margin.”

“It seems to me that action should be taken.”

Bill went white. “The kid needs the job. You know he’s his family’s only means of support.”

“How about listening to what I have to say before you jump to conclusions?”

“All right.” Bill sighed, looking very bleak.

“I think we should lower the quota.”

Bill gave him an astonished look. “What? Are you serious?”

“Of course I am.”

“But you’ve been adamant about not lowering the quota. I don’t understand.”

“Don’t try and understand, Bill. If I tried to explain it, you wouldn’t believe it.” Matt chuckled at his employee’s stunned expression.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Oh, come on. Tell me the truth -- I’ve been an asshole to work for, haven’t I?”

“Well -- I don’t think I would use that word exactly.”

“Be honest with me. I promise you won’t get in trouble for speaking your mind.”

Bill hesitated before he finally spoke. “You can be difficult at times.”

“Bill, I apologize for being such a jerk to work for, and I hope I’ll be able to make things easier for you,” Matt said sincerely. He had a pretty good idea how things had been, and he hated to see such low morale whenever he was around.

The sales manager looked surprised. “I think I must be dreaming,” he muttered.

“No, it’s not a dream. Also, we need to start talking about hiring some more help around here and about a promotion for you.”

The man looked faint.

Matt hoped he was taking the right steps toward redemption, because he didn’t want to go anywhere without winning Brandi back.

Chapter Eight

“Mom, you’re not listening to me”

“What did you say, sweetie?” Brandi looked up from her plate. Her daughter’s lips were pursed.

“I said, I wanted to spend the night with Missy this weekend.”

“Oh, what night?”

“Saturday. Maybe Grandma can take me to her house Saturday morning because her parents will take us to the movies, then we’re going skating.”

“Hmm, I’ll call her mother to check, but I don’t see why not.”

“Does that mean I’m going to be stuck with Grandma and Granddad by myself on Saturday? They’re cool, but they always do old people stuff.” DJ scowled.

“Not if you don’t want to. And just remember you’ll be old one day, too, if you’re lucky, so how about cutting them some slack, okay? They really enjoy your visits.”

“Sorry.”

“All right, but you should be more aware of what you say, because you can hurt people’s feelings.” She gave her son a brief smile. He was a good kid and she knew he meant no harm by his comment. “Maybe we can do something together. A movie perhaps?”

“That sounds cool, but I don’t want to see a girlie movie, okay, Mom?” Her son was making a skyscraper out of his mashed potatoes.

“And what do you consider a girlie movie?”

“Any movie with people crying, and old women.”

Brandi had to cover her mouth. Her children always said the craziest things. “I see. I suppose you would like to see something with lots of blood, guts, and guns?”

“Well, yeah. That would be cool. I wouldn’t mind seeing *Blood Ring*, with Jean Stallone-Segal.”

“Yuck. Isn’t he that horrible actor who can barely speak English?” Brandi frowned.

“Jean Stallone-Segal kicks butt, Mom!”

“You know we’re not allowed to watch those types of movies,” Mya piped up, her mouth full of chicken.

“Mya, I don’t need you to speak for me.” She gave her daughter a stern look before turning back to her son. “You know I’m not going to allow you to watch something like that. You’ll have nightmares.”

“Aww, Mom. I’m not a baby.” DJ looked mulish.

“I know you’re not, but I’m still not letting you watch something as violent as *Blood Ring* sounds. Maybe we can see a nice family comedy.”

DJ looked less than enthusiastic.

“Hey, don’t look so sad about hanging out with your old Mom.”

“It’s not that. It’s just ...” His voice trailed off.

“Just what?” Brandi prompted, frowning at DJ’s worried expression.

“It will be just you and me? No Uncle Rodney?”

Why was he asking that? She thought her kids liked Rodney, not that it really mattered anymore.

“Yes, sweetie, it will be just you and me. Do you have a problem with Rodney?”

DJ didn’t say anything.

“DJ, you do like him, don’t you?”

“I liked him better when he was just Daddy’s friend.”

It never occurred to her that DJ wouldn’t like Rodney. Why was it that everyone suddenly seemed to be having issues with him, and why hadn’t she realized it before?

“Do you feel this way, too, Mya?”

“He’s okay. He brings me toys.” Her daughter shrugged and stuffed some peas in her mouth.

“Toys aren’t going to make him my daddy. I hate him! I wish I had Daddy back!” DJ leapt from the chair and ran out of the dining room.

Before she went after DJ, Brandi looked at Mya, who sat as still as a statue.

Her son was sprawled on his bed, sobbing silently into his pillow. Brandi sat down next to him and stroked his soft hair.

“Honey, it’s okay. I know how you feel,” she whispered sympathetically.

DJ turned around with angry eyes. “No, you don’t! You love Rodney better than you love me. I know you do.”

She gasped. She could never love Rodney as much as she loved her babies! Where was this coming from? “Baby, why would you say something like that? You and Mya are the two most important people in my life. Nothing will ever change that.”

“Then why are you going to marry him? When I see you with him, it hurts me right here,” he said pointing to his heart.

Tears welled up in her eyes. She hadn’t realized how her engagement to Rodney had affected her children. They had always seemed to like Rodney, so she never thought to ask them how they felt about her getting married to him. Come to think about it, the night she had accepted Rodney’s proposal was still kind of murky in her head. That entire night was a complete blank.

An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach, but she pushed those thoughts out of her mind to focus on her son.

“Do you feel this way about Rodney because you still miss your dad?”

“Dad was great. Rodney’s okay, but he’s not Dad.”

“Is it Rodney you have the problem with or just the idea of me being with someone other than your father?” She wiped the wet tracks from his cheeks. “What if I didn’t marry Rodney, but later I found someone else I wanted to marry?”

DJ seemed to be giving this question serious thought. “I dunno. On Friday, when I was at Ben’s I thought his dad was really neat. I liked him a lot. I guess I wouldn’t mind if you were with someone like him.”

Brandi froze. How was it that everything always came back to Matt somehow? How ironic that DJ would say this after her earlier speech to Matt about the kind of man she thought she might end up with.

“I see,” she said lamely.

“Anyway, I don’t think Rodney likes me and Mya that much.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, he smiles at us a lot around you, but when you’re not around, he treats us different.”

“Like how, baby?”

“When you’re not there, he looks at us like he wished we weren’t around and he doesn’t really talk to us.”

“I never knew. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was afraid you’d get mad and I didn’t want to spoil things for you.”

“What if I were to tell you that Rodney and I aren’t getting married, after all?”

“You’re breaking up with him because of me?” He had a hopeful look in his eyes. She didn’t want DJ to get it into his head that he had could wield this much power in her decisions, although he certainly did.

“No. It wasn’t because of you or your sister. I think I have been having second thoughts for a while now. To tell the truth, I don’t know if I’ll find someone like your father again. Maybe I was meant to be by myself for the rest of my life.” She sighed.

After a few moments, she said, “So you liked Mr. Collins?”

“Yeah! I think he’s great. He played Playstation games with us, and he let us stay up really late while telling us ghost stories. He’s a lot of fun, just like Da-- He’s a lot of fun,” he finished with a frown.

Brandi knew what DJ had been going to say, and it struck a chord. From the moment she’d met him, she’d been trying to figure out why he seemed so familiar, and now it suddenly struck her. He reminded her of Derrick. It obviously wasn’t his appearance, but there was something in the way he had looked at her, something in his mannerisms. It was almost eerie when she thought about it. Could that be why she was so attracted to him? Whatever it was, she figured the sooner she could get him out of her system, the sooner she would be able to move on with her life.

“Mom?”

“Yes, baby?”

“You said that you would be alone for the rest of your life. That’s not true. You have me.” DJ threw his arms around her neck.

“And me, too.” Mya said from the doorway before running into the room to wrap her arms around them. Brandi should have known that her daughter would eavesdrop.

Her heart swelled with joy and pride for her two treasures.

* * * * *

Rodney walked to the house with an armful of toys and rang the doorbell.

“Rodney! How good to see you. We were wondering when you would be around again.” Mrs. Thornton opened the door wide to let him in. “I’m sure Tina will be glad to see you.”

He looked at the woman with a big smile. *What a stupid woman she is.* He’d been visiting the Thornton home for two years now and they still had no idea of the real reason. They thought it was because he actually gave a shit about their foster daughter. If he’d had his way, the little brat would be dead, too. Then at least things wouldn’t be so complicated.

“Would you like something to drink? I just made a fresh pitcher of lemonade.”

“That sounds nice. I would love a glass.”

He watched in disgust as the rotund woman walked to the kitchen, her flabby ass jiggling with each step. He wanted to throw up. Mrs. Thornton was no Brandi Evans. No one was as perfect as Brandi.

Jeff Thornton came out into the hallway. "Hey, Rodney, it's good of you to come. Tina's been making a lot of progress lately. She's been talking a little more each day. The doctors say with a little more therapy, she'll be functioning like most seven-year-olds."

That's exactly what Rodney didn't want. "How nice," he lied. "Do you think she remembers that night?" He tried to sound casual.

"That's one thing she won't talk about. Whenever her therapist brings it up, she goes into hysterics. He thinks she might remember what happened that night but that she refuses to talk about it."

Good. Rodney intended to keep it that way. "Where is she now?"

"She's in her room. Probably reading. It's something else really. She's so smart. The kid likes to read better than watching TV. I'll have her come downstairs."

"Please. I'm very eager to see her." *And to see how she reacts to me now that she seems to be getting better.*

Jeff walked halfway up the staircase before calling Tina down.

The little girl appeared seconds later, bounding down the stairs two at a time until she saw Rodney. She froze. Her eyes widened as she looked at him.

Rodney looked over the little brat. She was a pale child with a mop of unruly brown hair. Her hazel eyes nearly took up her entire face and she was small for her age.

"Come down, Tina. Officer Mitchell came to see you. Look at all the toys he brought you." Jeff gestured to the child to come off the stairs.

Verna Thornton walked back into the room with a glass of lemonade. "Here you go."

"Here, let me take those toys for you." Jeff removed them from Rodney's arms so that he could hold the glass.

Rodney's eyes never left Tina's face. He took a step forward. "Hi, Tina. I hear you're doing well." He smiled.

The little girl let out a shriek and ran back up the stairs.

The Thorntons frowned at each other.

"I'm really sorry about that. I'm not sure what's gotten into her." Jeff scratched his head.

Rodney was pissed. The little bitch obviously remembered him shooting her father and Derrick. She would have to die. They all would.

Chapter Nine

Matt didn't think Friday would get here soon enough. All week, the only thing he could concentrate on was holding Brandi in his arms again. He hadn't thought he would be able to make it though the week, but Friday night was finally here. He had the lights dimmed, and soft music playing. He pulled out the nicest bottle of wine he could find.

Absolutely nothing could go wrong. He paced back and forth in anticipation of her arrival. When he next glanced at his watch fifteen minutes had passed. She was running late, which made him a little nervous. Brandi was generally a pretty punctual person; he hoped she hadn't changed her mind. Could something be wrong with the kids?

Get a hold of yourself. Give her some time.

He plopped on the couch to look at the television. Maybe if he could occupy his mind, he wouldn't worry so much, but by the time nine o'clock rolled around, he broke down and phoned her. Matt waited impatiently as the phone rang. Maybe she was on her way.

"Hello?"

Immediately he heard the anxiety in her voice. "Brandi? It's Matt. Is everything okay?"

"Matt? Oh, my God." To his surprise, she burst into tears.

"What's happened?" he asked in alarm.

"I ... my house. It's -- Oh, God! Matt, I don't know what to do."

"I'll be right over."

"But --"

"No buts. You're obviously upset. Are the children with you?"

"No, I dropped them off at my mom's, but when I came back, the house was ransacked."

"Is anyone with you right now?"

“No.”

“Did you call the police?”

“Yes. They came by already and took a statement, but they’re gone now.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in a half an hour.”

“Okay.”

He was pleased that she didn’t argue. “I want you to wait at a neighbor’s house.”

“Yes, but Matt?”

“What?”

“Do you know where I live?”

Damn, he had to stop making these slip-ups. “Yeah, I looked it up the same time I found out where you worked, but why don’t you give it to me again, because I’m going on memory alone.” He waited patiently as she reeled off directions.

“Got it. I’ll be there in a jiffy. Don’t open the door for anyone until I get there, okay?”

“All right. Matt?”

“Yes?”

“Please hurry. I’m scared.”

After hanging up, he ran out to his car and drove to Brandi’s house as though he were in the Indianapolis 500. Several things raced through his mind. Did Brandi come across the intruder? Was the house burglarized?

As soon as he arrived, he rushed out of the car. There was a note on the door that said she was waiting for him at the house across the street. Matt had turned to go to her neighbor’s house, when he saw her small figure running across the street. She catapulted into his arms, nearly knocking him over.

“Matt! I saw your car pull up. Thank God you’re here.”

“It’s okay, sweetie. Tell me what happened.” He cradled her head.

“Look at my house.” She unlocked the door and tugged him inside.

It was a mess. Pictures were smashed, and furniture was knocked over. What the hell? Who would do this? He knew that Brandi got along with all of the neighbors, and this was a good neighborhood. He couldn’t remember anything like this happening when they had lived here together. “Did anyone see anything?”

“No. The police knocked on a few doors, but no one saw anything. Why my house? Who would do this to my home?” She cried.

He pulled her into his arms and let her get it all out. As he held her, he quickly surveyed the rooms he could see; it didn’t look like anything valuable had been taken. The electronic equipment was still there. What struck him was that all the family portraits that had once been so lovingly displayed around the house were destroyed.

His years of police experience told him that this was a personal attack, not the work of some random stranger. With nothing apparently stolen, this looked like someone was trying to scare her. But Brandi and he had lived relatively quiet lives. Who would ...? Rodney. It had to be. He didn't know why it hadn't occurred to him in the first place. What was that bastard up to now? When Brandi's sobs subsided, he held her away and looked at her.

"Where is your fiancé?" he asked.

"I don't know. He's been out of town all week. I don't want to talk about him, okay?"

"Okay." He had no problem complying, but it seemed mighty convenient that Rodney would be out of town. Matt didn't put it past the psychopathic son of a bitch to do something like this.

"Did you take inventory of the things in your house already?"

"Yes, I did a walk through with the police. I didn't notice anything missing. Thank God the kids weren't home."

"How did you discover this?"

"I dropped the kids off at my mom's was on my way to your house when I realized I'd left my overnight bag at home. I turned back, but when I got here the door was slightly ajar. I called the police because I knew I had closed and locked it. I should have invested in one of those home security systems, but this is such a nice neighborhood and Derrick had installed good locks on the doors. I didn't think anything like this would happen to me."

"Well, I think maybe we should start cleaning up. At least there isn't anything here that can't be fixed."

"You're helping me?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"You didn't seem like the type."

"What does that mean? Did you think I just came by for some ass?" He lifted a brow. She gasped. "No. Of course not."

"You're lying, Brandi, but I'll forgive you because you're upset."

She pursed her lips and placed her hands on her hips. "I'm not lying."

"You are. Did you know that your nose twitches when you aren't telling the truth?"

Her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Yes, I noticed. I've noticed a lot about you, Brandi. Now, there's no point in standing around here arguing about it. Let's get to work." He winked and gave her a pat on the cheek.

They worked diligently in silence to get the house back to rights. Every now and then Brandi would give Matt sidelong glances. What was it about this man that could make her feel so at ease? All week, the prospect of making love with him had filled her with excitement and fear. She was excited because with just one look from his sexy green eyes,

her panties were instantly wet. Brandi would find herself daydreaming about how his cock had felt pressed against her bottom, and the feel of his hands on her breasts. When he had whispered such wicked things in her ear, Brandi was hotter than she ever remembered being.

She felt fear because she was scared that her sexual need could develop into something much more with him. The fact that she was happy to hear his voice when he had called earlier should have been an indication in itself. She still couldn't believe that she had actually agreed to go to his house to have sex with him, but then again, she couldn't believe anything she did where he was concerned.

One complication she had to deal with, however, was Rodney. She had planned to end things with him this week, but because he'd left her a message saying that he would be out of town to take care of some business, he had taken the wind out of her sails. Now she had to harden her resolve all over again when she saw him.

She refused to take the coward's way out by telling him over the phone. After all he done for her and the children, she felt she owed it to him to tell him face-to-face. She hoped that one day they could be on friendly terms again, but she knew that things would never be the same once she gave him his ring back.

DJ's strong reaction nagged at her. It was all the more odd because Rodney had been in the children's lives from the day they were born. She supposed it was all moot now, since she wasn't going to marry him, anyway.

"A penny for them?" Matt asked.

She looked over to see him smiling at her.

"Umm, I was just thinking about the past week."

"I've been thinking about it, too."

She didn't trust herself to respond to that, because if she did, she knew the next thing she'd do was issue him an invitation to the bedroom. Considering the circumstances, the last thing on her mind should have been sleeping with Matt, but it was, and now that the thought was in her head, there was no getting rid of it.

"Look, I don't want you to think I only came for sex, because I didn't."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Your nose is wiggling again," he said, walking over to stand in front of her. He cupped her face in his hand and gave her a soft kiss on the lips. She closed her eyes and let the warmth of his kiss flow through her. He lifted his head and she whimpered. "We don't have to do anything tonight. Let me cook dinner for you. Have you eaten?"

She shook her head. Now that she thought about it, she was ravenous.

“Okay. I think I can whip us up something.” He released her and headed for the kitchen. Matt pulled up one of the chairs for her. “I want you to take a seat and all you have to do is let me do my thing.”

Brandi watched in fascination as he moved through her kitchen as though it were the most natural place in the world for him to be. He found a few things in the refrigerator that he said he could cook in a hurry. Occasionally Matt would ask her where things were, but he wouldn’t let her help.

He made her laugh by telling her funny things that had happened at his job. She couldn’t remember the last time she had laughed so hard that she had to hold her sides.

She pleaded for mercy. “Stop! I can’t take any more!”

By the time he was finished cooking a delicious-looking chicken dish, she had forgotten her troubles. “It smells yummy. What’s this called?” she asked as he placed a plate in front of her.

“I call it chicken à la Matt. I just threw some things together. I hope it tastes as good as you think it smells.” He took a seat in front of her.

She took a small bite. It was fantastic. “You’re quite a good cook. I think you’ve missed your calling in life.”

“I’m mediocre at best. I like to putter around the kitchen.”

Brandi would never have guessed that a man of his wealth cooked for himself. As though reading her mind he said, “You seemed surprised. Didn’t think I could throw down in the kitchen, did you?”

“Well, it did cross my mind.”

“Necessity is the mother of invention. I lost my housekeeper some weeks ago so I’ve basically been doing for myself.”

“That’s a lot of house for one man.”

“I suppose it is, but when Ben is with me it doesn’t seem so lonely. I think it’s the kind of house that needs a family in it.” He appeared to be sending her a message. She looked down at her plate and tried to think of something to break the awkward silence.

“Why did your housekeeper leave?”

“That’s a good question. To be honest with you, I’m not really sure, but let’s just say that I wasn’t really myself when she left. I’ve been calling Luisa’s house in hopes that she’ll come back, but as the magic eight ball would say, the outcome doesn’t look good.”

“That’s too bad. I’m sure that you could go through one of those agencies to find someone else.”

“No. I need her back.”

“Why?”

“To make amends.”

She looked at him in confusion. Sometimes Matt's words were very puzzling.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that she didn't leave in the best circumstances, and I would like to make it up to her."

Brandi paused, taking another bite of her dinner. The more she got to know him, the more of a mystery Matt Collins became. She peeked at him through lowered lashes. He looked good tonight in a dark-green polo shirt that brought out the color of his eyes. Her gaze kept straying to the sensual curve of his mouth; she wanted to lean over the table and kiss him.

In that moment, she knew what she truly wanted: she desperately wanted to fuck Matt. Brandi knew he really had come over with noble intentions, and she appreciated that, but seeing those sexy green eyes staring back at her made her so damn horny.

If someone would have told her a few weeks ago that she would find herself so sexually drawn to some slick car salesman, let alone a white one, she would have laughed them out of town. Strangely, she didn't feel just a sexual connection. There was something else, and that was the part that she didn't want to analyze too closely.

Derrick.

It was the first time in a long while that she wasn't haunted by his image.

"May I ask what are you thinking about now?"

She blinked. Matt's eyes were twinkling at her and had a look of curiosity.

"Oh, my gosh. I must have been daydreaming. I'm sorry."

"What about?"

"I hope you don't get mad. I was thinking about my husband."

"Oh?" He didn't seem upset but looked oddly pleased.

"He was killed in the line of duty a couple of years ago."

"I'm sorry. I can imagine how painful that must have been for you," he said sympathetically.

There was some unreadable emotion in his eyes, but maybe she was just imagining it. "It was tough for a long time. They say time heals all wounds, but I don't think I'll ever be completely healed."

"You must have loved him very much, and I'm sure he loved you just as deeply. Any man lucky enough to be with you would be crazy not to."

She smiled. He was a flatterer, but she liked it. "You're embarrassing me."

"It's only the truth."

"Thanks."

A comfortable silence followed while they finished eating. Regardless of why he'd come tonight, she was glad he was here. She was about to tell him so when the doorbell rang. "Who could that be at this time of night? Stay here and I'll go get the door."

She went through the living room and was surprised to see a furious Rodney on the other side of the door.

"What the fuck is going on in here?" he demanded.

Chapter Ten

Rodney roughly pushed past her.

“Excuse me? What is wrong with you and who do you think you are to talk to me like that, Rodney?”

“I go out of town and come back to find some dude’s car in your driveway. Where the fuck is he?”

Brandi gasped in outrage. Rodney had been acting out of character lately, but this was too much. The sheer rage that glistened in his hazel eyes frightened her far beyond finding her house in shambles.

She got mad. Actually, she was livid. Just who did he think he was to barge into her home as though he paid the damn bills?

“Have you lost your mind? How dare you storm in here demanding things and cursing at me? Get out!”

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “I will not leave until you tell me where he is.”

No one treated her like this. She smacked him across the face as hard as she could. It only seemed to incense him more, and he shook her harder. Before she knew what was happening, a pair of strong hands pried them apart, and she was pushed behind Matt’s large frame. His fist rammed into Rodney’s stomach, and he doubled over.

“I believe the lady has asked you to leave, and I suggest you take her advice, or things are going to get really ugly around here.” Matt grabbed Rodney by the collar. He was half a head taller than Rodney, but he lowered his head so that they were nose-to-nose. “Will you leave of your own free will, or do I have to toss you out on your ass?”

Rodney sneered. “Take your motherfucking hands off me! Do you know who I am? I can have you arrested for assaulting an officer.” He pushed himself out of Matt’s grasp.

“But you won’t, because you had no right to come into my home the way you did, and you assaulted me first.” Brandi came from around Matt to stand by his side. Both men looked as though they were about to murder each other. She turned to Matt. “Matt, I can handle this.”

“I’m not leaving you alone with him, so you can forget it,” Matt said with such determination that she knew it would be useless to argue.

“Fine, but let me handle it,” she snapped before turning back to Rodney. “Get out of my house now, before I call the police.”

Rodney laughed menacingly. “I *am* the police, Brandi.”

It was as though she didn’t know him at all. “I don’t know what’s come over you, but I’d like you to leave. I wanted to break things to you gently, but after your King Kong act, I’ll just say it. I don’t want to marry you.” She poked his chest with every word to drive home her message. “Furthermore, I don’t ever want to see you again. Stay away from me, and stay away from my children.”

Rodney went very still. His wrathful look changed to disbelief.

“What?” he asked, as though he couldn’t believe her words.

“You heard me loud and clear.” She turned and went to her room. It only took her a moment to retrieve Rodney’s ring. She returned to see Matt staring down Rodney like a cobra ready to strike. She didn’t know if it was because of Matt hovering over him or because she’d told him that she didn’t want to marry him, but Rodney looked a little pale. Brandi didn’t care one way or the other; she just wanted him to go away.

“Here’s your ring. Please leave and don’t come back.” She practically threw the box at him and pointed to the door.

“It’s because of this motherfucker, isn’t it? You’ve been cheating on me with this white bastard.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Matt take a step forward, and she held up her hand. The last thing she needed was two alpha males going at it in her home.

“Rodney, I’m not even going to dignify that with an answer. Are you going to leave, or do I have to call the police? You might be one of them, but I’m sure your lieutenant wouldn’t take kindly to one of her officers harassing someone.”

Rodney’s face crumpled, and he looked as if he were about to cry. He dropped to his knees and threw his arms around her waist.

“Rodney, what the hell are you doing? Get up!” She refused to feel sympathy at the pathetic sight he made.

“Please, Brandi, don’t do this. You’re not thinking straight. Forgive me,” Rodney pleaded.

Her jaw dropped. She caught Matt’s eye; he looked as stunned as she felt when Rodney began to sob. His head rested against her stomach as he cried.

You have got to be kidding me. Can this night get any weirder?

“Matt, would you leave us alone for a moment? Maybe you can start clearing the table.”

“You’re nuts if you think I will leave you alone with this fruitcake.”

She shot him a pleading look, but he stood firm. Despite what had just passed and out of deference to her husband’s memory, she wanted to spare Rodney humiliation. Well, there was nothing she could do about that now.

“Get off me, Rodney. You’re making a fool of yourself.” Brandi extracted herself from his arms.

“Brandi, I’m sorry. I was just jealous. I love you so much. It won’t happen again.” He begged as though he were a member of the Temptations. It was so pathetic, her anger faded. But she wouldn’t easily forget him barging into her home and manhandling her.

“You’re right. It won’t happen again because it’s over. Please get up, Rodney. I’m sorry to hurt you, but even you should be able to see that what you did was inexcusable. You have meant so much to me and my family these past two years, but it doesn’t give you the right to act this way.”

He stood up and took a step toward her; she retreated.

“Don’t come any closer to her,” Matt warned.

Rodney shot him a baleful glare. “I see how it is. You’ve chosen this guy over me,” he said between clenched teeth.

“No. I just don’t want to be with you.”

“But I love you!”

“And I don’t love you.” It sounded brutal, but he needed to know.

“Is it because of what happened last Friday?” he asked.

“No. I think I’ve always known that I can’t love you the way you want me to.”

“I don’t care. You can learn to love me. Just stop talking nonsense and say you were kidding.” He smiled and held the ring out to her.

Brandi shook her head. Why wasn’t he getting it? “If after two years I’m not in love with you, what makes you think I will ever love you?”

“But you told me you loved me,” Rodney accused.

“And it wasn’t a lie. I’m just not *in* love with you. I convinced myself that I could fall in love with you, but I can’t. It just isn’t meant to be.”

“Don’t say that!”

“It’s the truth.”

“So you’re dumping me for this ... person?”

“That’s none of your business, Rodney. Leave now because this conversation is getting us nowhere.”

Rodney's nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed. "This conversation isn't over by a long shot. We'll talk this over when your boyfriend isn't here. Know this; no one can love you like I can. No one!" On that note, he stalked out the door and slammed it behind him.

The look she had caught in his eyes was chilling. She couldn't believe that in the nine years she had known him she'd never seen this side of him before.

Brandi knew she had done the right thing. The way he had claimed his love for her in that fevered manner was frightening. Who knew what her life would have been like had she not come to her senses?

Shaking, she walked into Matt's waiting arms. He held her close and soothed her as she got herself under control. Brandi lifted her head to look into his eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked with obvious concern.

"I am now. Thank you. I needed that hug. I'm glad you were here. I don't know what would have happened if you weren't." She shuddered to even think about it.

"You were very brave." He kissed her temple.

"I was shaking on the inside, believe me."

"You know I would have stepped in for you."

"I know, and I appreciate it."

"That encounter was a little ... odd."

"Yes, it does seem surreal, doesn't it? I knew when I broke off the engagement with Rodney that he might not take it well, but I certainly didn't expect all that. It was my fault."

He frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"I should never have accepted his proposal. It was selfish of me."

"Selfish? How?"

Brandi shrugged. "He did so much for me after Derrick died that I couldn't imagine him not being in my life."

"That's not what I think. Look at me, Brandi." He lifted her chin.

She couldn't keep a straight thought when he looked at her like that.

"I think Rodney knew exactly what he was doing. He took advantage of you when you were most vulnerable, and he made himself appear indispensable. From what I saw tonight, it seems to me that you should probably file a restraining order against him. After that little display, there's no telling what he's capable of."

Brandi looked at Matt and felt sad. He had a point. "I never thought he would do anything to hurt me."

"Can you say the same thing after tonight? How well do you know him?"

"What are you saying?" she asked with confusion.

“It was obvious to me that your friend is a little unbalanced. Tell me something. How many times did he propose to you before you accepted?”

Brandi frowned. “How did you know he proposed more than once?”

“Lucky guess. How many times?”

There was such a serious expression on his face that she gave him the answer without hesitation. “Six.”

“What made you finally agree?”

She paused as once again she tried to remember and couldn't. She had been drunk and didn't know what had happened.

“Well?” he challenged.

Just then the power went out. Brandi let out a little yelp. She hated the dark. Matt's arms wrapped around her trembling body, and he kissed the top of her head.

“It's okay. I'm here. Brandi, I don't think it's safe here tonight. Come home with me.”

“I ... I can't.”

“Yes, you can. I'm not about to stand in the dark with you arguing about it. Go light a candle and get your overnight bag. Where's your flashlight?”

“In the kitchen, in the top drawer by the stove.”

“Okay. Stay here. I'm going to get it and check the breaker.”

She nodded. “Hurry back.”

“I will,” he said before grabbing her and giving her a quick kiss on the lips. Her body reacted instantly, but it was over too soon. When Matt left the living room, she remembered the matches in her desk drawer that she could use to light some candles.

* * * * *

The circuit breaker was fine. Everything should have been working, so why was it dark? He knew how conscientious Brandi was about paying her bills. Matt suspected Rodney had done something to the power line from outside.

“Rodney didn't do anything to the power. I turned the lights out.”

Matt nearly jumped out of his skin. He shined the light on Paul, who was looking more serious than usual.

“Why the hell did you do that? Brandi is scared of the dark.”

“I did it because you were treading on dangerous ground, my friend.”

“What do you mean?”

“Matt, I told you that you are not allowed to tell her what Rodney did.”

“And I didn't.”

“You were getting pretty close. If she’s going to find out, she’ll have to do so herself. Besides, don’t you think she’s been through enough tonight without letting her know that Rodney slipped her a roofie that night, then put his ring on her finger?”

Matt sighed. His friend had a point. When he was in heaven, he had been outraged at how far Rodney would go to get what he wanted, but he had been helpless to do anything. Now that he was back on earth, he felt just as helpless. When Rodney had rushed into the house, Matt wanted to do more than punch that bastard in the stomach, but Brandi had stopped him.

Seeing Rodney again had regenerated the deep hatred he felt for the other man. If it were the last thing he did, the bastard would not get away with everything he had done. There had to be a way.

“I know what you’re thinking. JC wouldn’t smile on your murderous intent.”

“I might as well be back in heaven. I’m nearly as helpless down here as I am up there!”

Paul cocked an eyebrow. “Is that what you really want? It could be arranged.”

“No!”

Paul laughed. “That’s what I thought. It seems you’re making progress with Brandi.”

“I suppose I am. She’s agreed to sleep with me, but that’s it. I want more than that.”

Matt pounded his fist into his hand. The frustration was tearing him apart.

“These things take time. You can’t just expect her to fall in love with you all over again in an instant and the two of you get married and live happily ever after. It’s great for the fairy tales, but in real life, things don’t work out that way. At any rate, I think Brandi is starting to look at you in a more favorable light, so hang in there.”

“I feel like I don’t have much time. I need to be with her.”

“Look, at least you’re doing well with fixing up Matthew’s life.”

“I’m trying. It’s not really easy. Everyone expects me to be such a bastard all the time that when I do something nice, it’s always viewed as suspect. Mrs. Collins -- I mean, my mother still won’t look me in the eye. I found her this really nice retirement community. It’s almost like the Ritz Carlton with a twenty-four hour nursing staff. I visit her every day after I leave the dealership, but she still seems mad at me. Also, I finally spoke to Luisa, but she cursed me out. At least I think she did; it was all in Spanish.”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. These things take time. Now, I think you should probably get out of here. As we speak, our pal Rodney is only two blocks away, fuming,”

“Okay. I have to ask: did he trash the house?”

“What do you think?” Paul asked before disappearing.

Matt hated when his friend did that. He trudged back up the stairs to find Brandi huddled on the couch with a lit candle by her side.

“Matt, you were taking forever down there. Did you find anything wrong?”

“No. It may just be one of those things. I have no doubt that it will come back on. Did you get some things to bring back to my place?”

“Yes. Matt, if I go to your place ... I ...”

“You can have your own bedroom,” he said. The last thing he wanted her to think was that he was trying to take advantage of her.

“I ... I don’t want my own bedroom. I want to be with you.”

She looked at him, the candlelight illuminating her chocolate-brown eyes. Brandi looked so beautiful, so vulnerable. His cock twitched. He wanted to take her up on her offer, but if he made love to her tonight, he would be no better than Rodney.

“Brandi, you need a good night’s rest, then you’ll be able to think about it more clearly in the morning.”

“I know what I want. I was thinking about it while you were in the basement. And I want you, Matt. I want you very badly.”

He was so hard it hurt. “I want you, too, Brandi, but tonight isn’t a good time. We both know it.”

“I know no such thing.” She stood in front of him and cupped her hand over the bulge in his jeans.

Matt shuddered with pleasure. “Brandi ...”

“Let’s get out of here.” She stood on tip toes to kiss the pulsing column of his neck. God, he wanted her.

“When we get back to my place, you’re going to have to behave yourself, or I won’t be held responsible for what I do to you,” he said through gritted teeth.

She smiled. “That’s what I’m counting on.”

* * * * *

Rodney was parked down the street from Brandi’s house, but he was close enough to see Brandi walk out with that man. What the hell did she see in that white boy? He wanted to slash that motherfucker’s throat for being with Brandi when it should have been him offering her comfort.

It seemed lately that all his plans weren’t turning out the way he had anticipated. After visiting the Thorntons to check on Tina’s progress, it had been unpleasant to see that the brat was showing marked signs of improvement. The way she had reacted to him had sealed her fate. He’d thought the little shit would be too traumatized to remember the night of the shootings. He should have killed her when he’d had the chance.

He could have spent the week working himself back into Brandi’s good graces. Instead, he’d had to take care of business. Torching the Thornton place was something that had to be done. He wished he could have stuck around to make sure none of them got out alive, but

when he saw a man jogging down the sidewalk with his dog, he'd realized he had to get out of there fast. The way he had set the fire, he was sure there couldn't be an escape for any of them. Good riddance to them all, especially little Tina. Poor little Tina. Maybe she was up in heaven reunited with her dear old mom and dad. He laughed.

Jeffrey had thought he could get in the way, too. Rodney had been eight when Jeffrey had come along, stealing all of their mother's love and affection for himself. Until then it had always been him and his mother. There had been the occasional boyfriend, but nothing that Rodney couldn't handle. It seemed that his mother's boyfriends always took a dislike to him. It wasn't his fault that his mother had loved him best.

Unfortunately, his mother's last boyfriend had left her with a souvenir: little Jeffrey. After three months of watching the pudgy little creature eat, sleep, and shit, Rodney had smothered him. It had felt so good.

How convenient that Jeffrey's death had been attributed to SIDS. His mother's love was all his again after the little bastard kicked the bucket. But then, not long after Jeffrey's death, his mother was killed in an automobile accident. He'd bounced through the system from one foster home to another until he turned eighteen. Some of the homes he had been placed in were living hells, while others weren't so bad. A couple of his foster moms had even treated him affectionately, but Rodney had never loved a woman as strongly as his mother until he met Brandi.

After he had taken care of the Thornton situation, his adrenaline had been pumping; he had needed to see his woman, only to find her not at home. To get inside, he had used the key he had had copied a while ago. He'd thought he could collect something else of hers before she returned from wherever it was she went.

He'd been looking around when he caught sight of a family portrait of Brandi, her children, and Derrick. How he hated seeing Derrick's smiling face staring at him, mocking him. Something had taken over him, and he'd gotten a little carried away.

When he realized what he had done, he'd thought it best to take a drive to cool off and maybe by the time he returned, Brandi would turn to him for some comfort, like she had in the last two years.

The sheer rage he had felt to see that someone was there before him had set him off and he had slipped up again. He knew he had frightened her, but he couldn't help himself. How could she treat him that way when he loved her so much? If Brandi thought she was done with him by giving his ring back, she was sadly mistaken.

She was his and he had no intention of letting her go. No one would stop him, not her boyfriend and not even Brandi.

He had worked too damn hard to win her to just let things fall apart at this late stage. No one else would have her!

Chapter Eleven

Matt groaned. “Brandi, you’re going to get us into an accident.” She kept her hand on his thigh, slowly inching it upward until it met his cock. He felt so large. The car swerved, and she pulled her hand away.

“I can’t concentrate when you do that.” His breathing was ragged.

Good. She wanted him to be as aware of her as she was of him. The night certainly hadn’t begun as she had thought it would, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t end that way.

When Matt was in her basement, she had sat in the dark by the lit candle and thought hard about why she was fighting her attraction to him. In the beginning she’d been cautious because she’d been engaged and she had never been with a man outside of her race, but after spending time with him and feeling so at ease with him, she didn’t know what she had been so worried about in the first place. They were both adults. He wanted her and she wanted him. She’d decided it was time to throw caution to the wind.

Now there was no more Rodney, the kids were with her parents, and her hormones were raging. “I can’t seem to keep my hands off you.”

“Please try, at least while I’m behind the wheel.”

She pouted. “You’re a spoilsport, Matt. Is this the same man who had me pressed against the counter in the dentist’s office? You were so hard I’m surprised your pants didn’t split.”

Suddenly, he pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the engine. “Unbuckle your seatbelt,” he said through clenched teeth.

“What?”

“Unbuckle your seatbelt.”

What was he doing? Was he going to kick her out of the car? Had she offended him? “Look, Matt, I thought --”

“If you don’t unbuckle your seatbelt, I will do it for you.”

Brandi looked at him in confusion and did as he asked. She let out a yelp when he leaned over and crushed her mouth with his. She was too surprised to react at first, but when his tongue thrust past her parted lips, her arms went around his neck and she surrendered to the sweet sensation of his kiss.

His mouth was hard and hungry against hers. She groaned into his mouth as his tongue circled hers. Matt tasted so good. God, she wanted him. Brandi squirmed as her pussy throbbed. She longed to have him touch her there.

She stroked his silky hair as he deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue further into her mouth and boldly tasting her as though she belonged to him. The scent of him filled her nostrils, a mixture of his aftershave and his unique smell, titillating her senses.

Matt lifted his head to lightly trace the outline of her lips with the tip of his tongue with slow, seductive precision. “You taste so good. I think I could kiss you forever and never get tired of it.” He captured her bottom lip with his teeth and gently tugged.

Brandi couldn’t remember the last time a kiss had made her feel like this. Matt released her lip and pressed his mouth against hers once more. He moaned in obvious pleasure. Brandi’s tongue darted out to greet his as she felt it touch the seam of her lips.

The kiss lasted for several moments before he pushed her back against the seat. Matt unbuttoned her blouse, and she shivered with each button he undid. His finger gently grazed her skin as he exposed it to his hungry gaze.

When her blouse was completely open, he rested his hands over the tops of her breasts. She looked down at his pale skin against her ebony flesh. It was such a wonderfully erotic contrast.

“You have such beautiful skin, Brandi. You have no idea how many nights I’ve dreamed of doing this,” he whispered, leaning over to kiss her on the collarbone. He pressed another kiss between the valley of her breasts.

Matt pushed up her bra to reveal her dark, naked mounds. Her nipples were so hard that they almost ached. He raised his head to look in her eyes.

“I love your nipples. They look like blackberries, so juicy and suckable.” His eyes never left her face. “Do you want me to suck them, Brandi? Do you want to feel my tongue rolling around them?” His fingers grabbed one dark peak and gently squeezed. She moaned as a wave of bliss swept through her.

This man was the master of sexual torture. In a minute she knew she’d beg for mercy. When Brandi didn’t answer Matt’s question, he applied more pressure to her nipple, making her gasp in pleasure-pain.

“Do you want to feel my mouth where my fingers are?”

“Yes. Please.”

“I want to hear you tell me exactly what you want me to do.”

“Why are you torturing me like this?”

“You started this, remember? A man can only take so much before he reaches his limit. Now tell me what you want.”

“I want you to suck them. Suck my nipples,” she said raggedly.

“I thought you’d never ask.” He grinned wickedly.

He tweaked one turgid point one last time before bending his head and taking the little nub into his hot, moist mouth.

Brandi felt as though she were about to explode at the delicious sensations flowing through her. His mouth felt wonderful as it sucked and tugged on her nipple. She held his head against her body as he ravaged her with his tongue. It seemed like he couldn’t get enough of the taste of her.

Matt transferred his attention to her other breast, lavishing on it the same thoroughness as he had the other one. Brandi threw her head back against the seat of the car, shaking it from side to side. As he sucked one breast, his hand caressed and kneaded the other one, stimulating her to the point where she could only moan helplessly against the assault of his mouth.

A slow tingling in her body began at her toes and spread throughout her body. A sudden head rush made her scream as she reached her climax. Her panties were soaked, and she could barely breathe from wanting him so much.

Matt sat back in his seat with a satisfied smile. “Did you like that?”

Brandi licked her dry lips. “You know I did.”

She was stunned that he had brought her to orgasm just by sucking on her breasts.

“Now buckle your seatbelt and behave yourself, or I’ll be forced to drag you out of the car the next time and fuck you on the side of the road,” he warned, refastening his seatbelt and restarting the engine.

Brandi squirmed at the thought of his taking her on the side of the road. The idea had its appeal. She smiled at him.

“Is that a promise?”

She drove him crazy. During the remainder of the ride, she’d rubbed her hands against his thigh and smiled at him as though begging him to screw her senseless. He didn’t know how they had made it home without him following through with his threat. By the time they pulled up to his house, his balls ached so badly he could barely walk.

After so many years of wanting to be with her again, he wasn’t about to make love to her in a car. Matt wanted things to be just right. Despite his new body, the flame between

them burned stronger than ever. Brandi still reacted to his touch with an unashamed passion, holding nothing back. The guttural moans she produced in the back of her throat were enough to make his cock explode.

Once they were inside and he put her overnight bag down, he asked, "Would you like something to drink?"

"No. You know what I want, Matt."

He groaned. She was making it very hard for him to be noble. "Brandi, you have no idea how much I want you, but you're vulnerable right now."

She reached up to stroke his face, her touch making him shudder with longing. "I know you want it, too. This is what we both want tonight."

When Brandi looked at him with her big brown eyes, he couldn't resist her. Matt made one last attempt to do the right thing. "I know what we both wanted, but you've had a shock. This is the last thing you need."

"No, this is exactly what I need. I don't want to think about all that mess now. I only want this with you. Right here and right now. Weren't you telling me not to fight what I feel? Now I'm asking you to do the same."

Her hand trailed from his jaw to his chest, not stopping until it cupped the stiff bulge in his pants. Matt gasped and tried to disengage her fingers, but she swatted his hand away.

"No, let me. It's time for a little payback." She gave him a sultry look then unbuckled his belt and unzipped the fly on his jeans. He stood as still as he possibly could, willing himself not to move. God help him but he wasn't going to be able to hold out, especially after she unzipped him and slowly slid his jeans down his hips.

"Brandi --"

"Step out of your pants."

He hesitated for only a moment before he complied. She ran her hand over his crotch through his boxers. "Oh, yes, you want me, too, and I'm not letting you back out." Brandi pulled his underwear down and gasped. "I don't think all of this is going to fit in my mouth, but I'm going to have fun trying." She licked her lips, her eyes wide as she stared at his cock. He stepped out of his boxers.

"You know you don't have to --"

"I want to. Be quiet and enjoy it." She laughed and dropped to her knees before him.

Matt had to fight to keep from hauling her back up into his arms. Her touch was light against his cock as she gently fondled him. It was as though she was testing the length and texture of him. The smile on her face told him that she liked what she found.

Brandi cupped his throbbing balls in her palm and gave them a little squeeze. Stimulating pulses of pleasure shot through his body. Matt didn't know how much longer his knees would hold out if she continued. Brandi gave him another squeeze, harder this time, and rubbed her thumb back and forth over the sensitive sac. He shuddered.

With one hand still holding his balls, she grasped his cock in her other palm.

“Matt, you have a beautiful cock. I bet it tastes delicious,” she said before touching the pink mushroom-shaped head of his shaft with her tongue. “Mmm. I was right. It is delicious.” She licked the length of his cock with one broad stroke. His breath caught in his throat.

“Yummy,” she said and licked him again. She continued her slow seduction of his cock, eating it like it was an ice cream cone. Brandi looked up at him as her tongue flicked at the drops of his excitement that had formed at the tip of his dick.

“Do you like this?”

He could only nod, incapable of speech as an overwhelming pleasure rocked his body.

She eased as much of his cock into her mouth as she could. He tried very hard not to thrust forward, not wanting to gag her, but he couldn't help grabbing the back of her head in his hand and guiding it. Her mouth felt like a tight, moist pussy wrapped lovingly around his cock.

It felt as though she would swallow him whole, but she paused, pulling back. Her mouth was like magic. She moaned as she sucked him, creating a vibrating sensation on his dick, which pushed him closer to the edge.

By the little noises that she made in the back of her throat, he could tell that she was getting off on this as much as he was. Brandi had always been a passionate lover, never holding back and always giving as good as she got.

When the tip of his cock hit the back of her throat, Matt cried out her name.

“Brandi! Oh. God, you're going to be the death of me, woman.”

She bobbed her head back and forth and Matt didn't think he could take any more of her delicious torment. She increased the pace to a frenzied rhythm, her hand jerking him to keep pace with her mouth. Her other hand caressed and fondled his balls.

“Brandi, this feels so damn good!”

She pulled away, relinquishing his cock, and let it bob in her face. “I like the way you taste, Matt.”

She gave him a huge smile before pushing his cock against his stomach and lowering her head to taste his balls. Her mouth against this ultra-sensitive part of his body was more than he could take.

Matt tugged gently on her shoulders to pull her away. She moaned with evident reluctance as she released his balls from her mouth. He dragged her to her feet. “Okay. You win.”

Putting his arms under her legs, he lifted her up. He couldn't get her to the bedroom fast enough.

Chapter Twelve

Matt laid her on the bed and ripped his shirt off before he fell on top of her. Brandi cupped her hand around the back of his head and brought his face down to her mouth. He was eager to feel her lips beneath his. The sweet nectar of her mouth was mingled with the taste of him, and he found it extremely arousing.

Matt lifted his head to plant kisses along her jaw line. He couldn't believe that he was finally here with her like this. It felt so right, like he'd never left her. The feel of her soft skin beneath him was like no other sensation he had ever experienced.

He looked down into her beautiful brown eyes. "You feel so good, taste so good."

"So do you, Matt. I never thought ..."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just don't stop kissing me."

"No, tell me. You never thought what?"

She gave him a look of uncertainty. "I don't want to kill the moment."

"Trust me, darling, as hard as I am, there's no way you could possibly kill this moment." He caressed her cheek. Brandi closed her eyes as though savoring his touch against her face. It pleased him that she was so turned on by him. "Tell me," he urged.

"It's just that ... after my husband died, I never thought it would be possible for me to feel this way with anyone again."

Matt's heart fluttered, full of hope. "And how do you feel?" he asked softly.

"I know how you make me feel physically. When you touch me, it's like you know all my secret spots. It's like ..."

"We were made for each other?" He raised a brow. He had said those very words to her on their wedding night.

Her eyes widened. “Matt, I don’t know about that, but I know that when I’m in your arms, I can’t think straight and the earth starts to spin.”

“Well, let’s just think about the here and now and how we make each other feel. Right now, I want to make you feel really good.”

“You already do,” she whispered.

He smiled at her, wishing he could tell her how much he loved her, but she wasn’t ready to hear it yet. Matt knew if he pushed things too quickly, it would scare her away.

He undid her blouse the rest of the way and pushed it off her body. She helped him unclip her bra. Brandi giggled as he made a big production out of pulling off her jeans. “Damn, these are tight. How was I able to keep my hands off you earlier?”

“I don’t know, which is why I had to take action. A girl has needs, too, you know.”

When he finally got her jeans off, he flung them to the far side of the room.

“The next time I see you in those jeans, I’m going to spank you.”

Brandi pouted playfully. “Why would you do that?”

“Because that’s what happens to bad girls, and only bad girls wear jeans like that.”

“I’ve been very bad. What are going to do about it ... or are you all talk?”

“Is that a challenge?” He smirked.

“What do you think?” she taunted, licking her lips seductively.

“Okay, you asked for it.” He squeezed her tightly against him and ground her lips with his. Her playfulness in bed always pushed him over the edge. She kissed him back, their tongues twirling around each other’s in frantic motions. He pulled away and flipped her on her stomach.

Brandi gasped.

“So you want to play, do you?”

“Oh, yeah.” She moaned as his body rubbed against her backside, his cock pressing into her ass.

“Oh, God, Matt.” Her bottom wiggled against him.

“Your panties are soaked,” he whispered against her ear, causing her to shiver. “Did you spill all that delicious cream because of me?”

Brandi didn’t speak, only nodded her head.

Matt reared up onto his knees and administered a light smack.

“Matt!”

“That’s my name.” He chuckled as he rubbed the spot he had just hit.

“Umm.” She pushed her butt higher beneath his palm as though asking for more, so he obliged. He swatted her saucy bottom again.

Matt caught a whiff of her pussy and his cock throbbed as the delicious scent filtered into his nostrils. He couldn't remember a time when he had needed her as badly as he did now.

He slid her panties down her shapely hips, revealing two perfect dark-brown mounds of smooth and firm flesh. She still had one of the best asses he had ever seen. Her body was so beautiful. It was hard for him to believe that she had given birth to twins.

He pulled her lower body up so that her weight rested on her knees and forearms. Brandi wiggled her hips and he gave her another playful swat on the rear.

"If you're not still, I'm going to come before I can get inside you."

She looked over her shoulder at him and stuck out her tongue. "We wouldn't want that to happen, would we?"

"Hell, no! I plan on savoring this pussy."

"Then savor away."

"Oh, I will."

He slid two fingers into her wet slit, and she gasped in delight. She was so wet that she could feel her juices dribbling down her thigh. His fingers twisted inside of her, and she thought she would burst. His long, thick digits mimicked the motion of a cock.

She was so hot. When he pressed his lips against her swollen labia, she couldn't take anymore.

"Stop teasing and fuck me," she yelled in frustration. He claimed that she was a tease, but he was far worse than she was.

"Be patient. I want to make this experience as unforgettable as possible for you."

"I don't think I'll ever forget this --"

She was cut off abruptly when his tongue slid between her damp folds and licked her clitoris. With one hand, he parted her tender flesh and captured her clit between his lips. Matt's buried his face deep in her pussy. Brandi gasped and moaned at the exquisite sensation of his mouth against her.

Brandi reared back, smashing her hot cunt against his mouth, wanting him to taste all of her. His tongue showed no mercy, licking, exploring, and tasting every inch of her sex. Brandi could feel herself getting closer and closer to heaven with each stroke of his skillful tongue.

His fingers continued to work in and out of her dripping channel as he sucked diligently on her swollen nub. Beads of sweat broke out across her forehead. The things Matt was doing to her should have been outlawed, because she felt like she was going to die of pleasure. He had told her that he wanted to make her feel good, and he was doing a damn fine job of it. Brandi couldn't believe how much Matt turned her on.

“God, you taste good. Your pussy is intoxicating,” he whispered against her cunt, creating a vibrating sensation.

Matt pulled his fingers out of her, but he continued to eat her cunt like he was a starving man. His tongue shot up her channel. Brandi screamed as her body began to quake and her knees nearly gave out on her. A strong surge of passion shot through her, shaking her body to the core.

She could feel her juices flowing from her pussy. Matt made slurping noises as though he were trying to lick up every drop of her cream.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Brandi didn’t know if she could take any more pleasure, but Matt was not finished with her yet.

She collapsed on her stomach, panting, weak from her mind-shattering orgasm. He flipped her over her onto her back. There was smile on his face and a feral gleam in his eyes.

“That will teach you not to issue challenges like that again, won’t it, Brandi?”

Before she could respond, he spread her legs as far as they would go and speared her pussy with his cock.

“Oh!” was all she could manage as he stretched the walls of her cunt.

Matt sighed with what sounded like relief. “Brandi, your pussy feels even better around my cock.”

“Your cock feels good inside my pussy,” she replied, lifting her hips up to meet his slow, steady thrusts. She massaged his chest, tangling her fingers through the ginger hair that covered his well-toned pecs. Matt had such a nice body, and she loved the way he felt beneath her fingertips.

As he moved within her Brandi felt whole, like she had been missing a piece of herself for a long time and now he had filled it. It was a strange, because she hadn’t known him that long even though it felt like it. She was so confused about her feelings for Matt, but she did know one thing: his tongue was sensational and his cock was absolutely lethal.

Her eyes locked with his intense green gaze, and she felt his fingers dig into her thighs as he pumped in and out of her with a smooth, steady motion. She needed to feel him closer to her, so she wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him on top of her.

Brandi could feel his heart beat against hers, and she closed her eyes tightly as she was taken on a wave of ecstasy that would surely drown them both. His mouth pressed against hers, and Brandi parted her lips, allowing him to deepen the kiss.

Matt thrust deeper and harder into her until she found herself on the verge of yet another explosive orgasm.

“Brandi, I can’t hold back any longer.”

“Then don’t, because I can’t either,” she moaned.

He stiffened against her and then shuddered violently.

Brandi felt his hot seed shoot into her pussy, triggering her third and most powerful climax yet. A rapturous wave of fulfillment washed through her.

“Matt, that was wonderful.” She sighed with contentment.

He kissed her on the forehead. “And it will only get better,” he promised.

She looked up into his flushed face and felt that twinge again. What was happening to her? When she looked into his eyes, why did he always seem so familiar?

“You look pensive,” he said.

“I was just thinking about how good it was to feel like that again.”

In a swift movement, he wrapped his arms around her and rolled onto his back so that she was on top.

“Whoa, you’re going to make me dizzy. My head is already spinning.” Brandi laughed.

“I didn’t want to crush you. You’re so small.”

“Is that a short joke?”

“No, I think you’re perfect just the way you are, and I wouldn’t dare to make a comment on your height or lack thereof.” There was a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

Brandi laughed again. “Uh, thanks for the compliment. I think.” She laid her head against his chest and listened. “Your heart is still racing.”

“You have that effect on me.”

Brandi smiled tiredly.

“Brandi?”

“Hmm?”

“Where do we go from here?”

She lifted her head. The look of uncertainty in his eyes made her want to smooth the worry away, but what did he expect from her? It wouldn’t be right to enter into anything other than a physical relationship with him when things were so crazy in her life.

She still couldn’t believe that she was here with him in the first place. No, she couldn’t give more, or could she?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. We had fun tonight, didn’t we? Let’s just leave it at that, okay?”

His eyes narrowed. “I think you know that I want more than that from you. Tonight was something special, or at least *I* thought it was.” He sounded hurt, and she tried to push away the shame she felt.

“Look, I don’t want to hurt you, Matt, but you knew how things were for me.”

“But what happened tonight was more than just sex, and you know it. There’s a connection between us.”

Brandi didn't want to have this conversation. Why did he have to ruin the moment by getting serious on her? She rolled off him and sat up.

"Matt, I think you should take me home."

He sat up, too, anger flashing in the depths of his eyes. "Oh, no, you don't. You're not going to laugh with me, share your innermost thoughts with me, let me make love to you, only to tell me to take you home because I want a relationship with you. I won't be dismissed like some gigolo."

She scooted off the bed. "Now you're starting to sound like Rodney. Don't tell me how I should behave." She crossed her arms across her breasts and glared at him.

His face went a chalky white, and his lips tightened into a thin, angry line. Brandi took a step back when he got off the bed and hovered over her.

"Don't ever compare me to Rodney again."

Her mouth opened, but she couldn't say a word. This man was definitely not like Rodney, and she wasn't sure why she had said it.

"Brandi, whenever you're near me, no one else exists for me. I think you feel the same way, too."

"You don't know how I feel!"

"I can tell when you're in my arms. Why are you fighting this so hard?"

"I just broke my engagement. What would it look like if I turned around and started dating you?"

"Do you honestly care what other people think? Are you ashamed to be with me?"

"No."

"Then why?"

"I have my kids to think about."

"And I have a son. What's your point?"

"I have done my best to raise them the best way I could since my husband died. What kind of example would I be setting if I allowed you into my life after a broken engagement?"

"Our children get along well, and, frankly, I think your children and my son want us to be happy."

"And just what makes you think you can make me happy?"

"I know one place where I can make you happy, and I think I can make you happy outside of the bedroom, as well. Just give us a chance."

"I can't."

"Why can't you? What are you so afraid of?" He grabbed her, pulling her body against his. Damn him for making her feel this way. Already she could feel her nipples hardening against his chest.

“I’m not afraid of anything. I just know this isn’t right.”

“Says who?” He lifted one chestnut brow as he brought his face closer to hers. She could feel the heat of his breath against her lips.

“Don’t.” She knew if she allowed him to kiss her that would be it.

“Don’t what? Don’t kiss you? Don’t touch you? You know I can’t honor that request. Please, Brandi, give us a chance. If you’re worried about the kids, we’ll take things slow. They don’t have to know about us right away; just don’t fight what I know we both want.” His lips descended on hers.

Brandi’s fists were clenched tightly against her sides. Her head and heart were in a tug-of-war. She had to fight this, but his tongue was pressing at the seam of her lips, and she felt a familiar rush of excitement pulse through her body.

Her heart won. Her arms went around his neck, and she surrendered to his kiss.

Chapter Thirteen

Paul entered the hospital room and watched the little girl. Her arm and leg were encased in casts, and he knew she had a mild concussion. There was a bandage wrapped around her head. She looked so peaceful and silent as she lay there. Anger washed through him as he thought about the monster who had done this to her. He wished that he were alive so he could wrap his fingers around that son of a bitch's neck. Anyone who could do this to a child had no soul.

He gently touched Tina's face, and she shivered. As a Watcher, Paul had seen much pain and suffering. He had watched helplessly as his wife had opened the door to find his fire chief on the other side instead of him on the night of their anniversary to tell her about the accident. He had felt her devastation and wanted to take her in his arms, but he couldn't. The miserable nights she had spent crying while he could do nothing had made him curse fate's cruelty.

Then there were the women beaten by their husbands or boyfriends, teenagers strung out on drugs, parents abandoning their children, and mothers who cried themselves to sleep because they didn't know where the next meal would come from to feed their children.

Paul knew that the big guy had a plan, and he had no business questioning his boss's will, but he couldn't help but wonder why there was so much suffering in the world. He had thought he would have the answers when he crossed over, but he still didn't.

What devastated him the most was to see the suffering of children. Tina had been through so much, and she deserved some happiness. Paul realized that because of the considerable trauma she had been through, it wouldn't be a good idea to drag her into the middle of Matt's problems. They would try to find another way to bring down Rodney, but unfortunately, she was already involved.

Paul closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was inside Tina's mind. There she was, in a dark corner, holding her knees to her chest, weeping silently to herself. He approached her with silent steps before kneeling down next to her.

"Tina, don't cry, sweetheart. Everything will be okay." He touched her hair in a soothing gesture.

Tina looked at him, her hazel eyes filled with fear. She opened her mouth and let out a silent scream, rolling herself into a protective ball.

"Please don't be scared of me, Tina. I'm your friend. I want to help you."

The little girl didn't respond as she rocked herself back and forth.

"I know you don't want to talk, and that's understandable, but I would like to talk to you, okay?" he asked gently.

Still no response.

Paul sighed. He knew this wasn't going to be easy. He sat down beside her.

"Sweetheart, I know that you're frightened and you don't understand why this happened to you, but I want you to know that you have a friend. I will do everything I can to make sure the bad man doesn't hurt you again."

She looked at him then. Tina opened her mouth as though to say something, but didn't.

"Do you remember when I helped you out of the house? I said I wouldn't leave you if you needed me."

There was recognition in her eyes then. "You helped me," she said slowly.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it wasn't your time."

"Oh."

"Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

She shook her head.

"I want you to get better, so you can grow strong. One day, when you get to be really, really old, we'll see each other again in heaven."

"Daddy said there's no heaven," Tina said, eyeing him suspiciously.

Paul gently patted her cheek, and this time she didn't flinch. "Your father was a very troubled man, sweetie. I can assure you that there is a heaven. I live there."

"Is my mama there?"

"Yes." Jessica Reed, although not a Watcher, was indeed in heaven and said a little prayer for her daughter every day.

"She is?" Tina asked with wide eyes.

"Yes, and she's very proud of you. You look just like her, you know."

“Mama was so pretty. Daddy said ...” Her voice trailed off.

“I can imagine what your Daddy said, but he was wrong.”

“MomMom and PopPop are in heaven now, aren’t they?” she asked with a solemn expression.

She was referring to the Thorntons. Damn Rodney. This child had suffered too much loss for one so young. He was more than happy to reassure her that they, too, had survived the fire.

“Will I live with them again? They were nice.”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. Without their house, they might not be able to take care of you anymore.”

“I’m all alone now.” Tina burst into tears, and Paul felt such an acute pain in his soul that it almost felt like he was alive again. He took the sobbing child into his arms.

“Shh, shh. It’s okay, sweetie. Uncle Paul is here, and he won’t leave you alone.”

He stroked her head and rocked her back and forth in his arms. At times like this, he wished he were alive again so that there was more that he could do. If he could, he would go back in time and find a way for Rodney to stay away from the police force. Then Derrick might be alive and Tina would be okay.

No, he thought, chiding himself, maybe if Tina had been left alone, she would still be in an abusive home, and perhaps her father would have eventually turned the gun on her.

There was really no point in wondering about the what-ifs. He had to trust that everything really did happen for a reason.

When she finally stopped crying, she looked at him.

“I’m scared of the bad man.”

“I know you are, sweetie, but I have a friend who will make sure that the bad man won’t hurt you anymore. I just want you to know that when you wake up, even if you can’t see me, you will never be alone.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

* * * * *

When they had said goodbye that Saturday morning his heart felt like it was breaking. He couldn’t stand not being around her, so Matt had called her and asked if she could drop the kids off somewhere for a couple of hours. He had said it was important for her to come over to his place because he needed to show her something. He wouldn’t say what, but it sounded serious, so she had gone.

“I’m here. What was it you wanted to show me?” Brandi walked into his house.

Matt pulled her against him and brought his mouth down on hers. He cupped the back of her head to kiss her more deeply. His tongue slid between her slightly parted lips and explored the warm, wet cavern.

Brandi moaned into his mouth before wrapping her arms around him as she pressed her body against him, molding her tiny frame to his. She returned his kiss eagerly, her tongue darting forward to meet his.

The scent of her floral perfume was playing havoc with his senses and her lips tasted of peach lip-gloss. He pulled back slightly to trace them with his tongue and then repeated the process because he couldn't help himself. Brandi shivered with obvious pleasure. "You taste delicious as always," he said, grinning down at her.

"So what was the emergency?"

"I needed a kiss."

Her jaw dropped. "You're kidding, right?"

"I never kid about needing a kiss. Wasn't that kiss worth the trip?"

"Matt, as wonderful as your kisses are, that was a dirty trick you pulled. It's a school night and my sister reamed me out for dropping the twins off with such short notice and not telling her where I was going. Here I was thinking something was terribly wrong, but you called me because you wanted a kiss?" She placed her hands on her hips, glaring up at him.

"Never underestimate the power of a kiss."

"We would have seen each other next weekend. You could have had all the kisses you wanted then."

"I couldn't wait until next weekend. Besides, this was an emergency. My cock has been hard as a rock from just thinking about you all day. If I don't get some relief, I may get blue balls. I thought you were a woman of compassion. Blue balls are a serious medical condition, you know." He tried very hard to keep a straight face.

"You have got some nerve, do you know that, mister?" Although the tone of her voice was stern, Matt saw the hint of little smile growing on her face.

"But why shouldn't I have called you, when you're the cause? Can you imagine what it's like to walk around all day with aching nuts? My pants were rubbing against me all day, and I had to walk with my hands in front of me. Some little old lady called me a pervert at lunch today as I was standing in line at a fast-food place. My erection was so huge, I had to leave the damn place."

Brandi burst out laughing.

"You think this is funny?"

"Oh, my, that does sound like you have a problem."

"I didn't realize that my dilemma would be a source of amusement."

“You nut! I can’t believe you called me over here for this. You know I can’t stay. I told Lisa that I would be a couple hours at the most.”

“Just enough time for a quickie. Besides, you should see what I wanted to show you.” He moved his hands to the button on his jeans. Her eyes were glued to his fly as he unfastened his pants and slid them down over his hips and kicked them away. Then he quickly discarded his boxers and freed himself. His cock ached so badly that if he didn’t get some of her pussy soon, he would explode.

“It’s so hard. Poor thing. I guess I could take care of that for you.” She ran her fingers lightly over the head. His breath caught in his throat.

“You little tease. I’ll teach you what happens when you torture me like this.”

She let out a shriek as he swept her off her feet and carried her up the stairs, taking them two at a time. When they reached the bedroom, Matt dropped her unceremoniously on the bed and literally ripped his shirt off. He was so eager and ready for her.

“You have no idea how much I’ve wanted you all day,” he said before falling on top her.

“I do, because I was thinking about you today, too,” she confessed, then wrapped her arms around him.

His mouth merged with hers, and their tongues met passionately, circling and entwining with each other. She tasted like heaven. Her sweet warm breath mingled with his as she sighed into his mouth. He cupped her face to thrust his tongue further into her mouth. He couldn’t get enough of her. The sensual feel of her fingertips gliding up and down the back of his neck was making him delirious with desire.

Matt didn’t think he would ever get tired of kissing Brandi. Every kiss always felt like the first. He wished this moment could last forever. “God, you taste sweet,” he muttered against her mouth.

“And you taste yummy, too.” She smiled up at him.

“Why are we talking? I want that scrumptious pussy of yours. Help me get you undressed, otherwise, I can’t guarantee what state your clothes will be in when I get finished with them.”

She chuckled softly, raising herself up slightly.

The feel of her clothes rubbing against his heated skin only served to arouse him more. He got up on his knees and unbuttoned her slacks. Meanwhile, her fingers went to her top.

Matt made quick order of pulling her pants off and Brandi worked quickly on her blouse, removing it to reveal her small, but perfectly formed dark-chocolate mounds. His mouth watered just looking at her. He was torn between sliding his cock between her thighs and taking one hard pointed nipple into his mouth. In the end, he decided he wanted both.

Matt grabbed her and rolled onto his back so that she was straddling his thighs. “Ride me, baby.”

Brandi gave him a seductive smile as she climbed over him. They both gasped as she impaled herself on his cock. The delicious sensation of their joining made Matt shudder with a savage desire.

“Oh, God, Matt, your cock feels so good.” She began to move over him, her breasts jiggling as she rocked on him.

He reached for her breasts, squeezing and shaping them with his hands. Brandi arched her back, pushing her breasts forward into his palms. Her cunt was so small and tight around him, made just for his cock.

“Lean forward, baby, and let me taste those nipples you’ve been tempting me with.”

She complied, leaning forward just enough that the hardened peaks of her breasts touched his face. His rubbed his face against the taut mounds, reveling in the feel of her soft skin against his.

“I love your beautiful dark skin. It was one of the first things I noticed about you,” he murmured, before capturing a hard tip in his mouth.

Brandi shuddered against him, going still momentarily, before she moved up and down on his dick again. “That’s it, baby, don’t stop riding me,” Matt said as his tongue flicked her nipple. He took it into his mouth again, and this time he sucked on it with the ferocity of someone who had been too long denied.

“Matt, I don’t know if I can take it if you keep this up,” she whispered urgently.

His teeth nipped the tiny bud, and she gasped. “Yes, you can. You’re a passionate woman, Brandi, and you can take anything I can give you. That’s why when we make love, it’s explosive. I know you like this, because your pussy is dripping. I like that.” He turned his attention to the other nipple, licking and bathing it with his tongue. “Delicious.”

He knew she was enjoying this by the little gasping sounds she made. Brandi had always been a vocal lover, never one to hold back when she was enjoying something. It was one of the things he loved about her.

“Your tongue is magic,” Brandi said between gasps.

“As magical as my cock?”

“Nothing compares with your cock, but I think you need to be taught a lesson about teasing.” She kissed his neck, sucking on his flesh.

“Are you trying to leave a hickey?”

“And what if I am?”

“Just checking.” He laughed. Actually the thought of her mark of possession against his flesh sent a shudder through his body.

Brandi’s tongue circled the spot where she had sucked and then moved to another part of his neck, repeating the process. She was driving him crazy with each brush of her lips and

flick of her tongue. She did all this while still moving on his cock. Her pussy muscles tightened around his dick and he cried out in pleasure.

“Oh, God, Brandi!” He knew she had done it on purpose.

Her muscles clenched around him again, and he knew she was close to coming.

Matt was finding it increasingly difficult to hold on. Her pussy felt so damn good. Brandi straightened up, and he grabbed her hips as she bounced up and down on his cock more forcefully. She threw her head back, exposing the delicate arch of her neck. He wanted to kiss that lovely neck, but he knew there would be time for that later. Sweat glistened on her dark body, and she looked like a goddess, riding him with a wild look of ecstasy on her face.

Matt was too close to his climax to do anything except surrender to the wave of passion. His pulse raced, and his body tightened. The smell of their mingled sex filled the room. Her muscles clenched around his cock each time she ground her hips on him. She licked her lips in a seductive gesture, her dark eyes connecting with his. “Your cock is so deep inside me,” she moaned. “I’m glad you called me over.”

“Me, too. Oh --” Matt was abruptly cut off by a jolt of pleasure so powerful that he jerked and shook. He shot his seed into her juicy cunt, grabbing her hips to get deeper inside of her.

“Matt, Matt, Matt!” she screamed. Her body shook, too. Brandi collapsed against him, her face buried in his neck. His cock was still firmly planted inside her. She panted against his neck, clearly as out of breath as he was.

He petted the damp hair plastered to her head.

“That was wonderful,” she sighed.

“Now can you see why I called you over?” he teased.

She gave him a kiss on the neck before lifting her head to look at him.

“Well, I guess if you had this type of emergency, I’m flattered that I was the one you called.”

“Who else would I call but you? I don’t know anyone’s whose pussy is as good, tight, or as wet as yours. It was a no-brainer.”

“Hmm, you don’t have any other girlfriends that I don’t know about, do you? I don’t share, you know.”

“No. Only you.” Matt was secretly pleased at this sudden display of jealousy. It gave him hope that perhaps it wouldn’t be long before she admitted that she loved him. He knew it would take some time, but if she were feeling a little possessive toward him, then it had to be a positive sign.

“You had better hope so, mister, because I don’t like cheaters.”

“I would never cheat on you, darling.”

“Have you ever cheated on someone before?”

Matt paused. Oh, dear Lord. What was he supposed to tell her? Technically he had never cheated on anyone, but the old Matthew’s past was now his.

“Our pasts don’t matter now that we’re together. You have my solemn vow that I would never do that to you. You mean a lot to me, Brandi.”

“Matt --”

“Please don’t say it. I know you don’t feel for me the way I do for you yet, but I want you to trust me when I tell you how much you mean to me. I told you in the beginning that I wouldn’t push you, but please respect me enough to believe that I’m telling you the truth.”

A look of hesitation crossed her face. She searched his.

Matt didn’t realize he was holding his breath until she spoke again. “I trust you.” She bent down and brushed her lips against his. His heart raced with love for her. In a sudden movement, he rolled over, reversing their positions. His cock was still inside her and getting harder by the second.

“You’re ready again?” She seemed amazed.

“You shouldn’t be surprised by now. You know what you do to me, sweetheart. I can’t get enough of you.”

“But I’m going to have to leave soon. My sister is going to be furious with me.”

Matt thrust forward, making her gasp.

“Okay, maybe a few more minutes.”

Chapter Fourteen

Matthew Collins was a dead man walking. Rodney was seething inside. He stood on a hill watching the laughing couple through his binoculars as they sat on a park bench throwing breadcrumbs at the ducks. Brandi was laughing as though she had just heard the funniest joke in the world. Collins leaned over and kissed her.

Rodney didn't like the way Collins was touching his woman. He had to push back the urge to rush over and smash that bastard's face in. Collins would pay.

He couldn't figure out what Brandi saw in that cracker. It should have been him sitting there, holding her hand. If Brandi thought she could throw him over for someone else, then she was sadly mistaken. She belonged to him, and he wasn't going to let her go! For the past two months, she hadn't returned his calls. She had even changed her numbers and installed a new security system.

The final slap in the face was when she had applied for a restraining order against him. It had cost him his job. That was okay. He had plenty of money to live on from his last foster mother. That old bitch had thought he had actually cared about her, when what he had really cared about were the extravagant gifts she had liked to shower on him. Even better, she had left him her all her money.

Rodney laughed at Brandi's feeble attempts to keep him out of her life. As a former member of the police force, he had learned a few things about home security systems and how to get past them. He still liked to watch her through the windows. Even with her inside the house he was able to get in without her knowing.

Every now and then, he would take the underwear from her dirty clothes hamper. She had plenty of under things. He was sure she wouldn't miss a few articles here or there. Besides, she owed it to him after putting him through the hassle of sneaking around like this.

Sometimes when it rained, it poured, and Collins wasn't the only problem he had to deal with. Somehow that little thorn in his side had survived the fire. More than ever he needed to get rid of her. For now, she lay in a pediatric ward, an even bigger ball of nerves than she had already been. He chuckled to himself.

Little Tina would be totally insane by the time he was finished with her ... that is, if he didn't kill her first.

Brandi and Collins stood up, then walked down the trail holding hands. They were staring into each other's eyes. It made him want to hurl.

You may think she's yours now, but I'll be watching and I'll be waiting.

Rodney lowered the binoculars and dug into his pocket, pulling out a pair of unlaundered pink panties. He brought them to his nose and took a deep whiff. He felt calmer as Brandi's essence filled his nostrils. He stuffed the panties back into his pocket and moved toward the unsuspecting couple.

* * * * *

"I can't believe it's five o'clock already. I'm supposed to pick up the kids in a half hour," she groaned.

"I feel the same way, but I enjoyed spending time with you today. I have Ben next weekend, and I was thinking the five of us could do something together," Matt suggested.

Brandi looked at him warily. "Matt, it's too soon. Remember, we agreed that we would take things slowly."

"It's been two months. We only see each other on the weekends when I don't have Ben. How much slower do we have to go? You let me make love to you with no qualms, but you won't bring our relationship in the open. Am I going to be your dirty little secret for the duration of our time together?"

Brandi looked away from the hurt and anger in his eyes. The past couple of months with Matt had brought her more joy than she had experienced in the past two years. She found herself looking forward to the weekends she could drop her children off with her mother or sister. Brandi realized her family suspected that there was a man involved. Her parents didn't say anything, but she was subjected to knowing looks when she picked the kids up. Lisa, naturally, had bluntly asked. She, in turn, had changed the subject immediately.

When she was with Matt, she felt like a teenager again. He made her laugh, and he was easy to talk to. Their days were loaded with activities, and their nights were filled with steamy passion. When she wasn't with him, he was never far from her thoughts. The more time they spent together, the more she wanted to be with him, but Brandi didn't know if she was ready to analyze her feelings any further than that. To do so would mean having to

admit that she more than cared for him. What if her kids became involved and things didn't work out? They didn't need any more upheaval in their young lives.

"Matt, please try and understand this from my perspective. I'm a single mother trying to raise two children and I want to do right by them. I don't want to set a bad example."

"I'm not asking to spend the night with you while they're there. I'm also a single father."

"You don't understand. Ben's only with you every other weekend. My kids are with me all the time."

"And?" he prompted, folding his arms across his chest.

"I already made a mistake. With Rodney."

"How?"

"The kids caught us in bed together. Then the engagement was over just like that. I can't imagine what would have been running through their minds. How is it going to look to them if I tell them you're my boyfriend? How can they respect me if they think their mother is loose?"

He grabbed her hands and pulled her against him, giving her a long, deep kiss. When he lifted his head, she was breathless. Matt always seemed to make her forget everything when he kissed her like that.

"You're not a loose woman; you're a very passionate woman. Your kids will understand if you explained things to them."

"Do you intend to tell your son about me?" she asked skeptically.

"Of course, I will. My son is always asking about you. He thinks you're pretty. You might even be the object of his first crush."

"You're making that up!"

"I swear. He asked me just last week what I thought about Miss Brandi."

She pursed her lips. "Now I know you're making that up."

Matt dug into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He speed dialed a number and put the phone against his ear.

"Who are you calling?"

Matt didn't answer; he seemed to be waiting for someone to answer the call.

"Karen, this is Matt. Can I speak to Ben, please? Thanks."

Brandi's eyes widened. "Matt, no!"

He ignored her. "Hi, Ben. How's it going, champ?" Matt smiled at whatever the boy said.

"I can't believe you're doing this," she hissed at him, but he held his hand up.

"Ben, I have a friend with me who wants to say hello."

“No,” Brandi backed away from him when he held the phone in front of her.

“Take it,” Matt urged.

She shook her head. Matt gave her a knowing smile, then put the phone back to his ear.

“Well, it seems that my friend is shy all of a sudden. Maybe another time.” He winked at her. “Yes, I’ll make it to your soccer game. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He laughed at something else Ben said. Matt chatted for a few more minutes before ending the call. “Okay, kiddo, see you then. Love you.” He replaced the phone in his pocket.

“That was a dirty trick.”

“You are the one who accused me of lying. I was only trying to prove my innocence.”

“Matt, you’re not making this easy for me,” she groaned.

He lifted her chin so their eyes met. “It’s not my intention to make this hard on you, but my feelings for you are very real, Brandi. I love you.” Matt let out a deep breath. “There, I said it. You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to tell you.”

Her eyes filled with tears. The tender look in his eyes told her that he meant it. Her heart began to race because she knew then that she loved him, too. It wasn’t the grateful-friendship type of love she had once felt for Rodney; this was real and much more intense. It was also the kind of love she had felt with Derrick, and it scared the hell out of her.

“Matt. I ... I love you, too.”

His eyes lit up and he took her into his arms. She melted against him and opened her mouth to the welcome invasion of his tongue. She didn’t know if she would ever get tired of his kisses. Matt could make her come with just the flick of his tongue.

Matt lifted his head. “Those words are music to my ears.”

“But we still need time.”

“Time for what? We love each other. What do we have to wait for?”

“I ... I just want to run things by my kids first and get their take on things. I mean, I love you, but they are my priority.”

Matt looked like he wanted to argue with her but thought better of it.

“Just give me enough time to get them used to the idea of you and me.”

“Okay. For you, I would wait an eternity.”

Her heart fluttered. She stroked his cheek. “You say the sweetest things. Now, I really should get going. I promised Mya I would take her to the mall on the way home.”

“By all means, you don’t want to keep the young lady waiting.” He chuckled.

“No. My daughter can be pretty tough when she wants to be.”

“How quaint.” A malevolent voice spoke from behind her.

Matt's face went beet red. "What the hell are you doing here? You know you're not supposed to be within one hundred yards of Brandi."

Brandi turned to see Rodney standing behind her. What *was* he doing here? A couple of months ago she would have never suspected him of stalking her, but after the night she broke their engagement, she had taken the necessary precautions to keep him away from her and the children. She been very careful in the way she had told her children about her broken engagement, letting them know that no one was to blame, but that she felt it was for the best that she and Rodney separate. Surprisingly, they both seemed fine with it, DJ especially.

Since then, he had left hundreds of messages on her answering machine and cell phone. It had gotten to the point where the children were questioning why he was calling so much. If the sheer volume of the calls didn't give her cause for alarm, then the nature of the messages did.

In the beginning, the messages had been apologetic in tone, then they progressively became more belligerent. "No one will love you like I do. No one." That particular message had chilled her to the bone. The very next day she had had her numbers changed.

She also received daily deliveries of flowers at her office with equally chilling messages. Why had she never noticed that Rodney was like this? From his reaction to the breakup, she wished she had kicked him to the curb sooner.

Who knew what would have happened had she actually gone through with the wedding? Any gratitude she had felt because he'd been there for her during a tough time in her life had flown out of the window with his actions.

"This is a public park. How was I to know you would be here?" Rodney's hazel eyes surveyed her face and she shivered at the possessive look he shot her. "You look beautiful, Brandi."

"Rodney, you know I have a restraining order against you. If I call the police, you will get arrested. We have to get going. Come on, Matt."

Matt never took his eyes from Rodney. "Sure." He put his arm around Brandi's shoulder, and they would have walked away if Rodney had not stepped in their path.

"Move!" Matt said without preamble.

Brandi tried a more reasonable approach. "Please leave us alone, Rodney."

Rodney's nostrils flared. He seemed incredulous. "You can stand there and tell me to leave you alone as if I don't matter? As if we didn't have something special?"

She opened her mouth, but Matt jumped in before she had a chance to speak.

"Brandi has asked you to leave her alone, and I suggest you do so."

Rodney advanced on them, and Matt moved in front of Brandi.

"And what are you going to do about it, white boy? You have no idea what I can do to you. Stay out of this; it's between me and Brandi."

“Are you threatening me?” Matt asked, showing absolutely no fear.

“I don’t make threats, pal. Threats are for people who don’t plan on following through. I make promises.”

“Rodney, what the hell is wrong with you? You’re acting crazy!” Brandi couldn’t believe this exchange.

“Brandi, I’m only crazy in love with you. Can’t you see this guy is no good for you? He’s not good enough to wipe your feet on.”

“I’m warning you, Rodney.” Matt’s teeth were clenched.

“Warning me? I should be warning Brandi.” Rodney smiled. “You seem to think Matthew Collins is such a paragon, but did you know that he was a deadbeat dad? I have it from a very reliable source that as rich as he is, he has been late with his child support payments on several occasions.”

“You’re making that up!”

“Am I? It’s in the public records if you want to check for yourself. If that doesn’t bother you, then how about what he did to his poor, sweet mother? Right after his father died, he put her in one of the worse nursing homes in the state. And let’s not forget that he’s a serial cheater.” Rodney smirked triumphantly. “Matthew, why don’t you tell her how your first wife committed suicide? I guess she got fed up with the way you treated her.”

Brandi gasped. Why was Rodney making up lies about Matt? She knew in her heart he was a good person. He just wasn’t capable of these things.

“Rodney, I don’t know what you think you’ll gain by making up these lies, but you need to get the hell out of my face before I put my foot up your ass.” She placed her hands on her hips and tipped her head back to so he could see the anger in her eyes.

Rodney gave her a satisfied smile. “You’re even more beautiful when you’re angry. If you don’t believe me, then ask lover boy if everything is true or not.”

Something in the way Rodney said it made her look at Matt. Her heart sank when she noticed his stillness and how pale he had gone.

“Matt, tell me he’s lying.”

“I can’t.”

Chapter Fifteen

The look of disappointment in Brandi's eyes tore him apart. Matt wanted to smash the smug smile off Rodney's face. He desperately wanted to tell Brandi exactly what Rodney had done to him and the kind of man he was, but he knew he couldn't.

He didn't know what he could possibly say that would reassure her that he was a new man. One thing was certain, however: he wasn't going to let the sins of Matthew Collins's past destroy what he and Brandi had found together again. He'd have to work doubly hard to win her trust.

"Is that all you can say?" Her eyes seemed to plead for him to deny Rodney's accusations.

"He can't deny anything because it's all true," Rodney taunted evilly.

Matt's fists clenched and unclenched by his sides. He ached to hit him. Worse, he felt like a fool for having let his guard down where this maniac was concerned.

"And how do you know all these things?"

"Oh, I have my sources. Brandi, you really should be careful about the company you keep."

Matt's control snapped. His fist slammed into Rodney's jaw and the other man stumbled backward. To his amazement, instead of retaliating, Rodney laughed as he rubbed his jaw.

"Now do you see the type of man he is? The truth hurts, doesn't it, Collins? I could have you arrested, you know." His grin widened.

Brandi watched them with horror etched on her face. She turned to Matt with tears in her eyes. "I thought you were special," she said. The hurt was evident in her voice.

“What we have *is* special, Brandi, but I refuse to defend myself in front of him.” Matt glared at Rodney, who gave him a menacing smile. His face was beginning to swell. Good. It was no more than he deserved, although Matt wanted to do much more.

“Defend yourself? You haven’t even tried. If it’s true then how could you possibly explain what you’ve done? When I asked you if you ever cheated, you were very quick with your little talk about trust. Now I know why you never answered me.” She took a deep breath. “I have to go pick up my kids. I’m sure you’ll understand when I say that it’s best that we not see each other again. I can’t afford to have someone like you in my life. Goodbye, Matt.” She turned her back on him and walked away, but not before he saw a tear slide down her cheek.

He ran after her and turned her to face him. She hastily wiped away her tears and glared at him. “Let go of my arm. I can’t believe what a fool I’ve been.”

“Are you going to condemn me without a hearing?”

“I already gave you a chance to explain yourself, but you declined, so now I’m asking you to let go of me and get the hell out of my life.”

Matt had no choice but to release her. “I can explain.”

“You know, I don’t care to hear what you have to say.”

“Brandi, how can you tell me you love me one minute and then tell me that you don’t want to see me in the next? I think you at least owe me a chance.”

“I don’t owe you shit.”

“Look me in the eyes and tell me that your feelings have changed. Tell me that you’re willing to walk away from me without at least letting me explain.”

Brandi hesitated, confusion clear on her lovely face. Matt felt his heart breaking with each silent moment that passed between them. Her lips parted. “I --”

“Brandi, don’t listen to him. Whatever he has to say will probably be more lies. If he could do all those other things, what makes you think he would be honest with you?” Rodney had walked up behind them.

In his frantic efforts to stop Brandi from walking out of his life, Matt had forgotten about Rodney.

A mutinous expression entered Brandi’s eyes. “You know what? You both can go to hell! I’m through with men.” She flung her arms up before turning and leaving the two men staring at her retreating figure.

Matt whirled around and landed a blow right onto the bastard’s nose this time. There was a loud crack, and Rodney hit the ground, screaming. “My nose!” Blood gushed from Rodney’s nose.

Matt felt murder in his heart. This was the man who had taken away his life, his wife, and his children in the first place. Then, just as he had begun to make some headway with Brandi in his new life, Rodney was hell-bent on coming between them yet again.

Something had to be done to stop him. Matt would have grabbed the writhing man off the ground, but some force seemed to be holding him back.

A woman in jogging gear who must have witnessed the exchange came rushing over. "Mister, I saw it all. I'll call the police on this goon if you need me to. At least let me call the ambulance for you." She knelt down next to Rodney.

"Get the fuck away from me, you stupid bitch!"

The woman gasped at his sharp words. She looked up at Matt, lips pursed. "My mistake. You probably should have hit him harder." She got up. Matt barely acknowledged her before she jogged off. He kept his focus on his adversary.

"You're going to pay for this. You've hit me three times now. There won't be another," Rodney hissed.

"Are you going to have me arrested? Fine. While you're reporting me to the police, you can explain why you were violating the restraining order, and, oh, yeah, why don't you tell them what happened to your partner two years ago."

Rodney's eyes widened as he slowly got to his feet and took a step back. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You think you're so clever with the way you've wormed your way into Brandi's life, but I know what you did." Just remembering that night made the blood pound in his head. He tried to advance on the man, but again, something held him back.

Rodney threw him such a look of hatred that Matt should have been dead. Again. He tried to move, but his limbs were frozen. What was going on?

"*You're threatening me?*" He laughed abruptly. "Who's going to believe someone with your history? By the time I'm through with you, you're going to wish you'd never set eyes on Brandi. She's mine and nothing and no one will stop me from having her."

Matt fought against the unseen barrier holding him, but he was still unable to break free. "You're sick."

Holding his nose, Rodney glared at Matt. "Watch your back, Collins."

Matt watched helplessly as his enemy walked past him. "Chicken shit bastard."

When Rodney was out of eyesight, Matt attempted to move again and still found that he couldn't.

"If I hadn't intervened, you would have killed him."

Paul.

"Do you have any idea how much I want to make that bastard suffer for all he's done to me and my family? Do you know what it's like to look into the eyes of your murderer?"

"No, I don't, but I told you, you aren't allowed to retaliate against him. And you were getting dangerously close to telling him who you were."

“You said I couldn’t tell Brandi who I was, not Rodney.”

“Now you’re getting technical. Fine, but I’m warning you to take it easy. He’s a very dangerous man. Letting him guess who you are has put you in even more jeopardy.”

“I don’t care. I want him to know. I want him to sweat it out and spend sleepless nights thinking about this.”

“And you would endanger Ben, and possibly Brandi and the kids, because you can’t keep your mouth shut?”

“What does Ben have to do with this?”

“You know as well as I do that Rodney isn’t playing with a full deck. He could easily take out his anger on Ben. Do you want to risk that?”

Matt raked his fingers through his hair. He hadn’t thought about that, but he wouldn’t put it past Rodney to harm a child.

“Damn, I’ve made a mess of things. Brandi hates me now. Why did Matthew Collins have to be such a bastard? His past has ruined my chances with Brandi and I can’t really say I blame her. I wouldn’t want to be with someone who had done half the things he did.”

“Give her a little time. I’m sure when she has time to think more clearly, she’ll realize that you’ve changed.”

“How in the world did Rodney find out?”

“Most of it from public record and asking former employees at the car dealership. He’s also gotten friendly with Karen.”

A chill went down Matt’s spine. “Karen? She told him all this? Has he had contact with Ben? Why didn’t you tell me?” He paced in an angry circle. “As a matter of fact, where the hell have you been? I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

“Are you okay, sir?” A little old lady walking her dog stopped to stare at him as though he had two heads.

Matt realized it probably appeared as though he were talking to himself. He heard Paul’s soft chuckle. If his friend weren’t already a spirit, he would have choked him.

“I’m fine, ma’am. Thanks for asking.”

Her little terrier barked in Paul’s direction. “Rex, behave yourself. I don’t know what’s gotten into him. Well, if you keep talking to yourself, young man, people will start to wonder. Come, Rex!” She pulled the little dog along with her as it continued barking.

“Paul, if you were flesh, I’d strangle you.”

“But I’m not.” Paul smiled.

“Some guardian angel you’ve turned out to be,” Matt muttered.

“Would you rather go this alone?”

“I’ve been alone for the past few weeks. What would be the difference?” He sighed. “Tell me how Rodney has wormed his way into Karen’s life.”

“Take it easy. He was using her for information, nothing more. Now that she’s no longer useful to him, you needn’t worry, and, no, he never came into contact with Ben.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I had a few other things to take care of.”

“I thought you were supposed to be helping me.”

“I have been helping you.”

“How?”

“Rodney has been keeping tabs on Tina Reed since the night of your murder. The poor child has hardly said a word since that night.”

Matt had an awful suspicion that something had happened. “Dammit, what did he do?”

Paul shook his head, almost as if he couldn’t believe what had happened.

“Rodney went to see the Thorntons because they told him that she was getting better. He was afraid Tina might have said something to them. They were all sleeping when he broke in and torched their house.”

“Shit!”

“The Thorntons got out, but their house didn’t make it. Rodney had doused the house with gasoline so the house lit up like a match. They tried to get to Tina, but the fire was already out of control.”

“That monster! He got Tina?”

“That was the plan, but Tina didn’t die.”

“What? How is that possible?”

“The kid was trapped, and I, uh, guided her out of the house.”

Matt closed his eyes in relief. “So she’s okay then,” he said hopefully before he caught the look in his friend’s eyes.

“Unfortunately, the only escape route was through the window; although I cushioned her fall, she fractured a couple of bones, but it could have been a lot worse. Right now, she’s in a light coma.”

“But if you hadn’t helped her, she could have died.”

“I know. Peter wasn’t happy about my meddling, but I couldn’t let her die. It wasn’t her time, and she’s the only one other than you who knows what happened that night.”

“Paul, what can I say? Did you get in trouble? How could all this have happened?”

“I got a talking-to, but you know Peter is a big old softie when he wants to be. Besides, JC has taken a special interest in this case. He’s rooting for you.”

“JC? Are you kidding me? He’s never involved himself in Watcher business before.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t normally, but then, we’ve never let a Watcher come back to earth in the flesh before, either. There’s been concern that since you were able to come back, some of the others might want to do the same.”

“Have we started something?”

“Amanda Collins is also involved, so it’s bigger than you and me now. Anyway, perhaps you should think about visiting Tina in the hospital soon.”

“What’s going to happen to her? She’s been through so much.”

“Right now she’s at Children’s Hospital. The Thorntons are no longer able to take care of her, and she has no relatives to claim her.”

“So she’ll be just another victim of the system.”

“Unfortunately. Most people who are looking to adopt want babies or very young children. Tina is not only seven; she’s also not socially developed for a kid her age. Now that this has happened, it’s another strike against her.”

“How could anyone do this to a child? Something has got to be done.”

“Actually, at the moment I’m more worried about you. I think you ought to be more careful.”

“I can take care of myself, but do you think he’ll do anything to hurt Ben or Karen?”

“I don’t think so. He hasn’t seen Karen since he got the information he wanted from her.”

“What about Ben?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll watch out for him and keep you informed.”

“And Brandi and the kids?”

“I’m only one spirit. I can’t be in two places at once.”

“Damn. We’ve got to stop him. He’s too dangerous.”

Paul was silent for a moment before he spoke again. “I have an idea.”

* * * * *

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

Brandi was chopping vegetables for a stew. She turned to look at her daughter and gave her the brightest smile she could muster. She was still reeling from last weekend.

“Nothing’s wrong, sweetie. Do you want to help with dinner?”

“Sure.” Mya shrugged.

Brandi handed her a bowl of peeled potatoes. “Here, rinse these off for me and make sure they’re clean, then you can take out the table settings.”

Mya took the bowl from her. “Mom, I know something is wrong because you didn’t say anything when DJ called me bubble butt.”

“Did he? Well, I’ll talk to him about it later. I guess my mind has been on other things.”

“Is it your boyfriend?”

Brandi nearly dropped the knife. “What are you talking about? I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Well, ever since Uncle Rodney stopped coming around, you drop us off at Grandma’s and Aunt Lisa’s a lot, and when you pick us up you’re always whistling. Missy says it’s because you’ve got a boyfriend.”

Brandi gave her daughter a stunned look. When did the kids become so damned perceptive?

“I think your friend Missy talks too much, and you really shouldn’t be spreading my business out there like that.”

“She’s my best friend. We tell each other everything.”

“Even so, I will thank you to not share pieces of my life with your friend, okay?”

“Okay.” Mya was silent for a moment, then asked, “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Do you have a boyfriend? Because if you do, I just wanted to say I’m okay with it.” Mya shot her a conspiratorial grin.

“There’s nothing to be okay about because there is no boyfriend.”

Mya’s smile widened. “Okay. I understand if you don’t want to tell me.”

“I said there was no boyfriend, so how about dropping the subject?” Brandi snapped.

Mya’s face fell, and she turned back to the sink. “Okay.”

Brandi closed her eyes in exasperation. Why was she taking out her anger on her child? When Rodney had dropped the bombshell about Matthew’s past, she hadn’t believed him. There was an innate goodness inside of Matt that she felt each time she was with him, but when he had not denied the terrible accusations, she had had to walk away.

After losing Derrick, she hadn’t thought that she could love another man that way again, but then Matt had come into her life. It had almost seemed too good to be true. And so it had turned out to be. Brandi didn’t know if she was mad at him for all the things Rodney claimed or mad at herself because she hadn’t heard him out as he had asked.

What was really eating her up was that a week had passed and he hadn’t tried to contact her. Maybe now that she knew exactly what kind of person he was, he had moved on to the next fool. Still, a voice in the back of her head told her that there was more that needed to be said. What if he did have a good explanation for those things? Yet, even if he did, it still remained very damning.

Why did her foolish heart keep telling her to go to him? She just couldn’t allow that kind of man in her life, and especially her children’s lives.

“Mya, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

"It's okay," the little girl mumbled, but she didn't turn around.

Brandi walked over to her daughter. "Sweetie, look at me."

Mya did so with obvious reluctance. Her lips were poked out mutinously.

"You know I love you and your brother, don't you?" She affectionately tugged one of Mya's long braids.

"I guess so."

"There's no guessing about it, young lady. The two of you are my world."

"Mom, I just want you to be happy. You were smiling again, like you did with Daddy."

It still amazed her how discerning her children could be. Maybe her daughter was mature enough to be told the truth. "There was a boyfriend, but not anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't think he was a good man."

"Is that why you aren't with Uncle Rodney? DJ knew something was wrong, but I ... I liked him because he gave me toys. I know now that he wasn't so great. His messages were scary."

Brandi had tried to shield her kids, but ... "You heard those?"

Mya nodded.

"Oh, sweetie, don't think about them, okay? Rodney won't be bothering us again."

After the confrontation in the park, she had phoned the police to report that he had violated his restraining order. She wished she hadn't taken so long to realize just how off Rodney was. She found it disturbing that she had allowed him so deeply into their lives.

"Okay, but what about your other boyfriend?"

"What about him? It's over."

"But you were so happy."

Brandi sighed. She *had* been happy. Dammit, why did he have to turn out to be so damned rotten? "I told you, he wasn't a good man."

"Why? What was wrong with him?"

"He did some bad things."

"Oh. Did he say he was sorry?"

"I don't think sorry will fix what he's done."

"Why not? You said if you do something bad, you should say you're sorry to make things better."

"It's more complicated than that."

Mya obviously didn't understand. She gave Brandi a long and inquisitive look. "It doesn't have to be. I think you should make him say he's sorry and then you can be happy again."

“It wasn’t something he did to me.”

“Oh. Well, did he say sorry to the people he did the bad things to?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask him.”

“Why not?”

“You know, you’re asking a lot of questions.”

“You said I should ask questions if I don’t understand something.” Kids always had a way of throwing whatever you said to them back in your face. Brandi silently prayed for the Lord to give her patience.

“I didn’t like what I found out about him.”

Mya was silent for a moment. “I think you should say you’re sorry to him.”

Brandi looked at her daughter in disbelief. She couldn’t believe she was having this conversation with her eight-year-old daughter.

“Why should I apologize?”

“Well, it doesn’t sound fair that you didn’t ask him to explain. I would be sad if I was him.” Mya turned back to the sink to finish washing the potatoes.

Out of the mouths of babes. Had she been wrong to not listen to what Matt had had to say?

Chapter Sixteen

Matt held Ben's hand as they walked down the corridor of the retirement home.

"Do you think Nana will remember me? I haven't seen her in an awful long time."

"Of course she'll remember you. I think you're just the person to cheer her up. She's been a little sad lately."

"Why?"

Because her son was a cold bastard.

"I think she's feeling lonely." Matt knocked on his mother's apartment door. A middle-aged nurse with a friendly smile opened it.

"Mr. Collins, how good to see you. And this handsome young man just has to be your son. He looks just like you! I'm sure Mrs. Collins will be thrilled with another visitor."

"Yes, this is my son Ben, Rita. How is Mom today?" Matt asked as they entered the apartment.

"She's about the same as always. She'll watch a little television in the morning, then go for a walk. She's starting to socialize with the other residents a little more, which is a positive sign, but you still get the feeling that ..."

"That she's not completely involved?" Matt asked.

"Well, yes, but she has improved. Why don't you both go into the sitting room and I'll tell her that she has company. I know she'll be happy to see her grandson." Rita walked off.

Matt and Ben took a seat on the sofa and waited patiently for his mother to come out of her room. Even after several months, Matt had not made any headway with Brie Collins. She looked at him with cold eyes, not saying a word. No matter what he said to her, his words were always met with a stony silence.

After dropping Ben off after another weekend together, it had occurred to him that if she didn't respond to him, maybe she would respond to Ben.

Brie walked out of her room with a wary expression on her face. Her iron gray hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and she wore a black velour jogging suit.

Matt stood up and walked over to her, kissing her cheek in his usual greeting. She remained still. It was like kissing a marble statue. Brie didn't respond to his greeting, but walked over to Ben and sat down next to him.

He watched as his mother took Ben's face in her hands and gave him a long stare as if she were searching for something. "Oh, Benny, it's really you. I've missed you so much." She kissed Ben and pulled the little boy into her arms. "You have gotten so big. You will be strong and handsome ... like your father." She sounded as though that was what she least hoped for.

Matt could sense her uneasiness with him there. He had hoped that by his bringing, Ben she would thaw a little, but she barely glanced at him, so he took a seat in the corner and watched as his mother threw a barrage of questions at Ben, who seemed to be enjoying his grandmother's attentions.

As they chatted away, Matt again thought over the events of the past few weeks. His redemption project seemed to be moving forward fine except where his mother and Karen were concerned. In fact, he had finally been able to speak to his former housekeeper without her hanging up on him. He'd learned at last why she had left his employ and really couldn't blame her.

Apparently Luisa's former babysitter had quit on her, and she'd had nowhere affordable to take her four-year-old. Of course her employer had given her a hard time about bringing her child into his home and had turned a deaf ear to her pleas.

She had agreed to return, after some cajoling on his part and the promise of a raise for her to take her child to a proper daycare center, but not before he had apologized.

Karen was another matter. Matthew had really hurt her, and she wasn't willing to forgive and forget so easily. When he'd reproached her for making disparaging comments about him in front of Ben, it had only served to make her angrier.

"Who the fuck are you to tell me what I should and shouldn't say to my son?" she had demanded.

"I'm his father."

"Ha! It's taken you eight years to figure that out. I've had to be both mother and father to him for as long as he's been alive, so you have no right to dictate to me how I should be raising him."

"My mistakes, although inexcusable, don't give you the right to say things in front of Ben that shouldn't be said."

"Oh? And parading your bimbos in front of him was appropriate?"

“No, it wasn’t.”

She’d been taken aback when he had readily agreed to her accusations, but it didn’t seem to lessen her anger. “Then you’re a fine one to talk. You’re damn right your mistakes were inexcusable, and I will never forget them!” she had hissed at him.

“What can I do to make it up to you? I know I’ve hurt you, Karen, but there’s no need for us to be at each other’s throats. Let’s put Ben first.”

“When I need tips from you on how to be a parent, I’ll let you know. Until then, you can go to hell.”

“You know, I thought you were a good mother, but if you let your hatred toward me overcome your love for Ben, then something is wrong.”

“How dare you!” Karen had gone red with rage.

He had tried to reason with her. “No, how dare *you*. I’ve made mistakes, but now I intend to be there for Ben and you whenever you need me. I want to be the father to him that I wasn’t before. I don’t want to be your enemy, Karen. We both love Ben, so that’s at least one thing we have in common.”

“I resent you for daring to imply I’m not a good mother. I’m a damned good mother. You’ve got some damn nerve to say otherwise.”

She was right. He realized he hadn’t said the right words. “I apologize. You’re right, of course. I think you’ve done a good job with Ben, but I want you to know I’ve changed.”

She had given him a look of skepticism and contempt. “The days when I thought you were a decent human being are over. Spots and leopards, Matthew, if you catch my drift.” With that she had ended the conversation.

Matt didn’t know how he would make things up to Karen and his mother, but neither woman seemed ready to forgive past transgressions so easily. They were justified in their feelings, of course, but what exactly did they want from him? If his problems with Karen and his mother weren’t enough, he was absolutely torn that he hadn’t seen Brandi in over a week. He felt as though his heart had broken all over again.

He wanted to go to her and make her listen to him, but knew the best thing right now was to give her some space. He figured if she had time to think things through, she might be a little more receptive to him later on. To force her to listen to him would only serve to push her further away.

At least Matt knew that she was safe, because Paul had been keeping an eye on her and the kids. He was pleased to learn that Brandi had called the police about Rodney violating the restraining order. As a result, Rodney had spent a night in jail.

He only hoped that the letters he had sent to Rodney were enough to keep him away from Brandi until he could figure out a way to get Tina Reed to talk.

The poor kid. She had come out of her coma, but the one time Matt was able to visit her in the hospital, she had cried hysterically. The nurse had informed him the poor girl was terrified of men and wouldn't even let any of the male doctors near her.

It seemed like it would be a while before she could talk to anyone about what had happened the night of the fire and the night two years before. He wished he could do something for her.

"Dad, are you listening?" Ben demanded.

Matt shook his head, clearing all other thoughts before turning to his son. "What is it, champ?"

"Rita made cookies. Can I have some?"

Matt looked up to see the nurse standing in the room with a tray of cookies.

"Sure. Knock yourself out."

"Cool."

"I'll take the little scamp to the kitchen to get him a glass of milk." Rita held the tray out. "Would you like some, Mr. Collins?"

"No, thanks."

"Mrs. Collins?"

The older woman shook her head.

"Okay. We'll be in the kitchen and you two can have a little chat." Rita smiled at them both before exiting the room with Ben eagerly following.

Once Ben and Rita had left the room, there was complete silence. His mother shot him a quick glance, then turned her head away.

"Mom, you can't keep ignoring me like this."

His mother didn't say anything. She examined her nails.

Matt sighed. He got up and walked over to sit beside her.

"Please look at me," he pleaded. Matt reached over to take her hand in his. How was he ever going to win her forgiveness?

She snatched it away and focused angry eyes on him. "How could you? Your poor father would be rolling in his grave." The raw hurt in her voice and eyes pierced him to the core. He wished that he could take her in his arms to comfort her, but he didn't think she was ready for that.

"Mom, you have no idea how sorry I am for what's been done. I know it doesn't change anything, but you have my heartfelt apologies nonetheless. I'm trying to make amends the best that I can."

"What do you know about having a heart? Do you think by putting me in this fancy place you can make up for what you did? I had an active social life and friends until you put me in that awful place. You made them think I was crazy. The orderlies stole from me, and a

nurse smacked me. I was never treated so shabbily in my life. When I told you and begged you to take me away from that place, you wouldn't." She started to cry.

Matt touched her shoulder, but she flinched away. He felt sad for her and incensed at the man she had given birth to. How could anyone treat their mother like this? Brie Collins had every right to be bitter. The pain she must have endured after her husband's death was tragic, and her son hadn't helped.

Rita rushed out of the kitchen in alarm. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, we just need a moment. If you don't mind keeping Ben occupied in the kitchen for a few more minutes, I would really appreciate it." Matt smiled at her reassuringly.

"Sure." She threw a questioning look at his mother, who nodded in agreement.

Once Rita was gone again, Matt handed her a tissue from the coffee table.

Brie wiped her eyes. "You know, I really only have myself to blame for what you became. I guess I have to live with it, but I don't have to like it." She turned away again.

"Why do you blame yourself?"

"Your father and I gave you everything you wanted; you never had to work for anything. We always turned a blind eye when you got into trouble, paid for your girlfriends' abortions, and bribed teachers to pass you. You never learned to be a responsible adult because we let you get away with everything. We enabled you to become the monster you are."

Matt didn't know what to say. Maybe the Collinses were partially responsible for their son's behavior, but ultimately it was up the individual to shape his or her own destiny.

He suddenly realized that Brie Collins wasn't so much angry at him as she was with herself. "Mom, please don't blame yourself. It's not your fault or Dad's; it's mine. You're right. Putting you in this place doesn't change anything, but I would like to start over with you. I want to be the son you've always wanted, someone you can be proud of."

"You say that now, but how can I open my heart to you again when you've let me down so many times before?" she asked, her eyes pain-filled.

"You'll just have to learn to trust me again. I know it's asking a lot, and I know I've treated you terribly, but I've changed. I want you to be in my life, and I want you to be in Ben's life ... and any other children I may have."

"Is the woman you've mentioned before responsible for this change in you?"

"I do love her very much," he replied softly.

Brie gave him a long, speculative look. He didn't know what she was thinking, but once her examination was complete, she seemed satisfied at what she had found. "Your eyes are different. The meanness is gone."

He wasn't sure whether to thank her or not.

"Who is this woman?"

“Her name is Brandi. She’s a widow with a set of twins, a boy and a girl. Our sons are best friends, and she’s beautiful inside and out.”

“I hear the love in your voice when you speak of her. She’s a very special woman indeed, if she’s changed you.”

“Let’s just say that she saw the person within.”

“Hmm, I would like to meet her.”

“You’ll like her.”

“I’m sure I will if she has managed to give my son back to me. I ... it will be difficult to get over the past, but you’re my son, and ... and I want to give us another try. Please don’t disappoint me again.” There were tears in her eyes. Matt scooted next to her and gave her the hug that had been a long time coming. As he held his mother in his arms, he hoped that things would work out with him and Brandi as well.

* * * * *

Brandi didn’t know if she was making the right decision or not, but she couldn’t go another day without talking to Matt. She had to know the truth. Her daughter’s words still played through her head. *It doesn’t seem fair that you didn’t ask him to explain. I would be sad if I was him.*

She was taking a chance that he would be home. Her children were at her sister’s, celebrating her niece’s tenth birthday, and although she was supposed to be helping Lisa with the party, she’d had to get away just for a little while to see him. She just couldn’t wait any longer.

Brandi pulled up to his driveway, and, to her relief, Matt’s black Mercedes was there. A jolt of nervousness shot through her, and she nearly turned her car back around, but she stopped herself.

No, I’ve come this far. I might as well see it through.

She got out of her car and walked up to his door, shaking with anxiety. A small Hispanic woman opened the door. She was pretty with big blue eyes and long black hair. She wore a pair of jeans and a tee-shirt, looking quite at home.

Brandi’s heart dropped. Had she been replaced already? She could feel the heat rise to her face and the rage resurface. What a fool she had been to come here! It was no wonder Matt had not tried to contact her, because she obviously hadn’t meant as much to him as he had claimed. Everything had been a pack of lies.

“Can I help you?” The woman’s English was only slightly accented.

“No. That’s okay. I think I made a mistake coming here.” Brandi turned to leave.

“Who is it, Luisa?” Brandi heard Matt’s voice, and she hurriedly walked to her car. She couldn’t face him now, while she was on the verge of tears. She already felt humiliated enough without him seeing her like this.

“Brandi! Wait. Come back!”

Brandi opened her car door, but Matt’s hand covered hers. “Let go, dammit.”

“No. You came to see me. Please don’t go.” He turned her around to face him.

“Why don’t you go back to your girlfriend!” She tried to twist out of his grip.

A look of confusion appeared on his face before understanding seemed to dawn on him. Matt burst out laughing. This was just too much.

She hit his chest. “What’s so damn funny?”

“You thought Luisa was my girlfriend?”

“You couldn’t wait to find someone else to warm your bed, could you?”

“Number one, Luisa is my very happily married housekeeper, and had you stuck around, you would have found that out. Number two, you’re adorable when you’re jealous.” Matt smiled down at her.

Brandi felt like an even bigger fool. “I have a way of jumping to conclusions, don’t I?” She couldn’t look him in the eyes.

“Yes, and the worst one you could have jumped to is that I would stop loving you so easily.”

Chapter Seventeen

“You ... you still love me?” she asked uncertainly.

“Of course I still love you. I could never stop loving you. Come inside. Ben and I were sorting through some baseball cards.”

“Ben is here? I’m sorry, I didn’t realize --”

“Don’t worry about it. Karen dropped him off with me because her mom is ill.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to come in. You know our sons will talk and --”

“So what? They’ll talk. Does it really matter? Come in and stop being silly.” He took her hand and led her into the house. “Hey, Ben, look who’s come to visit.”

The child looked up from his baseball cards. His eyes lit up. “Hi, Miss Brandi. Did you bring DJ?” he asked hopefully.

“No. Just myself. I’m sorry. He’s at his cousin’s birthday party today.”

“Oh, well, do you want to help us sort these baseball cards?”

“Champ, Miss Brandi and I need to talk. How about you work on those cards, and I’ll be back out to help you, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Come on, Brandi, let’s go to the sitting room. Would you like something to drink?”

She shook her head. Seeing him so at ease with his son, she wondered how it was possible that Matt was all the revolting things she had thought he was. She took the seat he offered. He sat across from her.

An awkward silence filled the room. Not knowing exactly where to begin, she looked down into her lap. Matt was the first to speak.

“Brandi, I’m so glad you came. This past week without you has been hell.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I want to start by saying that I’m sorry you had to find out those

things about me the way you did. I should have been upfront with you about my past. I suppose I kept it from you because I was scared of losing you.”

Her eyes widened. Was he sitting there admitting what he had done? Had she wasted a trip?

“I can see your doubts, but please hear me out.”

“That’s what I came for.”

“Thanks.” He drew in a deep breath. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my past, and some of those mistakes were inexcusable. I won’t sit here and try to justify all that I’ve done because I can’t. I don’t like the man I used to be. How I even looked myself in the mirror is still a mystery, but I will say that I’ve changed. I’ve tried to make amends with the people I’ve hurt. My mother and I are working on rebuilding our relationship. I want to be a better father to Ben, and I only want one woman in my life. I was definitely no saint and I don’t think I ever will be, but I’m a different man now.”

She raised an eyebrow. More than anything, she wanted to believe him, wrap her arms around him and forget the past week’s torment without him ... But could she believe him?

She wanted to forget the lonely nights when she woke up with her body drenched in sweat, longing for him, wanting and needing him. Brandi had known then that she hadn’t stopped loving him, either. It was obvious from her observations of Ben that the little boy worshiped his father and vice versa.

Brandi also had to consider her source. Rodney was a man scorned. She wouldn’t put it past him to have embellished a few things, “Matt ... I’m sorry for not listening to you. I was just so upset with Rodney and when you didn’t deny his words, I felt like an idiot. I can’t say that I’m not uneasy about your past and that it doesn’t give me pause, but a wise person told me that I might have been too hasty in judging you.”

Matt smiled. He stood and held his hand out to her. Brandi took it and let him pull her into his arms. She felt as if she had come home.

“Who was this wise person? I have to thank them.” He caressed her hair.

“Believe it or not, it was my daughter.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“That’s one smart kid. Remind me to send her flowers.”

Brandi smiled up at him. “She would be thrilled.”

“So, where do we go from here?”

She could see the worry in his eyes and she laid her hand on his face. “I would like to try again, but I want you to know that if I think you’re lying to me or if you withhold information from me again, there won’t be any more chances.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

“What for?”

“For loving me and giving me another chance,” he replied before lowering his head to hers. It was as though no one else in the world existed except her and this man.

Brandi’s lips parted under the insistent probing of his tongue. She returned his kiss enthusiastically. He tasted so good. She’d missed his warm mouth over hers. Her breasts were crushed against the hard wall of his chest, and she could feel a stirring between her legs. She wanted him; oh, how she wanted him.

Matt’s tongue circled hers, sampling, teasing, worshiping. His cock pressed against her. Brandi felt a burst of lust course through her body. Matt’s hands slid up her ribcage to cup one taut breast in his palm. Brandi thought she would cream herself right then and there. She had missed his intimate touch, and she needed this right now, more than she needed air to breathe.

His palm rubbed the aching mound, sending shivers of delight up and down her spine. Brandi’s hands roamed down his back to cup his ass in her palms. She loved the way his hard body felt beneath her hands.

Matt lifted his head to look at her, making her whimper at the sudden withdrawal of his lips. He looked hungrily at her, like he couldn’t get enough of the sight of her.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed this,” he whispered.

“I think I do because I’ve missed it, too. Please kiss me some more.” She pulled his head back hers. Brandi took charge of the kiss, exploring his warm and moist mouth, reveling in the taste of him. The scent of his cologne filled her nostrils, making her head spin with desire. She wanted him so badly.

Brandi pulled back slightly to flick his lips with her tongue. “Mmm, you taste just as yummy as I remember.” She smiled at him before pressing her lips against the pulse on his neck. His hand was still on her breast, squeezing and kneading it. Brandi could feel the dampness in her panties; her pussy ached and contracted with need for his cock.

“Dad, I have a quest--”

Brandi and Matt pulled apart in horror. Brandi wanted the ground to swallow her up when she spied the open-mouthed astonishment on Ben’s face.

“Uh, Ben, what is it, champ?” Matt tried to sound natural but failed miserably. His face was beet red.

“Umm, never mind.” Ben left the room in a hurry.

Matt turned to her with an apologetic look on his face. “Damn, I’m really sorry about that. I guess I got carried away.”

Brandi was mortified. “I did, too. It was just as much my fault. What will you tell him?”

Matt sighed. “The truth. I’m going to tell him that we love each other, and he will have to learn to deal with it.”

“But what if he doesn’t accept it?”

“Ben likes you. Don’t worry about it.”

“I guess this means I should tell my kids, too; otherwise they’ll find out at school tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry that it had to come out like this, but we have nothing to be ashamed of. Let’s go and have a talk with my son.”

“No. I don’t think it would be appropriate for me to be here when you talk to him. Besides, I really should be getting back to my sister’s house. I told her I would help out with my niece’s party. Lisa is already mad at me for bailing on her, but I had to see you.”

Matt ran his thumb across her bottom lip, causing her to shiver. “I’m glad you did. When can I see you again?” he asked eagerly.

“On the weekend ... if you have Ben, the five of us can do something.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I think the kids would enjoy it. Call me and we’ll make plans.”

“I will.” He gave her a long, lingering kiss before leading her to the living room where Ben sat sorting through his baseball cards as though he hadn’t witnessed her and his father in a passionate embrace.

“It was nice seeing you again,” Brandi said to the little boy.

“Yeah, okay.” He sounded less than enthusiastic, and his attitude took her by surprise. What was wrong? He had seemed so friendly when she’d arrived.

Brandi looked to Matt, who shrugged. He seemed just as confused as she was.

“I’ll talk to you this week,” she said before leaving them.

Matt saw her to the door, but she insisted that he stay with Ben. As she drove to her sister’s, she wondered if she was doing the right thing.

* * * * *

Matt had sensed something was wrong the minute he and Brandi had walked back into the living room. After seeing Brandi off, Matt wanted to know what was bothering his son.

“Ben, are you okay?” He sat down next to the boy.

“Yeah.”

“What did you want to ask me?”

“Nothing. It wasn’t important,” Ben muttered.

“If it was important to you, it’s important to me. Tell me what’s on your mind, kiddo.”

“I was going to ask how valuable you think this card is.” Ben handed it to him.

Matt examined it. “Hmm, I don’t think it’s very valuable. This guy only played one season in the majors before getting sent to the minors. This card is probably more valuable to

the player and his mother than it is to you.” Matt attempted to joke, but Ben didn’t crack a smile.

“That’s not all that’s on your mind. Tell me.”

Ben’s lips pursed to a thin line, and he shook his head.

“Come on. You know you can tell me anything.”

The little boy’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t speak. Ben turned back to his baseball cards. Matt closed his eyes with disappointment. Ben obviously wasn’t happy about what he had witnessed in the sitting room.

“Ben, about what you saw earlier --”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” Ben snapped.

Matt looked at the child in astonishment. Ben was usually laidback and accepting, but his attitude now was baffling.

“Well, we’re going to talk about it. Look, I just want you to know that no matter what, you come first in my life.”

Ben looked disbelieving.

“It’s the truth, son.”

“You better not hurt Miss Brandi. She’s my best friend’s mom.”

Matt was taken aback. “Ben, why would you think I would hurt her?”

“Because you do it to all your girlfriends. Mom says so. If you hurt Miss Brandi, then DJ will stop being my friend. I don’t ever want to see you again if that happens. I love you, Dad, but I don’t want to lose my friend.”

Matt tried to push back the wave of anger he felt toward Karen. She had to stop poisoning Ben’s mind this way.

“Now you’re mad at me, aren’t you?” Ben asked.

“No. I’m not mad, just a little disappointed that you would think that I would hurt Miss Brandi. I care about her very much. Sometimes, your mother says things about me that may have been true in the past, but they aren’t anymore.”

“Are you mad at Mom?”

“I’m not mad at anyone. I just want you to know that no matter what is said, I love you, and I would never do anything to hurt Miss Brandi. She’s very important to me.”

“More important than me?”

“No one is more important than you, but you know, champ, a person can love more than one person at a time.”

“I know. I love you and Mom. What if you and Miss Brandi stop liking each other; does that mean I would have to stop liking DJ?”

“No, I’m sure that won’t be the case.”

“Really?”

“Let’s not worry about the what-ifs, Ben.” He ruffled the boy’s hair with affection. “I take it that you don’t mind Miss Brandi and me dating as long as I don’t hurt her?”

Ben paused to think. “Well, I hope you two get married, and then me and DJ could be brothers.” Ben gave him a big grin.

That’s what Matt was counting on, but he knew it wasn’t a good idea to get Ben’s hopes up just yet. “What do you think of Miss Brandi? Forget about DJ for a moment.”

“Well, she’s nice and pretty. I like her.” Ben seemed to have given the matter a lot of thought. “Maybe she is what you need.”

“Oh?” Matt lifted a brow.

“Yeah. I worry about you all alone in this house. You need a woman to take care of you. If you had a woman, she’d cook for you and rub your feet and all that other junk.”

Matt laughed. “If only things were that simple.”

“Of course they are. I saw it on TV.”

“I see. Well, I’m glad I have your seal of approval. Your mom won’t be here for a few hours, so how about we go get some ice cream?”

“Sure!”

“Okay, get your jacket, and we’ll go.”

Matt was relieved that Ben was willing to accept Brandi, but it bothered him that Karen was still sounding off against him. He didn’t know what it would take to stop it, but he had to figure out something because it was affecting Ben.

The trip to the local Dairy Queen was uneventful, but on the way back, as the car coasted down a hill, Matt tapped on the brakes only to discover that they weren’t working.

He didn’t want to worry Ben, so he tried to stay calm as he continued to tap the brakes without result. His anxiety increased. As he rolled through a stop sign and saw another car coming straight at him, it finally dawned on him that someone had tampered with the brakes.

Chapter Eighteen

Rodney watched in satisfaction as the large SUV plowed into the side of the black Mercedes, causing the smaller car to flip over on its hood. The accident was made even sweeter by the fact that Collins's brat was with him.

Good. I hope they both die.

If this accident didn't take care of the bastard, he would just have to keep trying. The thought brought a smile to his face. Rodney had known something had to be done when he had received letters about the night of Derrick's shooting. They had intimated that if he didn't stay away from Brandi, then the secret would come out.

Collins had already hinted that he knew about it, and the only other person who knew was Tina, and she couldn't possibly have sent the letters. As though to drive the point home, the letters had been in Derrick's handwriting, signed with his name. How the hell had he find out, and how had he gotten hold of Derrick's writing? Who the fuck was he to tell him to stay away from his woman? No one kept him from what was his.

There was something about Collins that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Something about the man niggled at him. Well, it didn't matter now, because with Collins out of the way, at least temporarily, he could concentrate on what needed to be done about Brandi.

She had called the police on him, and he had spent one humiliating night in the tank, like a common criminal. People he had worked with were unable to look him in the eyes. Him! Once she realized that she belonged to him, he'd have to teach her a lesson.

It would hurt her as much as it hurt him.

Rodney watched while a crowd gathered around the big wreck, and smiled. He hoped the bastard suffered. He popped in a CD of the Police's greatest hits, started his engine, and headed off to find Brandi. "Yes!" he exclaimed in glee as the lyrics played.

Every breath you take, every move you make, every bond you break ... I'll be watching you.

* * * * *

“Why the hell do you look so damn happy, and where did you go?” Lisa demanded as they stuffed the birthday goodie bags. “You’ve had that big, cheesy grin on your face since you came back.”

Brandi smiled at her sister. “Can’t a girl just be happy for no reason?”

“No. You look like you just got laid or something.”

“Be quiet. One of the kids might hear you.”

“They’re all in the yard. Now tell me where you’ve been.”

Brandi rolled her eyes. Why did her sister always think she had a right to know everything? “If you must know, I had to go see a friend.”

Lisa’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “A friend, huh? A certain man, I suppose?”

“And if it was? What’s it to you?”

“What’s it to me? Nothing, as long as you’re happy. Are you happy?”

Brandi couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Deliriously so. Oh, Lisa, I know it’s only been a little over two months, but when I’m with him, I feel like I’ve known him forever.”

“Hmm, would this new man happen to be that hunky Matt Collins you were trying so hard to avoid a few months back?”

Brandi could feel her face grow hot with embarrassment. “And if he is?”

“Ha! I knew it! He’s hot and loaded, lucky you. So have you two bumped uglies yet?”

“Lisa! That’s none of your damn business!”

“I know. Did you?”

“You’re impossible. Why should I tell you?”

“You did, didn’t you?” Lisa must have seen something in her face because she exclaimed, “Oh, my God! Was it good? Is he hung? I’ve never been with a white boy before. What’s it like?”

Brandi was torn between strangling her sister and laughing hysterically, but she knew there was no getting around the barrage of questions unless she told her persistent sister something. “Let’s just say I had no complaints.”

“I knew it! My little sister has jungle fever!” Lisa chortled.

“Yuck. I hate that expression. We’re just two people.”

“Two people of different races.”

“So what?”

“So what, indeed. Hey, I’m not knocking it. As long as he treats you well, you have my support. I just wonder what Dad will say.”

“What can he say? I’m thirty-four, and I don’t need my parents’ approval for who I love.”

“So you love him, do you?” Lisa was like a dog with a bone.

“Maybe I do.”

“You know I only want you to be happy, right?”

“I know, but do you have to be so damn nosy?”

“That’s what big sisters are for. There was something else I wanted to ask.”

“What?”

“Has Rodney been bothering you lately?”

Brandi frowned. She didn’t want to be reminded of him. She still couldn’t believe how crazy he had turned out, and it seriously made her wonder how he had fooled her and Derrick for so long. It also made her wonder about the night she had gotten engaged. Was it possible that she hadn’t accepted his proposal? She certainly couldn’t remember having done so. Until recently, Brandi hadn’t given it much thought because she never would have suspected that Rodney might have lied. Just thinking about him now sent a chill down her spine.

“No. I haven’t seen him since the day in the park.”

“You never did tell me exactly what happened.”

“I’d rather not get into it. I’m just glad to have him out of my life.”

“I’m glad, too. I had this nagging feeling about him, but I didn’t realize that he was nuts.”

“I know,” Brandi agreed uneasily. So many things that didn’t quite add up plagued her, but hopefully with the restraining order against him, he would leave her and the children alone.

Lisa stood up. “Well, I guess I should get the cake out. I hear the little savages getting restless.” She walked over to the counter where the cake sat. “Damn!”

“What?” Brandi asked.

“I forgot to buy the candles. I’ll have to get Ed to run to the store.”

“I’ll go. The 7-11 is just a few blocks down. I can be there and back in fifteen minutes. Can you hold the kids off for that long?”

“Of course I can. You sure you don’t mind?”

“Not a problem. I could use the exercise, and it’s such a nice day.”

“Thanks, hon, you’re an angel.” Lisa gave her a brief hug.

Brandi looked out the kitchen window to see her children happily playing with the rest of the partygoers. Satisfied that they were okay, she grabbed her purse and walked out the door.

She hummed to herself, excited that things felt right in her life again. She was so madly in love with Matt, and Rodney was out of her life. There was no more guilt, no more uncertainty, and she felt free for the first time in over two long years.

The convenience store was just ahead when a hand holding a rag covered her face. An arm wrapped around her waist, nearly squeezing the breath from her. She tried to scream, but the rag muffled her voice. With all her strength, she struggled against her assailant, kicking and clawing.

The awful smell of the rag overwhelmed her senses and she could feel herself blacking out. As she drifted into unconsciousness, a voice whispered, "I told you that you were mine."

* * * * *

Matt's head ached like a son of a bitch. When the car had flipped over, his head had slammed against the steering wheel before the airbags were deployed. When he had come to, the doctors had told him he had a mild concussion and a fractured collarbone.

Matt's first concern, however, had been Ben. To his great relief, Ben was okay except for a few minor scratches on his face from the broken safety glass. His son was a bit shaken up, Matt had been told, but nothing major to worry about. Ben had briefly visited his room to make sure he was okay.

The cops had just left after taking his statement. Where the hell were they when that psycho had tampered with his brakes?

The doctors were running tests on him when Karen burst into his hospital room. She looked pissed. "You sorry motherfucker! You could have killed my son!" She was beyond enraged.

He winced, her loud voice aggravating his headache. "Could you please not yell? I hear you loud and clear. I'm sure the entire hospital hears you."

"I'll yell if I want to. What the hell were you thinking when you ran that stop sign? Did you think you were too good to stop or that you're too important to obey the traffic laws?"

"Karen, calm down."

"No, I will not calm down. You have been a complete and utter bastard, but I didn't think that even you would endanger my son's life. I want you to stay the hell away from him. You've hurt Ben for the last time."

For her to stand there and accuse him of deliberately hurting Ben was too much. He sat up, ignoring the pain from his fractured collar. "Has it occurred to you that maybe, just maybe, it was an accident?"

“I wouldn’t put anything past you. Well, now you’re going to pay. I’m going to sue your sorry ass for endangering my son, and I’m going to press charges against you with the police.”

“On what basis?” he asked incredulously.

“Child abuse. Had you not been driving like a jackass, you wouldn’t have gotten into an accident. If you want to drive like that, you shouldn’t have had Ben in the car with you! You can just die for all I care”

“This has all been about you, hasn’t it? Otherwise, you wouldn’t be in here upbraiding me for some imaginary sin against him.”

“Imaginary! My son has just been in a major car accident, thanks to you, and you have the nerve to tell me it’s imaginary?”

“I’m not saying that the accident was imaginary. I’m saying that it wasn’t intentional. You’ve been waiting for me to mess up, haven’t you? You wanted something to happen so you could justify your irrational anger.”

“Oh, isn’t it just like a man to call a woman irrational when he knows she’s right. Let me tell you something, I will never let you see Ben again. I’m sure that given your track record as a deadbeat dad and all-around louse, no court would disagree.”

“And if I fight you?”

“No court will grant you any type of visitation after this. I hate you, and it’s time for you to suffer for what you have put me and Ben through.”

Matt lay against his pillow. His head hurt so badly that he could barely think straight. “Okay. You’ve said your piece. Now you can leave.”

Matt realized that no amount of arguing or pleading his case would make her see reason. If it took going to the courts to get visitation rights to see Ben, then that was what he would do. He opened one eye to see her still standing over him. She looked surprised.

“What? You don’t have anything else to say? You don’t care about not seeing Ben again?”

“I care very much about seeing my son again, and for whatever it’s worth, it was an accident.” He leaned his head back against the pillow and closed his eyes again.

“Just what I thought. You were looking for an out, weren’t you? This is exactly what you wanted me to say, wasn’t it? Now you can walk away neatly and cleanly and put the blame on me. I won’t let you do that!”

Matt sighed. Why wouldn’t she just go away? He turned his head to look at her. “You can’t have it both ways. You either want me in his life or you don’t. You’re making this more complicated than it has to be.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m some errant child. I’m going to make sure Ben knows just what kind of bastard you are.”

“Are you finished?”

“Not by a long shot!” she snapped.

“Then hurry up and say whatever else you need to get off your chest and go. I’ve asked you once already.”

“You think you’re so clever, worming your way back into Ben’s affections as though it will make up for all your years of neglect.”

“So you’re willing to hurt Ben? I am begging you to think clearly about this. If you do this, he will get hurt in the process.”

“He’s already been hurt by you; this will be just more of the same. He needs to know what kind of person you are so he won’t be hurt by you anymore.”

Matt shook his head at her vehemence. He knew he shouldn’t take it personally, because of what Matthew had done to her. He had hurt her so badly, she couldn’t stand the very sight of him, and he wondered if he would have shown as much restraint as she had, had the situations been reversed. He still couldn’t believe Matthew Collins would get off with just purgatory instead of the hell he deserved. As a cop, he’d seen many kinds of evil, but nothing quite like this.

He was sure Karen was a good woman. She just happened to hate his guts. Ben seemed to love her, and that was what was important.

“Apparently, there’s nothing I can say or do that will make you forgive me. I’m sure I could apologize until my last breath, but you won’t accept my apologies, will you?”

“You’re damn right I won’t!”

“Nonetheless, I *am* sorry, whether you want to hear it or not, whether you believe me or not. Before you go, though, I *will* be picking up Ben on my designated weekends. Not only that, I will be applying for joint custody of him. He’s going to need a positive male role model in his life, and there’s no better role model than a child’s father.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I’m not letting you see my son, and I’ll be damned if you get custody of him in any way, shape, or form.” She advanced on him, then stopped short.

“I guess we’ll have to let the courts decide.”

“And I suppose with all your money, you will make sure to paint my reputation black. Nearly destroying me during our marriage wasn’t enough for you, was it? Now you want to take my child away from me?”

“My intention is not to take Ben away from you. My goal is to be a bigger presence in his life. You can carry on your grudge against me if you’d like, but where our son is concerned, it has to stop. Ben deserves the love and support of both his parents. I’m not going to talk about this anymore.”

Karen went red to the very roots of her blonde hair, and she looked as though she was about to explode. “I would leave the country before you got your hands on him.”

Matt's temper finally snapped. "You selfish bitch! I'm beginning to think you're not a competent parent, after all. If I even think you'll try to keep me from him by pulling a stunt like that, I will slap you with a petition for full custody so fast your head will spin. You might have thought I was a bastard in the past, but you haven't seen anything yet if you keep this shit up! Now get the hell out of my room!" He made a move to get out of the bed, ignoring the pain.

Karen's eyes widened before she quickly left. Matt fell back against the pillow, and his anger subsided. He wanted to have a good relationship with Karen for Ben's sake, but he now knew that it wasn't possible. Her hatred of him was too deep.

He wondered if this meant he would fail his redemption project. The thought made him panic. He couldn't go back when he had come so far and finally won Brandi's love again.

He called out. "Paul."

Nothing.

Where the hell was Paul when he needed him?

Matt had known that Rodney would make his move eventually, but he hadn't thought of something like this, especially with Ben in the car with him. The bastard had to be taken care of. It was obvious that Rodney didn't care who he hurt.

Matt shuddered to think of what would have happened had Brandi or the kids been in the car, too.

Brandi.

He had to get to her and the children.

Chapter Nineteen

Brandi woke up in a dimly lit room. She lay in the middle of an old mattress on the floor, surrounded by candles. Her shoulders were sore and her head felt foggy. When she tried to move her arms, she couldn't. Her hands were restrained behind her back, and her ankles were tightly bound together. The last thing she remembered was struggling with someone, and then that awful smell. She'd been kidnapped, and she had a pretty good idea who the culprit was.

Brandi screamed at the top of her lungs. "Help me! Someone please help!"

No response.

"Someone help!" she yelled again.

Still no one came.

Her heart was racing, and questions flew through her mind. Where was she? How long had she been out? Was anyone looking for her? What about her children? Were they okay?

Brandi wanted to give in to tears but knew they were a luxury she couldn't afford right now. She had to focus on getting out of here before her captor returned. She didn't know if he planned on maiming, killing, or raping her, or all three, but she definitely didn't want to stick around and find out.

First she had to try and get her hands in front of her. Brandi wiggled her arms behind her back, trying to pull them past her bottom. She strained and stretched until she was sweating and her shoulders ached even more, but she finally managed to get her hands under her butt.

She took a deep breath and worked to get her legs through her arms, bending, twisting, and contorting in ways she hadn't thought she was capable of. She almost felt as though someone was giving her the extra push she needed. When her feet slipped through the cuffs

and her arms were in front of her at last, Brandi fell back against the mattress, breathing huge sighs of relief.

Being short and petite had finally paid off.

Once she caught her breath, she sat up and attacked the knots in the rope around her ankles. They were tight and she broke nearly all of her nails before she was able to free herself.

Brandi rubbed her swollen ankles as the blood rushed back into them. She wished she had the keys to her cuffs, but at least she was mobile. She rushed to the door.

Standing on the other side was Rodney, a large butcher knife in his hand.

She let out a loud blood-curdling scream.

* * * * *

Ignoring his pain, Matt slid past the doctors and out the hospital door. He had had to sneak into the doctors' locker room and steal a set of scrub tops because his shirt had been cut from his body when he had been brought into the hospital. He was glad that his jeans and shoes were intact.

Matt dug into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. After assuring himself that he had enough money for a cab, he replaced it. His heart beat a rapid tattoo against his chest as tension gripped him. He knew something had happened to Brandi.

"She's not at her house. He's taken her." Paul appeared next to him.

Matt whirled around angrily. The sudden movement caused him excruciating pain, but he stopped himself from grunting aloud.

"Paul, where were you when the car got trashed with Ben in it?"

"I can only do so much, you know. Although I couldn't stop Rodney from tampering with your brakes, I was holding Ben when the car flipped. Since then, I've been with Brandi all this time. I was helping her out of her restraints before Rodney could show up, but, unfortunately, he came back before she could escape. You have to get over there, and fast."

"No, shit! Where are they?"

"He has her in an abandoned house in Center City. A half hour away from here."

"How did he get her?"

"She was on the way to the store to pick up candles for her niece's birthday cake when he took her. That was hours ago. Her sister has called the police, but she hasn't been missing long enough for them to use the manpower for an extensive search."

"Why didn't you know he would take her?"

"I was watching her, not him. You need to calm down."

"Calm down? How am I supposed to calm down when Brandi is in the hands of a psychopath?"

“The last thing she needs is for you to lose your head.”

Matt sighed. His friend was right. Now wasn't the time for him to lose his cool. “Damn. Will the police even know where to look?”

“Probably not; that's why it's up to you to get there in a hurry.”

“What is he going to do with her?” Matt's body was tight with fear.

“I wish I knew, which is why we have to get there quickly.”

“Damn. Where's a stinking taxi when you need it?” Matt asked in frustration.

“One is coming.”

“Paul, when I get there, I don't want any interference from you. That motherfucker is mine.”

“Hmm.” Paul was noncommittal.

“Paul ...” Matt growled.

“We'll just have to see when we get there. Remember the rules,” Paul reminded him.

“How can I not retaliate when he almost got Ben killed and he kidnapped Brandi? Do you expect me to do nothing?”

“I expect you to tread lightly.”

“How lightly do you think I can tread? This man is responsible for my death as well as attempted murder of the Thorntons. Had you not intervened, he would have killed Tina as well. Heaven only knows how many others he's harmed. The man has to be stopped, and if there are consequences, then so be it.”

Paul sighed as though realizing that nothing he said would convince his friend to back off. Matt was a man on a mission.

* * * * *

Brandi backed away from Rodney. There was a maniacal gleam in his eyes. She knew that not only was Rodney not completely there, but he was absolutely psychopathic.

“Where were you going, Brandi? You weren't going to leave without saying goodbye, were you?” He smiled at her as though holding a knife over her was the most natural thing in the world. And maybe it was. For him.

Brandi had known fear in her life, but nothing quite like this. She had always wondered why the women in horror movies stood frozen as the killer advanced on them, and now she knew. Her fear was paralyzing. She was so terrified that she could barely breathe. Brandi was sure that her heartbeat could be heard a mile away.

She could feel the sweat rolling down her face and wondered if this was how her life would end. Who would have thought that when she and Derrick had invited Rodney into their lives that things would turn out like this?

When he stepped forward, she was jolted into mobility once more and took a step back.

“Don’t be scared, Brandi. You know I would never hurt you as long as you behave.” He smiled but his eyes were cold.

She took another step away from him and tried to brazen her way out. “This has gone far enough. Let me go.”

“Why would I do that? I love you.”

She shook her head. “Love isn’t supposed to be like this.”

“You just don’t know any better. I will show you what real love is. I brought you here because it’s my right. You belong to me and your place is with me. I’ve loved you too long and fought too hard to be with you to let you go to that bastard Collins, but it’s okay now. I took care of him and his damn son.” Rodney laughed.

Brandi’s heart literally stopped for a second. Had he killed Matt and Ben? “What did you do?” Her voice was barely above a whisper. She no longer feared for herself, but also for what he might have done to two innocent people.

“Oh, let’s just say I gave them a break.” He laughed again.

Her fear was replaced by a new emotion.

Rage.

She rushed him, hitting him in the chest with her hands clasped in one big fist.

He pushed her off and she stumbled. Brandi lost her footing and fell on her bottom. She screamed at him. “You psycho! You killed them!”

“I hope so. I didn’t stick around long enough to find out, but I’m sure that after the magnitude of the accident, Collins won’t be bothering us for a long while, if ever. Should he have survived, by the time he’s realized anything, we’ll be out of the country. I have a villa in Guadalajara. You’ll love it there. It’s a paradise, and it will be just the two of us.”

“You’re crazy. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“I’ve told you before, Brandi, I’m only crazy for you.” He walked to her. She tried to scoot away, but he grabbed her by the handcuffs, yanking her up.

“It was clever of you to get your arms from behind your back. Next time, I’ll just have to make sure you’re more secure. I want to show you something. I’m going to prove to you once and for all that I love you more than anyone ever could.”

She struggled until he placed the blade of the knife against her throat.

“Brandi, you have such pretty skin. I would hate it if you make me cut you, but I will to show you who’s in charge. Come on.”

He tucked her under his arm and practically dragged her out of the room. He led her down a dark hallway and opened the door to another room and shoved her inside.

The room was small, but well lit with candles and incense. In the middle of the room was a structure of some sort. It looked like an altar.

Brandi gasped. The centerpiece was an 18”x 20” photograph of her. It was part of a missing picture of her with Derrick and the children, but everyone else had been cut out, and the picture had been enlarged.

A cold chill rushed through her as she surveyed the rest of the room. The walls were literally covered in photographs and sketches of her. There were pictures of her sleeping, eating, showering, walking to her car ... Most of them seemed to have been taken when she was off guard, and they spanned the nine years she’d known Rodney.

She has been wrong. Rodney was not psychopathic; he was completely insane.

There was nothing romantic about this room. It was creepy, and now she was more scared than she had been before. It was obvious that his unhealthy obsession with her was not recent. How had they all been so fooled?

“Do you see how much I love you now? Can you deny me after seeing this?” He dug into his pocket and pulled out what looked to be a pair of her missing panties.

Holy shit! He had been inside her house while she wasn’t there. Brandi watched in horror as he put the panties against his nose and inhaled deeply, then replaced them in his pocket. He gave her an easy smile.

Her jaw dropped. She couldn’t believe this. Things like this only happened in the movies.

She retreated until she was against the altar. As gently as she could, she said, “Rodney, it’s over between us. I’m sorry if I hurt you, but this isn’t right. I don’t want to be with you.”

She’d miscalculated. He advanced on her and grabbed her head before she could react. He brought his mouth down on hers, grinding her lips painfully against her teeth.

The tip of his knife was pressed dangerously against her side, and she knew if she moved, it would pierce her flesh.

“Open your goddamned mouth,” he muttered against her lips.

Brandi parted her lips slightly, and his tongue slid roughly past her teeth. She fought the urge to bite him. There was no telling what he would do, and she had to stay alive. The thought of leaving her children orphans kept her centered. She had to keep her mind on them if she was to make it through this.

She stood completely still as his tongue probed and explored her mouth. Brandi could feel the bile rising in her throat. This was not a kiss but more like a protracted form of rape. It seemed to go on forever before he lifted his head with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

“You taste so sweet, Brandi. I’ve waited so long for this moment. Do you know when I realized you were mine?”

She shook her head, not really caring to know the answer. “From the moment I saw you. When you smiled at me, I thought to myself that here was a woman I would lay my life

down for. This was a woman worth fighting for ... and killing for. And I have, Brandi. I've killed for you. Now do you understand the depth of my devotion to you? Do you finally realize I will never let you go?"

"I ..." What could she possibly say to him that wouldn't make him snap?

"You think I'm talking about Collins, but I'm not." Rodney smirked. "Derrick thought he could keep us apart, too, but I showed him."

"You ... you killed Derrick? But ... he was shot by that man."

"Yeah, that's what they say, isn't it? It was very convenient for me."

"Oh, my God! You killed ... You son of a bitch!" With a strength she hadn't known she possessed, she swung her arms. Her fist caught him on the side of his face. He was taken off guard, and the knife fell from his hand as he stumbled backward. Brandi dashed for the knife and snatched it before he could.

She ran at him with murderous intent, her body propelled by her incredible anger, but Rodney was prepared for her. He sidestepped her as she brought the knife down to slash his chest, and his fist slammed into her jaw, sending her flying back.

He was on top of her in an instant, grabbing the knife from her fingers. He slapped her across the face, but she refused to stop fighting.

"I told you I didn't want to hurt you, but you're making me very angry, Brandi."

"You murderer! You took Derrick from me! You took Matt from me! What makes you think I could ever love you? You're a monster!" And with that she spat in his face.

Rodney jerked back in surprise. Spittle dripped down the side of his face. He slowly wiped it off his cheek, examining it before licking it off his fingers. "Umm, delicious." He smiled down at her.

Brandi's stomach roiled with disgust. She made a move to get away, but he pinned her beneath him, straddling her with his thighs so that her arms were trapped. She fought and squirmed, but her strength was no match for his.

She knew she wouldn't get out of this situation using muscle, so she tried using her mind. "Rodney, you know you'll get into a lot of trouble for this. You were a police officer. Your job was to protect and serve. Have you forgotten so easily?"

He paused as though considering what she had just said. Then he laughed.

"Is that why you think I joined? That's so sweet of you to think so, darling, but I don't give two shits about protecting or serving. Cops have access to places most people wouldn't, and people trust them. Besides, a cop can carry a gun. I like guns. I'll show you my collection one day. Now, baby, how about we get you up? Will you behave yourself, or do I have to start chopping off some parts?"

Her eyes widened. He had to be kidding. He just had to be. "If ... if you love me, then why would you hurt me?"

“Brandi, I love you so much that I’m willing to do that, even though I don’t want to. You see, I will keep you with me by any means necessary, and if that means cutting off your feet so you won’t run from me, then so be it.”

She shook her head. “Rodney, normal people don’t think like this.”

“When are you going to realize that my love for you *isn’t* normal. It’s extraordinary, and in time you will understand. I just want to love you, baby, but if you don’t cooperate ...”

The way his voice trailed off left her in no doubt what he would do.

“Have you ever seen the movie *Boxing Helena*?” he suddenly asked.

Brandi nodded her head automatically. She had seen it and didn’t particularly want to act out the roles. She remembered being disgusted over the doctor who was so obsessed with the female character that he had cut off her limbs in order to keep her dependent on him. Brandi felt sick to her stomach at the thought of Rodney trying to pull a stunt like that on her.

“I think Dr. Cavanaugh had it right. I wouldn’t mind having my own Venus di Milo, although I would prefer you with all your limbs intact.”

Brandi’s eyes filled with the tears that had not come earlier. “What about my babies? They need me. They need their mother. Don’t do this to me. Don’t do this to them.”

“Let your family take care of them. You belong to me. Tomorrow, we’ll get on a flight to Mexico, and we’ll start our new life together.”

“I won’t leave them, and you can’t make me!” She renewed her struggles.

“You’re making me angry again. Do I have to cut that cute little pinky finger off to show you that I mean business? Make this easy on yourself and just let me love you.”

“I’ll see you in hell first,” she hissed venomously.

His eyes tightened with rage. “You want to do this the hard way? So be it.”

Brandi screamed as Rodney raised the knife.

Chapter Twenty

“This is the place?” Matt asked as they came to an abandoned brownstone.

“Yes, let’s go,” Paul answered.

Matt broke through the barrier covering the door and rushed up the stairs as he heard Brandi scream. “He’s hurting her!” He raced toward the sound and crashed through the door of the room.

Matt’s heart nearly exploded with fright at the sight that greeted him. Rodney straddled Brandi, holding a knife over her.

“No!” He charged at Rodney, knocking him off Brandi.

Rodney had been so intent on his victim that he obviously hadn’t heard Matt’s explosive entry. Matt barely felt the pain coursing through his body. All he could think about was saving Brandi.

“Matt!” Thank the Lord she seemed unharmed.

“Get out of here, Brandi,” he said, then lunged at Rodney, who was getting up. Brandi scrambled out of the way but didn’t leave the room.

“I won’t leave you!”

Matt would have argued, but he had to keep his concentration on Rodney. He slammed Rodney into the wall.

“You bastard! You were going to kill her!” he raged as he slammed his opponent against the wall again.

Rodney brought up his knee, but Matt had anticipated the move and twisted aside. Unfortunately, he wasn’t quick enough to completely escape the blow to his groin. He fell back, gasping for air.

“Why aren’t you dead, motherfucker? You’re still trying to take Brandi from me, but it won’t happen. She’s mine!” Rodney’s fist connected with Matt’s jaw.

Matt’s head snapped back, causing him to lose his footing.

Rodney searched the floor. Matt knew he was looking for the knife. Matt jumped to his feet and tackled Rodney at the knees, sending them both crashing to the floor.

Brandi looked on. “Kick his ass, Matt!” He never would have thought she’d be so bloodthirsty.

Matt punched Rodney directly in the face, smashing into one of his eyes.

Rodney howled, grabbing the injured area. He fell backwards and grabbed a candlestick.

“You’re not going to get a chance to kill me again.” Matt was about to hit him in the face again when Brandi called out, “Watch out, Matt!”

Rodney blindsided him in the head with the candlestick, then pushed him off and laughed, repeating his blow. “Again? The first time wasn’t successful, but I’ll make sure that this time will be!”

The men stood and circled each other, waiting for the other to strike.

Matt’s head was spinning from the recent pounding, but the blood that dribbled from a cut on the side of Rodney’s face gave him some satisfaction.

Rodney grabbed Matt. He must have noticed Matt’s tender spot, because he slammed his fist right into Matt’s collarbone.

“Aargh!” Matt screamed in pain.

Brandi had found the knife on the floor. She lunged toward them and plunged the blade into Rodney’s arm. He howled in agony. The wounded man turned on her and slammed his fist into her stomach.

She doubled over and fell to the floor.

Matt saw red and grabbed for the knife, but Rodney had already removed it and slashed it in Matt’s direction.

“You’re going to die tonight, asshole.”

Matt jerked away from the slash of Rodney’s knife. “Like I already said, you won’t find it easy to kill me again.”

“I haven’t killed you yet, but I will. Are you that eager to die?” Rodney swung the knife at him.

This time Matt wasn’t quick enough to completely dodge the knife as it sliced into his side. Brandi grabbed Rodney by the ankle and pulled him off balance, tripping him to the floor. This gave Matt the opportunity to recover.

Matt kicked Rodney in the side, but Rodney still held on to the knife. Rodney’s sleeve was drenched in blood from his wound.

“Oh, you killed me, all right. Didn’t you get my letters? Don’t you recognize me?” Matt glared at Rodney before kicking him in the stomach.

“What ... the ... hell ... are you talking about?” the fallen man asked between breaths as he tried to raise his knife.

Matt stepped on his hand, and Rodney dropped the weapon.

“Take a good look at me. Who do you see? Do I remind you of anyone, *friend?*”

“Derrick?” Rodney’s tone was disbelieving. “How ... but ... you’re not him.”

“No? Let’s just say I have powerful connections, and I’m here to make sure you don’t get your hands on Brandi or the children. I’m not going to give you another chance to take away my life.”

“You’re crazy. You’re not Derrick!” Rodney attempted to get to his feet, but Matt kicked him in the chest and made him crash back to the floor.

Matt stole a quick glance at Brandi, who was staring at him with eyes full of unshed tears. “Derrick?” she whispered.

“Get the knife.” Matt didn’t answer her question.

Rodney tried to reach for it, but Matt brought the heel of his foot down on Rodney’s fingers, crushing them. Rodney howled again.

“Don’t even think about it,” Matt hissed. “You took away a part of me I will never get back. You were my partner and my best friend. I trusted you around my wife and children, but you took my life, and for what? Brandi never loved you.”

Rodney glared up at him. “You’re making this up!”

“How else would I know what you did? Know that you shot that man, took his gun, and shot me. Know that you plotted, and drugged Brandi the night of your supposed engagement. Know what you did to little Tina Reed. It’s time to pay the piper, and I’ve come to collect.” Matt let his rage take over and kicked Rodney in the face.

Rodney went out like a light.

Matt tried to kick him again, but once again something was holding him back.

“He’s out,” Paul said in his ear.

Brandi ran over to Matt and fell into his arms, bursting into loud sobs. He held her tightly, petting her. “Shh. It’s over.”

She cried long and hard, her body shaking. He rocked and soothed her, kissing the top of her head. “Shh.”

She looked up at him with a tear-streaked face. “Derrick?”

“Yes, it’s me, but I’m Matt now. It’s one of the conditions for coming back.”

“I knew there was a reason why you always seemed so familiar to me. Oh, my God, why didn’t you tell me who you were? I missed you so much.”

“I couldn’t tell you. Would you have believed me?”

"I ... I guess not, but it was always there in your eyes. You always seemed to know how to touch me, and what I liked. I've no more doubts about who you are. Why did you wait two years?"

"Well, actually, it doesn't usually work this way. Once you're gone, you're gone, but I cut a deal with Peter. I mean St. Peter."

"You know him?" She sounded impressed.

"Yes. I couldn't let you go through with your engagement. I didn't know how crazy Rodney was until the night he shot me."

"I began to suspect that things weren't exactly right with him around the time we got engaged -- or rather, around the time he tricked me." She shuddered. "I didn't actually realize he was insane until I saw this room."

"It took this to make you realize it?"

"You have to remember how long he was in our lives. He had you fooled, too. Now that I think about it, I know he probably trashed our house. Oh Derr-- I mean Matt. Why me? Why did he have to pick me?"

"Who knows what runs through the mind of a psycho?"

"I love you so much. Wait until I tell the kids."

Matt shook his head. "No. You can never tell them."

"Why?"

"I'm Matt now. For all intents and purposes, the Derrick you knew no longer exists." His heart broke at her crestfallen expression. "Baby, we'll talk about this when we get out of here. Let's go."

"Yes, and the sooner we call the police the better."

He was about to usher her out of the room when Brandi screamed. "Matt, look out!"

Rodney was upright again, but this time he was holding a gun aimed at the both of them.

"Ha, looks like you forgot something about me. I always have a gun strapped inside my pants." He laughed wildly. "You're not taking her away from me, you motherfucker!" There was no doubt about it -- what little sanity he'd had was gone.

To Matt's horror, Rodney pulled the trigger just as Brandi lunged at him.

"No!" Both men cried out as Brandi fell to the floor.

No! No! No! This wasn't supposed to happen! Not to Brandi!

Rodney looked at him with loathing. "That bullet was meant for you!" he screamed. "You're going to pay for this!"

Matt rushed forward, not caring whether he lived or died anymore. Rodney pointed the gun again and attempted to fire.

Nothing.

Matt tackled him to the ground, and they wrestled for the gun. He punched Rodney's mouth and was sure that he'd cracked a few teeth, and his knuckles in the process. Matt grabbed Rodney's wrist and slammed it continuously on the floor until Rodney released the gun, which went flying across the room. When Matt made an attempt to get it, Rodney gave him an uppercut that sent him backward. Rodney took advantage of his stunned state and straddled him. He grabbed a handful of Matt's hair.

"I'm going to enjoy killing you ... again," he said, slamming Matt's head into the floor. He seized Matt's throat and began to squeeze.

Matt gasped for air as he began to lose consciousness. No, he couldn't let Rodney get away with what he'd done. He reached for Rodney's throat.

"Oh, no, you don't," Rodney hissed, smacking his head back to the ground.

No, God, no. Not again. He had failed Brandi, and now she was dead. His head was swimming, and he could barely think. It felt as though his body was shutting down as the hands tightened around his neck.

"Rodney!"

Matt opened his eyes in surprise.

Rodney loosened his grip.

Brandi stood over them with the gun. She looked weak. "I won't let you hurt him," she yelled at Rodney.

"This is all for you! Haven't I proved my devotion to you? You still don't get it, do you? No one loves you like I do." Rodney's eyes filled with tears.

Brandi lifted the gun higher. "Let him go."

A savage expression crossed Rodney's face, and he squeezed Matt's throat even harder.

"No! I'll kill him, and you'll be mine again. He doesn't love you like I do -- no one does!"

"Thank God for that," she whispered and pulled the trigger.

The recoil thrust her backward. Rodney looked stunned before his body fell on top of Matt.

Matt could barely move, his head was swimming, he ached, and he was losing the battle to the darkness.

Just as he passed out, he saw Brandi slump to the floor.

* * * * *

Matt found himself standing in the dark. A bright light stood off to the side, and he knew he was standing in the gateway. Was it all over? Should he have left well enough alone? If he had, would Brandi still be alive?

Paul appeared behind him. "She's not dead."

“Thank the Lord. Will she make it?”

“Yes. The bullet didn’t hit any vital organs. As long as she gets to the hospital in time, she’ll be fine.”

“And Rodney ...”

“Is finally gone. He won’t be bothering her again. Brandi and the children are safe.”

“How will someone find her? No one knew where she was.”

“A passerby heard the commotion and called the police. Your bodies will be found.”

Matt was almost afraid to ask, but he had to know. “What about me, Paul? I failed, didn’t I?”

“Peter isn’t happy. You weren’t supposed to tell her who you were.”

“I know, and I didn’t. I told Rodney.”

“You’re splitting hairs again.”

Matt sighed. “Purgatory?”

Paul was silent, and Matt feared the worse. Had he fouled things up so badly that he had to go to the other place? The thought sent chills coursing through him.

“You’re one lucky son of a gun, because they’re going to let you stay.”

“What? Are you serious? That’s fantastic!”

“What you did for the people in Matthew Collins’s life makes up for your indiscretion.”

“Even if I didn’t work things out with Karen?”

“You tried, but that’s not to say that when you go back, you stop trying. You have to keep on trying.”

“I understand.”

“There is one other thing,” Paul began hesitantly.

Matt didn’t like the sound of his friend’s voice. “What?”

“Brandi won’t remember that you were Derrick. She’ll only ever know you as Matt Collins. Her feelings for you won’t change, of course.”

“I can live with that,” Matt shrugged.

“You won’t remember your life as Derrick, either, and you won’t remember your time in heaven ... or me.”

“What! Do you mean that I’m going to stop loving her, and I won’t remember my kids? I won’t remember you?”

“You won’t forget how much you love her. You’ll remember everything from the time you returned to earth, and, as before, you’ll retain enough memory to function as Matt Collins.”

“So all the memories of the past will be gone?” Matt felt the walls caving in his heart.

“I talked to Peter, and he agreed that when your time on earth is up again -- which won't be for a long time, by the way -- your memories will return, but not before then.”

“But I won't remember a big chunk of my life.”

“I'm sorry, but that's the way it will be if you return to earth.”

Matt wanted to scream and rage, but he realized that he had no choice if he wanted to be with Brandi again. “Paul, will ... will you be watching us?”

“You couldn't stop me.” Paul smiled.

“What about the Fox family? You were their guardian first. Will you be able to manage us all?”

“So I'll be pulling double duty for another half century or so. No biggie.”

“Paul ... I'm going to miss you, man.”

“This isn't goodbye, you know. We'll see each other again.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

They embraced. Matt's chest was tight with emotion. He pulled back and looked at his friend. “One more question.”

“What?”

“Did you stop that gun from firing?”

Paul winked. “What do you think?”

Matt closed his eyes and shook his head. Paul was one in a million.

When he opened his eyes, he was in a hospital bed. Again.

Chapter Twenty-One

“I told you my Dad would love you as much as I do. I don’t know why you were so nervous.” Brandi smiled at Matt as they drove back to her house.

“Well, he sure didn’t act like it,” Matt growled.

“That’s just his way. Sometimes it takes a little while for him to warm up to people. Besides, my parents are crazy about Ben.”

“And why shouldn’t they be? He’s a super kid.”

“Speaking of kids ... When we’re married, do you want any more? I have the twins, and you have Ben, and I’m not getting any younger.”

“I’d rather hold off, but let’s play it by ear. Our children are at an age where they can pretty much entertain themselves; a baby will take both of our time. I want to be a little selfish right now and have some of your attention, too.” He winked at her.

Brandi’s heart fluttered. She was so happy that she almost felt guilty. Matt filled her days and nights with so much joy she could barely stand it. He’d proposed to her one month after the horrifying Rodney incident.

Things had been hectic once the police had arrived on the scene. Apparently a passerby had heard the commotion and called the police. Brandi and Matt were rushed to the hospital.

When they were both released, they gave their separate statements. Because of their statements, plus the restraining order, the phone messages, and what had happened to Matt’s car, the police decided no charges would be made against Matt. Brandi shuddered to think about the whole ordeal.

Although she would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night from a nightmare, with Matt’s support, it was easier to deal with all that had happened to her. She loved him to distraction. Their bond had grown stronger than ever, and the kids adored him. DJ looked up at him with the same hero worship in his eyes that Ben did.

Mya was finally over her aversion to redheads, and Ben was one of the sweetest little boys she knew. The kids got along beautifully, and she and Matt were planning their future. Matt had decided to sell his house to buy something a little more family-friendly, and they were having a ball house-hunting.

Brandi studied Matt's handsome profile. She didn't think she would ever tire of his beautiful face. Though he still seemed very familiar to her, it no longer mattered that she couldn't place her finger on why. All that mattered was how much she loved him.

"It was nice of your parents to watch the twins and Ben tonight."

"Yes, but they love them. They spoil the twins to death. They come back so rotten after they've spent time with their grandparents."

"That's what grandparents are for."

"I suppose," she said.

"I have to get them a little gift for keeping Ben with them, as well."

"It's nothing. We're going to be family in a few months, anyway." She touched his face. "Matt, I can't wait to be your wife."

He took his eyes off the road briefly to look at her and smiled before turning his attention back to driving. "I know how you feel. I can't wait for you to be my wife."

"Do you know what would make this night perfect?"

"Hmm, making love?"

"You must have read my mind. Hurry up and get us home."

"You don't want me to get a ticket, do you?"

"No, but let's take a shortcut."

"Am I going to have to pull over to the side of the road and fuck you senseless?"

"You keep threatening me with that, but you never do it. You're all talk."

"Oh? I am? We'll see."

Matt turned the car at the next intersection and drove until they came to a dead end. He pulled over and stopped the car. "Okay. Get out."

"What? Are you serious?" she asked incredulously. He turned to look at her, his green eyes dark with desire.

"I'm going to prove to you once and for all that I am not all talk. Now get out of the car." He undid his seatbelt and stepped out of the car. Matt walked around to her door and opened it.

"Matt! What are you doing? We can't do anything out in the open like this."

"Says who? This is a low traffic area. It's not likely that anyone will be turning down this dead end and if they do, they'll just get a little show."

“Umm, I’m not really sure if I want to be anyone’s show, Matt.” He ignored her as he undid her seatbelt and pulled her out of the car.

When he closed the door, he pressed her body against the car. She could feel the hardness of his cock against her stomach.

“What’s the matter, Brandi, you’re not all talk, are you?” he taunted her with her own words, then his mouth came down on hers before she could protest again.

The instant his lips touched hers, she was lost as she always was when she was in his arms. His kiss was urgent and demanding. She felt the rush of his breath in her mouth. She could taste the wine that he had had earlier on his tongue as it slid past her parted lips. She welcomed the persistent exploring and probing, returning his kiss enthusiastically.

Brandi wrapped her arms around him and practically became one with him. Her heart swelled with love and her pussy throbbed with desire. Matt captured her bottom lip with his teeth, tugging it playfully before stroking it with his tongue.

“Mmm, you taste delicious, as always,” he murmured.

The carnal feelings that spread through her demanded more. She cupped the back of his head to bring his lips back to hers, but Matt seemed to have other ideas. He moved his mouth to her ear to gently nip on her earlobe. “Do you like that, Brandi?”

“You know I do,” she whispered back.

“Damn, you’re sweet.”

His hands cupped her breasts, caressing them with a reverence that made her weak in the knees. Brandi knew that she would have fallen if she hadn’t been leaning against the car. The feel of his fingers playing with her breasts through the thin material of her sundress made her body clamor for more of his wicked touch. She wanted to feel him on her bare skin.

As though reading her mind, he pushed the straps of her dress off her shoulders to reveal her braless mounds. “You have the most beautiful breasts I’ve ever seen. They look good enough to touch ... and taste. Do you want to feel my mouth right here?” Matt asked, lightly grazing a taut peak with his knuckles.

Brandi shivered in response. A gust of wind blew, teasing her already hardened nipples. She gasped at how sensitive her body had become with just a look from his seductive green eyes. A long time ago, she stopped trying to figure out how this man was able to make her feel this way. There was no question that he was the master of her body.

“Yes, Matt. Please touch me. I want to feel your mouth on me,” she said, pulling his head toward her breasts. She leaned against the car as his hot mouth sucked in one swollen nub.

“Oh, yes.” She moaned in delight as he ravaged her. His tongue swirled around and flicked the dark tip.

Matt bit her breast playfully. "It tastes as good as it looks. Let me see if the other one is just as delicious." He turned his attention to her other breast. Brandi could only shake her head from side to side, moaning in the back of her throat as sinful waves of pleasure coursed through her body.

The way he played with her breasts was driving her crazy. As he licked and sucked one breast, his fingers played with the other. "Matt, you really turn me on," she moaned.

"Good. I love the way your body gets so hot for me." He smiled before blowing on her wet nipple, making her gasp in delight. He buried his face between her breasts and nuzzled her. She loved the feel of his face against her sensitive skin. The light stubble of a day's growth teased and titillated her senses.

Matt stood up and pulled her into his arm, crushing her mouth to his again in a kiss more forceful than the first. As his mouth moved passionately over hers, he grabbed her thigh and lifted it up so that he could slide his hand inside her dress.

Brandi's breath caught in her throat in anticipation. She couldn't wait to feel his hands on her eager pussy. She was already wet with need for his cock. "Yes, please touch me, Matt," she begged.

"Do you want my hands on your pussy, baby?"

"Yes, I want it all: your hands, fingers, and cock. Give them to me!"

"You're greedy, aren't you?"

"Greedy for your touch. Stop teasing me." Brandi pouted.

"You know I can't resist you when you look at me like that." Matt smiled at her and slowly slid his hand up her thigh until he reached her panties. "Umm, you're already wet for me. I can feel it and I can smell it." His fingers slid inside her panties, and he touched her clit.

"Oh, God, yes. Touch me like that." Brandi would have never thought in a million years that she would be outside in plain view of anyone who cared to drive this way, begging to be touched like this, but he had her so hot that they could have been in the middle of Times Square for all she cared.

He twirled her little button between his fingers and she cried out his name. "Oh, Matt!"

"I love touching you like this, Brandi. I love the way you moan in the back of your throat and call my name. I love how wet your pussy gets. Before I met you, I didn't know a pussy could get this wet. My cock is so damn hard just from touching you like this," he said in a deep whisper, his eyes never leaving her face.

She shuddered with desire as he seduced her with his words. Matt then slid two fingers inside her channel, thrusting and twisting. When he scraped his nails against the wall of her pussy, she nearly passed out from the sudden burst of pleasure.

She looked down to see his pale hand probing sensually between her legs, and the erotic picture that it created was enough to send another burst of sensation through her body. Brandi looked at Matt through glazed eyes, and although her passion was raging, it couldn't match the feeling for him in her heart. She loved this man so much, and there was nothing more sensual than being with the man you loved.

"I love you, Matt," she whispered.

"I love you, too, Brandi. You have no idea how much." He kissed her on the side of the neck, although he continued to fuck her with his fingers. His hand was no longer enough. She was so damn hot and she wanted his cock. She wanted to feel the thrust of him inside of her.

"Fuck me now! I can't take this anymore."

"I'm so damn hard, I thought I was going to burst at any minute. You have that effect on me, you know."

"I know, because you have the same effect on me. Now stop talking and give me some of that beautiful cock of yours. My pussy is getting lonely."

"Undo my pants."

Brandi eagerly complied, quickly unbuckling his belt, undoing his button, and unzipping his pants. She then pushed everything down his hips and his cock popped out.

Matt's breath caught in his throat as her hands slid over her his cock, lightly stroking it. Damn, she was beautiful. He loved this woman more than life itself, and he didn't know what he had done to deserve her. She was gorgeous, sexy, sweet, and only she could give him the hugest hard-on imaginable. At work, he would find himself daydreaming about how much he wanted her, and his cock would instantly spring to life.

Matt wasn't about to admit to her that he had had every intention of pulling to the side of the road before they got home and that her taunting had had nothing to do with it. He had just been too damned horny to make it.

He lifted her up against the car and hiked her dress to her waist. Too impatient to pull her panties down her thighs, he ripped them off and tossed them aside.

"Matt, those were expensive!" she exclaimed, but she didn't really sound that angry about it.

"Not anymore," he growled before he plunged into her pussy. They both gasped at the same time. The exquisite sensation of her cunt wrapped around his cock was like no other feeling. She was so damn tight and wet that he didn't know how much longer he would be able to hold out.

Every time they made love, it always felt like the first time. Matt knew that he would never get tired of being inside of her. Brandi wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck.

“Yes! This is what I’ve been waiting for,” she cried out, gyrating her hips against the thrust of his cock.

“You feel so good, Brandi. Your pussy is so tight around my cock,” he moaned.

“Fuck me harder, Matt. Make me yours.”

“You are mine, and I’m yours,” he said as he plunged roughly into her pussy, giving it to her exactly how she liked it. For such a tiny woman, Brandi gave as good as she got.

Thunderbolts of sensation danced along his nerves, heightening the sensations of the moment. He loved the feel of her fingers running through his hair and the way she pressed kisses into his neck as he continued to plunge in and out of her. Matt was drowning in an ocean of lust, and he didn’t want to be rescued.

“You’re so sexy, Brandi. You’re my little chocolate pocket Venus.”

“You’re my white knight,” she murmured.

He increased the pace of his thrusts, going faster and deeper, and Brandi worked her body over his, matching him stroke for stroke. Matt gripped her ass in his palms and plunged deeper still.

“Oh, God, Matt, I’m so close!”

“So am I.”

Each thrust pushed him closer to the edge. He was on fire, and when he felt her pussy tighten around his cock and she screamed, he could no longer hold in his own explosive climax. His seed shot up her channel, and she went limp in his arms.

Matt pressed her body against the car, resting his head against her shoulder. He could hear the erratic beating of her heart that matched his own heart’s frenzied beating.

“I won’t ever accuse you of being all talk again.” She laughed.

“I told you I was a man of action.”

“I can’t wait to get home.”

“Are you ready for it again? You’re insatiable.” He chuckled.

“Only insatiable for you.”

“Brandi, I love you so much. Thank you for loving me,” he whispered.

“No, thank you.”

As they drove home, Matt couldn’t help but thank his lucky stars. When he had woken up at the hospital, a big chunk of his memory was missing. He couldn’t remember much of anything. The doctors told him that it was normal to experience some memory loss after head trauma and that maybe he would eventually get his memory back. He wasn’t so sure, and it was scary that he couldn’t remember so many special things that had happened in his life before the injury.

There was one thing he was grateful for. He remembered Brandi, and she had been by his side the whole time. He loved her so much that it hurt sometimes, and he adored her

twins as though they were his own already. Their children got along, and he couldn't wait for them to be a family. It was as though he had a guardian angel looking out for him.

Epilogue

Two years later ...

Matt walked into his home after a visit to his mother. She seemed to be thriving at the retirement home, especially now that she'd met a suave widower she had become quite fond of.

"Daddy, look at me!" the little girl waved at him as she did a cartwheel.

"That's great, honey, but you probably shouldn't be doing that in the house. Your mom wouldn't like it. Where is everyone, for that matter?"

"They're in the pool. Are you coming? We're playing Marco Polo."

Matt looked indulgently at his youngest daughter. He and Brandi had been watching a news special about children who were up for adoption in the area. Adoption had not been in their minds, as they had three children between them already, but there was something that tugged their hearts about little Tina Reed's story.

The poor thing had suffered so much in her young life. After a long discussion and running it by their children, Matt and Brandi had submitted the paperwork to begin the adoption process.

Looking at Tina with her shining brown hair and big hazel eyes, she didn't look like the same child they had first taken in. She'd had been extremely shy and withdrawn. Brandi had been the only one she allowed to touch her. Whenever Matt took a step close to her, she would scream. It had been obvious at the time that Tina had trust issues where men were concerned.

With continued counseling and through the love and support of their family, she had slowly opened up to him. Tina had blossomed to become the vivacious child he saw standing

in front of him. Now she gave him hugs and kisses freely. It actually upset her if she didn't get a kiss goodnight from him.

Her mental hurdle was still a factor in their lives. With each passing day, however, she was getting better, and Matt was positive that one day she would be the wholly sunny child she was meant to be. Mostly she was happy and smiling like she was at the moment; other times she would want to be alone in her quiet place, her room.

One day after coming out her quiet place, she had been smiling. Matt had asked her why she was so happy. She had replied, "I'm happy because my friend kept his promise. I'm never alone." When Matt had asked her to elaborate, she'd given him a secretive smile and skipped away. At the time he'd shrugged it off, thinking she was perhaps referring to an imaginary friend, but sometimes he wondered.

Matt wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but it seemed to give Tina comfort. Perhaps she did have a guardian angel looking over her. At times, Matt felt like he had one, as well, because of all the good things in his life.

Besides welcoming Tina into their family, so many other things had happened. Karen had married a man she'd met through her job as an image consultant. Although she'd never completely warmed to Matt, she had agreed to grant him joint custody. Matt had Ben on the weekends, summers, and school breaks. It worked out well for both of them because it gave Karen a chance to spend time with her new husband, and it gave Matt a chance to cement the bond with his son.

Ben always had a smile on his face now. He loved the idea of having siblings and was especially close to DJ. Matt and Brandi jokingly referred to the two as Frick and Frack; wherever one was, the other was bound to be close by. Brandi was so great with Ben, treating him like her own, and he loved the twins as much as he loved Ben and Tina. All of his children brought him joy every day.

"Come on, Daddy." Tina tugged at his hands.

Matt chuckled. "Okay, sweetheart."

He followed Tina to see his family frolicking in the pool and his heart swelled with love.

Matt's eyes drifted to his wife. He fell in love with her more and more each day. She was so beautiful. The sun glistened on her dark skin and laughter was in her eyes. She flashed him a big white smile and waved at him.

"Are you coming in? The water's great!" she called to him.

"Yeah, come on in, Dad!" Ben called.

"Hey, Pop!" The twins called out together. They had decided to call him Pop instead of Dad, because they wanted to preserve the memories of their birth father and he was okay with that. He owed Derrick Evans a lot. Without him, they wouldn't exist.

Tina ran and cannon-balled into the pool, splashing everyone.

“Let me go inside and get my trunks and I’ll be right in,” he called.
He tossed one more glance at his family before heading upstairs.
Yes, life was great.

 THE END 

Eve Vaughn

Eve Vaughn enjoys writing above all else. She began writing short stories to amuse herself since she could form letters. Mischievous as a child, she lost her television privileges quite a bit and found writing to be her outlet. Besides writing, Eve likes to read, bake, volunteering, traveling, and spending time with her family. She currently resides in the Philadelphia area with her husband and turtle.

Eve loves hearing from her fans so feel free to contact her at EveVaughn10@aol.com or join her yahoo group at evevaughnsbooks@yahoo.com.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Loving Lola

by Lena Matthews

Available Now from Loose Id

Loving Lola

“No. No more words.” Pulling her close, Marcus crushed her mouth under his. Sliding his tongue through her parted lips, he stroked his tongue against hers, and despite herself Lola began to respond to his kiss. It was impossible not to. The man was gifted. There were just no two ways around it. He tasted just as she would have expected him to -- like sin.

Her nipples tightened as her pussy began to swell. Everything was crying out inside of her to reach down, unzip his pants, and claim his body as hers. To worship his cock, to take it deep inside of her mouth, tasting his flavor and drinking in his essences. Lola wanted to feel him hard and deep inside of her, but she knew it was wrong. Wrong to like this, wrong to feel this way about him, all wrong. Marcus was the last thing she should want, but she couldn't stop kissing him.

Lifting her up, Marcus set her on the counter and moved between her legs, all without breaking away from her mouth. Trying to pull back, knowing she should, Lola wedged her hands between them, trying to separate their bodies but instead ending up placing her palms against his nipples, which hardened at her touch.

Marcus inhaled and broke away from her mouth as she ran her fingers loosely down his chest. Grabbing her hands, he pulled them behind her and gripped both with one of his. The position forced her back to bend a little, making her breasts push up. Throbbing and aching, her nipples hardened against her bra. Poking through her thin shirt, they betrayed her, revealing her arousal to him.

“Marcus, we can't.”

“Not only can we, but we will, because I'm done with pretending. I know you watch me, Lola, the same way I watch you. I know that it's this,” he said, eyeing her aching breasts, “I think of every night when I'm jerking off. It's your name I cry out when I finally find my release.”

Lola moaned her denial, but Marcus wasn't listening. Instead, he tightened his hold on her wrists. Lola couldn't help the way her body responded, any more than she could help Marcus seeing the way her pupils dilated and darkened with passion. She was turned on beyond belief by his words, and creaming from the feel of his fingers around her wrists.

There was an awed quality in voice as he spoke. “Who would have ever thought my little sadist liked a little pain herself?”

Licking her lips nervously, Lola tried to steady her rapidly beating heart. “No, I don't.”

“Little liar.” He chuckled, releasing her hands and digging his fingers into her hips. The feel of his nails biting into her jean-clad thighs sent a chill of desire running down her back. The quick, sharp, tingling pain caused her nipples to harden further and her clit to swell. It was like Marcus had found a secret trigger that made her want to come, and come quickly.

Marcus must have sensed her arousal, because he chuckled and squeezed a bit harder. “You like that, baby?”

“No,” Lola lied. She would rather die a slow, painful death than admit she liked it.

“Really? 'Cause I could have sworn that you did. Let's try something. You continue to play hard to get, while I sit here getting hard, and we'll see who breaks first.”

Running his hands up her thighs to her full chest, Marcus squeezed her breasts through her thin cotton shirt. Palming her heavy mounds, Marcus sought out one nipple with his thumb and index finger while his mouth moved over the other one. Capturing the peak, he circled it, pinching it gently at first, increasing the pressure while he sucked her other one through her shirt.

The feel of her nipple, hard and aching, scratching against the lace as he sucked steadily, had Lola arching up into him. Never had she felt this good from mere nipple stimulation. Maybe it was because guys were always careful, never wanting to hurt her by tugging too hard, but with Marcus that wasn't even a question. He wasn't treating her like a china doll, with soft kisses and caresses. Marcus was touching her the way she had always wanted to be touched -- with more pressure and with an intensity she couldn't describe. Lola wasn't able to deny the way her eyes had glazed over with passion the more dominating he became, any more that she could deny the way her body craved his touch.

An involuntary moan escaped her lips as she pulled his head closer to her breasts. She wanted to cry out with pleasure, but despite how moist she was growing between her thighs, she couldn't let go enough to get into it, because of who was doing it. It was Marcus, the man who had besieged her days and tormented her nights. She couldn't understand how she could be enjoying this as much as she was. Why was her body betraying her like this?

Gripping his ears with her fingers, Lola tugged, pulling his mouth from her aching nipple. His breathing was just as harsh as hers, leaving no doubt that he was just as turned on as she was. “Marcus ...”

Marcus moved his hands down her waist and gripped the bottom edge of her T-shirt, moving to pull it off of her.

“Wait.” Lola pushed him back so she could slide off the counter. This was going too fast and too far.

“For what? For you to come up with another reason to push me away?”

“Marcus, we're bad for each other. You bring out the worst in me, and I know I bring out the caveman in you,” Lola said pointing out the obvious. “We'll kill each other in a week.”

“But what a way to go.” He chuckled, nipping her earlobe between his teeth. “Just admit it, *chère* -- you're mine.”

"I'll never be yours," she said breathlessly as Marcus released her breasts and slid his hand down her stomach to the waistband of her jeans. Unfastening her pants, he slid his hands into her panties, slipping past her trimmed mound and centering on her clit.

"You've been mine for years, Lola; it's just taken you this long to figure it out," Marcus replied as he found and teased her clit with his thumb. It was a tight fit with her jeans still on, but Marcus managed to slip his hand far enough into her pants that he was cupping her sex with his palm while he fingered her at the same time.

"What do you want?" she moaned, her knees almost buckling from the intense pleasure. Marcus used his free hand to cup her breasts and torture her nipples with pinches and pulls, working her up to an intense climax.

"Just you," he replied, pulling her tightly against him as he fingered her.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Loving Lola

Lena Matthews's *Loving Lola* is a book that you will not want to put down. You will be captured from the first page... This book should not be missed!

-- Tewanda, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Loving Lola by Lena Matthews is a sensational short story that showcases a great, luscious, spicy hot romance that will capture your heart from the first page... I fell in love with Lola and Marcus and I hope Ms. Matthews will bring this loving couple back in future reads.

-- Contessa Scion, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

Loving Lola is a fun, erotic read. The word sparring between Marcus and Lola had me hooked from page one... If you're looking for a fast, sweet, fun and sexy read, pick up a copy of *Loving Lola* and enjoy!

-- Luisa, *Cupid's Library Reviews*