

Love in a deadend town



**Dee's
Desire**

LARAN MITHRAS

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By

Laran Mithras

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And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

~ 1 Corinthians 13:13

CHAPTER 1

Dead End. I live in Dead End, Nowhere, Nebraska. "No wait. You what?" Dee shook her head in disbelief. "You what? You can't; I need this job."

Charlie shook his head. "I'm sorry, Dee. But Dedren is a dying town. I get fewer calls for service every year."

She wrung her hands. She had worked for C and S Heating and Air Conditioning for almost twenty-five years. "But--"

"Look, you're a great employee, but Sheila and I just have to move with the times. We're moving to Sydney."

Her mouth fell open. Sydney. Everything was Sydney. The talk around Dedren was employment at the Walmart Super Center there. A forty-five minute drive for work was not an obstacle to some. "Sydney? Sydney? You said you and your daughter would never give up—"

"I have to think of Sheila." He paused and raised his eyebrows at her. "Of course..."

And there it was. Dee knew Charlie was offering again. He had wanted to marry her for some time. He had wanted her to be a wife to him and a mother to his daughter. The problem was, even though her own clock was fast ticking out at forty-three, Charlie was a slob. His potbelly was not attractive and even worse was his ever-present butt-crack rising out of his pants. Couldn't the guy even pull up his pants?

He wasn't done suggesting. "We could all of us move on. There's a better life in Sydney—"

She rose from the small desk that had been hers for so long. "Sydney, Sydney, Sydney! I don't want to give up for Sydney. What about California? What about Florida? What about some place with a view and beaches and—"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. Really. But I've already arranged a place and rented the moving van for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Is that why you booked nothing for today?"

He nodded.

"This is rather sudden." She sat back down and held up her hands in the air. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Call the two appointments I have for tomorrow and Friday. Postpone them to Monday and Tuesday."

She still held her hands in the air. "What am I supposed to do?" I will not cry.

"Make the calls. My offer..." He shrugged. "Or I'm sure you'll find something. Wasn't Devin hiring?"

Devin Blake was Dee's final hope. The handsome man owned Blake's Bar and Casino. Flush with enough money to live, he offered Dee the best hope for a secure life. And he's handsome. If he'll ever notice me. "I..." I can't work for the man I want to marry, right? "I don't want to work in a bar."

Charlie shrugged again. He glanced at his watch quickly and used it as a pretense to end the conversation. "Gotta go. I'll bring you an envelope later with your final pay."

She finally dropped her hands. Then her shoulders. Then her head.

Charlie was already out the door.

Dee heaved a sigh. What am I going to do? Dedren was just a flyspeck pitstop on Interstate 80 west of the Interstate 76 junction. Between Sydney to the west and Ogallala to the east, Dedren was a nothing town losing everything it had to both of the larger towns. There was a gas station here, a nice one, right off the Interstate. The restaurant struggled, barely making ends meet.

Occasionally big rigs would pull in for an overnigher, not wanting to use the truck stops. Though an annoyance at times, the truckers brought much needed cash into Dedren.

The grocery store was small and word around town was that Marcia wanted to close up shop. No one had the kind of money required to buy her inventory and run the store. Already, the shelves there were looking thin.

She pulled her cellphone out of her purse and pressed call for Gina Rovigatti.

"Hey Dee." Gina's voice was cheerful.

"Shit! I've been fired."

"You—"

Dee pulled the cell away from her ear. Noises on the other end were loud and painful: Gina had dropped the phone. She waited until all the banging and shuffling sounds abated. "Charlie's going to Sydney. Tomorrow. Gone."

"No way."

"I'm not fucking joking."

Gina's moan on the other end spoke of the realization of loss. "Oh, no..."

She wiped her eyes. No one lost their job in Dedren without having to pick up and move. There just wasn't anything else. Not anymore. "I don't know what to do..."

The door to the office opened.

She gave an exasperated laugh. "I guess I have a customer."

Gina's voice was quiet. "Sure. We still sitting at Blake's later?"

It was something she did almost every night with Gina. Sat, had a daiquiri, and hoped Devin Blake would finally notice her. "Of course. I'll see you there." Dee ended the call and regarded the unusual sight in her office.

A tall and thin black woman stood there, wringing her hands. She was very pretty, but the look on her face was all worry and stress. She appeared to be in her thirties, somewhere.

"Can I help you?" Dee said. Dedren had no black people. A truck driver once in

a while, but no black people lived in town.

The woman's hands wrung faster. "I... I was hoping to find a job—"

Dee burst out laughing, but not with mirth.

Confused, the black woman's face melted into a more serious hurt. "I just want to work—" Water around the eyes glistened.

She slapped her hand to her mouth and shook her head. "Oh, no. It's not that. I didn't mean to laugh at you. Please, sit." She motioned to the chair.

The woman looked and sat gratefully, even if she was only just perched on the edge of the chair. Ready to run, almost. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry for laughing. My name's Dee."

"I'm Felicia."

"Nice to meet you, I suppose. I just learned a few minutes ago I'm losing my job here. The doors are closing."

Felicia's face and voice softened. "Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

The bitterness came back. "Seems like everything is closing up in Dedren. What brings you here? Of all places?"

The woman wrung her hands even more but the movement could not contain the sudden quivering of her fingers. "It was the only place cheap enough where I could pay for a whole year's rent."

She giggled. "Dedren Estates?"

Felicia gave a quick nod.

"Well, the trailer park is where most of us live and I'm sure you made Walter a very happy man."

"Do you know of any place I could work? I have a daughter to feed."

Dee shook her head. "The only place in town that might be hiring is Blake's Bar

and Casino. He's mentioned hiring someone a few times but never put up a sign. You can ask there. Other than that, most of us here travel to Sydney for work. That's a forty-five minute drive."

Felicia nodded. "Thank you. I'll head to Blake's right now."

For a moment, Dee hesitated, wanting on one hand to dissuade the woman so as to protect her own avenue for employment. On the other hand, she knew she didn't want to work for the man she was trying to marry. She just didn't want to go that route. So she said nothing. She simply gave a nod and an encouraging smile. She wondered as the woman rose how someone could be so thin. Felicia didn't look like she was unhealthy, just one of those born a natural wisp of a woman. My hips are almost twice the size of hers. "Good luck over there."

Dee watched the woman leave and then went and stood at the glass-front door. Dead End. The joke had become reality for Deirdra "Dee" Butler.

Her mother and father were of no use; they were retired and traveling the country living out of their Winnebago. Her aunt still lived in town in the very house Dee had been raised. But the place held no memories for her except for that time she had found her second cousin by marriage, Sam, in a very compromising position.

~ ~ ~

Almost thirty years before...

Dee sat in the folding lawn chair looking at her plate. Barbecue sauce smears were all that remained. Food was not plentiful, but it was good. She had eaten her fill and at fourteen didn't require much on her stick-thin frame. Gangly and goofy-looking, the girl wished she would someday grow some boobs. I'll be flat-chested my whole life. This is bogus.

The barbecue was a special event. Aunt Mary had visited one day several months before and had met a local named Brent Stone, an aging widower. Today was their reception at the Butler residence. Milling around her house were people she didn't know. Or mostly didn't know. Brent was a man she had seen only occasionally even as small as Dedren was.

Brent's brother was there. He was a World War II veteran who was married to an old woman with an accent. They had a son late in life named Sam and she knew the boy from school. He had been a senior when she was a freshman. They lived just out of town to the north somewhere.

Dee let her mother take the plate from her.

The older woman leaned down. "Try to smile, dear."

She rolled her eyes. "Like, anyone cares."

That earned a poke.

She plastered on a fake smile that was more a grimace than anything else.

Her mom put fist to hip and raised an eyebrow at her.

With a sigh, Dee bounded up and headed for the house. The other people in the yard paid her no mind. I'll just go pop Wham into my Walkman and avoid everyone.

Aunt Mary passed eyes over her, but went back to chatting with the other people Dee found too dull to know.

Like, this is totally bogus. She passed into the house. It was cooler outside than in, but she didn't care. The yard was too small for anything but one tree and the food was being served under it. Sitting in the sun all day listening to old people pump their gums about work and politics made her want to gag.

She heard the creak of a chair in her father's office. Curious as to who would be snooping through his things, she tiptoed to the doorway. The door had been removed long before since it had never shut properly.

The sight made her freeze.

Sam, now eighteen, was in her father's chair. His pants were slid down a little and he had his penis in his hand. It was erect and standing straight up. His hand moved up and down on it, fast and furious. His breathing was ragged and he was sighing his moans low enough to avoid being heard. The air was thick with his breathing and smelled of barbecue and Doritos.

She was in the process of clapping hand to mouth, eyes wide, when she saw what made her want to really gag.

He was masturbating to her school picture.

She gagged and coughed. Eww, gross. Like totally gross! She turned and ran for her room. She scurried, shaking her hands low and wide, as if trying to shake away filth. "Ewww..."

~ ~ ~

Dedren, 2015...

Dee turned back to her desk. She would need to pack very little. At forty-three, life had passed her by. Her best years were behind her. Thoughts of leaving Dedren had always flirted with her sensibilities, but she stayed with her folks. She stayed with her friends. Years rolled by and went faster the longer she stayed. Now it was too late to leave.

Start life over in Sydney? Shit.

She dropped into her chair. She still looked good, even if she was no longer all gangly like a teenager. Her hips had widened a little and her thighs thickened up. She had finally grown some almost okay boobs, but they had served her little purpose. A quick grope here and there or being mauled under a grunting Ditch Jenkins before he had ditched her and left town was nothing she could call a success. She remained single and not by much choice.

It was just a few hours later when Charlie returned with her envelope.

He even looked sorry. "You made those calls?"

She couldn't look at him – just took her envelope. "Yes."

"Any new ones?" He asked every time he came in.

She supposed she would wonder the same in his place. Any new business? Any way we can eke out a living in this corpse of a town? "No."

He sighed. "Sheila and I..." He left it unsaid.

And she knew what he was offering, again. But she had made clear to him he just wasn't her type. It didn't dissuade him from trying, but he was at least diplomatic about it. He had never tried to force or take advantage of her. "I know."

And with that, Dee reached her dead end. Exiting the small office, she approached her car at work for the last time. I need to get drunk. Or something.

CHAPTER 2

Dee's trailer was a single-wide, rented from Walter. She showered as she did every day, twice every day – once before work and once after. She wanted to be fresh for Devin.

She entered the old thing and sighed. The plastic cuckoo clock on the wall read seventeen minutes after three. But it had for many years now. It was battery-operated and batteries were expensive. Her carpet was old and worn down, probably the original carpet from the 1960s. She didn't have many things and didn't spend a lot of money shopping that she didn't have. The end table was missing a leg and held up by some books.

She had a credit card and was still paying off the computer she had bought six years ago. She had a little over two hundred dollars left to pay it off and the machine was already hopelessly outdated. She made do with it, just as she made do with all that she owned. Her wardrobe was all similar: jeans and simple button-up shirts from the sale racks at Walmart. She owned two ankle-length skirts so she could hide her slightly thick legs. She chose one of them and set it on the single bed.

I am so glad I never got fat. She thought this every time she squeezed into the small trailer shower. She bumped elbows in the thing if she wasn't careful. At least it was fast to clean.

Showered and refreshed, she brushed out her hair to help it dry. Wavy but going gray, her hair framed a plain face that held little of interest except large eyes. She had been referred to as "cute" and "pretty," but never as beautiful.

She didn't bother with make-up; she didn't own any. Nope, too expensive. But would make-up make a difference? Would hair dye help? She blew out a breath at her image in the small bathroom mirror. Old. Getting old. What if Devin wants someone young? He's probably too handsome for me. But she squared her shoulders, determined to catch the man she had wanted for so long. She told her mirror-self, "You'll get him."

~ ~ ~

Blake's Bar and Casino was the only two-story building in Dedren. Dee parked her car in the gravel lot that was now mostly dirt and weeds. The bar was an ugly cinderblock building covered over by cracked plaster. But Devin Blake paid for painters every five years to keep the place looking marginally fresh. He did not repair the cracked plaster, though.

She saw Gina's car parked near the street exit. Her friend always liked to be out if she wanted to leave. Dee suspected a car on the corner provided less privacy for someone too drunk to use the interior restroom and she suspected Gina was right. Having to step over vomit on occasion made her wonder how many times she had stepped through someone's pee.

Gross.

The jukebox sounds drifted out, playing some crappy rap song. She hated rap. The difference in musical talent between her time in high school and now was breathtakingly depressing. Who likes this shit? She entered the bar through the heavy tin-plated door.

The usuals were there: several men and women who had nothing else to do in life living in Dedren. The only men that ever stood out to her as a curiosity were the married ones. Why were they here? They had a wife and home. Why spend it in a bar?

She understood Brittany hanging around. The big-titted blonde mooched off anyone she could blow. She had earned the quiet nickname, "Bathroom Brit." Gina was texting someone on her phone. Probably her father in Sydney. Even her father had given up where Gina had not.

Her friend said, "Hey."

Dee sat and looked at the cheap restaurant table with wonder. It was round, as

was the style from fifty years before. It wasn't the age that made her look twice; no, she was used to it without thinking about it. What caught her attention was the lack of rag smears. Devin was not too caring about how they looked. He wiped them with a dirty rag and went on about serving drinks.

She looked over at Devin behind the bar. He was chatting with Brittany.

Gina touched her arm and pointed.

Following her finger, she saw Felicia in the corner, wiping down a chair.

"Wow," she said. "I guess she got the job." In a way, she was disappointed.

"You know her?" Gina's eyes were wide. But they still didn't balance out her wide mouth. While not unattractive, her friend's mouth was just too wide for her face. Not that Dee would ever say anything.

"She was the one who came in while we were on the phone. Looking for a job." She laughed.

"Here? In Dedren?"

"Yeah, that's about what I said."

Gina raised her eyebrows. "I thought you'd cave one day and take it yourself." She meant the job here.

Dee blew a breath through pursed lips and rolled her eyes. "I like being here, but I would never want to work here. Mopping up spills and who knows what else? No thanks."

"Tell me about it. I find the grossest things at the diner."

She shook her head. "I don't want to know."

Her friend flashed a smile. "At least the tables will be clean now."

Devin caught her eye with a raised head. "Daiquiris?"

She called back over the shitty rap sounds, "Please." She gave him what she thought was her best smile, but he was already turning to make the drinks.

Gina leaned forward. "He'll make a wonderful husband. He's so handsome."

"Yeah. Someday."

"I'm still waiting for my billionaire."

Dee laughed. "Oh come on."

"What? I know there's one for me."

She had never really criticized her friend before about this silly billionaire fantasy of hers, but tonight, with the loss of her job, she was at her wit's end. "Have you ever seen a billionaire?"

"What? Sure, on TV."

"And you believe everything you see on TV?"

"They wouldn't be on TV if they didn't exist."

"It's all made up, Gina."

Her friend frowned. "Oh, I know all that. I meant the billionaires exist even if the TV is all fantasy."

"But that's just it. Have you ever seen a billionaire? Go out and pick up a Forbes or Money magazine when they put out their lists and take a look at what you're waiting for."

"Huh?"

Dee leaned across the table as Devin approached with their drinks. "I mean that there are no twenty-seven year-old billionaires running around."

"Of course there are. I've read plenty of books about them."

Dee rolled her eyes in her best remembrance of her high school years. "Sure, and they all fly their own private jets while wearing no shirts and have two hundred and ten-pack abs that ripple constantly." She moved back for her drinks.

Devin's rich and warm voice greeted them. "Here you go, ladies."

Dee batted her eyelashes at him and said, "Thanks, Devin. You're so sweet."

He gave them a wink and retreated.

Dee sighed.

Her friend said, "Don't worry, girl. Keep at it."

"I don't know. Sometimes I think my chances with him are about as far out there as your billionaire fantasy."

Gina leaned over the table while toying with her drink. "Someday, my billionaire is going to walk right through that door."

She laughed while raising her drink. "Yeah, right here in the middle of Dead End, Nebraska."

"I'm serious. Those billionaires are always riding into some small town and sweeping the woman off their feet."

"Like I said, have you ever seen a billionaire? They're all eighty years old and very not-handsome."

Gina was waving her hand as if shooing a fly away. She sipped her drink. "Plenty of twenty-seven year olds and there's one out there with my name on him."

She took a drink of her own. "Do you know how long it takes to make money? And at twenty-seven he would be five years at the most out of college? So just to be a billionaire he would have to make two hundred million per year? I wonder if that's net or gross?"

Gina was frowning again. "Happens all the time."

"It takes time to make a business grow. So if he had a million to dump into it in the first place, he would still have to make two hundred times his investment every single year right away. And then doesn't that mean his company is a billion dollar company? I mean, he would have business expenses and all that. You don't just make billions because you pout and have rippling abs."

"What?"

"It takes money to make money."

"Yeah, so?"

Dee sipped again and looked around at the other patrons. "So to even make two hundred times your money every year until you're that magical bad-boy twenty-seven, you would have to have been born a millionaire."

"I hear all the time how they start as orphans—"

Dee's laughter silenced her. "Those are romance fantasies. Orphans don't work their way through college working at Pizza Hut as a delivery driver and graduate a millionaire to make their big investment."

Gina looked uncomfortable.

She shook her head and reached for the bowl of nuts. Devin kept a small bowl on each table. Someone had told her once it kept people thirsty so they would order more.

Her friend scowled. "You don't know how long those have been sitting there."

She coughed in indignation and popped a few in her mouth.

"Besides, they're probably salted with chemical sodium and cooked in soy or canola oil."

Dee nodded. "You know, you're such a Debbie-downer." But she knew her friend was right. Over several years, her big-mouthed friend had been a health nut, telling her horrid stories about food and the even more horrible effects on the body. "You're so smart when it comes to food. Why do you have such silly blinders about men?"

"Billionaires know all about food and they often look at what a woman buys for groceries to judge her inner worth."

Dee rubbed her brow.

"My billionaire will recognize me for who I am right away."

"Girl, what twenty-seven year old is going to go for a forty-one year—"

"I'm thirty-nine."

She snorted. "And holding."

"I'll keep up on hair dye, too. Billionaires don't like seeing..." Her eyes went to Dee's hair.

"Don't worry; I'm not going for a billionaire."

Gina looked embarrassed. "Well, that's a good thing, then." She glanced again at her hair.

The jukebox went silent.

"Thank goodness," Dee said.

Her friend pursed her lips. "Well..."

She turned and looked. "Oh no."

Sam was leaning over the jukebox. He had grown older over the years - since the masturbation encounter in her father's home office - and just a bit taller. He was lean and wore worn-out clothing. His hair had lightened some and was going gray.

"Why don't you tell me about it?"

"I can't, really."

Careless Whisper began playing.

Gina looked him over. "He looks like a nice, clean guy."

Dee shook her head. "You know, I used to love Wham." She finished her drink and got up.

Her friend looked at her. "Tomorrow?"

She nodded. She would look on the internet at Nebraska job listings, hitting refresh all day to see if anything popped up close by. She knew, though, that she was facing lottery odds at finding a job close to Dedren.

Her friend's smile split her face. "See you tomorrow then."

Dee's approach to the bar to pay her tab was intercepted by Felicia.

"You're the nice lady that told me about this job."

She gave the woman a smile. "Yes. I'm glad you found something because there just isn't anything in Dedren."

"Thank you. Dee, was it?"

"Yes."

A hand went to her arm, gripping and almost desperate. "Really. Thank you." The hand went away.

Not sure how to respond, she tried a smile and nod. Then she went to pay her bill.

Sam was sitting at the bar and glanced at her. He came in three times a week - on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday - to have a beer. A single beer. He did not say anything to her. He had tried many years back, but she had felt dirty afterward.

She placed her glass on the bartop and fished through her purse.

He went back to sipping his beer.

She put three dollar bills down and waved to Devin.

Coming down the stairs at the side of the bar were Devin's friends. Upstairs had once been a private pool room but Devin had stopped offering it years before. He now used it as just another private room together with his apartment above the place.

Rogan, Garth and Tucker were considered the most handsome men in Dedren. Rogan wore his hair slicked back and always smelled clean. He treated Dee as if

she were a barfly. Garth was a bad boy motorcycle rider who had eyes for Brittany. Tucker was a well-formed hunk who was the only one of the three who ever paid attention to Dee.

The nice man winked deep blue eyes at her. "Hey there, Dee. Leaving already?"

She sighed. Why was the only nice one already married? "Yeah. I need to hit the job listings tomorrow. Charlie and his daughter are caving and moving to Sydney."

Tucker stopped in his tracks. "No shit? That's another business that bites the dust."

She laughed. "Please don't start that dumb song; it'll be stuck in my head all night." She knew though, that Careless Whisper would be stuck in her head. The song was just ending.

"What are you going to do?" Tucker came close.

She put her back to Sam; the conversation definitely did not include him. "I don't know. I really don't want to go work at Walmart."

He tilted his head. "They actually pay very well."

"It's a forty-five minute drive."

"You wouldn't move there?"

She fiddled with her purse. "I don't want to leave Dedren. And start all over. I'm too old to start all over." She hoped Devin was listening.

But Devin was not.

CHAPTER 3

Dee left the bar and spent a quiet night at home searching the job listings. All three that weren't in Sydney were United States Army listings. She was too old for the army. Even the listings in Sydney were very thin. Nursing assistants, medical records, hospital administrators – what the fuck? Was everyone sick? Was that all there was left in America was job opportunities treating an ever-growing population of the sick?

Maybe Gina is right. Maybe it was all deliberate. Huge money went into "health care," not prevention. Billions and billions were made off a single prescription. Doctors, Gina had told her, were good for mending broken bones, stitching up a cut, and giving a certain few of the many vaccines. Otherwise, all they did was push prescriptions that caused a whole range of side effects that ended up requiring more prescriptions to "treat" but never solve the problem.

Health slavery.

Dee didn't want to be a slave and neither did she want to work around sick people who were nothing but health-slaves to the system.

She blew out a breath. Walmart.

But she reserved her decision for later.

The following day brought nothing new to the job listings. She sat in her chair the entire day, searching, refreshing the listings, and even looking at some kind of personal business she could run. For twenty-five thousand dollars she could get twenty vending machines pre-placed selling candy.

Who buys candy from a machine anymore?

She didn't have twenty-five thousand dollars. Even then, she might only barely eke out a living doing it and living off the proceeds. But there weren't twenty places in Dedren that could support the machines – which meant she would have to travel. Gasoline would eat her income.

Great. The light began to dim and she got up from the computer after a fruitless day of searching. I'll grab a newspaper at the gas station before heading to Blake's. Some employers reserved their listings for the old fashioned method.

Having cleaned up, she put on jeans and a simple blouse. She didn't feel all too optimistic about the day. Why doesn't Devin like me more? He winks and smiles, but never goes further. Is he afraid? Should I make more of an effort? But she didn't feel much like making an effort. Not tonight, anyways.

Her 2011 Chevrolet Cruze had another seven months to go to pay off. She had no savings to speak of; she would need to do something quick or she would lose the car. And so close to paying it off.

She grabbed two of the papers at the gas station – one for Ogallala and the other for Sydney. She liked Sydney better, even if Ogallala had its quaint little historical area. Sydney lacked pretension.

Behind the counter, Tom Clarks gave her a sympathetic frown. "Papers aren't a good sign." Everyone in town knew, buying a newspaper was generally not a good sign.

She felt the weight of her life on her. "No. Not here. It's the sign of doom, isn't it?" Hurrying from the well-stocked mart, she tried not to run. Tried not to look like she was running from her problems. But she wanted to. In that moment, she knew she would have to leave Dedren, eventually. And sooner rather than later. There's nothing for me here, anyways. Except for Gina and she's a phone call away no matter where I live.

Resolved at the change of heart and feeling as if a weight had been shifted, she drove to Blake's. Thursday was not a big day at the bar, though the casino patrons – all three regulars – were there no matter what day it was. One was a welfare disability gal named Marcia and the other two were senior citizens: Roger and Oscar. They never paid anyone any mind.

Inside the bar area, Brittany was already in place, sipping her water. She would offer blowjobs for drinks later. She gave Dee a dirty look that said she thought Dee was disgusting. Or competition. A couple of the older patrons were there, too, talking about the good old days. Felicia was polishing bottles and waved to her with an almost cheery smile.

She sat at the table she and Gina usually used and checked her messages. Her friend had texted that she would be along soon.

Devin was at the bar, mixing a drink. He looked at her a few times. It was the reason she and Gina had chosen this very table: she could see Devin and her friend could watch the door for her mythical billionaire.

Should I just give up? Devin doesn't want me. In all these years—

Devin was approaching with a daiquiri for her. That was unusual; he normally waited for Gina to arrive before offering to make one.

She wasn't sure what to say. "Oh, thanks. I guess I can have an early one." She looked up into his smoky eyes and her words dried up. She wanted him like she had wanted no other man. But he had never gone beyond a look or a smile.

He put the drink down in front of her. "No charge." His voice was soft.

"No? But—"

He pursed his lips. "I heard about C and S. Damned shame. Your drinks tonight are on the house. If..."

What? Wait, what? "If...?"

"How would you like to join me tomorrow night upstairs in the pool room. Relax after we close? I'd like to include you in my circle."

To be invited up to where Devin only invited his friends was a shock to Dee even if she had been hoping for it for years. A quick thrill raced through her. She breathlessly said, "Oh, sure. I'd... I'd love to."

He reached out and did something he had not done before. He gave her forearm a squeeze. The touch sent a shiver through her.

She watched him walk back to the bar, all sexy-like as she fought the urge to pass out. Wow, after all this time? Me? Finally?

Gina's arrival several minutes later was barely registered. Dee was flying high with anticipation.

Her friend coughed. "You started without me? Well, I guess I can't blame you. Any luck in the job search?" Her tone said she expected nothing optimistic.

She leaned toward Gina. "You won't believe this. I got invited up to the poolroom. To be included in his circle of friends."

Her friend's eyes went so large they almost matched her mouth. "No way."

"Yes, really."

"No way."

"Way. Shut up." Dee giggled.

Gina wriggled in her seat as if trying to contain her joy. "Wow, that's awesome. I'm so happy for you."

Devin called from the bar. "Gina? Daiquiri?"

"Please." She turned back to Dee. "What about the jobs?"

She downed the rest of her drink. "Nothing. I guess I'll have to look at Walmart."

Her friend nodded silently.

"But, I'll go Monday and see about a position."

Devin delivered Gina's daiquiri and scooped up Dee's empty glass. "Be right back," he said.

She blushed. "Thank you."

Gina raised an eyebrow at her. "You're going to get trashed."

"So?"

"Nothing wrong with that. Just saying."

"Don't I deserve it?"

"Maybe you do."

~ ~ ~

Dee floated high on a cloud of euphoria that night and the next day. She had not gotten trashed, but she had laughed and smiled like she hadn't in a long time.

Friday morning she looked through the newspapers. About the only difference between the net listings and the papers were a couple of hotel laundry jobs in Ogallala. Yuck. Even then, the lack of offerings couldn't ruin her mood. Having made up her mind the previous day to seek employment in Sydney, she felt the better for it.

Monday would be the first step in a new life. No, the second step. Tonight I finally get included in Devin's circle.

She spent the day making sure she looked her best. No stray hairs, no facial hair, and she even shaved her pussy. Thoughts that he might eventually touch her there had her idly toying with her clit and wondering what he would finally be like in bed. Her dream man. She was careful not to abuse herself and reluctantly stopped – saving it for later. If. Selecting one of her long skirts and a white blouse, she dressed for the evening.

She made the drive to Blake's a half hour early; she could not contain herself any longer. She entered, almost fearful, wondering if life was going to play a cruel joke on her and have Devin laugh and snatch away his offer.

But she was put at ease almost immediately. Devin gave her a big smile and a wink that promised more later.

You devious bastard; you hid your like for me all this time? She went up to the bar. Brittany was there, twirling her water glass. "No luck so early in the afternoon, huh, Brit?"

The blonde gave her a dirty look. "It's Brittany."

"Cheer up, it's Friday. I'm sure you can get a couple guys to buy you drinks after

you..." She let her voice trail off.

The blonde's eyes bulged and her lips drew together.

Devin came over, interrupting them. "Daiquiri now? Or later?"

"Now is fine, thanks."

He moved away to make it.

Brittany leaned over. "No one wants your fat ass."

Fat? My ass is not fat! "No one wants your saggy tits – that's why you have to blow for drinks. Better go get bolt-ons—"

"What?" Her feigned outrage almost sounded real. She thrust out her chest. "You wish you had these."

"I don't need them and wouldn't want them. They look lumpy and gross."

Brittany's eyes drew down. "I always thought you were a bitch. That's why you'll never get a guy."

Dee slowly turned her head to the blonde. She raised her eyebrows and slitted her eyes. Quietly she said, "Have you ever been invited up to the pool room?"

The woman scrutinized her with searching eyes. Finally she faced forward, her shoulders jerking forward one after the other as if walking fast. Her head wagged and she grabbed her glass.

Devin handed her the drink and gave her another wink.

Without another word to Bathroom Brit, she turned and headed for her table.

Felicia was mopping the floor, moving the handle easily back and forth. But it was a damp mop – not the wet one used in the evenings after closing.

Dee almost stepped in the dampness. "Oh, sorry."

Startled out of whatever thoughts she was enduring, Felicia looked around wildly for a second. "What? What?" She looked at Dee and then the floor. "Oh.

Oh, sorry. No worries, honey. You go right ahead. Just making sure the place is all nice for tonight." She gave Dee a brilliant white smile that only added to the dark woman's beauty.

"Thanks." She still tried to step as little as possible in the dampness.

Gina's arrival was early; Dee was not yet done with her first drink. "Excited, huh, Dee?"

She nodded. "You bet."

"Seen any billionaires come in?"

"Four. They left early."

Gina slapped her playfully on the arm. "Bad girl."

"They said they were going to check the bars in Ogallala." The twinkle in her eye was not lost on Gina.

"Don't make me spank you."

She giggled.

Devin brought fresh daiquiris and left after another smoky smile.

Gina smiled and shook her head at his retreating form. "If he was a billionaire..."

"You stop that right now. He's mine."

Her friend looked back at her with wicked deeds in her eyes.

Dee fumed. "Stop that or it will be me spanking you."

Gina giggled.

Dee leaned close. "I told Bathroom Brit she needed bolt-ons to get a guy."

Her friend sat back, clapped a hand to mouth and squeaked. "You what?"

"She was giving me a dirty look; I had to say something."

"She gives all the women dirty looks."

"Well, why should I have to put up with it?" Dee firmed her mouth and lifted her chin.

"Uh oh."

Dee looked to the door expecting to see some billionaire coming to sweep Gina off her feet. Sam had come in and was approaching the bar. "Huh?"

Gina leaned close. "Brit started primping."

She snorted. "Over him?"

Her friend coughed. "She'll blow anyone for a drink."

"Him?" She repeated.

Gina slowly turned her face to Dee. "Enough. You're going to tell me what it is between you two or I'm going to go tell Devin you have VD."

Dee's mouth dropped open with shock and outrage. "You wouldn't..."

"Spill, girl." She folded her arms.

CHAPTER 4

Dee sighed. "Fine. But let's get this straight. This story goes nowhere beyond you and me."

Gina grinned. "That juicy, huh?"

"No, not at all. It's just embarrassing."

Gina gave her an eyebrow.

"Back when I was fourteen I found him playing with himself."

"Ooo, kinky."

Dee coughed. "No, it was gross. He was all feverish and everything—"

"Sounds nice."

"Would you shut up? It was yucky. He was doing it to my school picture."

Gina's laugh was quiet, but rapid and filled with fun. "What's so bad about that?"

"He was my cousin."

Gina's face dropped. "What? He was? What are you talking about?"

Dee sighed with frustration. "My aunt married his uncle."

Gina looked up and to the side, her head moving. "So he's your... step cousin?"

"Or cousin-in-law or something like that. Yes."

"I didn't know you two were related."

"Well, we aren't anymore. My aunt was dumped for an eighteen year old and they got divorced."

"Dumped for an eighteen year old?"

"Yeah, then the guy dies of a heart attack while she's riding him a year later. She's supposedly nutty as a loon now."

Gina's eyes went wide. "Oh, oh! Old man Stone!"

Dee nodded.

"I remember that." Gina's face was filled with wonder. "I had forgotten..."

"Who wants to remember something so dumb? Anyway? We're related."

"You are not."

She blew out a breath. "We were at the time."

Gina's laugh was pure scoff. "What, like step second-cousin in-laws?"

"It was gross." Why doesn't she get this?

"Sounds kind of hot to me. What did his thing look like?"

"Gina!" Dee almost shouted it.

Her friend was looking sideways and poked her. With a head motion, she indicated the bar.

Brittany was hitting on Sam.

Sam was leaning away from her, protecting his single beer.

Dee rolled her eyes. "She'll go after anything."

"Think she'll get him in the bathroom?"

"Probably?"

Gina looked doubtful. "I don't know. Look." She pointed with her chin.

Bathroom Brit was wriggling her boobs in Sam's direction and he was shaking

his head.

Her friend mused. "Brit doesn't often get turned down. Blowjob for a drink. That's pretty cheap."

Sam was leaning almost to fall off his stool. He was shaking his head vigorously and even added in a hand like a traffic cop.

Gina's voice was wistful. "I think he's cute. Too bad he wasn't a billionaire."

Dee shook her head. "You'd want a billionaire who masturbated over my picture?"

"Sure. He could masturbate for me."

She said nothing in return. Actually, that does sound kinda nasty.

Brittany finally gave up and went back to her stool two places away.

Sam straightened and then looked into the mirror behind the bar – right at Dee.

~ ~ ~

Dee looked down quickly, trying to hide that she had been watching.

Gina kicked her lightly. "Hey, what's wrong with this picture?"

"Hmm?"

She jerked her thumb at the jukebox. "Wham ain't on."

"Life is full of small pleasures."

"Unusual for him, isn't it?"

"Who cares?"

"I think you're too hard on him."

"We're sort of related."

"Not anymore you're not."

"Of course we are—"

"If your aunt got divorced you're not."

"Oh, whatever." Dee gave up, though she knew Gina was technically right.

Devin came and replaced drinks.

Sam got up without any further looks, paid his tab, and walked to the door.

Rogan strolled in just as Sam was leaving and they exchanged greetings.

Garth came in with Tucker a half hour later. Tucker looked her way and gave her a big smile.

Gina shook her head. "That one flirts with danger, I tell ya."

"Hmm?"

"He's married and smiling at other women?"

"Yeah..."

"Do that here in Dedren and women can end up dead."

"Too many women and not enough real men. I know it." But no one had ever been murdered in Dedren in their memory. Four suicides, but no murders.

"I wonder if Carla knows he flirts and puts up with it, or isn't even aware?"

"All I know is that I wouldn't want to be her. That's what makes Devin so special; he never flirts."

"But now?" Gina gave her a grin. "Tonight's the big night?"

Dee shrugged. "I don't know. I get to be with him and his friends. It's a start, I guess."

"Gotta start somewhere. The ball is finally rolling for you now."

She blew air out between her lips. "Shh, yeah. Now I just need to go get a job at Walmart on Monday."

"At least the pay will be better than C and S."

"But the drive..."

"Get over it."

She heaved a deep sigh. The rum in the drink was relaxing her nicely. "Yeah, I suppose. I just never wanted to give up on Dedren."

Gina tilted her head. "You didn't give up. Dedren gave up on you."

~ ~ ~

Dee's heart raced in anticipation of closing a half hour before it came. She was happily buzzed and feeling no pain. No pain at all.

She and Gina had laughed hard three times that Friday night as Bathroom Brit had gone into the restrooms with a guy in tow and followed them out moments later daintily wiping at her lips. Three men went home relieved and Brittany received three free drinks. She vamped and strutted with a look towards Dee and Gina as if she knew they were watching.

Gina shook her head. "You'd think she was proud of herself."

"I think she is."

Tucker came by the table and pulled over a chair. "I hear you're joining us

tonight?" His smile said he approved.

Dee blushed. "I guess so."

He raised a fresh beer. "Well, I'm glad Devin finally invited you."

Gina said, "Pardon me, but I think I'll head out now and avoid the rush."

Dee shrugged. Ten people leaving all at once from the parking lot made nothing more than a couple-minute nuisance. But sometimes people stood around and chatted while blocking the exit. She supposed when you really wanted to get home, you didn't want to sit in your car while three drunk men gave their opinions about the latest superbowl. "Okay, I'll be here tomorrow night."

Gina faked a kiss. "See you then." She briefly squeezed Dee's arm.

Tucker looked pensive. "I didn't mean to scare off your friend."

"Oh, come on. She always leaves early."

"I'm sorry about C and S."

Dee sighed. "Yeah, well..."

"What are you going to do?"

"Drive to Walmart, Monday."

He nodded. "I hear the pay is good."

"Somebody told me once it was all slave labor."

He chuckled. "Nah. The pay is above minimum wage and they have structured raises. For that kind of position, the pay is really good. It's not the pay of a brain surgeon, but if you wanted that kind of pay you'd be a brain surgeon, not working for Walmart."

That made sense to her. "I suppose that's true."

"Besides, if you really want an office job based on your skills, then look around Sydney in your off time. Knock on a few doors. You might find something with

slightly better pay for what you're used to doing."

Yes, actually that sounds like a great plan – especially since I've already committed to driving to Sydney for work. "That's an awesome idea. Thanks." She leaned back a little and shot a look to the bar. While appreciative and pleased with Tucker's suggestion, she did not want it to appear to Devin that she was flirting with the man. She changed the subject. "So how's Carla?"

He smiled. "Oh, you know."

I'm sure that put his male mind back on track if he was thinking of flirting. Married men are so easy to handle. "How're her recipes doing?" Carla sold her recipes online and spent a lot of time pushing them.

He gave a quick shrug. "I think it pays for the internet, but she likes doing it, so..."

"And your business?" She always wondered how he supported his family doing odd jobs for people."

"Really good. No competition. Need something fixed or hauled away? I'm the man."

She shook her head. "I just never thought twenty or thirty bucks here and there could add up."

"It's more than that. Some of the light construction work I do is where the real money is. Twenty is only for hauling something away and that doesn't include the dump fees. And? It's all under the table."

"You don't pay taxes?"

He grinned. "Haven't since I started and that's been twenty-two years now?"

"Wow." She laughed and shook her head again. "I wish I could get away with that."

"Not everyone can." He got up. "See you in a few."

She watched him walk to the restrooms and then looked over at Devin. He was

busy cleaning up the bartop and putting glasses in the hot soak. Felicia was cleaning tables and bringing empty bottles and glasses to the bar.

The last few minutes ticked slower to close. She got up to use the restroom herself and make sure she was fresh. As she looked in the mirror she wished for a split second she indulged in make-up. A bit of lipstick would make her pale lips stand out a bit more. Am I going to get kissed tonight? Or is Devin just as slow making something more of a friendship as he was in inviting me in the first place?

She toyed with the idea of unbuttoning one of the buttons on her blouse. No, I don't want to overdo anything. Getting invited is the first step – I don't need to ruin it by acting like Brit. She left the bathroom.

Brit had already left; the blonde bimbo knew she would get no more drinks this night. Too many women in town. The men had their pick and none of them wanted a blonde who would blow anyone and everyone. They used her mouth and were happy to dump their loads between her lips. But that's all she was good for. No man in town wanted to marry her.

Garth waved at her with his calloused hand. Then he jerked his head with a smile. Towards the stairs to the poolroom.

She glanced at the clock. It was closing time and Devin was quietly herding the few remaining people out the door.

Felicia was cleaning and drying glasses from the soak sink.

For a moment, the scene seemed surreal – something different from opening hours. The bar seemed to take on a lonely look without the regulars in it.

She followed the bad-boy Garth up the stairs as Devin began shutting down the four casino machines.

CHAPTER 5

Dee knew there was a poolroom up here behind the always-closed door, but had never seen it. It was a total man-cave. Unlit neon signs hung in every space on the wall that wasn't otherwise occupied with beer posters and old tins. The pool table was old and the leather couch well-used. A card table was in the corner and a mini-bar in the other. A small refrigerator from the fifties hummed away next to the minibar. A small stereo set sat on the shelves behind the bar.

Though it seemed as if designed for a man's comfort, she immediately felt at ease. The room was old and comfortable with no bad smells or cluttered mess. If Devin didn't have new things, he had well-cared for old ones. I could get to like that in a man.

Garth turned and grinned. His handsomely weathered face from years on a motorcycle was easy to look at and easier to like. "I'm not sure what we're all going to talk about now. Somehow I don't think football is going to be the top of the list." He winked.

"Oh, is that what you guys do up here?"

"Talk about sports? Nah. We play pool. Have a drink or two and relax. Talk about the town." He turned serious on the last part. "We used to talk about some big company rolling in one day and setting up a huge factory – something to revive and employ us. But that kind of died on the vine."

"The talk?"

He leaned back against the pool table. "The hope. We don't even have a mayor. Sydney and Ogallala can make all kinds of deals we can't. What company would come here?"

"Is there really any hope for us?"

He pursed his lips and shook his head. One lock of his light-brown hair swung loose. "Nah. The years and the times have passed us by long ago. One gas

station and a restaurant ain't gonna support us."

Footsteps came up the stairs and Tucker came into the poolroom.

She said, "What did? I don't remember much of anything being here, even when I was a teenager."

"What are we talking about?" Tucker looked curious. "Sports teams? We never had one."

Garth scratched his jaw. "Nah, business-life." He looked back to Dee. "Maybe before you were born the town supported the gas station and the walnut-pickers."

"What? Walnut pickers?"

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder as if to point out the obvious. "Go up the north route some and you had a few walnut growers. But the big growers association took all that over and they send in pickers. Many even from out of state down Colorado way."

Colorado was close. "Why there? Why not Nebraskans?"

Tucker snorted. "Immigrant labor. Ten bucks an hour stuff."

Dee's eyes went wide. "There are a lot of people that would like ten bucks an hour."

"The growers don't care. The association can tell the immigrants where to go and they don't have to pay expenses."

Devin and Rogan came up the stairs last, each carrying a couple drinks. Devin Blake, devilishly handsome and delightful, let the door shut on its sprung hinge behind him.

For once in her life, Dee felt important. She felt as if she was in on the workings of the town and had a hand in making decisions. She knew she didn't, really, but she felt it. She had just learned more background on Dedren than she had learned her entire life. Despite the dizzying effect of the daiquiris, she pondered her position at this point in Dedren's long demise. Would anything we do ever reverse it?

Devin came to her and handed her a final daiquiri for the night. "Boring talk about the town?"

"Thank you," she said, taking the glass. "No, I'm finding it fascinating. I didn't know we used to be a picker-town."

He nodded as if to dismiss it. "But we aren't any longer. Talking about the past doesn't help our future."

She sipped her drink while the men took their drinks. She wanted to make a connection to her man. "What do you think we should do? About our future?"

He smiled. His teeth were nice and straight and clean. The sparkle in his eye was playful. "Nothing. We need to take what we can here and enjoy life." He stepped close to her.

Her heart began to pound.

He lifted a curled finger to her chin and gently raised it. "I think all of us need to find a happiness here and make the best of what we've been dealt."

She looked up into those dark eyes, so bright and shining. "We do?"

He stepped closer and his words were quiet – between her and him. "We all heard about C and S. I felt so bad for you. Sweet Dee."

Her heart fluttered wildly; she couldn't speak. He was so close...

"All of us agreed to bring you up. That made me very happy."

What? Like it's a club or something? Unanimous vote? But those thoughts were swept away in a rushing tide of wild emotion as he leaned even closer and took her in his arms. Yes!

He clutched her to him, warmly.

Her body tingled, numb from the rum, happy from the daiquiris, and thrumming to the hug. She inhaled his clean scent - his manly cleanliness - and knew she had finally won her man.

He said, "We want you up here with us." He slackened his hold, signaling the end of the hug.

She let her arm slide down his – her other still held her drink. How did I manage not to drop it? She took a strong gulp.

Devin took the glass from her and indicated Rogan.

He stood near, head tilted, his look kind and caring. He held out his arms.

She paused for a second. "Oh." They all want to hug me. How nice. It did not escape her that Devin was the first.

Rogan hugged her briefly; it was warm and sensitive. Garth took his place and wrapped her in a bear-hug that almost lifted her off her feet. She giggled. One of his hands came up and cupped the back of her head, his fingers twining through her hair. "Welcome upstairs, Dee." He let go.

She was all smiles, embarrassed but happy.

Tucker was last, taking her up in a close hug that felt as if she melted into him. She could feel his body through her clothing and... Was that? Oh wow, he's excited. She could feel his male member hard and pressing against her pubic mound. Blushing, she started to pull back. What would Devin think? I don't want him to think I'm some slut.

But Devin was right behind her. His lips came to her ear and his hot breath sent chills up and down her spine. He whispered, "Let him hug you. I want it."

"Y-You do?" Her heart, racing before, now thundered out of control in her chest.

"Yes." His fingers brushed her ear as he pulled away.

Tucker pulled her back in and hugged her again.

She felt Devin's fingers trail along her neck on the other side, soothing her. Well, I guess a hug is fine.

Tucker moaned happily, nuzzling her neck.

Dee's body responded on its own, vibrating from within to the first intimate hug in over a decade. Has it really been that long? She felt him press his bulge against her and she involuntarily sighed. It felt so good she couldn't help it. Then she felt his kisses against her neck. A cascade of liquid heat ran down her body and created a warmth and pulsing in her pussy that she couldn't control. She gasped.

Devin's voice in her ear was pleased. "There's my beautiful Dee."

I've had way too much to drink. This actually feels good and that's not going to look good to Devin. She broke the hug and turned to her man.

He scooped her into his arm from the side and pulled her away from Tucker. He led her to the couch and they sat.

Rogan handed her the drink and he sat on the other side of her, several inches away.

Tucker and Garth set up a pool game.

Devin leaned close, but his words weren't low enough not to be heard by Rogan. "I understand you've had an eye for me for quite a while. I didn't know."

I knew I should have been more forward. "You didn't?"

Tucker and Garth moved around the table, taking shots and sipping their tumblers of rum.

He shook his head. "I've always admired your beauty from a distance – your control, poise and flair for friends. I was a very happy man when I was told."

I could have been with him sooner if I'd just been more forward!

"I'm glad, though, it was you and not someone like Brittany."

Oh shit, I'm glad I was not more forward.

"Tucker says you're thinking about Walmart?" He appeared concerned.

She nodded. "There's no other work."

"You won't be moving, will you?"

"I guess it depends..." On like if you ask me to marry you. "Rent here is cheap, but the drive..."

"Yes, I understand. Well, I hope you stay. I'd hate to lose you as a friend around here." His arm was around her shoulders, gently squeezing and reassuring.

They were outside the pool of light surrounding the billiards table, and in their own bubble of intimacy.

He said, "I hope you don't stop coming here."

"Anything, for you."

He went still and she saw a vein pulsing in his neck. His mouth was open, slightly, and his soft eyes penetrated hers. "You don't know how much it thrills me to hear you say that."

She finished off her daiquiri.

He motioned with a finger to her glass. "You want some rum? That's the liquor behind the daiquiri so you aren't mixing."

"Yes, I know." She felt happy. "Sure, I'll take a rum."

He got up and held out his hand.

She placed hers in it and was lifted up. He led her to the small bar. She leaned against it, on her elbows, and watched him pull up a bottle from below.

From behind her, arms gently wrapped around her and she felt the press of a man against her backside. It startled her and she leaned back up. Her breath caught in her throat – the press of his body felt very nice. She turned her head to the right, to look over her shoulder and Tucker's lips locked onto hers. She squawked and pulled her head back. She shot a fast glance at Devin.

He was pouring the drink. He gave her a wink and a nod. "It's okay," he said.

"What?"

He came around the bar and stood next to her, placing the drink down near her hand. "It's okay." His smile was filled with pleasure.

"It is?" She felt Tucker's hardness pressing between her butt cheeks through her skirt.

Devin's smile and his touch on her hand were reassuring.

But Tucker was gently pulling her chin towards him again and their lips met. The kiss became the center of her universe. The invasion of his tongue brought out all her heat from years of lost passion. She gave in, kissing him back.

She was turned around, not breaking the kiss. Tucker leaned into her, pressing aggressively. She could feel his manhood rubbing and pushing forcefully into the cleft of her legs. It's a good thing this bar is holding me up. Her head spun with delight and lust.

She trembled out of control until he broke the kiss.

Tucker's eyes were lidded with lust. "I've wanted to do that for a very long time." He let go and stood next to her at the small bar.

The words flattered her. Really? Me? But you're married. She tried to catch her breath. "What about Carla?" That should solve it.

Tucker leaned back close. His words were shaky. "Tonight is all about you."

She moved back a little. "Me?" She moved up against Devin, who was still right next to her. She looked back and forth.

Devin took her in a hug from behind, much like Tucker had.

This feels better.

His whispers in her ear sent more lust through her body. "Yes, tonight is about you. All about you."

She went quiet, closing her eyes. She felt warm and the lust worming in her body made her feel tense – in need of release.

His hands agitated the lust. They gripped her shoulders and then began sliding down her arms. They passed near her breasts and she felt her nipples harden. A moan escaped her lips. His hands didn't stop, but curved in beneath her heaving breasts and down her stomach.

She opened her mouth in shock, in surprise, and in satisfaction as his fingers traced down over her pubic mound and down her cleft. Yes, touch me. She parted her legs for him automatically. Yes, I still remember what to do. She leaned her head back against his shoulder and closed her eyes.

Devin moved his fingers back and forth over her crotch and then began curling. His hands began grabbing and pulling up her skirt.

Mmm, should I stop him? No way. She parted her legs even more.

He pulled the skirt all the way up, exposing her panties. Holding up the skirt with one hand, he reached down with the other and caressed her where she needed to be touched.

CHAPTER 6

Dee moaned with delight and desire. Devin's fingers felt so good moving up and down her clit. She opened her eyes, remembering Tucker standing there.

The handsome man was smiling down at what Devin was doing. He reached a hand to join in and she tensed.

Devin's whisper was soothing. "It's okay. Let him."

She wanted to ask if he was sure, but she never got to ask. Tucker's fingers were already adding to the pleasure, exploring and touching her where she desperately needed some attention. She had little control due to the rum and the years of desire; she moaned louder.

Hands were everywhere, more than she could count. She gasped at the sensations of being touched and caressed. She felt herself being moved. Then she felt the soft leather of the couch. All of them were there, sitting and kneeling next to her. Oh shit. I think this is what my mother would have wanted me to avoid.

But her half-started protestations turned to moans as hands ran up and down her legs and between them. Her panties were removed and she felt a momentary vulnerability – until those fingers began touching her pussy, her clitoris, and her center of need. She was pulled so that her feet were on the floor and her head bent up against the back of the couch. Her knees were moved apart and Tucker and Garth worked her pussy with their fingers.

She floated, spinning tighter and tighter with need and desire. Oh wow. Sorry, mom. This feels too good. Forgive me, but I'm an adult.

When Garth touched his tongue to her pussy, she was not prepared. Her eyes were closed and she hadn't known it was coming. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes bugged out in shock – and intense pleasure. No man or boy had ever licked her before. The feeling was so unashamedly good that she cried out in elation.

The wet and warm tongue moved over her in more sensuous ways than the fingers. But soon Garth added his fingers, moving them in and out of her pussy as he licked. Her inner world lurched and righted itself, but the coils of her lust were winding tighter.

She looked around quickly. Devin was sitting next to her and Rogan on the other side. Tucker was standing and—

She gasped.

His pants were off and he was stroking his shaft while he watched Garth.

It was the first live penis she had seen in over a decade. She hurriedly looked away, remembering Sam's feverish stroking, but then her eyes fixed back on the married man's masturbation. Why does it look so good? Shouldn't it be yucky? Shouldn't I be embarrassed? What if his wife walked in? What if this makes Devin mad?

She quickly looked up at Devin.

He was gazing down at her with much satisfaction in his face, despite Tucker stroking himself not two feet away. He glanced over her to Rogan and gave a frown and a short jerk of his chin. Then he pointed.

She looked to her left. Rogan had his cock out, too. The slick-haired man took her hand and placed it on his shaft. The soft velvet skin contained a hardening core.

Holy shit! I'm touching a man's cock! No way! Me?

Rogan nodded at her and moved her hand up and down his erection. Then he let go. She moved her hand hesitantly, then with more purpose.

"Good girl," said Devin. "That's how you do it."

The tongue left her pussy and she pouted.

Garth was standing, removing his jeans. He began stroking himself and smiling at Dee.

Uh oh, two men masturbating. What about me? She felt Rogan stiffen completely to fullness. He shifted around and knelt by her head. Offering his erection back to her hand. She had a close up view of the underside of his shaft as she stroked it.

Then she felt Garth moving back between her legs. She looked down her body and her eyes went wide. He wasn't approaching her with his tongue this time, but with his bad biker cock. She tried to clamp her knees shut, but he was already between them.

Devin touched her face, pulling her chin over towards him. He had knelt, too, though he was still clothed. His face was near hers – about as close as Rogan's cock. He smiled and said, "This is for you, tonight."

Whuh?

She felt a touch and pressure as Garth pushed his erection against her pussy.

"Keep stroking him." Devin motioned to Rogan. "For me."

Pressure and an old remembrance assaulted her as Garth's push began to work past her unused pussy lips. Her mouth fell open and she couldn't breathe. She felt her lips stretch open in a delicious memory of times past. She felt a pressuring fullness begin to stretch and open her inner folds.

Tucker said, "Isn't she beautiful?"

Garth chuckled. "Yeah, and softer than saddle leather."

Saddle leather? Was that good? But little thought existed more than feeling the slow sensation of her empty insides being filled with real man-flesh. She remembered Rogan and began stroking him. His cock was tantalizingly close to her face.

Devin was still there, too. "Go ahead," he said. "I think he's been waiting for it."

"Are you—"

"Go ahead."

She took the head of Rogan's shaft into her mouth. It had a very clean and soapy taste to it. She tried to concentrate on it, but Garth's pushing and pulling back and forth had finally wetted his shaft and he sank it all the way in. It felt so smooth, and hot, and full. She moaned around Rogan's cock in her mouth. Oh, why has this been so long? I could definitely get to like this.

"Yeah," Rogan said. "That's nice."

She sucked him harder, pulling and licking.

He smiled down at her. "Careful with the teeth."

She blushed, remembering. "Oh, yeah, sorry."

Garth's pushing became heavier and harder. He was hitting deep and touching satisfying spots. The lips of her pussy vibrated with sensation at the passage of his sliding shaft.

Oh, this is dirty. I love it.

Rogan pulled back, his cock pulling out of her mouth.

Immediately, Devin's mouth met hers and his tongue moved in, swirling and exploring with the kiss. It was their first kiss.

The Best First Kiss Ever. She moaned happily as they kissed and Garth fucked her.

Devin pulled away, smiling, eyes bright, and licked his lips. "Wonderful," he said. Then he and Rogan got up.

Dee's body was beginning to move to very hard thrusts. Garth grunted hard with each push.

Tucker was still stroking and said, "You're going to be at it all night. Let me in there."

The biker chuckled. "Yeah, takes me a while." He pulled out. "Pay your respects to the lady."

Dee watched Rogan and Devin go through the door into his private rooms. Huh?

Before she could figure out what was going on, Tucker had moved her into a laying position along the length of the couch. He moved between her legs and placed his fat cock at her entrance.

Dee looked up at him through the rum and lust. "But, you're married."

He smiled down at her. "Shh, this is between you and me." He moved her legs up, bent at the knees. He rubbed his cock up and down her slit, causing untold good vibrations and salacious sensations coursing through her. The winding tightness in her was becoming aggravating.

She looked at his heavy erection pointed at her. She panted with need. "Do it."

Garth chuckled. "Oh, yeah. She was definitely the right choice."

Tucker dropped his hips down onto hers and drove his shaft into her pussy. She stretched open wider, instantly, as his cock plowed into her and filled her. His pubic bone mashed down onto her clit.

She gasped and moaned and cried out all at the same time. The couch creaked and Tucker moaned in relief.

Garth stepped over to her head and she gripped his shaft. Her hand worked it erratically as Tucker began ramming her pussy with couch-shaking thrusts. Over and over he grunted and slammed her. Her pussy spiraled higher, tightening. It was getting the kind of work-out she had missed for so long. Much better than Ditch Jenkins. Way better. This is too good to stop.

Then Felicia walked in.

~ ~ ~

Dee froze, though Tucker did not. Everyone looked over at Felicia.

The woman's soft and small features went wide in shock. Her mouth dropped open and the whites around her eyes were stark. But she made no move. Finally, she said, "Oh my."

There was silence, except for the creaking of the couch and the slapping of skin. Tucker was still slamming down into her pussy.

Felicia licked her lips, recovering something of her composure. "Wow, that looks really good." Her body trembled, as if she was frightened to be saying it.

Garth moved then, walking to her. His biker look didn't hide the concern for Devin's hired help. "You like what you're seeing?"

Felicia nodded, quickly, and shifted on her feet. "I was just coming to tell Devin I was done..."

Garth grinned. "You like seeing white cock?" He gave his hips a small twist, sending his erection wagging.

The woman burst out in a chuckle. "Yes, it's beautiful."

"You can touch it. If you want."

Dee was watching what was going on between the two of them. She felt a surge of lust at the thought of seeing Felicia touch Garth's erection. Yes, do it.

The slight black hand reached out tentatively and stroked it once. Then she gripped it and gave it a few strokes. Her open mouth showed her tongue laying behind her lower teeth – as if she were panting. But it disappeared in a smile. "Wow, very nice."

Garth looked pleased. "You think so?"

"Oh yes. I love the look of a good white cock."

The biker chuckled. "I thought black cock was supposed to be better. Bigger and all that."

Her smile evaporated. "No. Not usually." She stopped talking, stroking slower, lost in thought for a moment. "Yours has a very nice shape and size."

He was looking at her as if trying to decipher her facial expressions. His words were soft. "Well, thank you, ma'am."

Felicia concentrated on stroking again and the smile returned to her face.

Dee looked up at Tucker. Except for more than a glance or two at what was happening by the pool table, his eyes were all on Dee. He smiled down at her, then slowed his ramming. He leaned down and planted a deep kiss on her, sending vibrations of pleasure down through her mouth, up through her pussy, and meeting warmly in the center of her being. They were connected, mouth to mouth and crotch to crotch. She felt complete.

He broke the kiss, leaving her dizzy. He leaned back up and started thrusting hard again, driving his shaft deep into her.

She felt the invasion inside her, filling and emptying her, over and over. His pubic bone hit her clitoris with each thrust, sending jolts through her to add to the tightening spiral of her lust. She looked over at Garth and Felicia.

The black woman was on her knees, her mouth slowly moving back and forth on his erection.

Dee moaned. Instead of feeling jealous that the cock that had been in her just a few minutes before was now being pleased by another woman, she felt a connection to Felicia. Yes, suck him. I hope you like it. She wanted to say it, but couldn't find the courage.

She soon lost the coherency of thought as the coils in her began sending out alarming feelings of impending explosion. Fuck me, Tucker. Fuck me...

Garth moaned happily.

The sound of the couch receded in her ears as the only thing that mattered was the hot passion of the man making love to her. Oh... yes. Oh yes! An explosion of tension tore through her and she cried out in an agony of intense pleasure. The shock of suddenness ripped her breath away and her body convulsed. She emitted short grunts that timed themselves almost perfectly to Tucker's thrusts.

She felt him swell inside her. She felt his excited increase in thrusting. Her spasms receded, becoming dull, but full waves of satisfying pleasure. He panted

above her and the only thing she wanted in that moment was to feel the power of her sexuality wringing the man dry. She found she was able to speak. "Yes, fuck me. Give it to me. Give it to me, please."

Tucker's mouth dropped open and his eyes squeezed shut. He groaned loud and sank his cock all the way in.

She felt it expand and then begin pulsing inside her. Hot wetness planted itself deep in her and she gasped with relief. He grunted over her, his hips jerking, trying to drive his spurting cock deeper. Yes, give it all to me.

When he collapsed on her, she wrapped her arms around the man to hold him close – to savor the conquering of his manhood by her pussy.

He panted, catching his breath. "That was awesome."

She giggled. "That was..." What was she supposed to say? What could she say? She had been surprised she liked it. Not the fucking so much as that it had been given by a married man. She wasn't supposed to like that, was she?

He leaned his head up a little. "You okay? You liked it?"

She nodded, smiling. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say. She looked over at Garth and Felicia. Sometime during all of it, Garth must have finished. Felicia was standing and wiping at her lips. She looked embarrassed with a small smile on her face.

Tucker said, "I'll look forward to next Friday."

Dee felt as if she were trapped. Not that she didn't want to be. She knew she would want to come back next Friday. She would want to kiss Tucker and feel him slide his manhood into her again. She wanted him to fuck her.

CHAPTER 7

Dee woke Saturday morning and groaned. What did I do? She dropped an arm over her eyes. I should call Gina. Oh, wait. No, that's not a good idea.

She rolled out of bed and blew out a breath. Rubbing her forehead accomplished little. Did I really fuck Tucker last night? And Garth?

Showering seemed the thing to do and she spent far longer than normal soaking and scrubbing – as if to remove the memory of what she did. When she realized she was soaping for the third time, she stopped. While drying off, she felt still unclean and she looked back at the shower briefly.

The phone chimed.

With a groan, she stepped into the bedroom and snatched the phone up. It read Gina Rovigatti. "Hi Gina."

"Wow, girl. You sound depressed."

Was I? "Maybe a little hungover."

"How did it go last night?" Gina's voice was curious and eager.

"Oh... well..."

"Oh, come on. Talk."

I can't tell her I fucked them. "Well, we talked..."

"About what?"

She sat on the bed. It made the room seem a little more stable. "About Dedren and how this used to be a picker town."

"Picker town? What?"

She laid back and closed her eyes. "Something about walnut growers."

"Oh... All those trees north of town?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Never really thought of them, except they were pretty."

"I've never been up there."

"So what else did you talk about? How was Devin?"

Devin... The last she remembered, he was going into his private rooms with... Rogan. Is he...?

Gina sounded frustrated. "Are you there?"

"What? Oh, yes. Sorry. Was just remembering."

"Well?"

"Uh... we kissed."

There was a shocked and excited intake of breath on Gina's end. "You did?"

Yeah, right after Rogan pulled his cock out of my mouth. "Er, yeah."

"Are you bullshitting me?"

"No, really. It was a very passionate kiss." Except that I probably tasted like Rogan's cock. Holy shit. She groaned.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Oh, uh..." The man I've been after is gay. That's what's wrong. "Well, I think I drank too much last night."

"You're hiding something; I can tell by the tone of your voice."

She sat up. "Well, I might be and I'm sorry, Gina. Some things are private. But I... I had a great time."

"Well, okay then. Are we going to Blake's tonight?"

The thought of a daiquiri made her queasy. "Ugh, not tonight. The thought of drinking... eck."

Gina's laugh tinkled on the other end. "Wish I could have been there with you. Sounds like you had a lot of fun."

"Oh, yeah. I sure did." Thoughts of Tucker's pounding cock made her pussy twitch. At the same time, she felt like needing another shower.

"Alright then, call me Monday when you find out about work. You'll want to go to Blake's by then, right?"

"Oh, I'm sure. I just need to let my stomach and head recover."

Gina made a kissy sound and clicked off.

Dee put the phone back on the charger. Then she headed back into the bathroom to take another shower. This time, when she soaped her pussy, she thought of Tucker and her pussy clamped in a convulsive grasp on the memory of his cock in her.

Back in the bedroom, she laid back on the bed naked and went through her memory of the night's events. How did I get so easily maneuvered into having sex with all of them? I'm no slut. She found herself toying with her pussy folds and clit. Why had it all felt so good? What do they think of me now? What does Felicia think?

~ ~ ~

Monday was a big day for Dee. She drove to the gas station and filled her tank. As she was leaning against her car waiting for the gas to finish pumping, she saw the old Ford pick-up pull up on the other side of the aisle.

She tried not to make any moves or noise.

Sam got out and approached the machine to pay with his card. He peeked around the unit and made eye contact with Dee. He seemed startled to see her and jerked back. Then he poked his head around again, looking embarrassed. "Hi, Dee. Didn't know it was you."

She frowned at his slow drawl. Didn't know it was me? What's that supposed to mean? "Hi."

He was dressed in his customary worn-out blue jeans. A white t-shirt poked out from under a very worn flannel shirt. The same clothes he always wore. He pulled back and went about his business.

The guy can't even afford clothes, forget about updating that truck of his. She recalled seeing Tucker and Garth masturbating for her. Her pussy twitched. Stop that.

He faced the other way, his back to her as he waited for his tank to fill. He was looking towards the minimart.

Was it really all that bad that he had masturbated over my picture? Garth and Tucker masturbated over me last night. She wanted to say something, but wasn't sure what to say. She was relieved of having to say anything when her pump clicked off. She replaced the nozzle and paused, looking at Sam's back. Not knowing what she wanted to say, she spilled the first thing that came to mind. "Well, I'm off to Sydney."

He turned as if surprised she was talking to him. "Hmm? Sydney?"

His slow way was soothing and not nose-y.

"Yeah, I'm going to apply at Walmart. C and S moved away."

He nodded slowly. "A bit of a drive."

She folded her arms, not knowing what else to say. "Yeah. Don't know about driving every day. But I don't even know if I can get a job there or not."

He looked at her from under his eyebrows. He did not check her out. He looked

straight into her eyes. "Well, good luck."

She smiled with relief. "Thanks." This is awkward. I don't know what to say. "I guess I'll see you tonight at Blake's." Oops, that almost sounded like a friendly invitation.

He nodded very slowly as if deep in thought. He said nothing before he turned away.

I made a mess of that. Why even talk to him? She felt like a fool. I hope he doesn't think I want to be his friend or something. Hanging around such a loser would look really bad. Then she felt bad for thinking it.

Her drive to Sydney was filled with classic hits from 99.7 FM, KOGA out of Ogallala. She felt good about the drive and the prospect of work. I will get a job. And if I have to leave Dedren behind, then so be it. Then her thoughts were filled with the activities of the previous Friday night and she wondered if she could leave all that behind.

What was Tucker doing right now? What had he told his wife, if anything? Could he keep it a secret? Would he want to do me again? What about Garth? Why did I find all this so sexy?

She arrived in Sydney and pulled into the Walmart Supercenter hornier than a teenage boy.

~ ~ ~

She pulled into Blake's later that day, filled with hope and smiles.

Devin waved to her and saw the smile, he gave one of his own.

Felicia glanced at her and looked away quickly, then looked back. She paused her wiping of the table she was at and frowned. Then she approached Dee at her table. "Hi, uh..." She wrung her hands together.

Dee giggled. "I know. Like, are you as embarrassed as I am?"

Felicia sank into the chair usually used by Gina. She acted as if all strength had left her knees. Her laugh was both relieved and nervous. "I didn't want you to think I was..."

Dee leaned forward, whispering in a conspiratorial tone. "I know. Me, either. I'm not like that. I mean, normally."

The woman's eyes were wide. "Oh, don't you worry. You looked like you were having a lot of fun. I just wanted you to know I'm not a whore or something to be sucking off—"

"I didn't think that. As far as me, that was the first sex I've had in over ten years."

Felicia's tone was total disbelief. "You get out of here."

"Really."

She touched Dee's arm. "A pretty thing like you?"

"Really." She emphasized with a nod. "I'm no whore, either. But... yes, it was fun."

Felicia laughed. "I don't know what came over me Friday, but I saw you having fun and something in me thought, 'Girl, you need to get yourself some of that.' But I was so afraid."

Dee sat back straight. She felt better clearing the air with Felicia. "Afraid? Afraid of what?"

"Many people think black women are whores. Or trashy. Maybe some are. But, I'm not."

"I didn't think that of you."

"Thank you."

"So we took advantage of the opportunity and had fun. Is that so wrong?"

"If someone had walked in, what would it look like?"

Dee nodded. "I've been thinking the same thing all weekend. Wondering if what I did was wrong."

The woman sat back and moaned in warning, as some black women did. "Oh girl, I know. That Tucker is married, is he not?"

Dee nodded.

"Well, I won't be saying anything to anyone. But you watch yourself. If word gets around..."

She smiled in appreciation at her. "Felicia..."

"Yes?" She had started to rise – to go continue cleaning.

"What brought you here? Other than the cheap rent? What's the story?"

The woman straightened and started wringing her hands again. She looked one way, then the other. Her eyes darted about, then settled back on Dee. "I'm married."

That startled her. "You are?"

A nod.

"Where's your husband?"

A fierce look came to the woman's face. "Hopefully nowhere near here."

Uh oh. There's a story here. "What happened?"

A sneer came over her features. Her whisper was low, but forced. "Drugs." She spat the word with hatred. "He had a good job at a tire shop. Next thing I know he's dealing drugs. To kids. I wasn't going to put up with that."

Dee's eyes were large. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"He got it in his head he was larger than life. All important now. He beat me when I told him to stop the drug dealing."

Her heart raced in a panic. "Oh no. I'm so very sorry." She reached out and

gripped Felicia's hand.

The woman frowned with hatred at the memory. "Don't you worry none. It happened once. Then I ran. Took Shayla with me. Bastard probably has me up for kidnapping."

Dee stood and gripped Felicia in a hug. "I won't tell anyone. No one deserves that kind of life. You stay in hiding."

The woman searched her eyes, worry and concern for her own well-being and that of her daughter's evident in her face. She gave a slow nod. "You're a good woman."

"And so are you."

Felicia turned to go, then said over her shoulder, "The world needs more like us, that's for sure."

Dee sat back down, stunned at the revelation of Felicia's presence in Dedren.

~ ~ ~

Gina bounced in full of eagerness an hour later. She glanced at the jukebox; Careless Whisper was playing. She looked all around the bar and then sat down with Dee. "Hey girl. I don't see Sam?"

"No, Oscar put it on, can you believe it?" She pointed to the casino area.

She giggled.

Devin called from the bar. "Ladies? Drinks?"

Dee waved. "Please." She guessed the free drinks were over.

Gina leaned forward. "So how did it go?"

"Good. I'm hired on condition my background check comes through clean."

"Background check?"

She nodded. "It was involved. I also took a drug test."

"Wow."

"Oh, no worries. I'll pass that. And my background will show them I'm clean. I have orientation Wednesday."

"Great. How was the drive?"

"Not bad. And the pay will be really good. They have a Position Pay Grade system to keep everything fair and I'll be starting at just over nine dollars an hour."

"Wow!" Gina's eyes tried to match her mouth. "Maybe I should think about Walmart. Even with tips I don't make anywhere near that."

Devin delivered their drinks.

"Thanks, Devin." To Gina, she said, "Sure. We could drive together. If we get the same shifts."

Gina slumped slightly. "What would I tell Steve?"

Dee rolled her eyes. "His wife can wait tables."

"I don't see Robin going back to waiting tables."

"Well, that's their problem, isn't it? He can put a help-wanted sign in the window."

Tucker came strolling in looking loose and suave.

Bastard has to be handsome, doesn't he?

Gina whispered to her, "What's that look for? I thought you liked him."

Dee hadn't realized she was scowling. "Hm? Oh. I do, actually. It's just..."

Well..."

Tucker came over to the table. "Hey, Dee." His voice was all sexy. His look made her insides feel like melted butter.

Gina looked back and forth between them.

She gave him a grin because she couldn't help it. "Hi."

"How'd it go today?"

"Hired, I think. Couple of checks have to come back. I go Wednesday for orientation."

"Great. Sorry it had to come to this, but I'm glad for you. I'm going to head on up. Shoot some pool and listen to music. Come on up, if you like."

"Oh, thought the invite was for Fridays?"

He chuckled. "No, anytime. Every day even." He winked at her.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, a sudden heat blossoming from between her legs. "Oh, well, probably not today."

He nodded, though a slight look of disappointment crossed his features. "Enjoy your drinks, ladies."

Gina watched him out of the corner of her eye. When he was heading up the stairs, she leaned over and said, "Is something going on...?"

How can I tell her? Not that I don't trust her, but... "What makes you think that?"

Her friend leaned back, crossed her arms and gave her an eyebrow.

CHAPTER 8

Dee didn't have anything to say to Gina about what her friend had just witnessed. Thankfully, Gina let it go, though she spared no expense giving Dee suspicious looks.

Stop it, girl. It's none of your business. Dee sipped her drink, then downed the rest of it. "You ready for another round?"

Gina still gave her the eye, but softened. "Sure. Just don't tell me you're throwing Devin over for Tucker."

Dee laughed, but not at what Gina implied. If you only knew Devin was gay... But that wasn't her place to tell. If Devin wanted people knowing, he would announce it.

Garth burst through the door. "I'm thirsty," he announced.

Dee winked at him on her way to the bar. She set the glasses down. "Refills, please."

"How'd you like my entrance?" His rough voice was amused.

She turned to the biker. "I've seen worse."

He kissed her forehead, then went past her to the stairs.

Behind him, Sam was walking in.

Her smile evaporated. Oh no. I hope he doesn't expect me to sit with him or something.

He glanced at the jukebox.

Alarmed and not wanting to hear Wham again, she said, "Oscar just played Careless Whisper not a couple minutes ago."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Did he? Well then." He went to the bar and started to sit. "How did it go, anyway?"

Devin had already set down her glasses. He began tapping a beer for Sam.

She didn't want to stand there and repeat everything. "Bring your beer and I'll tell you." Oh shit. I just invited him to come sit at our table? Great, Dee. You twit.

He looked at her with surprise, not moving. Then he reached for the beer. "Alright, then."

His response set her at ease – as if he didn't ever expect another invite and would just come by the table the one time. She led him back to Gina.

Her friend's eyes were amused but the smile said she was pleased. "Hi, Sam."

He raised his beer slightly. "Gina."

Her friend shot her a glance then looked back at him. "What's a handsome guy like you doing following Dee around?"

He froze and looked at Dee for the longest time.

Suddenly uncomfortable, Dee sat. She pointed to a chair at the next table.

He still hadn't moved, but then he looked at Gina. His words were slow, in that lazy drawl of his. "I don't know."

Dee shifted in her chair, already regretting inviting him to sit. She watched him pull over the chair and sit easily with his chest to the back of the chair. He rested one elbow across the back and sipped his beer. His eyes were so light brown they were almost amber. They regarded one and then the other of them.

Dee cleared her throat. "I guess I'm hired."

His eyes shifted to hers. He raised his eyebrows.

The movements disturbed her – unsettling her in a way that suggested he saw far more with those eyes than he let on. An intelligence rested there. She said in the silence, "Just need to wait on the background check and drug test."

He said slowly, "I imagine those are clean."

Something in her wanted them to be clean to meet his approval. Then she shook herself. This is insane. Who cares what Sam thinks? She nodded firmly, as if to show her affairs were in order and not subject to his approval. "Oh, they are."

He nodded, those eyes on hers. He sipped his beer.

"I guess I'll be starting Friday." She didn't know what to say.

Gina was looking at Sam. "I guess you're too old to be a billionaire, huh?"

A grin spread across his face and he eyed her. "Am I that old?"

"You're older than twenty-seven."

He drank some beer and pursed his lips. "Can't say I've ever met a twenty-seven year old billionaire."

Gina waved her hands around. "They're all over the place."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Is that a fact?"

Gina looked back and forth between Dee and Sam. "Of course they are."

Sam's voice had a playful tone to it. "What happens when they turn twenty-eight?"

Gina's mouth dropped open and she coughed in indignation.

Dee's amazement at the turn of conversation burst from her in a hearty laugh. "Yeah, Gina. What happens, then?"

Her friend shot daggers at her. "You two!"

Sam was rising, having finished his beer. He paused, as if wanting to say more. But a stony look settled over his face. "Congratulations on the job, Dee."

Her laughter died and she looked at him in confusion. What had just happened? She watched him slide the chair back into place and head to the bar.

Gina leaned close. "He's an odd one, if handsome."

Dee had nothing to say. She still couldn't figure him out. It doesn't matter; he's as dead-end as Dedren.

~ ~ ~

Dee punched Gina's number Wednesday afternoon.

Her friend's voice was expectant. "Well?"

"I'm hired. Just got out of the orientation."

"Awesome."

"I start Friday, so I'll be late to Blake's."

"Oh, who cares? It's good to hear you got a job so quickly."

"I'll be at Blake's in a bit. Going to grab a bite at home first."

"Remember not to eat too much."

Dee nodded to the phone though Gina couldn't see it. She had thought drinking on an empty stomach was a bad idea, but her friend's trick of not eating before or while drinking had kept them both slim. "Sure, Gina, but I feel light-headed. I'll just have a bit of ham."

"Good girl. See you in a bit."

The drive almost felt lonely. Her thoughts turned immediately to Dedren. What was there for me anymore? Did I owe the town anything? Shouldn't I just make arrangements to move? Maybe I will. A few months of Walmart pay and I can slide over to Sydney and rent a trailer there.

Her thoughts turned to Blake's. I wasted so much time pining after Devin. Maybe I should have gone after Garth. Nice and all, but he's a known sleep-around. I would have had to put up with women nosing around him all the time. And Tucker. Could there be anything there? He's married. I can't even hope that he'd divorce Carla for me.

Just the thought of him reminded her pussy of the fierce and so very pleasurable fucking it had received. She smiled at the memory. Then she frowned. He had made it pretty clear he wanted more. Would that be so bad? If they kept it between themselves and she didn't try breaking his marriage, was that acceptable behavior? Of course not. But... it was so good. Maybe I should just view it that I'm using him for my own benefit. Satisfying my own need.

Thoughts of the dead-end town raged through her mind with the despair of death, even as she ate her small slice of ham at home.

As she drove to Blake's a little later, she knew she would have to leave Dedren for good. There was nothing here for her. I have to go or I'll end up like Sam. As if thinking about him summoned him, she saw his truck already in the parking lot at Blake's. She blew out a breath. Great.

Gina's car was there, too, and so was Garth's Harley.

There was no music playing when she entered, but she heard Gina laughing. Her friend was not at their table. She was annoyed to see her at the bar, sitting next to Sam.

Devin gave her a wink.

That would mean so much more if I had a dick between my legs, wouldn't it?

Sam turned on his stool. "Dee." His greeting was short and quiet.

Gina frowned at her. "Why the scowl, girl?"

Just that the man I wanted for so many years would rather wink at a man. "Eh... Thoughts of Dead End, Nebraska. What are you doing at the bar?"

Gina's chin went up in challenge. "Talking to Sam. Is there something wrong with that?"

"What? No..." She felt embarrassed for having asked it, and especially because that was exactly why she was asking her.

Gina touched Sam's arm. "Thanks for the jokes. Those were good."

He raised his beer at her and ignored Dee.

Her friend pulled her along to their table. "That was rude."

Dee fidgeted. "I didn't mean to be..."

Gina was scowling. "So what if you don't like him. If I want to talk to him, I'm going to talk to him."

"But..." He's such a loser.

"Grow up, girl."

They were interrupted by Felicia. She put down their daiquiris. Her eyes darted back and forth, the whites flashing in the chocolate face. She looked back at the bar, to Sam, and then gave Dee a look and pursed her lips. The disapproval was there but she was too adult to throw her opinion around unasked.

Dee felt ashamed.

Gina snorted. "Oh, don't mope."

She lifted a hand and let it fall lightly on the table. "Oh, I don't know. All of this crap about Dedren is hitting me really hard."

Her friend crossed her arms.

"I think I need to move."

A man's voice startled her. "What's that I hear?" Tucker.

She looked up into those sexy eyes. "Oh... Well, just thinking I should move to Sydney. Start over there."

"That would be a shame."

And she knew it. She could feel it. Leaving everything behind that had been her life. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. She was at a loss. Her condition was further compounded by Tucker's good looks. Stop that. I'm not in the mood for sexy. But her pussy began to ache. Thoughts of a good pussy-pounding drifted through her head. She shook her head trying to dismiss the thought.

His look was soft and disappointed.

Gina waved at Sam; he was leaving.

Garth came in and gripped Sam's arm in a hearty shake. His rich voice boomed out. "Sam, you old hound. You didn't drink all the beer, did you?"

The slow drawl was measured. "I surely did. You'll have to drink Blue Nun tonight."

Garth chuckled. "Shit." He angled towards Tucker and the girls. "Hey, don't be hogging the women."

Dee suppressed a smile.

The biker winked at her. "Tell me you're coming upstairs later."

"Well, I—"

"Promise."

She giggled.

"Come on."

"Well, maybe for a drink or two."

He wiggled his eyebrows and elbowed Tucker. "Let's leave the girlies alone. I need to beat you again at pool."

She shook her head as they left. "Incorrigible."

Gina leaned towards her. "Is that so bad?"

Yeah, if you only knew. "Sometimes they act like little boys."

Her friend sat back. "They're having fun."

Yeah, with my pussy. She blushed. Maybe heading up there tonight is what I need.

Gina said, "So tell me about Walmart. Sell me on changing jobs."

~ ~ ~

One of the regulars paid a quarter to hear rap. That was enough for Dee. "Sorry, I think I'm going to head upstairs."

Gina pouted. "Alright. Thanks for telling me about Walmart."

"I think you'd like it there. The pay is good and the people I met were very nice." She rose, knowing there was still another two hours until close – an hour left for Gina.

Her friend said, "Guess I'll head out early, then."

"See you Friday, but it'll be late."

Gina waved. "Call me."

"Kay." She walked hesitantly at first towards the stairs, then with more resolution. Do I really want this? More of... whoever? Rogan had not arrived and Devin was chatting with Brittany. Wednesdays were slim for the bathroom blonde.

Felicia caught her eye and the woman looked surprised. She saw where Dee was going. She looked away, then back again. Eyes large, her tongue made a quick dart at her lips and she gulped noticeably.

Dee gave her a smile and a wink. That's not too forward, is it? Or saucy? Or slutty? I feel like an idiot. She climbed the stairs to avoid any other eyes.

Tucker's face lit up when she entered the room. The guys were relaxed on the couch, drinks in hand. He said, "We were just talking about you."

Dee stumbled. Is that good or bad? I hope they don't think I'm some cheap slut. "Oh?"

Garth grinned that snappy, lopsided biker smile. "We were just becoming good friends. We're hoping you don't move away."

How do I tell them that I'm going to move without making it seem like I'm running from them? Am I running from them? And if I am, why am I up here tonight?

Tucker rose and indicated his seat on the couch. "I'll mix up a couple drinks."

She sat near Garth and he scooted over to close the distance. His arm came over her shoulder but he made no other move. Dee slowly relaxed. Being held was at least somewhat comforting.

Tucker came over with the drinks and handed them out.

Feet came running up the stairs.

Heads turned as a breathless Felicia came through the door. She looked hesitant, determined and shy all at once. "Uh..." she said.

Garth cracked a smile. "Something going on?"

The black woman looked at each of them, unsure who to address. "No. Nothing's going on. Devin said..." She trailed off, her words caught in her throat.

Garth stood and walked to her. "What is it? What did he say?"

She squeaked and swallowed. "Uh, he said I could..." She stopped and then started again. "He said he could handle the customers down there if I wanted..."

Tucker chuckled. "That devious bastard."

Garth laughed. "And you wanted to?"

Felicia, eyes wide, nodded.

The biker put his arm around her thin shoulders. "Well now. I think we can all be friendly."

Dee looked closely at the woman. "Are you sure?"

A nod. Then the woman swallowed, standing a little taller. Her voice was still shaky. "And miss out on the fun? Sometimes you have to grab the bull by the horns."

Dee nodded. Yes, you do. She watched Garth and Tucker hug her from either side. The woman's eyes went wide again, not in shock, but in excitement.

Garth said, "You really like white cock?"

The expression looked embarrassed, but then she nodded quickly. "I do. I very much do. Is that bad?"

"Not if you don't think it is." Garth turned her a little towards Tucker. "Why don't you get him ready? He's claimed dibs on Dee here, tonight."

Dibs? But her pussy responded with a flush of heat.

Tucker was grinning like a little kid. He unzipped his pants and got out of them. His penis hung half hard.

Felicia's gaze was locked on it and she licked her lips in a nervous gesture.

Tucker leaned back against the pool table and winked at her.

Dee shifted, her pussy sending signals of lust to her brain.

Felicia knelt down and touched his shaft, turning it and looking at it. It began to harden rapidly.

Garth stepped back and removed his clothes. Then he pulled Felicia up just as she was starting to stroke Tucker's cock.

"What?" she said.

"Let's get you out of these clothes."

"Oh..." She let him undress her.

Dee watched in fascination as the men unclothed her. The woman was as thin under all the clothing as she looked. But not emaciated and bony. Just very smallish while being tall. Men would call that willowy. Her boobs were tiny bumps and she was very trimmed. Dee thought she probably spent time considering her looks naked.

Felicia took both of the men in her hands and her smile grew dazzling. "Oh, yeah. Now this is what it is."

Dee squirmed. The chocolate hands on the white dicks made her wet. She wasn't sure which hand and cock to watch.

Garth got behind the woman and bent her over towards Tucker. Felicia knew what he wanted and took Tucker's cock into her mouth.

The married man leaned back, a smile on his face. He winked at Dee.

Felicia's mouth moved up and down slowly on the shaft.

Garth was running his hands all over her body from behind, then dipped a hand down to rub along the woman's pussy.

She moaned around Tucker's erection.

The biker moved forward and took his cock in hand, using it to rub up and down her slit.

Dee gasped as a jolt of sensuality tore through her. Her eyes were glued to Garth's white cock moving up and down Felicia's chocolate lips. Yes, put it in her. Shove it in and give her your fat cock. Her head began to pound to her heartbeat.

Garth moved forward and bent his hips.

Felicia responded with a long, "Yesss..." Her head was off Tucker's penis and she gripped him with her hand, jerking erratically. The backs of her legs began to shake, quivering and convulsing as if undergoing spasms.

The biker pulled on her slender hips and shifted his stance a little. Then his butt clenched and his hips moved closer to Felicia's butt.

The woman's mouth fell open and her eyes were squeezed shut. The look was almost comical, but Dee could almost feel what the woman was feeling. Pent-up lust and need finally being answered with a thick cock. The sensation would be almost paralyzing.

Garth's hips met Felicia's butt. He sighed with relief. "That's a mighty fine pussy you have there, ma'am."

The woman's sigh was long and lusty. "Oh, that feels so very good." She put her mouth back down on Tucker's cock as Garth began fucking her from behind.

Dee felt envious. Wow, that looks great. Fuck her. Give it to her hard. She squirmed harder, and then finally gave up. She pulled up her skirt and slid off her panties.

Tucker pulled away. "I think you've done a great job. But I've been looking forward to that pretty woman over there. If you'll excuse me."

Felicia gripped the edge of the pool table in his absence. Garth rammed her from behind and her legs shook and quivered with each thrust.

Felicia's words came out in strings of almost gibberish. "Oh yes. Yes, mister, please. Oh yes. More. I want... Yes."

Tucker climbed onto the couch next to her and pushed her down. "I've let it be known that you're all mine." He touched her pussy.

All yours? Am I supposed to be flattered? Though she did feel better about that. She let him part her legs and climb between them. The touch of his erection to her pussy made her head swim. Then his cock was pushing hard into her, filling her and driving out the emptiness. It felt good and satisfying. But...

He heaved into her, his hips driving down onto hers with loud smacks. "All

mine."

She turned her head to look at Garth and Felicia. She was gripping the pool table with claws. He had her head bent back, a fist full of her wavy hair. His butt clenched fast as he fucked her. Her knees wobbled and it looked like she was about to collapse.

Dee's world spun, shifting and turning with the pleasure emanating from her pussy. Yes, it feels wonderful. But... She looked down at their junction. His shaft was a blur as it drove up and down into her upturned pussy. That's a married cock, Dee. And he says he's claimed me?

Tucker grunted heavily above her, giving her again what her pussy had lacked for so long. Passion. Lust. Satisfaction.

But...

Garth helped Felicia up. She had collapsed. She was laughing and panting all at the same time. He led her to a chair at the card table and sat down. He helped her climb onto his lap and position herself over his erection. She sank down on it and wrapped her thin arms around his neck. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth to breathe. She moved up and down sinuously while Garth smiled at her.

The woman moaned and then said, "I sure would like to know I can get more of this."

Garth's answer was colored in amusement. "Anytime, lady."

Felicia stuttered a relieved laugh while she rode him.

Tucker's blast of hot cum inside Dee's pussy was not unwelcome, but she felt unfinished. Incomplete. Lacking whatever it was that had so captivated her the previous Friday night.

She wanted to go home.

CHAPTER 9

Dee drove home to her trailer at the Dedren Estates. She was pensive, having said little except that she needed to get to bed early. They assumed it was for her new job, but she didn't start until Friday.

Tucker had certainly treated her well and given her something she was missing. But he would be going home to Carla in another hour or so. Carla got to feel him next to her all night. Carla got the hugs and kisses and presents and... love.

What am I? I'm reserved for him? I'm just the piece of ass on the side? Don't I deserve better than that? He's handsome and everything, but why am I just a piece of meat? Is it worth it to just be his mistress while some other woman gets everything else?

She knew Tucker had good relations with his wife. She had often overheard him mentioning that he keeps her very happy in bed.

So why does he need me?

She pulled into her spot. She looked back behind her a few trailers down. Felicia had rented that one. At least one woman will go home happy tonight.

Inside, she showered. She scrubbed and scrubbed, gritting her teeth with the effort until she found herself crying and rubbed red and raw. No, no, no. This isn't who I am. I won't be some married man's piece of ass on the side. Fuck him!

She slammed her fist on the fiberglass shower wall and sobbed. Not me. Not me.

~ ~ ~

Friday was a day of heavy clouds and cheer for Dee. Much better than yesterday.

Work was refreshing and fast-paced. She was helped along by a floor supervisor who was a nice kid about half her age. Back in her day, he would have been a yuppie.

She put the young Matthew out of her mind, though; he was far too young for her. She drove east on the interstate towards the place that felt less and less like home every passing hour. Thunder rumbled loud and she saw flashes of lightning in the distance.

Dedren. Dead End. Dead Town, Nebraska.

Her phone chimed. "Hey, Gina."

"Hey, girl. How'd it go?"

Dee didn't mind the inquisition. She knew Gina was looking for the impetus to make the change herself. "Well, it's work and I'm wore out. But I feel really good."

A sigh on the other end told Dee her words had an impact on Gina that was causing a lot of deep thinking.

She said into the silence, "I'm not sure how long I'll stay at Blake's tonight." She let it hang there that it was because she was tired, not because she didn't want to see her new "friends."

"Oh," said Gina. "Sure, sure. Just make sure you fill me in on everything that went on today—"

"I will." She knew her friend wanted reassurances. What kind of reassurances mattered? One from friends? Family? Personal experiences? The girl just needs some courage.

Rain spattered down harder on the windshield and she turned the wipers to high. The raindrops were bouncing up off the ground in a haze as she drove into the twilight of Dedren.

Not bothering to go home and shower – she didn't feel dirty – she drove to

Blake's. She didn't care to prepare herself for her friends upstairs. No skirt today – she didn't plan on ever climbing those stairs again. No matter how good it had been, she just didn't want it. Not like that. Not that way. If she died lonely, she would at least die with her dignity.

Gina's car was there. So was Sam's old Ford. She saw Rogan's Jeep and Tucker's truck.

Suddenly, she wasn't sure she wanted to go in. She sat in her car for a moment, staring out the window.

A sleek Mercedes S-Class, all white with tinted windows, cruised past.

She laughed and said to herself, "Well, either you're lost or Gina's billionaire has finally shown up." With that, she resolved to go inside.

Running through the rain, she scurried into Blake's. The air was warm and the music on the jukebox playing some jumpy new song by some female with a screechy voice. I swear they strangled that gal when she recorded it.

Devin waved from the bar. Sam looked over his shoulder at her and raised his beer. Gina was sitting next to him.

Brittany was leading Oscar into the bathroom.

Dee burst out laughing again. She felt too good to let Dedren depress her for long. She pointed at Brit and Oscar as Gina was looking.

Gina giggled and touched Sam's arm. She pointed.

Sam looked and froze. Then just shook his head.

Her friend got up and came to her. They hugged and she said, "So you're a Walmart employee now."

"I guess so." She smiled.

They sat at their table.

"Wow, so it really is a nice place?"

Dee nodded. She wants that reassurance. "I regret not going long ago."

Gina pursed her lips and looked down. "So if your age wasn't a problem--"

"Gee, thanks."

"I just meant they wouldn't mind hiring me, then, either."

"Of course not. Clean record, willingness to work. They even take retirees."

Devin brought their drinks. He hadn't asked.

She gave him a glance and said, "Thanks."

Gina was looking at her with that odd look again. "You sure have changed since last week."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

Gina waited for Devin to go back to the bar. "You were all gaga over him. Now..."

Dee nodded. "A lot has changed. Yes. I guess so."

Her friend shook her head. "What's gotten into you?"

She took a long drink. Devin had made it very strong. "Wow," she said. Then looked back to Gina. "I guess chasing the wrong men or being chased by the wrong ones." Feeling the sudden weight of the past week's events, she gulped the drink. It burned cool down her throat. She was fighting the urge to cry. It had been such a good day...

"What's wrong?" Gina's eyes were trying to compete with her big mouth again.

She shook her head. "I've wasted my life here, waiting for the wrong man."

Gina's eyes softened. "What's wrong with Devin?"

Feeling the effects of the rum in the daiquiri, she decided she had nothing to lose. She leaned over the table. "He's gay."

Now her eyes did match her mouth. "What?"

"Flaming, dick-sucking gay. He has no interest in women, except as a friend."

Her friend clapped her hand to her mouth. She must have been stunned – her hand was quivering. Finally, she said, "No shit?"

"No shit, Sherlock." She got up with her empty glass and approached the bar. She set the glass down. She said to Devin, "Give me another just like that one."

Devin's look was searching, but neutral. He knew when people were feeling stressed. He knew when they were happy or sad. She supposed he had seen it all.

He gave a slight nod and mixed the drink.

Sam was still there – on his second beer. He gave her a considering look and then looked away.

Tucker came down the stairs and gave Dee a big smile. "Hey, Dee. Joining us?"

Stunning half the bar to silence, she said forcefully, "No." She snatched her drink and spun.

Tucker's look was surprised. And confused.

Good. Go be confused upstairs.

Felicia eyed her from the casino area, a wondering look on her face.

Gina looked sheepish. "I think there's more than just Devin's cock-sucking that's got you bothered."

Taking a gulp of burning alcohol, she said through gritted teeth, "I deserve more than to be some married man's plaything." She looked straight into Gina's eyes. There, is that message enough for you? Do you get it now?

Her friend looked down, realization dawning on her face. "I'm sorry."

"For what? For me being stupid?"

"All your hopes, your dreams—"

Dee laughed and said a little too loud, "There's no hope in Dedren."

Oscar came out of the bathroom with a smile on his old face. He approached the bar.

Brittany came out after him, daintily wiping at her lips.

Dee pointed. "Hope? Hope to end up like her?"

The bar went silent.

Dee looked around, then looked down at her drink, hoping everyone would stop looking at her. She drained the rest of her drink.

The noise level resumed.

Gina's voice was so very quiet. "I guess we're all hanging on silly hopes. Look at me. What billionaire is going to walk through that door?"

Dee shook her head and laughed. "Maybe tonight's the night."

The surrender was in her voice. "It won't be."

"There was a sleek Mercedes cruising around outside as I pulled in. Maybe that's your man. But for me? What's here? I don't want to compete with Bathroom Brit."

Again, a little too loud.

Brittany's chin shot up. She strutted toward their table, fast, her shoulders jerking forward in an arrogant wiggle. Her finger shot out and wagged at Dee. "No one wants to end up like you. Used up and washed out. You're just an old hag."

Dee shot out of her chair, a little unsteady. She had reached her limit with Brit. With the people. With the town. "I'd rather be an old hag than sucking off guys in the toilet for drinks. You make me sick."

Brittany's mouth dropped open in a perfect circle of outrage. She placed her hands on her hips and her head quivered in little jerks.

Dee sneered at her. "Clamp your mouth shut. I don't have a cock and I won't buy

you a drink."

Devin was there, suddenly, between them. His voice was stern. "Ladies."

Brittany huffed. "This piece of trash is insulting—"

Dee didn't give her the chance. "Stuff it, whore."

"Why you used up old cunt—"

She raised her voice and called out to the bar, "Hey, does anyone want a quick blowjob? Bathroom Brit is on the clock!"

Snarls and screeches came from Brittany. Claws extended and she went for Dee's eyes.

Hands and shouts were suddenly everywhere.

Dee thought she got some of Brit's hair before they were pulled apart.

Devin was stone-faced, all business. "Brittany, go freshen up." He pointed to the bathroom. "Felicia, would you take Dee outside for some air? See that she gets in her car and goes home."

"Yes, sir." The woman took hold of Dee and escorted her to the door.

Sam was still sitting at the bar, beer half-raised to his lips. His eyebrows were up his forehead.

Dee gave him a smile. "A lot of excitement tonight in Dedren." Her words were a little slurred. More than you'll ever see again, right Sam? I'm out of this town.

Felicia got her out the door without being rough. "What's going on, Dee? Is this about the... upstairs?"

They stood under the overhang at the front door.

Dee snorted. The drink was really hitting her hard. She looked out into the rain. "I guess so. I just don't want to be like that... you know." She wobbled a little.

Felicia looked worried. "Like a whore? Like me?"

"What? No. I mean how I was supposed to be Tucker's fuck-toy. Fuck that."

The woman nodded slowly, looking relieved. "I don't blame you. I won't let him at me that way. But I really like Garth."

"Garth's a good man, but he's a ladies man. He'll sleep around."

She nodded. "That's fine. As long as he's not married. I don't want that kind of trouble, but I just don't want to be lonely."

Dee almost burst out in tears. She hugged Felicia with a sudden fierceness that shocked the black woman. "Oh, Felicia. Be happy. Find your happiness and don't let go. Garth is good for it if that's all you want from him."

The woman was too stunned to say anything.

Dee realized she was acting like a drunk. She pulled back. "Sorry."

"That's okay, girl. I know what you mean. And I want no business with a married man, so I think we understand each other just fine."

She blinked and looked out over the parking lot. The rain made her want to go back inside. She squinted; the Mercedes was there. "Someone should tell Gina to come out. Her billionaire's here."

"Hmm?"

Dee said, "I guess I'll go home."

"Let me help you to your car."

"You'll get wet."

"I've been worse. Come on."

Dee let herself be led to her car. But they never made it. Felicia stopped and trembled.

Parked on the street in front of Dee's car was the Mercedes.

She said, "See? Gina's billionaire."

The car door opened and Felicia screamed.

CHAPTER 10

Dee's world spun in a blur.

"Found you, bitch!" Someone yelled. That someone was a large black man, bald and wearing sunglasses.

Dee shook her head. Sunglasses? In the dark? Is he for real?

Felicia turned to run, but the man had her by the hair.

Hey! "Let go of her!" She launched herself at the big man and clawed at him.

"Fuck you, bitch!" was followed by a backhand that sent a stunned Dee flopping to the ground.

Felicia screamed again.

The man wasn't done with Dee. "Stupid fucking bitch!"

She felt a foot connect to her middle and she felt herself lifted into the air as the breath left her.

Shouts were spilling out of the bar and Dee saw something go flying past her.

The black man grunted in surprise. "What? Fuck you, motherfucker!"

Dee rolled on the ground, fighting for air. Sounds of fists meeting flesh echoed against the cars and she could contain her gasping no longer. She vomited up her drinks in a gagging explosion and need for air. She tried to get to her knees in the mud.

"Fuck you, motherfucker! Fuck you motherfucker!" The black man was on the ground yelling and thrashing.

Garth had Felicia behind him. "Break them up!"

Dee looked over at the man. He was cowering under a rain of fists. Sam was astraddle him, punching down hard and fast. A bestial look was on his features.

Garth, still shielding Felicia, said again, "Break them up! Hurry up before Sam kills him."

The regulars moved in.

Devin was in the doorway, then ducked back inside.

Dee shook her head. Leave it to a gay guy to be cowardly.

A growling Sam was pulled off Felicia's husband.

The woman was keening, saying over and over, "No, no, no!"

The man rolled on the ground. "Motherfucker, you broke my nose!"

Sam spat at him as he was shoved away from the man. He heaved several deep breaths and then came over to Dee. His words were in a pant, "Are you okay?"

She felt like she had been run over.

Garth said to the black man, "Get in your car and go back to whatever shithole you drove out of."

The man got to his feet. "Fuck you, motherfucker. No white fuck is going to tell me what to do. I'm a black man." His head moved and tilted with each word as if each word required a different angle of tilt.

There was a click from the door of the bar.

The man reached under his shirt and pulled out a gun. He raised it smoothly to aim at Sam.

Dee's eyes went wide and everything seemed to move so very slow.

The man brought the gun up.

There was an explosion and screams.

The gun kept going up and then there was a loud boom from it and fire from the barrel. Up into the air. The man was spinning back and around, falling.

Devin racked another shell into his 12 gauge and lowered it. He clicked the safety back on.

Dee blinked. "Oh shit." She found herself huddling in Sam's protective grip.

Devin shook his head. "Alright. Bar is closed." He fished out his cell and punched in a number. After a moment, he said, "I just shot a man outside my bar."

Sam lifted Dee as she blinked in confusion. She groaned and clutched to him. He took her to his truck and lifted her into it.

It's as old inside as it looks outside. She gingerly felt at her face. One side was numb.

Sam climbed in and started the Ford. He drove them out of the parking lot and away from Blake's.

"Where are we going?"

The whine and simultaneous rumble of the Ford's engine worked through the gears as he shifted. He drove slow and careful, just like his words. "I'll take you home and get you cleaned up."

Her head was swimming and she wanted to say something but nothing came out. Her eyes closed and she was aware of nothing more.

~ ~ ~

Dee heard something. Or someone.

"Are you awake?" A voice.

"Whuh?"

"I need to handle some things here. I'll be back in an hour and a half or so. There's some coffee in the kitchen."

"Huh?" She moved her head. The expected crushing hangover headache was not there. No, I guess I didn't drink too much, just too fast. Knocked me on my ass.

After a moment, she heard some kind of motorcycle or scooter start and then dwindle away.

She drifted back to sleep and dreamt of scary Mercedes cars in the night. She awoke in a rush and tried to calm her heart and breathing. Then she realized she was not at home and the light coming in was late-morning light.

She looked around. The room was small and spare. Old wallpaper with a design that said something about two centuries ago covered the walls. The old door was thick with old paint. A large and battered armoire stood in the corner. She was laying on a lumpy mattress that didn't feel like it had any springs.

She smelled coffee and old rugs. She blinked faster and leaned up. Just a little unsettled, she swung out of bed. She felt steady enough to walk. Then she realized she wasn't wearing her clothing. She had on pajamas that looked at least forty years old. Great. Sam gets to gawk at me while he dresses me in rags. But she didn't have any heat to her anger.

She mumbled to herself, "Wow, did all that really happen last night?" She breathed in deep. Yep, coffee and old rugs. The coffee drew her. She padded out barefoot into a small home straight out of the 1970s. Green shag carpet was well-worn, but clean. The couch was a faded brown thing with worn spots showing the foam cushion underneath. The end tables were light brown and sported simple wood and brass lamps not even an antique dealer would consider buying.

The walls had a few pictures on them, some were black and white. All were dusty. One of them was Sam's senior picture from high school. Cute kid, back then.

She followed her nose to the kitchen. The linoleum floor was almost white from decades of use and cleaning. At the edges, she could see it had once been lime

green with a floral pattern. The refrigerator was even older. White and rounded, the thing rattled. She looked at it suspiciously as if it might suddenly blow up in her face.

The coffee-maker was at least only a couple decades old or so – back when coffee makers were made to last. She saw the empty cup on the counter waiting for her. She gave a smile. Why, thank you, Sam.

She poured a cup and looked around. Near the door out the back was a coat rack. Simple in its function and holding two coats – a light one and a heavy one. Both looked long out of style. On the other side was a decoration she remembered seeing here and there back in the 80s. A collection of spices around a couple sheafs of wheat or something like that – tied and mounted in a little plaque. She nodded in memory.

She went back into the living room. The television was one of those antique consoles with speakers on the sides behind cloth netting. She figured it might be as old as her if not older. She passed back into the hallway of the small house and looked past her guest room. On her left was a small room with school mementos that said this might have once been Sam's room. It was now an office.

Office? What does Sam do? She didn't know. Probably masturbates in there. There was a computer on the desk, not too old and not too new. Several binders were stacked on the desk.

She shook her head, growing in curiosity. Other than a small bathroom, there was only one room left. Sam's room? He lives alone? I guess his parents are gone or dead by now. She opened the door to the last bedroom.

A wind-up clock ticked loudly on the ancient nightstand. A heavy wooden dresser drew her attention. A simple glass tray was on it, empty. Watch? Jewelry? Ring? She sipped her coffee and pulled open a drawer. She looked over the folded contents. White t-shirts. She slowly opened another drawer. Socks and underwear.

She turned around. The bed must have been old. The mattress was sunken in on one side and she immediately knew Sam slept there. The cover was neatly arrayed – it was a heavy quilt faded and old.

She wandered to the nightstand. The phone was there, a real honest-to-goodness

dial phone from the 1970s. A black, leather-bound Bible rested next to the ticking clock.

The drawer to the nightstand hooked her with curiosity. She slid it open. On top of a small phone book was a yearbook. His senior yearbook. Her freshman year. Wondering, she took it out and set down the cup. Opening it, the book opened instantly and easily to the freshman class. The book had been opened many times over the years and the spine had cracked with usage. There on the page was her picture. Around her picture was the thick ink of a marking pen. She was framed. No other picture bore a mark.

Creepy.

She snapped the book shut and placed it back in the drawer. Then she felt bad. Did he really think I was so special?

She took her cup and wandered into the bathroom. It was old, but clean. The shower tile was older than Moses, but held no mildew. The clean smell of Ivory soap permeated the air and she figured it must have soaked into the very tiles themselves over the decades. A hundred years from now, this bathroom will probably still smell like soap even if no one ever uses it again.

She looked in the mirror and gasped. She had a nice bruise on her cheekbone. Great. Sighing, she turned away from her image.

She opened the medicine cabinet. Toothbrush, comb, tweezers, razor. No cologne. Have I ever smelled cologne on him? No... Who would he be trying to impress, anyway? She looked around the bathroom and the bedroom. A lonely man lived here. A lonely man who thought his most important possession in his nightstand was her picture. She pursed her lips, trying to fight sudden tears. I've been so unfair to him.

A sensation built in her – curiosity, fear, rage, wonder... She went to the closet, opening it with fervor. Who was this man? Who was he beyond my memory of him masturbating like some creepy freak? Inside was a small row of simple shirts. Flannel shirts, old and clean. Jeans hung hooked over a couple of hangers. No other clothes hung there. No suits? No dress-up clothing?

She frowned. She had only ever seen him in jeans and flannel shirts. Frowning deeper, she walked out into the hall and back into his office. Yes, definitely once

his bedroom. She could see the outline of where his bed had been. Sometime over the years it had become an office.

She sat at his desk and looked at the computer. It was nicer than hers. Must have cost you a pretty penny. The screen was even a flat screen. She pulled the top binder and opened it. Inside was a confusing array of numbers in columns. Hectares and tons and numbers. What? Each page was a different lumber company. Lumber? There's no lumber in Dedren. Are these stock reports or something?

The binder underneath it was filled with papers from the Walnut Growers Association. More numbers and columns and yields that meant nothing to Dee. He's a walnut grower? "I thought you lived at the edge of town, Sam."

She put the binders back. She didn't know how to read the reports so looking at them just gave her a headache. She pulled open the drawer. Two checkbooks rested just inside – a small collection of stamped invoices next to them. She took up the first checkbook, the large one. Opening it, she glanced at the stubs. Water...

"Holy shit." The amount paid was over five thousand dollars. She shut the book and took up the smaller checkbook – the one that looked like hers. She flipped it open and gawked. She felt frozen, sitting there holding the checkbook open.

Seven hundred ninety-two thousand three hundred and thirteen dollars. Who has that much money?

Sam's voice made her drop the checkbook. "What are you doing?"

She jumped in the chair. Then she leapt out of it. "I'm sorry. I was curious." She felt herself blush a deep red at being caught.

He moved to the fallen checkbook and retrieved it. He placed it back in the drawer and shut it. His movements were precise and unhurried. He said, "This is my private office. If you would please..." He indicated the doorway.

"Oh. Sure." She scurried to the door, then went back for her coffee cup. "Sorry. Maybe I should go."

He said nothing, just looked at her for a moment. Then he said, "I'll check your

clothing. I put them to dry before I left but the machine sometimes takes two runs."

"Oh..."

"You had rolled around in mud and vomit. They needed to be cleaned."

She looked down. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"How do you feel?" He pointed to the couch.

"Okay, I guess." She sat. "Look, I'm sorry I was snooping—"

"Why did you?" He sat in the easy chair, arms resting on its arms as if he were on a throne. He did not move, just looked at her.

"I was curious. I don't know anything about you and—"

"You might have asked."

She twisted her fingers around the handle of the coffee cup. "I thought you lived at the edge of town in those houses—"

"I suppose this technically is the edge of town."

"Oh. But I meant in those crappy homes."

He shrugged, a little more like the normal Sam she knew. "A home is a home. It reflects those who live in it."

A wave of emotion swelled over her. "And this?" She held up her fingers. "Is this a reflection of you? Lonely?"

He said nothing.

"How come you've never told people how much money you had?"

He tilted his head a little. "I never thought I needed to impress anyone with what money I had. Money doesn't impress me."

"No, not me either. Gina maybe..." She trailed off. He was looking at her. No,

the amount of money would not impress... me. She fought back tears. "Why did you attack that man last night? He could've killed you."

"He hit you. I would've killed him for it."

Her words were shaky, on the verge of a breakdown. "You would have killed him... for me."

He stared at her for several seconds, then gave a slow nod.

His looks over the years, the single beers at Blake's, his fierce fight for her, her picture in his nightstand - it all came together and it was more than she could bear. She could hold back no longer and the tears poured down her face.

CHAPTER 11

Sam rose quickly, almost in a panic. He shifted from one foot to the next, looking at her in consternation. Then his expression became determined. He moved to the couch and sat next to her. "Don't cry."

Dee felt him put an arm around her and his other hand come up to cup her head against his chest.

"Don't cry." His hand stroked her hair and she heard his heart beating fast in his chest.

She sniffed and tried to stop. "Are you some crazy or something?"

"Do I look like it?" His words were slow again, but curious – as if he wanted to know how she felt.

"I don't know, you seem obsessed with me."

He was quiet and she listened to his breathing. But then he spoke. "I suppose I am. Obsessed. I've tried to help you along—"

"What? Help me how?"

"When Melissa left Charlie, he needed a secretary. But you were still finishing out your senior year. I offered to pay half the salary of a worker from Ogallala to fill in until you graduated."

"You did?" Is that how I got the job so fast?

"I also bribed a guy in Omaha to hire on Ditch. Far enough away that he had to move."

She broke from his grasp. "You paid to have Ditch move? But..."

His look went back to the neutral Sam she knew. "You deserved better than Ditch Jenkins."

Yes, probably, but shouldn't that have been up to me? "You've controlled my life?" Creep!

"Not entirely. Just helped you where you needed it the two times."

Anger replaced the shame. "I'm fully capable of handling my own life just fine."

He leaned away from her to look at her fully.

She fumed in his silence.

He said with a slow nod, "I suppose you are."

"Where are my clothes? I want to go home." I want to get as far away from Dedren as possible.

He stood and moved away from her. "I'll check them."

She crossed her arms. How dare the man! Does he think I'm some idiot? She wiped her eyes in a fast swipe. No more tears. Who cries for Sam, anyway? Creep.

He came back in carrying her clothing.

She stood and grabbed them from him as if he were soiling them. She rushed to the bathroom and slammed the door. She dressed as fast as she could, not wanting to spend a minute longer in the house than necessary.

She emerged and handed him the folded pajamas. "Take me home. Or point me the way and I'll walk."

He looked down and nodded. There was an odd look on his face – disappointment, but not at her, it seemed. At himself.

I don't care. You should be ashamed. Creep. Creep!

She was led outside to the truck. A four-wheel motorcycle was parked nearby. All around were enormous trees of a vibrant green. She did not take the time to look at them.

He opened the truck door for her and she got in with a huff.

The drive might have been a little faster than Sam usually drove, but still seemed to take forever. She supposed Sam did live on the farther outskirts of town as they soon passed the homes in which she had thought he lived.

Entering Dedren Estates made her feel sick. I really need to move and soon. The sooner the better.

She was out of the truck before it was fully at a stop.

"I hope you feel better," he said.

She slammed the door. Inside her trailer she peeked out the blinds. He was still sitting out there, looking down at his steering wheel. He eventually pursed his lips and put the F-100 into gear. The removal of his truck from her yard made her feel better. A lot better.

But she found herself pacing, fuming. How dare the man? Masturbate over me, then try to control my life. Who did he think he was?

She reached for her phone, then stopped. She definitely was not in the mood to call Gina. No, she needed to order things in her mind, first, or she would end up screaming.

She growled in frustration. Dead End, Nebraska, with no hope and no control. Tucker trying to use me and that loser Sam trying to control me. I need to move. Her mind was made up. She grabbed the phone.

Gina's voice was breathless. "There you are. Where have you been? The state police were crawling like flies everywhere and they wanted to talk to you."

"Me? What? I was with Sam."

"Sam? Oh... Well they wanted to talk to you but they eventually left."

"Do they still want to talk to me? What for?"

"Oh well, I wouldn't worry about it now. They left and said they had all they needed. So many witnesses saw what went on that they didn't even take Devin into custody. They just ran a check on his gun."

"So they don't want to talk to me?" Dee was confused.

"They did, just to hear what you had to say because he hit you. But Felicia said you came to her rescue—"

"Yeah, I did."

"So they don't need to talk to you anymore. They recommended someone get you to the hospital in case you were injured."

"I have a bruise. It's nothing. How's Felicia?"

"A wreck, but she says she's fine. I think he really scared her."

"For shit's sake, Gina. He pulled a gun..." And was going to shoot Sam. "He scared me!"

"Oh, I know. I think Felicia's just shaken from it all. He might have killed her."

Or me. Or Sam. "So, it's all over?"

"Yeah, not many of us got much sleep. What about you?"

"Sam took me to his house." She said it with anger. "Washed my clothes. I was passed out."

"That was nice of him."

She began pacing again and blew out a growling breath. "He's creepy. He has my picture in his nightstand."

"He does? He showed you?"

"No, I found it there."

"Wait, what? You were looking through his things?"

"Yes, I was curious—"

Gina's laugh was amused. "Remind me never to have you sleep over my place."

"What?"

"Who wants a snoop as a guest?"

"It wasn't like that."

"Oh? You just accidentally tripped into his room, fell over and opened his nightstand and just happened to see your picture? Yeah right."

Dee went silent. It did sound bad. "Okay, maybe I was snooping. But the guy's a creep."

"Why do you say that? I've been finding his company very nice."

"He got me the C and S job. And he paid to have Ditch hired over in Omaha."

Gina laughed. "He did? Hired? Sam?"

"Yeah, you'd like him; the guy is filthy stinking rich."

"Sam?"

"Well, he's no billionaire, but the money in his checking account..."

"He showed you his checking account? Nothing impresses you. He should've known better."

Oops. "Er, yeah... I sort of snooped into his office, too. He didn't show me. He found me looking and seemed upset."

"Oh my gosh, Dee. What were you thinking? And how could you be so shallow?"

What? Me? Shallow? I'm not shallow. Am I? "I know it sounds bad, but I had to know what kind of person he was."

"He got you a job. I think I'd be more worried about what kind of person you were."

She didn't want to talk about it anymore. "Well, whatever. I need to move. I can't have some guy controlling my life. It's creepy."

"Sounds to me like you were lucky to have someone—"

"The guy's a loser."

"A rich loser?"

Dee snapped her mouth shut. Losers didn't get rich unless they got drunk and bought a lottery ticket. Then they lost it all the next month gambling. "Fine. But he's weird. Who keeps a picture of me in his nightstand?"

Gina's voice was quiet. Then she just said, "Wow."

"What?"

"Nothing. I know when you'll listen and when you won't. You coming to Blake's tonight?"

"Fuck no. I'm done with Dead-fucking-end, Nebraska." She hit the off button before Gina could respond.

CHAPTER 12

Monday was a day of hoped-for hope for Dee. It was her first full day of real work. She would work the weekdays until the end of the week, then her shift might be changed. She didn't want the third shift, but she didn't care. She was going to use her lunch hour to find a place here in Sydney.

She would start a new life and it wouldn't be in Dedren.

Wearing her smart blue smock, she was assigned to straighten the office supplies aisles and encouraged to familiarize herself with the placement of the goods in her area. Matthew was on hand if need be.

Personal tragedy, for her, struck just before her lunch break.

A young couple were looking up and down and around in the pen area. They whispered to each other and shook their heads. She glanced and saw they probably needed help, even if they were outside the ten-foot zone of greeting suggested by Walmart policy. She started to head towards them.

The young man said, "Ask that old woman there." He pointed to Dee.

Old? She stumbled to a stop.

The young woman with him approached. A tattoo of some Chinese symbol on her wrist. "Excuse me, where are the mechanical pencils?"

Old? Me? Old? She felt suddenly lost and out of place. She stared at the woman for a second.

"Mechanical pencils?" The young woman pitched her voice a little louder and leaned, as if Dee were deaf.

She blinked. "I'm sorry, yes. This aisle over here."

The young man frowned. "Why aren't they with the pens?"

Because they're with the pencils, you brat. She pointed with a smile on her face. But behind that smile she fretted. Am I old?

The incident was going to plague her the rest of the day and week.

~ ~ ~

Tuesday she still fretted over the comments. She straightened the stacks of paper packs and made sure each was in the proper place.

Matthew had given her nods of approval, despite critical looks at her work.

But she still agonized over the young couple's comments. She had gone home the previous night and looked in her bathroom mirror. Lines around her eyes and the gray in her hair sure didn't make her look young. Was time so far along that she was considered the elderly? Where had all the time gone?

Someone entered the aisle behind her. She stood, positioning the stack of paper packs with a final nudge. She turned.

Sam stood there.

Was he staring at my ass? "What do you want? Are you following me—"

"I need some new binders." He held up the small blue Walmart carry basket.

"Binders? What are you doing here?"

Sam's look was neutral, as she was used to. "Three ring. Three inch, if you have them."

That's when she saw Matthew giving her a critical look from the other end of the aisle. Shit. Great. He'll think I'm being rude to customers. "Yes, right over here." She plastered on what she figured was a smile and waved him to follow.

Matthew moved on.

She said low, "What are you doing here, Sam? Why are you here?"

"I need binders."

"And you come all the way to Sydney—"

"Dedren don't sell them."

That was true. But then she knew; Gina had told him to what department she had been assigned. "Well, there they are."

Sam looked weary. Old and weathered, in a way. Older than his years. The fine lines at his eyes went with the gray of his once vibrant hair. It was even receding a little.

But is he old? He's only four years older than me. He looks different from last week, but old? I think he looks fine.

He chose four new three-inch binders and placed them in his basket. "Thank you," he said.

She turned to get away from him now that his question was resolved. She wanted to be away from him. From Dedren. From all of them.

"Dee."

She gritted her teeth. Why does he insist on dragging me through his obsession? All he does is remind me of that dead-end town. Her word was bitten off.

"What?"

He stepped close, fast, and lowered his voice. His move startled her; she was unused to seeing him do anything fast. Except punch out Felicia's dead husband.

His eyes were fierce. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. For all of it. I never meant to hurt you."

"Control me?"

He sighed and gave her that pensive look. Intelligent, but silent.

She turned fast and walked away from him. I must get away from Dedren. What she heard almost caused her to break into a run.

His voice shook slightly and sounded unsure of itself. "I love you. I've always loved you."

She broke into a run as if a mean dog were after her.

His voice trailed after her. "I would rather die lonely than live without you."

~ ~ ~

Tuesday night, she punched in Gina's number. Then hit the end button. She paced back and forth in her trailer. What was she going to do? Mister Obsession was going bat-shit crazy on her.

She hit the number again.

"Hi, Dee." Quiet. Reserved.

"I'm sorry I hung up on you the other day."

Silence.

"Come on, Gina. I said I was sorry."

"Ah... Yeah, I know. I'm just shocked."

"What?"

"You never apologize."

She stood up straighter. "What?"

"For little things, maybe. But never big things."

Was that true? She searched her memory for instances of apologies. She couldn't recall much. "What are you saying?"

Gina sighed. "Nothing. Let's drop it, shall we? What were you calling for?"

She coughed, then sighed. "Sam chased me to Walmart."

"Chased? In the car?"

Frustrated, she blew out a breath. "No. He showed up buying binders. Did you tell him what department—"

"I might have let it slip." There was challenge in her voice.

"What for? He stood there and told me he was sorry and that he loved me."

"What a fucking bastard, huh?" Her voice was sarcastic.

"What?"

"How dare someone love you, right?"

"What are you talking about? This man is crazy-obsessed with me."

Gina's voice got loud. "You listen to me, girl. Your idea of obsession is what I call love. I'd kill to have some man love me like that."

Dee was speechless.

"When are you going to grow up and admit that your idea of love hasn't gotten you anywhere."

"What are you talking about?"

"Love, stupid." Gina's voice was angry. Her voice rose in pitch. "What man has ever told you he's loved you?"

Dee's mouth was open. "I..."

"That's right, none. None. Not a one. Except for the man you hate."

"I don't hate him—"

"But you treat him like shit. How would you like to love someone and be treated like shit?"

"But—"

"And you've treated him like shit for over twenty years." Gina's voice broke. "Where's my man who would be patient with me for even one year? Just one. For me? And yours has waited for twenty? Fuck!"

The phone went dead.

Dee looked at it in shock. Gina never acted so emotional. This really bothers her.

She put down the phone and paced. Am I really taking all this the wrong way? Have I been wrong? I'm not perfect; but have I been wrong?

"What if I have?" She laughed, crazy-like. "Me? Wrong? Of course I can be wrong."

There was a knock on her door.

Dee peeked out the peephole. It was Felicia. She yanked open the door. "Felicia! Come in."

The woman came in after a small hesitation. "Thank you."

"Are you alright? After Friday...?"

She gave a fast nod, but her eyes were bright. "Oh, I'm fine. I wanted to thank you for trying to help me."

"Oh my goodness, it was nothing. Of course I was going to try."

"You're a good woman, Dee. Not many would have tried. Just watched."

Many had. She remembered the crowd spilling out of the bar and surrounding the scene as if it were a ringside fight.

She was the only one who had intervened. And Sam.

She turned away from Felicia. Only Sam had come to her rescue when it was Dee's turn. Only Sam had stopped Felicia's husband from beating her senseless. Or worse. The man who claimed he loves me.

She covered her mouth.

Felicia sounded concerned. "Is something wrong?"

"I just realized Gina was right. No one has ever said they loved me."

"I know how you feel, girl. I only got married because Mister Sweet-talker talked me into bed. And along comes Shayla. But I paid the price. I should have been looking for love and happiness, not a husband for security."

I'm such a fool. A stupid, stupid fool. A sob broke her throat, but she quashed it.

"Is everything alright?" Felicia's concern only deepened Dee's shame.

"I've done someone so wrong and I need to set it right."

The woman's voice was quiet. "Sam."

She spun back to her. "Does everyone see it, but me? I'm the last to know?"

"Us black women need to keep our eyes open lest the garbage truck roll over us."

Dee's confusion must have shown on her face.

Felicia leaned close. "I'm talking about life. The garbage truck of a garbage life."

"Oh..."

"White men tend to be a little more stable, if you catch my drift. So it's harder for women like me. I learned my lesson with James. I won't make no mistake again."

"Swearing off black men?"

"Oh, the garbage truck can come down both ends of that alley, girl. No doubt. All I'm saying is, my eyes are open."

Dee gave her a smile. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-three, tomorrow."

"Oh. Happy birthday, then. If I don't see you." Thirty-three and wiser than me by eleven years. Oh, Dee, what a mess.

"Will you be still coming to Blake's...?" Felicia's face said she doubted it.

"Not for anything upstairs. All I was supposed to be was Tucker's toy. My sights had originally been on Devin, but—"

Felicia's laughter was quiet. "His square peg don't fit in your hole."

Dee laughed. "Right. But I might stop by for a drink. If I have any friends left."

Felicia touched her. "You have far more friends than you know. I'll see you later, then."

Dee watched her go.

Sam. She began pacing. He had acted out of love for her? Would she have done anything different? "Why didn't he just approach me and admit it all years ago?" But she realized she wouldn't have done that, either. She had pined quietly after Devin for years.

She knew she needed to apologize. Her words and actions must have hurt him bad. I hope he doesn't go all despondent and commit suicide. Dedren has seen enough of those.

Suddenly panicked, she dug in the drawer for the phone book. She flipped to the S page and scanned down. Samuel Stone. Grabbing her cell, she punched in the number.

I don't know what to say! She paced as the phone began to ring. She was saved from having to say anything. The phone went unanswered. Not even voicemail.

Looking around wildly, it occurred to her he must have been at the end of his rope a few hours earlier. The only person he loved had run away from him. "Oh, Sam. Don't do anything stupid."

She grabbed her keys and raced out the door. Her hands were shaking so bad she couldn't get the key in the ignition. "Dammit!"

Getting the car started almost made her break a sweat. She moved the selector and mashed on the gas. The engine revved dramatically, but the car went nowhere. She looked down. It was in neutral, not drive. Shit.

Gravel flew as she spun out of the trailer park. The state police only patrolled here if they were called. She ignored streets and cars and floored it. Tearing through town in a cloud of dust and Chevrolet growl, she raced to the turn that led out of town.

She realized she was going far too fast.

Slamming her foot down on the brake, the car went into a skid.

Coming around the corner was Garth on his Harley. The look on his face said he saw the approaching death.

She screamed. And yanked the wheel. Her foot slipped off the brake pedal and hit the gas. Oh shit! The car suddenly shot off straight.

Garth's Harley wobbled wildly, his legs out and his arms trying to maintain control. His eyes were bugged out and his mouth open in a panic.

She watched him dwindle in her rearview mirror. "Sorry, Garth!"

The crappy houses flashed by, full of crap and crappy people. Ahead were the first trees. She couldn't see Sam's house and panicked, wondering if she had remembered correctly. But soon she saw the lonely little roof. She hit the brakes and slowed enough to enter his gravel drive. Her car slewed sideways and then spun around to face the entrance. Fine, whatever.

Leaving the car, she ran for the door. His truck was parked there, old, well-cared for. Solid and durable. Just like Sam.

She beat her fist against the door. "Sam!" She turned the knob but it was locked. "Sam!" She had a sick, empty feeling in her stomach. Sam, please. Don't do anything stupid.

She raced to the nearest window and peeked through, dreading on seeing his body. The room was empty. She went window to window, tears streaming down her face, feeling the dread. The doom. "Sam!" she screamed.

The doors were locked.

She saw nothing and the house was eerily still.

Oh no, the barn. He'll be hanging from the rafters! She ran for the barn, already out of breath and her lungs and throat burning. She went inside the open bay door. The inside was a mix of antique and new equipment. A couple of new trailers were inside and several crates.

She looked up.

Sam had hung some chains up there, but she saw no body.

Shaking with fear and exhaustion, she walked out of the barn. He's here but won't answer the door. If I missed him and he's dying or dead... I need to call the police.

She wrung her hands. Maybe I should just break in. But maybe the police would think I did it if I find the body. She looked at her car. She had left her cell back at the trailer. I'll just drive home and make the call. Let the police find the body.

She got back into her car and drove home.

CHAPTER 13

Dee walked the funeral march of death. The trip from her car to her trailer never seemed so long. Inside, she grabbed her cell through teary eyes. I've messed everything up.

She sighed. Best get the call over with. They'll need to find the body and then call the coroner. She glanced down at the phone book. She turned to the S page and dialed his number for the last time. Just to let you know I was thinking of you. I hope you're in heaven.

"Hello?" The quiet voice.

Dee's heart almost jumped out of her throat and danced around on the table. Her gasp was almost a choked scream. "Sam!?"

"Dee? Is everything alright?"

"No, it's not. You're okay?"

Silence for a few seconds. "I'm alright."

"I came over and you didn't answer the door. But your truck—"

"You came here?"

"Yes, just fifteen minutes ago."

"Well, I just got back inside."

"What?"

"I was out. Have a problem with a faulty irrigation valve—"

"I thought you had done something stupid."

"Me coming to Walmart today?"

"No!" She heaved a sigh to calm herself. "No, I thought... Never mind. Never mind. I had wanted..." She trailed off. I do, don't I? I do want to apologize.

"Yes?"

"I wanted to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all the years of being stupid."

Silence on the other end.

"Are you there?"

"I am. I'm just not sure what to say."

"You said you loved me."

"Yes, but..."

Panic flushed through her. "But? You don't? what—"

"I mean that saying anything to you is something that requires a lot of thought and planning."

Whuh? "It does?"

"You've always been touchy around me. Well, since that day at Uncle Brent's reception. That was you who saw me, wasn't it? I was never sure."

"Yes, it was me."

"One stupid thing ruined my life."

"Don't say that."

"But it did."

She went quiet. Ruined? He considered his life ruined? "But you're so successful and—"

"I blew my chance at getting you. I suppose it's a little easier to admit now that I made it worse."

Her lip quivered. "No, Sam. You haven't. You did the smartest thing you could today and it finally broke through my stupidity." She gave a short laugh. "With the help of a few friends."

"What are you saying, Dee?"

"I'm saying I'm sorry for being stupid for so long."

"Would you... Would you like to talk this over? Not on the phone? Maybe the Country House?"

Dee smiled. "I think that would be great, if you don't mind Gina scowling at me. I think I made her mad."

"She's been a good friend to you."

"I know."

"How about I pick you up in a half hour?"

She smiled wider. "I'll be here."

~ ~ ~

His truck pulling up next to her car was not a sight that caused consternation. Not this time. Gone was the feeling of annoyance.

She bounced down out of the trailer and ran straight to him. She gripped him in a hug that had him startled. "Sam, you're okay."

He let her break the hug. His voice was slow. "Yes... I'm alright." He opened the door for her.

"I thought you might have went home all despondent and..."

He gave one big nod and then went around to get in. Starting the truck, he put it in gear. "Well, I don't think I'd be that stupid."

She rode happily on the stiff suspension of the truck. "How come you never replaced this?"

He tilted his head at her. "It's a good truck. Runs great. Four wheel drive—"

"But with all that money you could have had—"

"Something not built as well."

Dee found that fitting for Sam.

They pulled into the Country House parking lot. A couple of cars were there, Gina's among them. It would be near the end of her shift.

The interior was old and worn down, just like everything else in Dedren. But the food smells were good and her stomach growled in spite of her stress.

Gina gave her an eyebrow and plucked two simple menus from the side of the register.

Dee leaned close. "I'm sorry, Gina. And you were right."

Two eyebrows went up suspiciously and her friend led them to a table without a word said. She glanced at them both and then left.

Finding herself sitting with Sam almost on a date left her not knowing what to say. She picked up the menu.

He moved his to the side.

She gave him a look. "Know what you want already?"

"Always."

Does he mean me? Or food? "Oh."

"You know I tried to proofread Gina's attempt at a book."

Dee frowned. "No, I didn't know that. You mean that book about food?"

He nodded. "It was so poorly arranged and written I told her it was hopeless."

Dee giggled. "You didn't."

He flashed a smile. It looked so strange on his face. But it was a solid smile. "I did. But I suggested she get a real editor."

"And that didn't go anywhere."

"No, but I picked up a lot about what she was saying. Now when I come to restaurants, I only order scrambled eggs. With all the genetically modified meat and wheats out there—"

She laughed. "Oh no, a Gina-clone."

Gina's voice drifted over the cook counter. "I heard that."

He grinned.

She set the menu down. "You said today you loved me. Is this something new?" She knew it wasn't.

He shook his head slowly. "No."

"How long, then?"

"Since the day I met you. Since school."

"Which explains why you'd be playing with yourself—"

He shifted quickly in his seat, a frown on his face. "Look, I'm sorry about that. It shouldn't have happened."

Thoughts of Tucker and Garth masturbating over her made her squirm in a different way. "Oh, don't worry. I might have thought it yucky back then, but now I kinda think it's sexy."

"Oh? You know I only did that that time and other times because you were younger. I didn't want to get an underage girl in trouble."

"Well, thank you. But that was a long time ago. Got gray in my hair, now." She lifted a handful of it.

"It's beautiful." His eyes were soft.

"Stop it. It's hideous."

He shook his head. "It's you. It's who you are. It's everything I find beautiful."

She looked down, not knowing what to say. No one had ever called her beautiful. "Thank you."

Gina planted herself at the head of the table as if ready for combat. She held her notepad out in front of her like a weapon. "Shall I take your order?"

Sam glanced at Dee. "What will you have?"

"What you're having."

He smiled and said to Gina. "We'll have eight scrambled eggs, fried in butter or bacon grease."

Her friend's eyebrow shot up and she jotted it down. "Sides?"

He shook his head.

She dotted her pen to the notepad as if making a hard period. "Very good." She looked closely at Dee. "Are you alright, girl?"

"Very sick, actually. I came down with a sudden case of common sense."

A slow smile spread across her friend's face and moisture gathered in her eyes. A hand darted out and gave Dee's shoulder a quick squeeze.

Sam was laughing quietly. "Well, I hope the condition is permanent."

"Don't make me kick you." She gave him a playful look. Then, feeling embarrassed, she said, "What held you back all these years? In telling me..."

They both knew what she meant.

He said, "You had already made up your mind that I was something to avoid. Which is why I said I ruined everything over one dumb act."

"You never thought to change my mind?"

He shook his head. "You had four years to cement in yourself I was some kind of freak. I couldn't talk to you about love before you were an adult; I would have been arrested and hanged."

She looked down. He might have been exaggerating, but he was right. That is exactly how it had happened.

He said, "Overcoming that after four years just wasn't going to happen. You had your life ahead of you. I was just a bad memory."

"I'm sorry, Sam."

"It doesn't matter. Even if this is all that ever happens, I got to sit and talk to the woman I love over one dinner. It was worth a lifetime of waiting."

The tears were rolling before she could stop them. "Stop it, Sam."

"I can't. I wouldn't. If this is my only chance – that break through your iron armor - then I'm going to use it. I don't want anyone else. I never have."

She couldn't talk. She had never heard words like this before, except in cheesy movies about fake people.

"I don't mean to make you uncomfortable..."

She was shaking her head vigorously. No, don't stop. This is wonderful. She thought of Dedren and how she wanted to leave. "Where do we go from here?"

He coughed. Then the tears streamed from his eyes. "I might die right now from happiness over such words I never thought I'd hear."

She laughed but was shaking her head. "You can't die on me now, so don't get any foolish ideas."

"Yes, ma'am."

She knew she would need to be honest at some point and she thought there was no better time. "I've been wanting to leave Dedren..."

His look went stony again. The old Sam.

She reached out and touched his arm. "But I want to tell you why and I hope you don't hate me for it."

Gina delivered their eggs and placed the ticket down.

Dee snatched the ticket.

Sam actually looked angry. "Hey, I'm paying for that."

She shook her head. "I owe you so much more. I think I can pay for some eggs."

He quirked his mouth to the side and sat back.

Gina left them alone.

She leaned over their plates. "I have to tell you something. It's why I want out of Dedren."

He salted his scrambled eggs, watching her.

She said, "For the longest time, I was after Devin."

He raised an eyebrow. "The gay bar owner?"

Her mouth dropped open. "You knew?"

He looked to the side and back. "Wasn't it obvious?"

"How come you didn't tell me?" The nerve.

"You weren't talking to me anyway and you never asked."

She leaned back. "So much wasted time."

He leaned over his eggs, fork halfway to mouth. "You want to leave Dedren because of him? Or because of your new job?"

She felt helpless, knowing she needed to tell him. She wanted no secrets. "No. And if you don't want me after this, then at least I was honest. When they invited me upstairs to be in their circle of friends, I was sort of the main attraction."

His eyebrows drew down. "Main attraction?"

"I went up there for Devin, but ended up with Garth and Tucker. I guess I was supposed to be Tucker's fuck-toy." There. It was said.

Sam's hand on the fork turned white in his grip. "You want me to beat the shit out of them?"

She jerked. "What? No. I went up twice. But I knew even the second time it wasn't what I wanted. I just don't ever want to go back up those stairs."

He seemed to relax. "That sounds like the Dee I know."

"That's why I want to move."

He frowned. "Just don't go up those stairs again."

"Huh?" He's not mad?

"Garth's a good guy. Tucker can be an ass, but they're big boys. They'll get over it."

"You're not mad?"

"What? Of course I am. I have a good reason to punch out Tucker, now. Garth I can understand, but Tucker..."

"I don't think you need to punch anyone out..."

He stared at her, his eyes considering. Finally, he said, "I'll do whatever makes you feel best."

"I don't need people beat up." She shrugged. "I want to be loved. I want to be cherished. I want to be wanted for who I am, not what I can offer in bed."

He finished chewing a bite and then regarded her for a moment. "I am all of that, for you. In all ways."

Dee stopped eating. For me.

His look was steady.

For me. Not for what he can get out of it. "You're going to make me cry again."

"Don't. I don't ever want to see tears on your cheeks. It pains me so deep inside I feel like I want to break in half."

She couldn't stop them. They streamed down her face and she laughed. "I'm sorry. Really." She wiped at them. "No one has ever said things like this to me."

"I would tell you every day."

She blew through two napkins wiping fresher tears and blubbering until she felt a total fool.

Gina stayed well away.

Dee tried to maintain a composed face. "So what do we do about me and..."

He leaned across his empty plate. His eyes searched hers, deep and hard. Finally, with some reluctance, he ventured some words as if wondering if they were right. "Let me take you home and make you forget those other men."

Dee felt a twist within her and a warmth that said yes. They were the right words. "I think I'd like that."

CHAPTER 14

Dee paid the tab over Sam's unease and they walked out together. She looked back over her shoulder and saw Gina smiling through the window as big as a land-shark.

The ride to Sam's place was filled with anticipation. Would she want this? She felt now like she did. Would she like it? She had never had a man tell her he loved her – this would be a new experience.

Dedren passed by outside in a new light. Dead town, dead end, and yet, something new. They passed by the Dedren Estates – a collection of lonely-looking trailers. Almost her entire life had been spent there, lonely. Tonight she went somewhere new.

Sam's voice was tentative. "Are you sure...?"

She looked back from the window. "I don't think there's been anything I'm more sure of... I just hope..."

"Hope?" He baited her.

"I just hope we find we didn't waste our time."

"I think we've already done that. Tonight, for me, will be the pinnacle of my life."

She knew then, it wouldn't be a waste.

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The old smell of his home was comforting.

He was trying to contain his excitement – the exuberance in his eyes, the enthusiastic tone of his voice. Two decades of yearning unfulfilled built a barrier of expectation and disbelief they both found difficult to grasp.

It was when he hugged her that all her thoughts went sailing away and dissolving.

He whispered into her ear. "I made a mistake with you. I never want to make one again."

Who could say they would be perfect? Who could claim perfection? "I don't imagine you're Jesus. Why not say you'll love me?" She wanted to hear it again.

He pulled back. His hand reached up to her hair and stroked it. "I love you. I've always loved you."

It was the right thing to say.

His mouth descended to hers and she became connected to the man she had thought creepy. Creepy because he loved me. What a fool. I'll never be so stupid again. Their tongues moved together, swirling around each other in a way she had not been kissed since Ditch Jenkins. No, not even Ditch. His kisses were all about himself and his own pleasure. No, I have never been kissed like this. Never like this.

She met his mouth and they became one, Siamese twins joined at the mouth, aware of each other and knowing each other. Their passion was expressed wetly, mouth to mouth. She found herself leaning against him, panting and out of breath.

He said with a happy smile, "That kiss was better than all the ones I've imagined."

She gave half a laugh – she was too euphoric to laugh.

He carried her in his strong arms to his bedroom and laid her gently on the bed. He slowly undid her clothing and undressed her.

She giggled. "Did you undress me like this Friday night?"

He frowned and pouted. "No. I was quick and tried not to look."

"Get out."

He shook his head. "I respected that you would not have wanted me to."

The instinctual respect for her feelings assaulted her eyes again and they pooled dangerously.

He softened. "Please don't cry. I don't want to make you cry."

She erupted in a small half-laugh, half-sob. "You jerk, you make me happy. These are happy tears."

A small grin started, then spread like a bad rash across his face, until it was lit up and full of vibrant happiness.

Having undressed her, he shrugged out of his own clothing.

She had a good look at his physique before he knelt. Nicely shaped, not over-buff and not skinny like she had imagined him. His penis hung mostly hard with a nice color and a very straight shaft. Oh baby. What a nice surprise.

He knelt at the foot of the bed and kissed his way up her shins. Her knees were ticklish and she gasped when he planted damp kisses on them. He alternated kissing and licking up her thighs until he reached her pussy. "Open your legs."

Garth had licked her there two weeks before, but she somehow felt this would be different. And it was.

His tongue touched her folds with a delicacy at first that made her want to pull his head in and mash his tongue against her. Then the full tongue was planted on her and moved up and down in a wide lick that sent her spiraling into a whirlwind of lust. She spun tighter and tighter as his whole tongue ran up and down, wetting and warming and cooling and caressing her clit.

"Ohhh..." she moaned.

He curved his tongue and ran it down her clit until it parted her lips. Over and over he did this until she thought she would scream. Her body heaved and convulsed, twitching on its own, reacting to his tongue as if a snake writhing in a pit.

He stuck his fingers in her and began probing. She spun faster and tighter.

She swore she saw colors. Her hips lifted. Her legs came up and started to curl around his head. Flashes of color and sensation appeared and disappeared in her head. She was heaved towards the precipice of lust until she was toppled over in waves of painful pleasure. Her convulsions brought out cries of pain and effort. She gripped his head in her hands and pulled him in while trying not to push him away from the exquisite pain of her orgasm.

Finally, she pushed his head away.

He leaned up and kissed the soft flesh of her lower abdomen. It quivered in post-orgasmic twitches.

She shook her head and laughed in relief. "Wow."

His eyes sparkled and his smile was mischievous.

She watched him kiss his way up her body. He spared a quick lick and light suck on each nipple before moving up to nuzzle her neck.

Oh, this is too good. Way better than Tucker or Garth. She clutched his shoulders and urged him higher. Penetrate me. Make love to me. I want to feel it.

His lips on hers were followed by a probing of her area with his erection.

She giggled. He wasn't in the right spot. She reached down and moved him to the right a little. His cock felt great in her hands – hard, throbbing, and excited for her.

Their kiss deepened and she felt the head of his shaft part her lips and spread her open. The sensation of movement at her lips was followed by the slow filling feeling of a cock entering her pussy. It felt so right and so good. She pulled at him, squirming. Get it in. Get it in! And when he was all the way in, she felt that bond and connection she had so long yearned for but never completely felt.

He was gentle, but sexy. His hips moved, working his shaft in and out of her, pushing and pulling her pussy lips in a lewd and sexy act of love. His kisses kept her breathless, and the muscles worked on his back underneath her hands in an intimate manner.

The slow and sensual invasion of her innermost private spot over and over by the man above her was considerate and comforting. "Oh, Sam," she murmured.

His thrusting became deeper, more forceful. "Dee, my love. You're everything I want, and more than I imagined."

She floated, happy, still tingling from the effects of her orgasm. His thrusts brought her a pleasurable serenity that she didn't want to end. "Sam..."

He sped up, panting.

She could feel him and his excitement. She figured he was close. She tilted her hips and helped him reach his depth. His cock touched those special places in her and made her gasp.

Gripping her neck from the back, he pulled on her, sinking his cock in deep. His eyes crossed and then screwed shut. He grunted loudly, his body convulsing in an explosive spasm that was accompanied by an enormous wet feeling, hot and deep in her. He grunted for a long time, slower and slower, until he finally collapsed on her.

Sam panted, out of breath and dizzy from the exertion.

She felt the satisfaction of knowing she had conquered his manhood, that she had coaxed from him the best he could give. It was all hers.

Then he destroyed it. "I love you, Dee. Marry me and be mine."

CHAPTER 15

Dee didn't recall the afterwards very much. She remembered asking to be driven home. She remembered his concern and his worry. All she knew was she had to get away.

Wednesday was a day like any other, except she had been given the schedule for the following week. She was on second shift. Fine by me. I need to think all this through.

Sam called and left messages. She couldn't bear to listen to them.

Her workday went by in a haze of thought and mindless obedience to her functions. Straightening some pile. Replacing some vacant product. Moving some item to its proper place from wherever it had been discarded by the fickle customer.

Why had she run from Sam? Was she just moving from one dead end to another? Could Dedren really offer anything but more dead ends? More Tuckers? More Garths? More gay Devins? More quitting Charlies?

Her life had been a bare existence of failure and dead hope from one year to the next. She would have to make a break. A clean break – one that made it clear she would no longer be Dedren's punching bag. Her entire life would have to change.

She drove home Wednesday evening resolved to say goodbye to her life in Dedren forever. She would do it and there would be no turning back. A new life.

She pulled into the Dedren Estates for the very last time. There would be no next time.

She entered her trailer and pulled out her only suitcase. Get out. Get out now, and never come back. Do it, girl. She piled her meager clothing into it. She used a box for the few small things she couldn't replace: photos; her Bible; her yearbook from school; and her other personal papers.

The light was flashing on her cordless. She knew her cell would show messages, too. She ignored them all. Her mind made up, she would leave and never come back.

Run. Run far and fast and never look back. She hauled her suitcase out and threw it in the passenger seat. She went back in and grabbed the box. The rest of the crap was just that: crap. It was the detritus of a life with no meaning, no hope, and no future. She was leaving it all.

Dedren thinks it can keep me. This shit-town thinks it can hold me down. No. Not me. Not ever again. She started her car. She did not look back to the open door of her trailer. Gravel flew as she sped out the entrance. She was on her way and she would never return.

And she never did.

~ ~ ~

She pulled to a stop and got out. Grabbing her suitcase, she headed for the front entry. She was determined to start all over, anew. A new life, a new hope, and a new beginning. She was not too old.

The door opened and Sam stood there, red in the eyes.

She dropped the suitcase. "I love you too, Sam. Yes, I will marry you. I'm yours forever and always from here on out." She ran to him and into his welcoming embrace.

An embrace that would last a lifetime.