



"What do you want?" Casey spun around to face him. He raised his eyebrows. "Right now?"

She shook her head. "Out of life, Mike. What do you want?"

He shrugged. "It'd be selfish to ask for more that I've got." He drew a circle in the sand with his toe. "I don't know. Marriage. Kids. I've already got the big house and a boat." He glanced at her. "What about you?"

She stared at the sand. "I don't know. I don't want to be alone."

He reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her to him again. "You won't be."

She took a deep breath. "So what are you looking for now? With me?"

He pushed her away and held her arms by her sides. "I think you know, Casey. I'm not playing games here. I'm not looking for a fling. It might look like that I've got this great life, but you know, I don't consider it much of a life at all. All I ever wanted was to find someone to build my world around; someone that was going to be beside me everyday; someone that I lived my life for. I was thinking that it might possibly...that it could possibly be you."



Build My World

Rebecca Abbott Miller



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by Rebecca Abbott Miller

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*For Scott, who has shown me how to
love someone completely.*





*Thank you to Dr. Charles W. Laird,
president of Wedding Ministers, Inc
for your help.
www.weddingministers.com.*



Chapter One



Casey bounced her knee as she stared at the door to the conference room. The interview was supposed to be at 2:30. A glance at her watch told her it was already fifteen minutes past that. She stifled a yawn; sleep hadn't come easily the night before. She didn't know what to expect, or whom she would be talking to. *I wonder if they will be here*, she thought.

"They" were the members of mega-superstar-pop-singing-sensation Quintessential. And she was here interviewing for a position as a traveling personal chef for the group. At the airport, she had bought several teen magazines with articles about the members of Quintessential. She read and reread the magazines on the plane, committing every word to memory. She studied their pictures and felt sure she could identify them by sight, but not confident that she wouldn't stammer, stutter and act the fool if she were actually in the same room with them.

Come on, let's get on with this. She hadn't even known about this job 48 hours earlier, it was a fluke that her college advisor had even heard about it. When she enrolled in culinary school two years earlier, she had no clue what she was going to do with her degree. After graduation, she pictured herself working in a restaurant. Working for a celebrity, much less five of them, was as far from her realm of thinking as running for president.

The door swung open and a well-dressed man stepped out of the conference room. "Casey Russo?"

Casey jumped up, forgetting that her purse was on her lap. It tumbled to the floor, spilling the contents at her feet. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* She knelt and pushed the contents back into her purse. She stood up and managed a small smile.

"I'm, Casey."

The man smiled and she relaxed. He extended his hand. "I'm Neil Black, general manager for Quintessential." She followed him into the room and he turned to the two men sitting at the table. "Gentlemen, this is Casey Russo. Mrs. Russo, this is Steven Howard, he works for Disney, who is sponsoring the tour, and he's serving as the liaison between us and Disney; and this is Chuck Zander, Quintessential's road manager. He's in charge of everything that goes on out there."

"Hello," Casey said as she sat down. She clasped her hands in her lap.

"So, Mrs. Russo," Mr. Black started. "We see here that you just graduated from Brighton at the top of your class."

"Yes, sir."

"But you don't have any professional cooking experience?"

She shook her head. "No sir, not yet, but I did intern at the Lafayette."

Mr. Black nodded his acknowledgment of the Washington, DC area restaurant. "This job would require you to be on the

road for almost nine straight months, living on a bus, occasionally in a hotel room. It's a lot of cooking, whatever, whenever, within reason. You would be responsible for the shopping. Of course, you would be given grocery money."

Casey nodded. "I understand."

"One of the young men in the group is a diabetic. Do you understand the special diet he would have to follow?"

Casey nodded. "Yes, sir. We did a great deal of sugar-free cooking at Brighton, and of course, as a nurse, I've dealt with many diabetics."

"A nurse?" Mr. Howard said, leaning forward with interest.

"Yes." She shook her head. "It wasn't on my resume. I graduated from the University of North Carolina with a bachelors degree in nursing. I worked in the ER for two years."

"Why did you leave nursing?" Mr. Zander asked.

She been on multiple interviews in the past weeks, but this question hadn't been posed to her. She thought about it for a second. "I left nursing after my husband, a doctor, was killed in a car accident. I had always loved to cook, so I decided to go to Brighton. The beginning of a new life, so to speak."

"A nurse, huh?" Mr. Black said, tapping his pen on the table. "Is your certification up-to-date?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Black looked to his left at Mr. Howard who raised his eyebrows. Mr. Howard turned to Casey. "If you were hired," Mr. Howard said, "would you mind putting your nursing skills to work as well?"

"Absolutely not. As much as I would like to be a chef, I miss being a nurse. It would be hard for me to not be a nurse." Mr. Howard and Mr. Black both scribbled something on the yellow legal pads in front of them.

"Are you fan?" Mr. Zander asked, sitting back in his chair and folding his arms across his chest.

Casey shook her head and decided not to disclose her recent cramming session. "I recognize them on the radio. I even know some of the words to some of the songs. I could probably recognize them as a group, and if you gave me a minute to think, I might could tell you their first names, but I'm not sure which is which. I don't have any CDs."

Mr. Zander nodded and smiled, apparently pleased with her answer.

"Do you sing? Dance?" Mr. Howard asked.

Casey knew where the line of questioning was leading. They were curious to whether she was looking for an inside edge to advance her own career in entertainment. She shook her head. "I took piano lessons for ten years. I've sung in public once and I was a cheerleader in high school. There's a certain amount of dancing that comes with that." She placed her palms on the table. "I'm a nurse, and I want to be a chef. That's all."

Mr. Black leaned forward. "Would you like to see the bus?"

"Yes," Casey said with a nod. She followed the men out to the parking lot where two brand new, shiny black buses were parked. The band's name and logo was painted on the sides, leaving no question to whom the buses belonged. Mr. Zander opened the door to one of them and Casey stepped inside. It didn't look like a bus at all, and it was a hundred times nicer than any RV she had ever seen. The front end of the bus was filled by a large rectangular table, big enough to seat eight. The kitchen was in the middle of the bus. It was furnished with two huge refrigerators, double ovens, six-burner range, microwave, a dishwasher and almost as much cupboard space as she had had in her own home.

"It's beautiful," Casey said, running her hand along the granite counter top.

Mr. Zander tapped his hand on what appeared to be cabinets above the table. "This is a bed. It folds down. It's a king."

He pointed to a door at the back of the bus. "That's your...I mean, that's where whoever we hire will live."

Casey slid open the pocket style door to the bedroom. Another king-sized bed stretched across the back end of the bus. The bed was built on a pedestal, with six large drawers underneath it. Another door revealed a bathroom, including a shower.

"Do you think you could handle this?" Mr. Black asked. "It's a long tour, eight and a half months, 100 cities, you'll be crossing the country a half a dozen times. It'll be a lot of time alone on this bus. Could you handle it?"

Casey looked around. Being alone didn't bother her; she had been living by herself since CJ died. The prospect of traveling excited her. "Oh yeah. I could handle it." She followed the men off the bus.

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Russo," Mr. Howard said. "We have your cell phone number, and we'll be calling."

The call came later that evening with the instructions to come back to Mr. Black's office the next afternoon with an entrée, a side dish, and a dessert. The job was, after all, about cooking.



The door to the conference room was cracked and Casey held the large bag of food in one hand as she pushed it all the way open. Knowing that all of the members of Quintessential hailed from the South, she had decided on fried chicken and the sour cream and chive mashed potatoes that her mother raved about. For her dessert she had made a sugar-free lemon meringue pie. Mr. Black, Mr. Howard, and Mr. Zander were in the room, along with the five men she recognized as the faces that adorned the magazines she had studied on the plane.

"Mrs. Russo," Mr. Black said as he took the bag from her.

"I'd like to introduce you to the members of Quintessential."

All five men rose as Casey approached the table. "Guys, this is Mrs. Russo."

"Casey, please," Casey interjected.

"This is Casey," Mr. Black corrected. "Casey, this is Reed Smith, Max Fitzgerald, Jason Gold, David Jacobs, and Michael Brooks."

Casey shook hands with each man. "Pleased to meet you," she said to each of them.

She took a seat in a chair offered to her by Reed as they waited for the second contender to show up. She stared at her hands in her lap, listening to the animated conversation they were having about some video game, and tried not to gawk at the celebrities in the room. She couldn't help stealing glances at Michael, though, and it was soon obvious that his gaze was lingering on her.

A middle-aged man with long curly purple hair and strappy sandals entered the room, carrying a bag and a cooler. He was introduced as Mr. Peters, and he was all that stood between Casey and this job. He stood against the wall as Mr. Black and Mr. Howard arranged the food in a buffet style on the table. Mr. Peters had brought roast turkey and dressing as well as a pasta and bean salad. His dessert was also a lemon-meringue pie. The guys went through the line, piling their plates high with a sample of all the foods except the pies.

She sat back and watched them eat, trying to decide from their expressions what they liked the most. After they finished the main course, Mr. Black sat a plate with a large piece of each pie on the table. Casey had no trouble recognizing hers. Her lemon filling was firm and her meringue seemed to float above the pie. The other slice was rather flat and watery.

Reed, David, Max and Michael each took a plastic fork and tasted Mr. Peters' pie first. From the expressions on their faces,

Casey could tell that the pie, despite its appearance, was very good. She bit her bottom lip as they took a bite of hers. She looked at Jason, the only one not participating in the taste test. She assumed he was the diabetic. She watched the others for their reactions. They were all taking second bites and thirds, devouring the entire piece in seconds, leaving the wedge from the man's pie looking rather lonely.

"That must have been good," Jason said.

Casey leaned forward in her chair. "It's sugar free."

"Sugar-free?" David asked. "That's incredible."

She smiled. "Thank you."

"Well," Mr. Black said, opening the door. "If you two wouldn't mind waiting outside." Casey and Mr. Peters left the room and waited in silence for the decision. A few minutes later, the door opened.

"Mr. Peters, thank you for coming out. Casey, congratulations."

Casey clapped her hands in front of herself like a school girl.

"Yay!" She went back into the conference room in time to witness the remainder of her pie disappear.

"That was excellent," Max said coming to her and shaking her hand. "The pie, I mean. What else was yours?"

"Thank you. The fried chicken and mashed potatoes."

Michael walked up to her, carrying a piece of chicken in his hand. "We're really looking forward to this, Casey." He tore off a bite of the drumstick.

She nodded. "Me, too."

"Food is very important to us," Reed said, picking the last of the crumbs off the pie plate. "We like to eat."

"Well, this ought to work out just fine, then," she said. "Because I like to cook."

After a few minutes of more praise the younger men left, heading for a commercial shoot. Casey sat back down at the ta-

ble with Mr. Black and Mr. Howard.

"Casey, we want to re-negotiate your contract," Mr. Howard said.

"How's that?"

Mr. Black leaned forward. "Well, we feel like it would be in the best interest of everyone if we contracted you as a nurse, also. We usually have medics at the concerts, but now, with Jason's diabetes, we feel like it would be a good idea to have someone to keep an eye on him all the time."

"He hasn't had it long?"

Mr. Black shook his head. "He found out at the end of the last tour. He's never toured with it. I don't know much about his condition, you'll have to talk with him. Are you willing to be a full time nurse also?"

"I told you yesterday that I couldn't not be a nurse."

"Well, it wouldn't be just for Jason," Mr. Black continued. "You, along with Dr. Klein here in Orlando, would be responsible for the primary health care of all of them. In other words, you'd have to kiss the boo-boos of all five of them."

Casey smiled at his statement. "I think I can handle it."

"I'll arrange a meeting for you with Dr. Klein, so you can go over their medical records."

Mr. Howard spoke. "We want to give you a little more money. Is another two thousand a month acceptable?"

Casey nodded. "Of course," she said. She thought it was not only acceptable, but generous.

Mr. Howard slid the contract toward her. She skimmed it and signed the bottom. He then handed her a large packet of information outlining the tour schedule and explaining her medical and other employee benefits. There was also a separate confidentiality agreement. Any medical conditions, including Jason's diabetes, were not to be disclosed to anyone.

"And finally," Mr. Black said, reaching into his briefcase

and pulling out a credit card, “this is for your expenses, groceries and whatever.”

“What about the others?” She asked. “Are there any other medical problems?”

Mr. Black shook his head. “Maybe a cold or a fall, David's got allergies, but nothing major.” He handed her several sheets of paper. A name of a group member was at the top of each of the five pages. “Likes and dislikes.”

She nodded. “Great.” She glanced through the pages. “They’re not very picky, are they?” She said, noting that the likes far outweighed the dislikes.

“Well, Casey,” Mr. Black continued. “They leave out of here on June first. That’s a Friday. How about you be back in Orlando by the twenty-fifth. That will give you a week to get everything you need for the bus.”

She nodded confidently, lists of things to do already forming in her mind. *I can do do this. No problem.*

Chapter Two



“**D**id you get it? Did you get it?” Emily, Casey’s thirteen-year-old niece accosted her as soon as she got off the plane.

Casey’s smile spread from ear to ear. “Yeah.”

“Did you get to meet them?”

“Yeah.”

“What are they like? Are they nice? Are they as cute in person?”

Casey put her arm around her niece’s shoulders and guided her to the place where her parents, Marjorie and Dan Johnson, were standing. “I’ll tell you all about it later, okay?”

“So?” Marjorie asked, raising her eyebrows.

“I got it.”

“I told you something would come along.”

Casey kissed her mother’s cheek. “You always have had faith in me.”

"I can't believe this! Are they coming back here in concert? Will I get to meet them?" Emily tugged on Casey's elbow.

Casey pulled out the schedule she had received the day before. "Ha! It looks like they'll be in Salt Lake City on July sixteenth."

Emily's jaw dropped. "Seriously?" That was her birthday.

Casey showed her the schedule. "Oh, my gosh." Emily paused dramatically between each word. "This is extremely awesome."

Three nights later, Casey and her sister Annie were in their mother's kitchen cleaning up the supper dishes just like they had done when they were kids. Casey washed the dishes while Annie leaned against the counter holding the dishtowel and pretended to dry. "You can't take two steps without stepping knee-deep into something good."

Casey turned to her sister. "What are you talking about?"

"You and this job. You and nursing school. You and cooking school. You and CJ."

Casey shook her head. "I don't understand, Annie. I worked hard for nursing school and Brighton. This job...it was good luck, I admit it, but don't you think I deserve a little good luck?"

"I think you have had plenty of good luck. You've always gotten everything you wanted."

"This is about the money again, isn't it? Do you know what I've gone through? Can you even imagine what I've had to sacrifice? CJ and I were married for only two years. He died, Annie. Remember? He died. He went to work one night and never came home. You have a husband who adores you. I wake up to an empty bed every morning. You have eight kids. I don't have any. I don't think I've been blessed with good luck."

"Well, I don't know. You've got all sorts of money and a glamorous job. Everybody thinks you're just perfect and can do no wrong."

"What do you think?"

“About you? I think that you make people believe what you want them to. And I also think that’s it’s pretty crappy what you did to CJ.”

“What I did to CJ?” Casey shook her head. “What?”

“I know about Chris Baker.”

Chris Baker had been a next door neighbor and good friend of Casey’s since before elementary school. They were close, and often a source of argument between CJ and Casey. A year and a half into Casey’s marriage, CJ had gone out of town for the weekend. While he was away, Casey had accepted an invitation to accompany Chris to the movies. He had taken her back to his place after their “date.” They had a few drinks together and Casey made the decision to sleep with him. She had never seen him again after leaving his bed the next morning.

“What do you know about Chris?”

“I know you cheated on CJ with him.”

Casey shook her head. “How do you know that?”

“He told his sister, and she told me.”

“I know what I did with Chris was wrong. And I’m sorry for it. But what in God’s name does that have to do with now?”

“It’s just who you are,” Annie said, throwing the dishtowel on the counter. She left the room.

“It’s just who you are,” Casey mocked. “Bitch,” she added under her breath.

She spent the next morning holed up in her room, planning menus, making shopping lists and packing the things she thought she needed for a eight and a half month trip. She finally left her room in search of lunch in the early afternoon. She fixed herself a sandwich and joined her father in his den. Casey sat down on the couch next to Dan. “I’m flying back tomorrow, Daddy.”

Dan flipped the channel from a baseball game to a NASCAR race. “I thought you were staying until Thursday night.”

She shook her head. "I was going to, but, you know, I've got a lot to do to get the bus ready."

"No other reason for your sudden departure?" She shook her head. "It has nothing to do with Annie?" He pressed.

She frowned. "She's being such a bitch."

"She's always been jealous of you. I guess there's just too much age difference."

"Maybe, but now that we're both adults, it doesn't seem like such a gap."

"Oh, sweetie, try to see it from her shoes. She's stuck in the house all day. You're out doing things."

Casey sighed. "Well, that was her choice."



Getting the bus ready was easier than she thought. Every kitchen appliance and gadget that she could dream of had been provided. The only non-food item she had to buy for the kitchen was a step stool so she could reach the top shelves. She spent much of the next few days stocking meats in the two freezers, filling the cupboards with canned goods, personalizing her bedroom and bathroom, and continuing to plan menus.

She was just going over some of her tentative meal plans when there was a knock on the door of her hotel room. Casey put her eye to the peephole and looked out. She stepped back and pulled the door open. "Jason?" It was the first time she had seen any members of the group since the day she had signed her contracts.

"Hi, Casey," he said. "Neil suggested that I come by."

She motioned him into the room. "Come in."

"I guess that he thought we should talk about my diabetes." He walked into the room and sat at the small round table in the corner where Casey's notes were spread.

She sat down across from him and cleared away some of the

papers. "Yeah, I just wanted to touch base with you and get up-to-date."

"Have you talked with Dr. Klein?" Jason asked.

Casey nodded. "Yeah, I talked to him yesterday, but he just gave me the basics: you were diagnosed with Type II diabetes in June of last year, and you've been taking Dymelor for a few months now."

"So what do you need from me?"

"What's your diet like?"

"I cut out refined sugar, basically. No desserts, no candy, only diet sodas, Sweet 'n Low in my tea."

"Are you taking any insulin?"

Jason shook his head. "No, and I don't plan on it."

"Well, hopefully, you won't have to, but you do know that this is a disease that can get progressively worse?"

He nodded. "That's what I hear."

Casey could sense that he didn't want to talk about his condition. "You're not going to be able to brush me off. You can't lie to me. I saw people come into the ER every day who tried to ignore their symptoms. I know the effects of this disease and I'm a real stickler for keeping up with your testing. I might be a real bitch."

Jason frowned. "Great." He stood up to leave, then turned back to her. "Can you make a sugar-free cheesecake?"

She nodded. "I can make anything you want, honey, and you'll never know it's sugar-free."

She was back on her bus a few evenings later when she was again surprised by a knock. It was the eve of the departure day and she was scurrying around the bus making sure she had everything she needed for the trip. She wasn't expecting company, and she certainly wasn't dressed for it. She was wearing short cut-offs and a T-shirt that exposed her midriff. She was barefoot and was wearing absolutely no make-up.

"Hey, Casey," Michael said as he came onto the bus.

She spun around, shocked. "Hey, Mike. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I had to see Neil about something, and I put some stuff on the bus. You wanna go get something to eat?"

She looked down at herself. "I'm really not dressed for it." He looked her up and down. "You look fine to me. I was just going to little Chinese place I know. Wanna go?"

She nodded. "Let me brush my hair." She disappeared into her bathroom. She pulled her hair out of its bun and ran her brush through it. She let it hang loosely around her shoulders. She washed her face and applied a little lipstick. After slipping on a pair of flip-flops, she grabbed her purse. "I'm ready." She eyed him as he opened the car door for her. "I didn't know you wore glasses."

He shut the door and came around the front of the SUV. He climbed in behind the wheel. "This is only the second time you've seen me."

"In person," she pointed out. "You can't even stand in the grocery line with seeing your picture."

He conceded to her point. "I have contacts that I wear on stage and when we have photo shoots. Anytime else, I wear the glasses."

They arrived at the hole-in-the wall restaurant where, from the greeting he received from the staff, she could tell he was a regular visitor. They had been sitting at their table for less than two minutes when two fifteen-year-old girls approached. "Can we have your autograph?"

Michael signed the paper menus the girls had brought to the table. He asked them each a few questions about themselves, and accepted a kiss on the cheek from each.

"That was nice of you," Casey said. "They remind me of my niece, Emily."

"Yeah?"

Casey nodded. "Yeah. She's thirteen and just crazy about

you guys, but I remember what it was like. When I was her age, it was New Kids on the Block. I thought I would just die if I got to meet them.”

Michael smiled. “I remember the craze. I was like ten years old or something and all the girls were just nuts. I thought it was absurd.” He shook his head. “If you had told me then....” his voice trailed off and he continued shaking his head. He shrugged. “It’s great.”

“Aren’t you the oldest?”

He nodded. “Yeah, not by a lot, but it’s enough to make a difference.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was the only one already out of high school when this started, so I didn’t have to do the whole correspondence school thing. It made me a little different at first, and they’re always teasing me about how serious I am, so that makes me feel older. Plus, I was the last one to join, and I wasn’t supposed to be permanent.”

“You weren’t? How did you all come together anyway?”

He took a sip of his drink before answering. “Well, Jason, Max and Reed all went to this boarding school near Nashville and they sang together in the choir and wherever else they could. Neil’s sister’s step-daughter went to that school, too, and his sister heard them singing in a talent show. She called him and told him to come hear these guys. Meanwhile, David is in Atlanta and he’s in this group that Neil had been managing. They had done some clubs and stuff, and was getting ready to cut a record, but they had a fight and broke up.” He paused to take a breath. “So Neil likes what he hears with Jason, Reed, and Max, but he feels like they need a fourth to balance things out. So he gets David to come to Nashville to sing with them. It worked out, obviously.”

“So where do you fit in?”

They waited while the waiter sat their plates on the table. “I

was here working at Universal Studios in the live stage shows, sometimes performing, sometimes working the lights, sometimes building sets, whatever I could do. So they get this gig at Disney opening for some bigger acts and miscellaneous shows. Then, Jason has to have his tonsils out, so he can't sing. Well, Mr. Howard, who used to be at Universal and hired me there, remembered me and asked me to audition to take Jason's place until he was better. When Jason came back, he wasn't one hundred percent, so I kept singing with them. And that's how it's been since."

"So it's a good thing Jason's tonsils went bad."

"I always thought so."

"And you all are best friends, right?" She had read that in one of the magazines.

He nodded. "I know it sounds like a cliché, but we really are. I mean, we've got other friends, of course, but really, when we're not working, we're still hanging out together."

"Are you closer to any one of them than the others?"

"You know, it used to be David who I was the tightest with, I guess because we were both outsiders. Now, I think if I had to pick one, I'd say..." He shook his head. "I can't pick one. That's a hard question, because we're all..." He intertwined his fingers. "We're like brothers."

"Are you nervous about this tour?" Casey asked him. "From what I understand, it's bigger than any other you've done."

He nodded. "It is by a lot. We caught a lot of flack after our last tour because we only went to forty cities, and a lot of people were upset that we didn't come to their state, so this one is a lot bigger. But I'm not nervous. I love being on stage. It's going to be a lot of hard work, and I'm not looking forward to being away from my family for so long, but we'll have breaks and we'll be home for Thanksgiving and Christmas. We're doing a TV special from Madison Square Garden on New Year's Eve. I'm really looking forward to that."

"That's my birthday. New Year's Eve."

"Really? How old will you be?"

"Old. Twenty-seven."

He shook his head. "You're not old." He paused. "So what about you? Are you nervous?"

"I don't know. Kinda, I guess. I'm nervous about whether or not I'll do a good job. I'm nervous about whether or not you all will like me."

"Well, from what I've tasted, you'll do a fantastic job, and I'm sure we'll like you. I like you."

She smiled and blushed. "But I'm looking forward to it. I've never really traveled, so this will be fun."

"So tell me about yourself."

She took a sip of her ice tea. "What do you want to know?" She raised her eyebrows. "What do you already know?" She asked, suspecting that she had been thoroughly investigated before being hired.

"Let's see. I know you're short."

"I am."

"And I know that you can cook."

She narrowed her eyes. "Did Mr. Black and Mr. Zander not tell y'all anything about me?"

Michael shook his head. "Not really. They said you were from Utah, but that can't be true."

"Why can't it?"

"Have you heard yourself talk? You are most definitely from the South."

"North Carolina."

"And you're single?"

"Widowed."

He nodded. "I know. How long has it been?"

"Almost two years." She sighed. "I don't talk about him much."

Michael nodded his understanding. She could tell from the

look in his eyes that he thought it was because the pain of his death was still so raw. "We don't have to talk about that then." He took a bite of his chicken dish. "So, I understand you're not a fan."

She smiled. "I'm not not a fan. I just don't know much about you. I'm sure I will be."

"I'm sure you will be, too. You've got to come to one hundred and twenty-five shows in the next nine months. We're bound to rub off on you."

"So is it true that you all fall off the stage?"

"Where'd you hear that?"

"I've got my sources."

"God, you fall off the stage once and you're forever living it down."

"You?"

"Yeah, me."

"So you're going to keep me busy?"

"Hopefully." He grinned. "You know, cooking."

Was he flirting?

"I'm hoping you won't have to put your nursing skills to work very often."

She nodded her agreement. "Me, too. I think that they want me to keep an eye on Jason. I get the feeling he's not handling his diabetes well."

Michael shrugged. "He doesn't like it. He doesn't talk about it at all. I think he generally tries to ignore it."

Casey frowned. "Well, that's part of my job, to make sure he doesn't ignore it, and to keep you all in good working order."

"So how did you go from nursing to cooking? It doesn't seem like a logical jump."

"I know, but it's something I've always wanted to do. Actually, after high school, it was either culinary school or I was going to be a teacher...my parents are both teachers, so it seemed like the natural choice. But, when I was sixteen, my

brother, Alex, died, and while he was in the hospital, I saw how important the nurses were and how much they helped. I decided then and there that was what I wanted to be.”

She paused and took a sip out of her glass. “After CJ died, I left my job. We worked at the same hospital and I just didn’t like the idea of going back there. I decided to go to culinary school instead of finding a job somewhere else.”

“How did your brother die? Was he sick?”

She shook her head. “Alex was a fireman. Some drunken idiot had set off fireworks inside a house. Alex got trapped inside. He was burned over eighty percent of his body. It’s really hard to survive that.”

Michael reached across the table and took her hand. “I’m sorry. Was it July fourth?”

“He didn’t die until the fifth.”

Michael squeezed her hand. “Were you very close?”

She nodded. “Yeah, extremely. He was five years older than me, but you would have never known it.” She shook her head again. “God, I loved him.”

He squeezed her hand again before pulling his away. “So, was it just you and him?”

She shook her head. “I have a sister, too. Older, married, eight kids.”

“Eight?”

Casey nodded. “Yep. So what about you?”

He shook his head. “Nope, it’s just me. I’ve got a bunch of cousins, though.”

“And four brothers.”

He smiled. “And four brothers.”

They chatted for a while longer before they were interrupted by another fan in search of an autograph and a picture. “Are you ready?” Michael asked when she left the table.

Casey nodded and they stood up. Michael took his wallet out of his back pocket and tossed a fifty dollar bill on the table.

“That’s what, like a twenty dollar tip?” She said as they left the restaurant.

“Twenty-five almost.” He shrugged. “I like that waiter. He’s in college, got two kids. He can use the money.”

Casey’s heart swelled. *He seems like such a nice guy.* It wasn’t the tip that impressed her; she knew he had it to spare. What had really touched her was the fact that he knew the waiter’s story.

They discussed her menus for the upcoming week on the drive back to the bus. He tried to convince her that a person could live a full and rich life without ever eating a bite of broccoli. She laughed and promised him that she’d never force him to eat it, but she couldn’t guarantee that she’d never cook it.

He parked the car outside her bus, but neither made a move to get out.

“Thank you, Mike. I had a really good time.”

“Me, too. I’ll see you in the morning, I guess.”

“Yeah, thanks again.”

Chapter Three



“Are you ready?” Chuck asked as he boarded Casey's bus.

She wiped her sweaty palms on the front of her pants and nodded. “I'm ready.”

“We'll be rolling out in about five minutes. Me and that menagerie of trucks and buses and RVs will go on into Atlanta to get the stage set up. After the show tonight, the road crew will almost always be a few hours ahead of you. It's less than five hundred miles, so lunch and dinner don't have to be so rushed. They always take the stage at 8:30, and they need to be done eating by 7:00. You'll stop around noon for lunch.” He handed her a two-way radio. “If you get bored, you can call them on the other bus. They're never doing anything important.”

“Thanks.” She turned the radio over in her hands, doubting that she would get up the nerve to instigate a random conversation.

"All right," he said. "Jake's right on the other end of that intercom." He pointed to speaker on the wall behind the table that served as the communications portal between her and the driver.

"Let him know if you need anything."

"I will."

Chuck stepped off the bus. "Okay, then. See you in Atlanta. Good luck."

Casey leaned against the counter and looked around. She was amazed at the toys the vehicle was equipped with: two TVs, a VCR, a DVD player, a stereo, and a laptop with a built in fax machine that was magically connected to the outside world via a satellite bolted to the top of the bus. The bus also came equipped with a first-aid kit that could put some ambulances to shame and a strong box stocked with all sorts of drugs, from cough syrup and antacids to Epinephrine, which could restart a stalled heart. Under the bus were slings, splints, crutches, suturing kits, and even a portable defibrillator, which Casey prayed she'd never have to use. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly as the bus began to move.

"Well, this is it," she said out loud.

She stood with the wardrobe crew during the show that night and watched the performance from behind the stage. Her eardrums throbbed in rhythm with the music, and the screams from the crowd vibrated her brain. It was exhilarating, though, and left her with a high that made her want to laugh and shout, run and scream, and beg for more.

Parked in the hotel parking lot after the show, Casey made the sandwiches that they guys had requested. She lugged a cooler of drinks and a large bag of sandwiches and chips into the hotel. She knocked on the door to the room where she had been told to bring it. No answer. She sat the bag on top of the cooler and knocked again. Reed, wearing only a towel, opened the door. "Sorry, Casey. I was in the shower."

"I'll wait."

He shook his head. "No, no. Here, let me help you." He bent over to lift the cooler. His towel slipped, but he grabbed it just before it dropped low enough to reveal anything.

"I can get it," Casey said.

Reed returned to the bathroom, and Casey took the bag into the room. She sat it on the table. She went back to the door to get the cooler. Jason was there, already lifting it.

"Thanks." She began taking the food out of the bag. Michael and David entered from the adjacent room.

"Food!" Michael said as he grabbed a bag of Cheetos and tore into them. "I'm starved."

"Jason, did you get the cards?" Reed asked, coming out of the bathroom shirtless and in shorts. Jason pulled the deck of cards out of his bag.

"Well, I guess I'm done here," Casey said looking around. "You guys have a good night and I'll see you in the morning for breakfast."

"Casey, don't leave," Michael said. She swung her head around and looked at him. "Stay, play cards."

"Yeah, Casey," Reed added. "Stay and talk to us. Let us get to know you. No need in going back to your room all alone."

"Oh, I don't have a room. I'm staying on the bus."

"Well, then," David said. "All the more reason for you to stay here and let me take your money." He sat down at the table. "Do you play cards?"

She nodded. "I've played." She saw the other guys pulling money from their pockets and bags. "How much do I have to have to get into the game?"

"Minimum bet is a dollar," David said. "So you have to have at least that much to be dealt in."

Casey put her hand in her hip pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. She counted it: forty-three dollars. "Okay, I'm in for a cou-

ple of hands, I guess.”

“So where’s Max?” She asked as David dealt the first hand.

“He’ll be here,” Reed said. “He sucks at cards, but he won’t miss a meal.”

“Why does he score his own room?” Casey asked. She had already determined that Jason and Reed shared a room as did Michael and David.

“He sometimes likes to entertain a guest,” David delicately explained.

Casey nodded her understanding. “I see.”

“Plus, he snores,” Jason said. “Really loudly.” He shook his head. “At home, our rooms are about as far apart as they could be and I can still hear him. I’m used to it, we used to be room-mates in high school, but still...”

Casey shook her head. “He can’t snore that loud.”

Michael nodded. “He can and he does. This is the first night of a long tour. You’ll hear him at some point.”

“So what do you do about him on the bus? Does he get him own room there, too?” There was a bedroom at each end of their bus; each room had four bunks.

“We make him sleep on the couch.” Reed said.

She looked at Jason. “You and Max live together?”

He nodded. “Yeah, David, too.”

“We all used to live there,” David said, “but those two moved out.” He motioned toward Reed and Michael.

“Well, I wanted my own room,” Reed said. “The house is only three bedrooms. I was sharing a room with Jason. We had bunk beds and everything.”

“So why didn’t y’all just get a bigger place?”

“Well, we didn’t really plan on living together forever,” Jason said. “But when we first came to Florida, that’s the house Neil got for us. He thought we should all live together for a while. It was supposed to be temporary, but...” He shrugged his

shoulders. "It's a nice house."

"Is it really big?"

Michael shook his head. "No, it's just an ordinary house in an ordinary neighborhood -- a neighborhood full of old people."

"It's very quiet," David said, "and our neighbors don't give a damn who we are."

"So do you two live together?" Casey asked alternating her glance between Michael and Reed.

Michael shook his head. "No, I live alone."

"And I live with my girlfriend, Dana," Reed said.

"They're neighbors," Jason added. "They both live in these huge houses on the lake."

"Do you all have girlfriends?"

"Not me. I don't." Jason and Michael answered, shaking their heads and looking dejected.

"I do," David said. "Shannon. She's in Atlanta, where I'm from."

"What about you, Casey?" Michael said. "Do you have boyfriend?"

Casey shook her head. "I was seeing someone, but it wasn't serious."

"How long has it been since your husband passed?" Jason asked.

"It'll be two years on the twenty-fifth of this month."

"How long were you married?"

"About two years."

"I'm sorry, Casey," Reed said. He looked at his cards and threw them down on the table.

"Was it hard to date again?" David asked. He raised the bet.

Casey cocked her head to the side. "You guys aren't shy at all, are you? You just ask whatever's on your mind."

"Yeah, yep, pretty much," was the answer from all around the table.

She shook her head. "It was kinda hard, I guess. CJ had been dead over a year when I started seeing someone – Tucker. But our relationship wasn't romantic. He was just someone to go out with, you know, the movies, to get a drink, go to a ball game, dancing. More friends than anything."

"With a little sex mixed in?" David said, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

Casey blushed and smiled. "Maybe a little, but he knew that I would be moving to Utah after graduation. We parted on great terms."

"So you moved to Utah? You're not from there?" Jason asked. He folded out of the hand.

Casey glanced up from her cards as Michael stood up to open the door for Max. "What's up? What's up?" He said, coming into the room. He grabbed a sandwich and flopped down on one of the beds. "Casey, they roped you into playing cards?"

She nodded. "I think it's more like they roped me into playing twenty questions." She raised the bet. "I'm originally from North Carolina. After CJ died, I went to cooking school in Virginia, near Washington, DC. My parents moved to Utah about five years ago, so after graduation, I went out there. Now, I'm here."

"What kind of music do you like, Casey?" Max asked, after several minutes of silent, serious card playing.

"I don't know. All kinds, really, but I generally listen to country."

"What's in your CD player right now?" David asked.

"Hmm." She thought for a moment. "Kenny Chesney, I think. That's a weird question."

"Oh," Max said shaking his head, "that's one we get all the time. That's way tame."

"Do you wear boxers or briefs?" Reed asked, illustrating another common question.

Casey giggled. "Boxers, of course."

"What's the last CD you bought?" Michael asked.

"For me, personally?" she asked. Michael gave an affirmative nod. "I bought *Stand Out* by Carmen Montgomery just last week."

"Really?" Jason asked, his eyes lighting up.

She nodded. "Yeah. I took my niece, Emily, and two nephews, Matthew and Sam, to see her in concert back in January. I really enjoyed it, so when her new CD came out, I bought it. Do you all know her?"

Jason nodded. "Yeah." He blushed.

"Jason's on that CD," Max explained. "The song *Changing*. He's the one she's singing the duet with."

"Really?" She shook her head. "I never put it together."

"She's not a fan of ours," Michael said. Casey rolled her eyes at him.

"Carmen's gonna open for us for fifty-some shows this tour," Reed said.

"Jason loves her," Max teased, causing Jason to turn a deeper shade of pink. "He's got a huge crush."

"They went on a few dates, too," Reed pointed out. "It's not just a crush."

"Well, that's nice," Casey replied, trying to end the conversation that was obviously embarrassing Jason. She frowned at her cards and folded.

"Was that the last concert you went to?" Reed asked.

"Well, tonight I saw this group, Quintessential, or something like that."

"How was that?" Max asked. "Are they any good?"

She wrinkled her nose. "They sucked." She smiled. "No, it was good. The way they dance is obscene! It's really hot."

"Did it make you all tingly?" David asked with a smile.

Her eyes met Michael's. He was staring at her awaiting her

answer. She envisioned him dancing, the gyrating hips, the pelvic thrusts, the sweating. “Yeah,” she said finally. She dropped Michael’s gaze and shook her head. “Does anyone need anything?” She walked to the cooler to grab a soda. She looked at her watch and dropped the drink back into the melting ice.

“You know, it’s been fun, but I’m going to go on back to the bus. One of you bring this cooler with you in the morning if you will.”

“Sure thing, Casey,” David said. “Thanks for letting me win.”

She smiled. “I’ll get you next time.”

She lit a cigarette as soon she got outside the hotel. She was going to have to stop smoking. It was okay when someone else was doing it, but she always felt self-conscious to be the only one in the room smoking. She counted the cigarettes left in the pack, the last pack of the carton. Eleven. *When this pack is gone, I’ll stop*, she promised herself.

The next few weeks passed quickly. Casey was having a great time, and solid friendships were forming. She regularly played cards with David and Jason until late into the night. She went jogging with Max in the mornings before breakfast and played computer games during the day with Reed. And she spent hours just talking to Michael. With his support and encouragement, not to mention the busy schedule they were keeping, she had kept her promise to herself to stop smoking – almost. The pack and a half she had been smoking had dwindled to a mere one or two a day.



She was beating Reed at an online trivia game when she felt the bus shudder and come to a stop. *I think we’ve been hit*, she

typed into the computer. She closed the laptop. She opened the door and stepped cautiously out onto the shoulder of the road. A quick look revealed that a compact car had indeed crashed into the side of the bus. Three teenage girls were filing out of the much smaller vehicle.

"Is everyone okay?" Casey asked, approaching the girls. She saw the guys' bus drive by and pull over about twenty yards in front of hers.

"Who are you?" One of the girls asked, peering down her nose at Casey. "Where is Jason and Reed? And Max? Who's on that other bus?"

Casey shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Good grief. I guess you're fine."

They were joined by Jake. "You okay, Casey?" She nodded, and he looked at the girls. "What the hell were you doing?"

"Nothing." The apparent driver snapped. "I lost control for a second."

Jake shook his head. "No, you've been driving erratically and following us for the past twenty miles. You were more concerned about who was on this bus than driving your own car. You could have killed somebody. I called the police." He looked at Casey. "You should go on the other bus. I'm going to have to take this into a shop. It looks like your water tank is busted, so you won't have any water." He looked at his watch. "Hopefully, I'll be there before the end of the show. If not, I'll catch up to you tomorrow."

"You don't need me to stick around?"

Jake shook his head. "No, go on. You don't want to be late."

"Late? I work on this bus."

"Do you want to wait around here for hours?"

"Not really."

Jake motioned toward the other bus. "Go on, then. I'll catch up."

Casey returned to her bus and put a change of clothes and her makeup case in a bag. She grabbed the book she had been reading and the suitcase-sized first-aid kit. A state police officer was just arriving on the scene. Casey walked the twenty yards to the other bus.

Reed swung open the door. "No girls allowed."

Casey smiled. "Yeah, right." She pushed past him and entered the bus.

"You okay, Casey?" David asked, diverting his eyes for only a second from the video game he and Jason were engrossed in.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Was it bad?" Reed asked.

"Well, my bus has a big dent in the side of it, Jake says the water tank is busted, and the car was pretty smashed up, but no one got hurt." She sat down on the couch next to Reed. "Jake's gotta take the bus to the shop, so I'm riding with you this afternoon." She looked around. "Where are Max and Mike?"

"Asleep," Reed explained. She cocked her head and listened. She could hear Max's snoring coming from the room at the rear of the bus. "You want a drink?"

Casey shook her head. "You know, I don't want to be in your way. I'm just going to take my book and go lie down somewhere."

"Well, I'd advise going in there," Reed said pointing to the front bedroom. "Max is in the other one."

Casey picked up her bag and slid the bedroom door open. A heavy, opaque, black curtain hung across each bunk to afford the occupant privacy. One curtain was pulled across one of the bunks and she could hear steady breathing coming from behind it. She sat down on the other bottom bunk and opened her book. Within a few minutes her eyes began to feel heavy and she put the book aside. She pulled her curtain and fell asleep.

Michael was moving toward her, crossing the kitchen in easy strides. They were alone, and he was singing. He took her in his arms, and she anticipated his kiss. He lowered his head, then disappeared as easily as he had appeared. She rubbed her eyes and squinted into the darkness. The singing from her dream continued, but she was sure she was awake. She pulled back the curtain. Michael was sitting on the bed across from her, electric keyboard in front of him, headphones on, eyes closed and singing softly.

She kept lying there, listening, watching and admiring. She couldn't hear the music, but his voice was clear and pure. He finished the verse and opened his eyes.

"Casey!" He pulled the headphones off. "What are you doing here?"

"You don't know? They didn't tell you?"

He shook his head. "I just woke up a little while ago and started playing around here. What happened?"

"My bus was in an accident. Jake has to take it to the shop. So, I'm tagging along with you guys."

"Oh, really? Are you okay? What happened?"

"Just some stupid teenagers trying to see who was on the bus." She nodded toward the keyboard. "That was pretty. New song?"

"Yeah, maybe. I'm just messing around. Did I wake you?"

She pushed herself into a sitting position. "I don't think so." She rubbed her own shoulders. "I've never slept so much as I have these past three weeks."

He nodded. "I know. The bus just rocks you to sleep. I'm a sleeper, anyway, but I'm hopeless on this bus."

She pointed toward the pages of sheet music that were resting on the keyboard. "Can I see? Or is it top secret?" He shook his head and handed her the music. She glanced over it. "Can I?"

“You play?”

She nodded and slid off her bunk and went to his. She unplugged the headphones. Sitting cross-legged on the bed facing him, she turned the keyboard toward her. Her fingers found their positions on the keys. She began to play the song.

“You’re pretty good.”

She stopped playing. “I ought to be. I took lessons for years.” She shrugged. “It just always came easy for me.”

“You don’t play anymore?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t played since Christmas probably, and that was just carols for the family.” She put her fingers back down on the keyboard and played the beginning of one of Quintessential’s ballads.

“Keep going,” Michael encouraged when it looked like she was going to stop. She finished the first half of the song then stopped. The second half was just a variation the first. “Do you have that memorized?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Not really. I can play a lot of things by ear, especially if I’ve heard them a lot.”

“You’re really good. You didn’t think about music as a career?”

“Oh no. It was always just for fun.”

“Do you sing?”

She shook her head again. “No, no, no. I had a small part in a musical in high school, and that’s the only time I’ve ever sung in public. I guess I wasn’t horrible, but I’m not *pop star* material by any stretch of the imagination.” She shook her head. “I can play the piano, but I’m not a musician. What about you? I didn’t know you played.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’ve been playing my whole life. My mom is a pianist, and I was playing by the time I was three. I love it. It’s such an escape.”

“So how come you don’t play in the show?”

"I have before, but we have a band and the show is so choreographed, you know. But I've played in the studio some and I'm even on the Christmas CD."

They were joined in the room by Reed. "Hey, y'all are awake. I thought I heard some music coming from in here."

Michael nodded. "Yeah, me and Casey have been jamming a little. She plays, did you know that?"

Reed shook his head and sat down on the bunk across from them. "You do?" Casey nodded.

"She's really good," Michael said, smiling at her and causing her to blush. "Hey, I worked on that new song we've been playing around with. I think maybe we've got the lyrics right." He handed the papers to Reed.

"Is it hard to write a song?" Casey asked.

Michael shrugged. "I don't find the music as hard as I do the lyrics."

"And I'm better with lyrics," Reed said. "That's why we make a good team."

"Well, I've been listening to your music a lot lately. Those sappy little love songs, from my experience, just don't sound like real life."

Reed shook his head. "It's not about sounding real. It's about saying what the girl would want to hear. Like, it's better to say, 'I'll never be that kind of guy that makes you feel alone' rather than, 'I'm gonna leave my dirty underwear in the floor and the toilet seat up'."

Casey and Michael laughed. "So, if guys know what they need to say or do for women, why do you leave your dirty underwear in the floor and the toilet seat up?"

"The same reason women are always late and can't make up their minds," Michael answered.

"Actually," Reed said, "it's not that hard to write. We've all loved and lost and been apart from someone we loved and had

fights and been dumped. We write songs about what we know.”

“Well, then you ought to be writing about chicken and dumplings and barbecued spare ribs,” Casey joked. “Because you all definitely know about eating.”

Reed and Michael laughed. “Speaking of eating,” Reed said. “I guess it’ll be Denny’s tonight.”

“Sorry,” Casey said.

Michael shook his head. “I like Denny’s. I can get breakfast for supper.”

Casey thought he was way too excited about the prospect of eating at the restaurant chain and she shook her head at him. “You’re all about sleeping and eating, aren’t you?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend. I don’t have a whole lot else going on.”



“Hey,” David said, as he, Jason, and Michael boarded the bus after the show. “It’s clean in here.” He sniffed the air. “And it smells good.” He looked at Casey. “Thanks.”

“No problem, but you should think about firing the person responsible for keeping it clean,” she replied.

“Mike, you’re fired,” Jason said without missing a beat.

Michael sat on the couch next to her. “Thanks a lot.”

She grinned broadly at him and let her body rest comfortably against his. “It looks like y’all are stuck with me all night. Jake’s going to try to catch up with us tomorrow.”

Michael let his arm fall across her shoulders. “You can sleep in my room.” He nuzzled his face close to her ear. “I’ll even let you be on top.”

She playfully pushed him away. “Crazy boy,” she laughed.

Max and Reed bounded onto the bus. “Look what we got,” Max said as he held up a case of beer. He began loading the

bottles into the refrigerator. He opened one. "I'm gonna get drunk." He handed Casey and Michael both a bottle.

"You're not even old enough to drink," She said putting her book down and twisting off the cap.

He held his finger to his lips. "Shh."

"Truth or dare?" David asked. They had been on the road for two hours and all but Jason, who had already gone to bed, were lounging around the living room portion of the bus. Casey and Max were sitting facing each other on the floor, while each of the other guys had staked claim to a place on one of the two couches. They were steadily making their way through the case of beer. Reed was nursing his second, David had slowed down at three and Mike, Casey and Max were downing a good portion of the others. They were also in the mist of a very silly and revealing game of Truth or Dare. Already Casey had confessed that she had her first kiss at age eleven, that she had been intimate with three men, and plus, as a dare, she had resurrected a cheer from her high school days.

Casey took another sip of her beer. "Umm, truth."

"How old were you when you lost your virginity?" David asked.

Casey smiled and thought back to the night that CJ had dropped her off at her front door then sneaked in her bedroom window twenty minutes later. It had been her birthday. "I was fifteen," she answered. "Barely."

"Hey, so was I," Max said.

"How about you?" She looked at Michael. He was lying on the smaller of the two couches, barely participating in the game. He was, by far, the most serious of the bunch.

"Oh, I'm still a virgin," he said in earnest.

She moved from her space on the floor onto the arm of the couch. "I don't believe that."

He pushed himself upright. "I was sixteen."

"Truth or Dare, Mike?" Max asked, opening another bottle.

"Dare."

Max rubbed his chin. "I dare you to spend seven minutes in Heaven with Casey."

Casey rolled her eyes. "Seven minutes in Heaven? What are we, thirteen? We gonna play spin the bottle next? Besides, how did I get dragged into Mike's dare?"

"Will you do it?" Max asked, ignoring her sarcasm.

Casey looked at Michael and raised her eyebrows. "I'm game."

Michael sighed and shook his head. "What do we have to do?"

"Go in the bedroom," Reed volunteered. "And you know what else."

Casey followed Michael into the bedroom and slid the door shut. "You don't have to do this," he said.

She nodded. "I know. You don't, either."

He suddenly leaned down and gently brushed his lips against hers. She pulled back, startled at the impetuosity of it. He kissed her again, this time opening his mouth slightly and running his tongue across her lips. She parted her lips and allowed him to probe her mouth. She heard the soft moan escape from the back of her throat.

He heard it too and pulled away. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Don't be." She stood on her tiptoes to help make up the fourteen-inch difference in their heights, and grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulling him in for another kiss. He responded eagerly, and backed her up until the backs of her knees banged against the bed. They fell on the bed together, lips locked, Michael on top of her with her arms pinned above her head.

A banging on the door caused them to pull away from each other. "You don't really have to spend seven minutes in there!" Max called.

Chapter Four



Casey opened her eyes. It took her a second to remember where she was. It was dark behind the curtain. Her head was pounding as a result of the five beers she had had the night before. She hadn't been drunk in a long time. The steady soft snoring of someone sleeping in the bunk above her was the only sound in the room. She pulled back the curtain. Michael was sitting on his bunk across from her, his head in his hands.

"Good morning," she whispered. He moaned. "I should not have drunk so much last night." He looked up at her. "I'm not much of a drinker."

She pointed her finger upward. "Who's that?"

"David." He stood up and pulled back the curtain enough to peek at the occupant. He nodded and let the curtain fall into place.

Casey stood and a wave of nausea washed over her. She reached out to steady herself and found Michael's arm. Their eyes met. "Listen, Mike, about last night," she began, ready to apologize for kissing him.

He shook his head. "Yeah, I'm sorry," he interrupted. "I was drunk," he explained. He turned to exit the bedroom.

She nodded. "Me, too." She grabbed his arm, making him turn around to face her. "I don't want you to think that's something I would normally do. I'm not a floozy."

He chuckled at her choice of words. "I know, Casey. I'm not a floozy, either. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"No, no. It was fine." *Great even*, she thought. He slid the door open and they stepped out into the living room, joining Jason and Reed.

Reed was kneeling in front of the refrigerator. He held out one of the leftover beers. "Some hair of the dog that bit you?"

"Ugh, no thanks. I need some food." Casey rubbed her hand over her stomach.

"Al just said we were stopping for breakfast in about half an hour. We're supposed to be meeting up with Jake."

"Denny's again?"

"If we're lucky," Michael said, pulling a bottle of juice out of the other refrigerator.

"That's who you guys should be endorsing." Casey flopped down on the couch next to Jason. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she sank comfortably into the crook of his arm. "I think I'm going to call in sick today," she said, rubbing her forehead.



They were in Washington, DC and Quintessential was participating in an all-day Fourth of July celebration. They had per-

formed an outdoor concert in front of the Washington Monument earlier that afternoon for a crowd of thousands. Having the night off, the guys were planning to forgo the fireworks and instead hit some area clubs. They had invited Casey to come along, but before making a decision on whether to join them, she had decided to call Tucker Stone, the man she had dated while she was living in the area.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Tuck, it's Casey."

"Hey, Casey. What a surprise! What's up?"

"I'm in town for the night, and I thought maybe you'd like to get together tonight if you weren't doing anything."

"Oh. That's sounds great, and I'd love to, but I'm kinda seeing someone."

"Oh, I just thought maybe if you weren't doing anything we could go get a drink or something. It's okay."

"Well, we're planning to out to JR's later, if you want to meet us there," Tucker suggested.

"Oh, no. I'm sure you're girlfriend wouldn't like that."

"Daisy won't mind. She knows all about you. Yeah, come on out. Come dancing with us."

"Okay. I'll be there." She clicked off the phone and looked around the table. "No, I'm not going out with y'all tonight."

She had just finished getting ready in her hotel room when she realized she had left her favorite perfume on the bus. She stepped out into the hallway and almost bumped into Michael who was holding a bucket of ice.

"I thought you had gone already," she said.

He shook his head. "They went. I didn't go."

"Why?"

"Because I fell asleep and apparently told them to go on without me."

Casey smiled and tried not to laugh. "Are you going to catch

up with them?"

"Nah. I think I'll just stick around here. Watch the fireworks from the window." He opened the door to his room, which happened to be adjoining Casey's. She followed him in.

"Well, why don't you come with me?"

"You don't want me going."

She nodded. "Sure I do. That way, I won't have to be a third wheel. Please, Mike."

"I don't know, Casey. Al and Jake went with them. Chuck and the rest of the crew will be leaving shortly. I can't ask any of them to go."

"You don't need a bodyguard," Casey scoffed. "I'll be your bodyguard."

He laughed. "You?"

"Hey, I might be little, but I'm tough." She paused. "But seriously, where we're going, no one is going to know who you are."

"Where are you going?"

She described the club that she and Tucker had gone to frequently. It was the epitome of a television saloon, with dim lighting, a live country band, sawdust on the floors, beer, line dancing, and even an electric bull. She grabbed his hand. "Please, Mike. Please. Please." She batted her eyelashes.

He sighed. "Okay, okay."

"So why are you going out with your ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend, anyway?" Michael asked in the taxi on the way to the club.

"I didn't know he had a girlfriend and I wanted to see him."

"Because you were looking for some... company?"

She shook her head. "No. I wasn't even thinking about sex. We're friends."

"How long did you date him?"

She thought for a second. "Umm, we met in November and

dated until I moved to Utah the next May. So what's that? Seven months?"

"It wasn't serious? Seven months is serious."

"I wasn't ready for a serious relationship. I don't know his reasoning, but I liked the companionship. I don't like being alone. There was a definite attraction there and a great friendship, but...I don't know, maybe our timing was just all off. He's definitely the marrying type, though. He'll make someone a good husband."

"But not you?"

She shook her head and opened the door as the cab rolled to a stop in front of the building. "Not me."

They approached window where two women were checking IDs and membership cards. Casey's outfit didn't have pockets and she hadn't wanted to carry her purse, so Michael was carrying her membership card, her driver's license, her credit card, and even a tube of lipstick in the pockets of his jeans. He handed her the membership card and opened his own wallet to pay the cover charge.

"Casey!" One of the women squealed. "I'm surprised to see you here. Tuck told me you moved to Utah."

"Hi, Marie," Casey replied. "I'm just back here for a visit. Is Tuck here yet?"

She shook her head. "Nope, but when he shows I'll let him know you're here."

"Let's get a table," Casey said to Michael who followed her through the crowded club to one of the tables that surrounded the dance floor. A waitress immediately approached and they both ordered a beer.

"So it wasn't casual, but it wasn't serious?" Michael said, turning the conversation back to Tucker.

"Right."

"Neither of you were seeing anyone else? Sexually?" He

leaned close so he could be heard over the band.

She shook her head. "What kind of girl do you take me for?"

"I was thinking more him than you."

She shook her head again. "We were exclusive." She glanced toward the dance floor. "You wanna dance?"

He nodded. Casey knew he was a talented dancer, she had seen him dancing countless times, and she wasn't surprised that he knew how to two-step. That song was followed by a ballad, and Michael pulled Casey close to him. He put his hands on her waist and she wrapped her arms around his neck, loosely intertwining her fingers behind his neck.

"So you came here a lot?" he asked.

"Yeah, we came almost every weekend."

"Did you do things like this with CJ?"

She shook her head. "No, CJ hated to dance, and he was always so busy with med school." She looked around. "He tried to be so...he was so..." She searched for the words to describe her husband. "He was conceited. CJ Russo would have never come to a place like this."

"So Russo is your married name. What's your maiden name?"

"Johnson." She paused. "Do you prefer Mike or Michael?" It was a question she should have thought to ask a month ago. Everyone called him Mike, so she had followed suit.

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Everyone in my family, except my dad, calls me Michael. To everyone else, I'm Mike. One of millions of Michaels."

"So would you give your kids unusual names?"

"I haven't given it a lot of thought. That's not what guys do, sit around and pick out baby names." He paused. "If I ever have a son, though, I'd like to name him after my dad, William."

The song ended and they returned to their table just as Tucker and his date, Daisy, were approaching. Introductions were quickly made and the foursome sat at the table, chatting casual-

ly. Tucker and Daisy had no idea of Michael's identity, so Casey didn't reveal it. They explained that they both worked for Disney and left the other couple believing that they were co-workers in a restaurant in the amusement park.

"You want to dance?" Daisy asked Tucker. He agreed and they left the table.

"Ready to go another round?" Michael asked. He took her hand and led her onto the dance floor. They danced through three fast paced songs, before the band slowed down the pace. Michael and Casey looked toward the band, surprised at the song they were starting to play. It was *Another Day*, the ballad that had rocketed Quintessential to stardom.

"Oh, we've got to dance to this one," she said. Once again he took her in his arms. She laid her head against his chest and listened to the lyrics. In her mind, she could hear Michael's voice. *God, it would be so easy to love him.* The feeling in his voice when he sang made you believe that he was truly singing from his heart, and the more she got to know him, the more she knew that he was. And she couldn't forget that there was something there, an underlying attraction to each other that had manifested itself the night Max had made his drunken dare. She wouldn't have done it with any of the other guys.

She could feel Michael's face nuzzled in her hair and she wondered what he was thinking. She pulled her head back and looked at him. "What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking that this was nice, and I'm glad you talked me into coming."

"Really?"

He nodded. "And I was thinking that you sure smell good. What about you?"

"I was thinking the same things," she said. "I'm glad you came, Mike. I...I." She wanted to tell him what she was really feeling. She wanted to kiss him.

"You what?" He raised his eyebrows.

"I think you smell good, too."

When the song ended, they returned to the table. "I love that song," Daisy said. Casey smiled at Michael. "You know it's not even country, it's some pop group, one of those boybands," Daisy continued.

Casey nodded. "I know." She winked at Michael, who took a drink from his beer to hide his smile. "I think I'm going to the ladies room," she said. She held out her hand, and Michael dug in his pocket for the lipstick.

"I'll come, too," Daisy said.

"I'm glad to have met you," Daisy said as the two women stood in front of the mirror retouching their makeup. "Tuck has told me a lot about you. He thinks the world of you. I was really nervous about meeting this woman who is the standard he judges every other woman by."

Casey shook her head. "You don't mean that."

Daisy nodded. "It's true."

"Well, then Tucker Stone needs to get out a little more." She paused and rubbed her lips together. "So how long have you two been going out?"

"About six weeks or so. We met right after you left."

"Tuck's a good guy, Daisy. He'll make you happy."

She nodded. "I know. So what about this guy you're with? He's a hottie."

Casey smiled. "Yes, he is, but we're just friends."

"Just friends like you and Tuck?" Daisy asked raising one eyebrow.

Casey shook her head and frowned. "Nope."

"You know," Daisy said, rubbing her chin, "he looks familiar to me, like I know him from somewhere."

Casey shrugged. "He's got one of those faces, I guess." They returned to the table, grabbed their dates and returned to

the dance floor.

"We'll leave after this dance," Casey said as Michael pulled her to him for a slow song. She could sense that he was getting tired. He nodded his agreement.

"Do you want to come in for a cup of coffee?" Casey asked as they stopped outside her hotel room door. Michael consented and followed her into the room. They kicked off their shoes.

Casey started the coffee in the pot that had been provided by the hotel. Michael flopped down on one of the two beds.

She leaned against the dresser as she waited for the coffee to brew. "Thanks again for coming with me."

"No problem. It was fun. You're a great dancer."

"Thanks." She eyed her overnight bag in the corner. "I think I'm going to go ahead and change." She took the bag into the bathroom. She slipped off her dress and bra replaced them with a white T-shirt that hung halfway to her knees. She pulled on a pair of gray cotton gym shorts that weren't even visible beneath the length of the shirt. She washed her face and pulled the barrette out of her hair. She came out of the bathroom carrying her hairbrush. Michael was gone, but the doors between their rooms were open. She tossed the brush on the bed and stuck her head into his room. He was standing at the end of his bed in his boxer shorts, looking through his bag. She watched him for a moment. It wasn't the first time she had seen him this close to naked, but it was the first time she had seen him this undressed and not surrounded by the wardrobe crew.

He turned around and saw her standing there. He raised his eyebrows. "Need something?"

Oh, God, yes! She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry." She turned and went back into her room, and poured the coffee into mugs. Seconds later, he followed, wearing a pair of shorts and pulling a tank top over his head. She handed him a cup.

"Want to watch a movie?" She asked, knowing that he

would say yes.

Michael flipped through the channels before finally stopping on a romantic comedy that they both had seen. "This okay?"

"Yeah. I like this movie. It makes me happy."

He smiled. "Happy?"

"Yeah, at the end when he finally shows up and kisses the girl, it just makes me all warm and fuzzy inside." She sat down on the edge of the bed and picked up her hairbrush. She began to run it through her hair. "Ouch!" she said as she hit a tangle.

"Here, let me," he said, crawling across the bed to her and taking the hairbrush. He gently worked the tangle out. "You're hair is really long."

"Too long. I need to get it cut." She took the brush away from him and unwound a rubber band from the handle. "I can't really do anything with it." She braided it and secured it with the rubber band. She threw the brush onto the other bed and folded her legs in front of her. She began to rub her feet.

"My feet are going to be killing me tomorrow. Those shoes aren't the most comfortable."

"Then why did you wear them?" He asked. He grabbed one of her feet and pulled her leg straight. He rubbed the heel of his hand in the arch of her foot.

"They're cute."

He shook his head. Casey couldn't blame him. It wasn't logical, after all, to sacrifice comfort for the sake of fashion. He placed his hand flat against the sole of her foot. "Your foot isn't much bigger than my hand. You are so tiny. Everything about you is tiny."

She frowned and looked down at her chest. "I know."

He chuckled. "I wasn't talking about those. I just meant in general. You're so small. I like it."

She bit her bottom lip and blushed. She wiggled her foot. "Don't stop."

Chapter Five



Casey slowly opened her eyes and reached for the ringing phone. She picked up the receiver and held it to her ear. “Hello?”

“Good morning. This is your seven o’clock wake-up call.”

She dropped the receiver back onto its cradle and groaned. She sat up and stretched her arms above her head. She looked to her right and smiled. Michael was still sleeping soundly in the other bed. He had fallen asleep there the night before while Casey had returned the favor of a foot rub. Instead of waking him and sending him back to his own room, she had left him in peace and slept in the other bed. She climbed out of the bed and gathered her things together. Max was already waiting for her on her bus. “Good morning,” she said as she entered. She went into the bedroom and dropped her things on the bed, then glanced at the schedule taped to bathroom door to see what time the buses were pulling out that morning. Her eyes quickly

scanned the page until she found the date: July fifth. Her heart immediately felt heavy. *I can't believe you've been gone for so long, Alex*, she thought. *Will I ever not miss you?* She paused at the refrigerator and glanced at the photographs stuck to the door. She ran her thumb across Alex's face and frowned.

She sighed and turned back to Max. "You got a route mapped out for us?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I thought we'd go down and run a couple of laps around the Mall." He tilted his head. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and pulled her running shoes out of a drawer and brought them into the kitchen with her. She sat at the table and put them on. "So, did you have a good time last night?"

He stood up and she followed him out of the bus. "It was all right. What about you?"

She nodded. "I had a really good time."

"Did you come back and hang out with Mike, or was he already in bed?"

"He went with me."

Max looked surprised. "He did?"

Casey nodded. "Yeah, I ran into him in the hall and he said y'all abandoned him, so he came with me, and I think he had a good time, too."

Max raised his eyebrows. "Really? What did you two do?"

"We went dancing, then we went back to the hotel and watched a movie, but we talked and talked."

Max frowned. "That's all you do is talk. Don't you know everything about each other yet?"

She felt the corners of her mouth turn up into a smile. "Not yet."

When they returned to the bus, Jason and David were sitting at the table drinking coffee. A vase overflowing with two dozen peach-colored roses sat in the middle of the table. "Oh, they're

beautiful!" She reached for the card. She opened the small envelope. The card read: *"If you get sad today look at these to make you smile -- Michael."*

She held the card to her chest and touched one of the delicate petals. "He remembered," she said to no one in particular.

"He who remembered what?" David asked.

She handed the card to him. "Mike."

"Remembered what?" Jason asked, taking the card from David. "It's not your birthday."

She bent down to breathe in the fragrance of the flowers. "About Alex."

"Who's Alex?" Max asked. He poured a cup of coffee and sat at the table next to Jason.

She turned around as Reed and Michael entered the bus.

"He was my brother. He died ten years ago today."

David looked hurt. "I didn't know. I'd got you flowers, too."

She smiled. "It's okay." She took Michael's hand and led him into her bedroom, leaving the door open. "Thank you."

He nodded. "You're welcome. Are you okay?"

"I'm great now. I love them, Mike. I can't believe you remembered." She stood on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek.

"Hey, Casey!" Max yelled from the table. "How about you quit kissing on Mike and come in here and cook me some eggs!"

She frowned. "Work calls."

He nodded. "I could use some eggs, too."



"Casey, we're pulling over." Jake's voice penetrated the otherwise quiet kitchen.

She pushed the reply button. "What's wrong, Jake?"

"Al said Jason's hurt." The bus rolled to a stop along side

the highway. Casey got off the bus and walked to the other one, which had stopped just ahead of hers. "Hey, Casey," Jake called to her. She turned around. "You better bring him back here, we're already an hour behind schedule."

She pulled open the door to the guys' bus. Jason was sitting on the couch holding a towel to his foot. David and Reed were obliviously playing a video game, Michael was cleaning up broken glass from the floor. She went to the couch and pulled the towel off Jason's foot. The cut was jagged and long, but didn't appear very deep. "What happened?"

"I dropped a bottle of juice and it shattered against the top of the fridge. I was barefoot and I stepped on a piece."

"Well, you're gonna have to come with me. Jake says we're already behind schedule."

Supported by Casey, Jason limped to her bus. He sat at the table and rested his injured foot on a chair. Casey grabbed her first-aid kit and gently cleaned the wound. She shook her head. "You don't need stitches." She peered into the laceration. "I think there's a piece in there." She used a pair of tweezers to extract a small shard of glass. She applied some anti-bacterial ointment and a bandage.

"It might be sore to dance on tonight."

He shrugged and picked up the remote to the television and turned it on. "I'll be okay."

"I'll want to see it again before you go on and again after the show. You know you've got to take extra special care of your feet." Poor circulation in the feet was a common side effect of diabetes and even a small wound could take months to heal if not cared for properly.

"I know, I know."

"You want something to drink?" He nodded and she poured him a glass of tea. "I'm going to go jump in the shower before I have to start supper."

When she came out of the bathroom, Jason was talking on her cell phone. She caught his gaze and raised her eyebrows.

"Okay, Emily. Here's Casey." He handed her the phone. She sat down at the table across from him.

"Hello?"

"Oh, my gosh. I was just talking to Jason Gold!"

"Big deal, Emily. I talk to him everyday." She winked at Jason, who smiled. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just calling to see if you had asked Mom about the concert."

"No, not yet. Is she there? Put her on the phone and I'll talk to her." She waited for Annie to come to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey. I wanted to talk to you about Emily's birthday."

"No, you can't take her to the concert."

"Oh, come on, why not?"

"I just don't think backstage at a rock concert is somewhere a fourteen-year-old needs to be hanging out."

"She'd be with me."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

Casey sighed. "Oh, Annie. What do I need to say to make you say yes?"

"I'm saying no."

Jason scribbled something on a pad of paper and slid it across the table. *Carmen will be there.* She nodded.

"Carmen Montgomery is opening for them," Casey said. "You let me take her and Matt and Sam to see her."

"So she doesn't need to see her again."

"I think you're being kinda unreasonable."

"And I think you're being a bully. Besides, I'm having something here at the house for her. Matt's family is coming over. If you're going to be in town and you can tear yourself away, you're more than welcome to come over."

Casey sighed again, defeated. "I didn't know you had something planned. Let me talk to Emily again, please."

"Hey," Emily said, dejectedly.

"You didn't tell me that your mom had something planned for you."

"I know I didn't. I'm sorry. Are you going to come by?"

"Of course I am. I'm sure these guys can live one night without me. I'll come home and spend the whole evening with you." They said their good-byes and Casey clicked off the phone.

"She's not letting her come?" Jason asked.

Casey shook her head. "I'll work on it more. Maybe she'll let her come to the sound check." She stood up and got a bag of potatoes out from under the sink. She got two knives from the drawer and put the potatoes and a large bowl in the middle of the table. "Peel or chop?"

He frowned. Casey knew he didn't want to do either, but that didn't stop her from always trying to recruit one of them to help her in the kitchen. "Chop." He took the bigger of the two knives and the cutting board offered to him.

"Emily didn't drive you crazy did she? You're her favorite subject. She asks a billion questions about you every time I'm on the phone with her."

He smiled and shook his head. "No, she was sorta shy, actually. We didn't talk long. What kind of things does she ask?"

"Oh, she wants to know things like what you do in your down time, and basically what kind of person you are"

"What do you tell her?"

"I told her that you're a genuinely nice guy and I couldn't think of a single bad thing to say about you."

"So you lied?"

She shook her head. "I didn't lie, Jason." She handed him a potato. "I have a great respect for you. I do for all of you, but

I'm really impressed with the message you're sending to the kids." Jason was a virgin. It was a conscience decision on his part to remain a virgin until he was married, and it was a resolution that he was proud to share with the public.

"Thank you, Casey, but it's a decision I made for me a long time ago, long before Quintessential ever was. It's not about my image."

"Do you mind if I ask you why?"

"It just seems to me that a lot of people get in trouble by having sex too soon or with the wrong person or for the wrong reason. I can't go wrong if I just wait. Sex will always be there, right?"

"Yeah." She was quiet for a moment. "So tell me about your family. I don't know much. You're parents are divorced, right?"

He frowned. "Yeah. My mom left when I was three and it was just me and my dad until I was thirteen. Then he married Julie and she and my step-sister Heather moved in."

"Where did your mom go?"

He shrugged. "Don't know, don't care." He shook his head. "She tried to get in contact with me about a year ago. I guess she decided she wanted to be my mom again. My dad told her that I didn't want to see her and I didn't need her and she should just stay away. As far as I know, she has."

"I'm sorry, Jason."

"Oh, no, don't be sorry. I love Julie and Heather. Heather was only like eighteen months old when they got married, so she's like my real sister." He concentrated on the potatoes for a second. "So what about you? What's going on with you and your sister?"

Casey sighed and shook her head. "I don't know. There's definitely some hostility there, mostly on her part, but she's my sister, so I just deal with it."



The buses stopped for lunch precisely at noon. They were on their way to Salt Lake City and would be arriving there in the early afternoon. Casey met the guys at the door to her bus. "I want you to eat out here today," She said, nodding toward the picnic tables at the rest area. "I'm using the table." She handed a tablecloth to Jason, who was first in line to board the bus. She started handing food to the other guys. They obediently set the table and sat down to eat. She returned to the project she was working on. After a few minutes, the bus door swung open and David entered.

"What are you building here?" He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a soda. He sat down at the table with her.

"Last night when we stopped at Wal-Mart, I bought this puzzle of you guys. I'm gonna put it together and have you all sign it for Emily's birthday."

David picked up the box and shook his head in apparent disbelief at the wide range of products with their picture on it. "I didn't think your sister let her have our stuff."

"You know, I really don't give a crap. It's just for fun." She snapped the last two pieces into the poster-sized puzzle. "There." She retrieved a permanent marker from a drawer. "Here, you have the best handwriting. Write 'Happy Birthday, Emily' and sign it."

He did as she asked. She handed him a copy of each of their CDs and asked him to autograph them, too. He flipped the inserts open to the pages with his individual picture on it. "That's one good lookin' guy," he said.

Max entered the bus. "What's going on in here!" He demanded jokingly.

Casey handed him the pen and pointed to the table. "Here.

This is for Emily's birthday." Max signed the puzzle and the CDs. He, too, took a soda out of the refrigerator. Casey took the compact discs and the marker out to the other guys.

"So you think you'll be able to bring her to the sound check this afternoon?" Jason asked.

Casey sat down at the table between him and Michael. "I doubt it. She would love it, though." She picked a barbecued potato chip off Michael's plate. "Are y'all really okay with eating out tonight?"

Reed nodded. "We're gonna order pizzas, I think."

Casey ate another chip, this time plucking it off Jason's plate. "Yeah, there's no Denny's in Salt Lake City," she said winking at Michael. "I'm gonna fix the sandwiches for after the show tonight. Jake said he would get them to your rooms. I'll be back in the morning in time to fix breakfast before we pull out."

She paused. "You know, if y'all really need me, I can come back for the show."

"C'mon, Casey," Michael said, "it's her birthday. We'll be okay."



"You've got the night off?" Marjorie asked. Casey had just arrived at her parents' house and was taking advantage of their laundry room.

Casey nodded. "Yeah, I promised Emily I'd spend her birthday with her."

Marjorie shook her head. "There's going to be a billion people over. I don't even know if I want to go."

"I know what you mean. I don't want to be around those people." Casey had nothing personal against the members of her brother-in-law's family, but they were very resolute in their religious beliefs, and Casey always felt that they were waiting

for her to do something sinful. She could only imagine what Annie had told them about her.

Marjorie smiled. "You know, you can go to the concert. Emily will get over it."

Casey shook her head. "I promised her, Mom. Besides, the guys will be okay." They left the laundry room and entered the kitchen.

"So how's it going? The job?"

"It's great, Mom, so much better than I could have ever imagined. It's so much fun."

Marjorie sat at the table and opened the photo album of snapshots Casey had started. "It looks like a lot of fun." She tapped her finger on a picture Reed had taken of Casey and Michael on the night of the memorable *Seven Minutes in Heaven*. After they had emerged from the bedroom, they had snuggled on the couch together. In the picture, Michael's arm was draped over Casey's shoulders and his mouth was nuzzled against her ear, obviously whispering something to her. Casey was laughing.

"What's going on here?"

Casey looked over her mother's shoulder at the picture. "I'm not sure. We were drunk."

"Looks like it. You're not drinking again, are you?" After CJ's death, Casey had spent weeks trying to heal the hurt with alcohol.

"It was one time, Mom, no big deal, and believe me, I regretted it the next morning." Marjorie raised her eyebrows in question. Casey was quick to explain. "Not because I did something stupid, because of the hangover."

"Is there something going on between you two?"

"No. Yes. I don't think so." She shook her head. "No."

Marjorie laughed. "Are you sure?"

Casey shrugged. "We've gone out a couple of times, out to

eat, dancing, but there's nothing going on. Not that I would discourage it; he's a terrific guy."

Marjorie's phone rang, causing Casey to feel her hip pocket for her cell phone. Her pocket was empty. *I must have left it on the bus*, she thought. "Mom, I'll be back in about an hour." Marjorie responded with a nod.

Casey's bus was parked behind the Delta Center, the arena that was hosting the show that night. She found her phone lying on her bed. It rang as soon as she picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Casey." It was Michael. She wasn't surprised. He called her several times a day just to talk; most times on the cell phone instead of the two-way radio so their chats would be private.

She smiled into the phone. "Hi, Michael."

"What's going on? Has the party started yet?"

"Nope. Not until seven." She left the bus and walked toward the building.

"So I guess you're not bringing her."

"No. I really wanted to. You know, this is the first show I've missed." She pulled open a heavy door and flashed her credentials at the security guards. "So what are you doing?"

"I'm sitting in the dressing room watching Scooby-Doo."

"Where's everyone else?"

"Jason went out to eat with Carmen, and the other three are doing the sound check."

Casey stopped outside the dressing room door. "So how come you're not at the sound check?"

"Oh, I was there, and my mom called, and I've never gotten back off the couch."

"Oh." She pushed open the door and entered the dressing room.

Michael jumped off the couch. "Casey!"

She clicked off her phone. "I forgot my phone."

He turned off the TV. They could hear the band playing. "I should go back out there." He stretched his arms above his head. "I need a nap." He stretched his arms above his head causing his t-shirt to raise up and expose the thin trail of dark hair that disappeared into his shorts.

She resisted the urge to reach out and touch him.

She shook her head. "I think you need some vitamins."

He held his arms out to her and she walked into his embrace. He hugged her tight. "Let's go make some noise," he said, mimicking what Casey said to them every night before they took the stage.

She tightened her grip around his waist, not wanting to let him go. She listened to him singing songs every night about the love he had to give, and she was quickly finding herself desperate for that love. He was a hard one to read, though. One minute, she felt like he may share her feelings and seconds later, he would be treating her like "one of the guys." She wouldn't dare let on to anyone how deep her feelings ran.

He rested his chin on her head. "Something bothering you, Case?"

She shook her head. "No, I just gotta go to this birthday party and I don't really want to. I'd rather just stay here with you." She wondered whether he noticed her slip of the tongue.

"Then stay." He tightened his arms around her. "With me."

She breathed in deeply, trying to steady her racing heart. "I can't." She reluctantly pulled away. "I need to go."

"Tell her we said hello and happy birthday."

She nodded and turned to leave the room.

"Hey, Casey?" She turned back around. "Call me later. I'll be up."

Chapter Six



Dan lit a cigarette as they walked the two blocks to Annie's house. He offered the pack to Casey. "I told you, Daddy. I'm trying to quit."

"How's that going?"

She nodded. "Pretty good. I only have a couple a day. Actually, I haven't had one since the day before yesterday."

"We'll see how long that lasts," he replied, eying the rows of cars lining both sides of the street.

"You two better behave yourselves," Marjorie scolded. "This is Emily's day."

Less than an hour after her arrival, Casey found herself on the patio, escaping both the heat that the forty people in the house had generated as well as the watchful eyes of the other guests. Dan was already there, sitting in a lawn chair. Casey took the chair next to his.

"You know, they're not bad people," he said.

Casey shook her head. "No, but I always feel like they're waiting for lightening to strike me."

Dan laughed and held the pack of cigarettes out to her. She took one. "You're such a bad influence," she said.

"You wanna leave here and get drunk?"

Casey laughed. "You better not let Mom hear you say that."

"Hear you say what?" Marjorie asked as she came out onto the patio.

Casey giggled. "Nothing."

Marjorie flashed them a disapproving look, a gesture that Casey found hysterically funny. "She's getting ready to open her presents," Marjorie said.

Casey and Dan crushed out their cigarettes and followed her back into the house. When Emily opened the gifts from Casey, the autographed presents as well as a portable CD player, she could see the jealousy on the faces Emily's teen-age cousins, and she could sense the animosity from Annie and her female in-laws. Casey knew that they already felt like she was a show-off, and tonight it seemed like she was flaunting the fact that she was hobnobbing with celebrities. Casey tried not to concentrate on that, but instead on Emily, whose face glowed with happiness.

Casey and her parents stuck around to help Annie and Matt clean up after the party. While the older couple went upstairs to say goodnight to the kids, Casey was left alone in the kitchen with Annie and Matt.

"I'm not letting her keep that crap you gave her." Annie said, holding her chin up as if she were challenging Casey.

"Why?"

"Because I don't want her to have it."

"Are you insane?" She turned to Matt. "Do you have an opinion here?" Matt simply shrugged and looked at his feet.

Wuss.

Casey shook her head. "She's wrong, you know. There's nothing wrong with a CD player or the CDs. She already has them on cassette anyway. And the puzzle, well, that was just fun."

"She doesn't need it." Annie said.

"Maybe she does. Those things make her feel special. You don't let her have anything just for her. Couldn't you tell how happy she was? She's going to resent you, you know."

"Resent us? For what?"

"For not letting her do the things that other kids her age are doing. For not letting her have teenage things. For not letting her express herself. She's fourteen years old. She needs to be able to be herself. She doesn't even have her own room. She shares it with toddlers."

"And what are we supposed to do? Let you build us a new house? You want her to come and live with you? You don't even have a home. You're living on a bus." Annie shook her head. "You have too much influence on her anyway. Bad influence."

"Bad? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know, smoking, drinking, cussing, sex."

She knew better than to argue with her sister on three of these points. Yes, she smoked. That she was trying to quit meant nothing to Annie; their father had been smoking for 40 years, and Emily saw him everyday. Yes, she had an occasional drink, but she had only been drunk just the one time in over two years. And yes, she swore, but never in front of the kids. But the sex issue was not one Casey could let slide. "Sex, Annie?"

"I know that when you were her age you were already screwing around with CJ. God knows what you did while you two were married based on what I do know, and who knows what you've done since he died. And what you're doing

now...with those boys.”

Casey ran her fingers through her hair and held her head in her hands. “That’s right, Annie, I’m a foul-mouthed drunken whore, but I’m happy and I’m successful and God forbid she grow up and be that.”

“Get out.”

“Fine.” She walked down the hall to the room Emily shared with her sisters. They were all asleep. Casey sat on the edge of Emily’s bed and slid the new headphones off of her ears. Her eyes popped open.

“I’m leaving now, sweetie,” Casey said, kissing her cheek. “If your mom takes your gifts away, I’ll get you more.”

Emily nodded. “Thanks, Aunt Casey.” She wrapped her arms around Casey’s neck. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

She kissed the other two girls and went into the boys’ rooms to say goodbye. She left out of the front door without seeing Annie.

“Hey, Casey.” Matt was sitting on the porch swing in the dark.

“What?”

“I’m sorry for Annie.”

“She needs some kind of help, Matt.”

He shook his head. “It’s just when you come around.”

“Then I’m the one who’s sorry.” She walked back to her parents’ house, but instead of going inside, she jumped in her truck and drove to the city. She found the buses at the hotel. There was a light on in her bus. *Probably Jake*. She pulled the pick-up up next to it and got out. She pulled the door open, expecting to see the bus driver raiding her kitchen, but the room was empty.

“Hello?” She called out as she made her way to the back of the bus to her bedroom. Michael was just coming out of the

bathroom. He jumped when he saw her.

“Casey!”

“What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I was going to look for those Little Debbie cakes, but then I had to pee.” He tore a paper towel off the roll.

She watched him clean his glasses. “Have I ever told you that you’re a fraud?” The contacts he wore on stage and during the photo shoots were colored blue, hiding his naturally brown eyes. She enjoyed teasing him mostly because he received fan letter after fan letter saying how sexy his blue eyes were.

He smiled. “I think you might have mentioned it a time or two.”

“You want to go for a ride?”

“A ride?”

“In my truck. It’s outside.”

“Sure.”

“Have you ever seen the Great Salt Lake?” Casey asked as she maneuvered the truck through the city streets.

He shook his head. “Nope.”

She took him there. They sat parked as close to the beach as she could get. The moonlight reflected off the lake and illuminated the mountains in the distance.

“It’s beautiful,” he said.

She nodded. “CJ and I used to come camping here when we visited my folks.”

“Are you missing him?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“You act like there is something bothering you.”

“It’s not CJ. It’s my sister.”

“What happened?”

Casey sighed. “Oh, just another fight.”

Michael put his hand on her knee. “You want to talk about it?”

"My sister and I aren't friends," she said after a few seconds of silence.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she doesn't like me and we don't get along."

"Why?"

Casey shrugged. "I don't know. My dad says that she was always jealous of me."

"Do you know why?"

"It's a lot of things, I think, a lot deeper than just sibling rivalry. She got along with Alex just fine. I was so different than she was. I was popular. I was a cheerleader. She wasn't. I was a good student. Everything came easily for me. She struggled and couldn't hack college. But she's a lot older than me. When I was a teenager, she was already married with kids, so I don't understand why she bothered comparing herself to me."

"Maybe you were who she wanted to be."

"Maybe, but it just keeps getting bigger and bigger. We can't even be in the same room together anymore." She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "After CJ died, I came into a lot of money, way more money than her husband will make in his lifetime. That's when all the shit hit the fan."

"Well, money will do that."

"I must have been stupid or naive, but I thought trying to share it would be a good thing. I offered them the money to remodel their house. You know, add a couple of bedrooms. They have eight kids in a four-bedroom house. I just wanted to help."

"And she thought you were trying to show off."

"I guess." She pounded her forehead against the steering wheel. "I could really use a cigarette right now."

Michael squeezed her knee. "Oh, Casey. You've done so well. It's been what? Two days since you had one?"

Casey shook her head. "Try two hours." She sighed. "I'm

not moving back here. When the tour is over and I'm unemployed again, I'm staying on the East Coast."

"In Orlando?"

"Maybe." She paused. "So how was the show tonight?"

"Oh, you know. The same."

"No crazy fans running on stage?"

"No, everyone was pretty well behaved." A smile spread across his face. "Oh man! We were throwing those balls off the stage and Max pegged some girl right in the face."

"Ouch," Casey said putting her fingers on her nose. The balls he was referring to were miniature basketballs, black in color with Quintessential's picture and logo printed on them. They threw about a hundred of them out into the crowd near the end of every show. "She okay?"

Michael nodded. "Yeah, she came backstage afterward and we gave her a bunch of stuff."

Casey chuckled. "I knew I'd miss something good. I should have stayed. Why didn't you make me stay?"

She turned up the volume as one of Quintessential's most popular ballads came on the radio. "You ever get tired of hearing yourself?" She asked as Michael's voice filled the cab of the truck.

He shook his head. "Not really. It's still kinda cool."

"I never get tired of hearing you. I think it's beautiful. I wish every one could hear you like I do. No loud music, no lights, no dancing, just you all sitting around singing. It's probably my favorite part about this whole experience. I feel so lucky to get to hear that."

Michael caught her hand and squeezed it. "Thank you. That means a lot. It really does."

She concentrated on the feeling of her hand in his for a moment. Her thoughts flashed back to a several nights earlier when they had danced together, then to the previous month

when they had kissed while playing Truth or Dare. She could practically feel his body pressed against hers again. She pulled her hand away and put the truck into gear.

"We should be getting back."

She parked the truck next to her bus. "I'm supposed to take the truck back home. I really don't feel like driving all the way back there."

"How far is it?" He asked.

"About twenty-five minutes." She yawned. "I'm tired. I guess I could just call Daddy and have him come pick it up tomorrow. I'll just get a room."

"I think that's a good idea," he said. "You shouldn't drive if you're tired." She agreed and he walked her to the front desk and waited while she checked into a room.

"Mike, thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder." She said when they reached the door to her room.

"Anytime, Casey. You're not a terrible person. Don't let your sister get you down."

"Thanks." She leaned forward to kiss his cheek, but he turned his head and the kiss landed on his lips. She smiled. "Oops."

He returned her smile. "You're okay, Casey, you know that? I'm gonna write a song about you."

She raised her eyebrows. "Yeah? What are you gonna call it, *Crazy about Chicken and Dumplings?*"

He laughed. "I was thinking, *Baby, I Love your Fried Chicken.*"

"I'll see you in the morning, Mike."

"Good night, Casey."

Chapter Seven



“Casey,” Chuck said as he approached her. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“What’s up?”

“We’re not pulling out until ten tomorrow morning, so I’ll just tell the guys to catch the buffet or order room service if they want breakfast. So you’re off the hook tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks, Chuck. I think I’ll get a room then.” She had started spending almost every night sleeping on the bus rather than getting a room on the nights they stayed in town after the show. It was easier for her to wake up and step in the kitchen and start to work instead of bothering with checking in and out of hotels.

Ten days had passed since Emily’s birthday and they were now in Las Vegas at the MGM Grand. Casey had never been to Las Vegas and she was looking forward to trying her hand in the casino.

"I'll take care of it," Chuck said. "That way, you can be on the same floor as the guys. I'd feel better knowing you were all together."

"Okay, Chuck. Thanks." Casey turned away from the man and directed her attention back to the stage. She smiled as she watched them dance. Just that morning, as they rehearsed the song they were currently singing she had stood in front of the stage and had unsuccessfully tried to match them step for step. Her antics had David and Max laughing so hard Chuck had asked her to leave.

She was just about to turn away from the stage and grab one of the bottles of water from the cooler that was kept close by when she saw Michael, who was dancing farthest away from her, fall to the floor convulsing. Casey ran across the stage to him even before the others had noticed he had gone down.

The band stopped playing and the other four, as well as Chuck, gathered around. Michael's eyes had rolled back in his head and he was foaming slightly at the mouth. "It's a seizure," Casey said hurriedly. "Kill the lights." Although it was not likely the stage lights had caused his seizure, it was hard for Casey to concentrate under the bright, flashing lights.

"Kill the lights!" Chuck yelled. The stage went dark except for the dim auxiliary lighting and the building became eerily quiet.

"What do we do? What do we do?" Jason asked.

"Stay calm. It'll be over soon. Get me my bag." She felt his forehead. "God, he's burning up!" Her medical bag appeared magically by her side.

Michael's seizure stopped, but he remained unconscious. She leaned close to his ear. "Mike!" He didn't respond. "Michael!" She looked around. "Let's move him," she said, suddenly aware of the seventeen thousand people watching. Max and Chuck picked him up and moved him off stage. He

still didn't respond. "Someone call 911." She found her thermometer. It was the kind that measured the patient's temperature instantly by inserting a probe into the ear.

"Already did, Case." Chuck said.

The thermometer beeped and she looked at the digital reading: 103.6 "Shit," she said. She practically ripped his shirt off of him. Small red bumps covered his chest and neck. Her mind raced. *What could that be?* She pulled her blood pressure cuff from her bag as well as a stethoscope. She sighed with relief. Other than his fever, his vitals seemed normal. She bent to his ear again. "Mike!" Still no response.

"What's wrong, Casey?" Reed asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. He's got a high fever and this rash." She rubbed her forehead. "And the seizure."

Someone handed her a towel that had been moistened with cold water. She dabbed his head with it. "Mike!"

"How could this happen?" She said, mostly to herself.

Michael hadn't been feeling quite himself for the past few days. Casey had assessed his symptoms, headache, swollen glands, low grade fever, and determined he was getting the flu. His spirit had not been dampened and he didn't act like he felt bad. She had been keeping a check on his temperature, even taking it in the dressing room before the show. He had waved her off, thinking she was being too overbearing. Before the show it had been 99.6, barely feverish. Now, less than an hour later, he was unconscious. She relayed all of this information to the paramedics when they arrived at the scene.

At the hospital, Casey followed Michael into the exam room. Michael's identity had been disclosed to the hospital staff before he arrived and they were waiting with security, thinking that maybe some fans might try to follow them to the emergency room. He had regained consciousness in the ambulance, but his mind was clouded and he was unable to think clearly.

"He hates these stupid pants," Casey said as she tugged at one of the legs of his tight leather pants. She pulled them free and folded them before putting them in a bag along with his shirt, shoes and socks. His boxer shorts were wet; he had apparently lost control of his bladder during the seizure. It wasn't uncommon and Casey had expected it.

"I'll get a gown," the nurse said. She left and came back with a light-blue standard issue garment. She handed it to Casey and left the room again.

Casey grabbed the waistband of Michael's boxer shorts then paused and closed her eyes, thinking she should get the nurse back. She shook the thought out of her head. *She* was a nurse. She was a nurse specifically hired to take care of him, and she had to protect his privacy.

Come on, Casey. Pull yourself together. She willed herself to think of Michael as a patient. She grabbed a pair of scissors from the table and cut the shorts off of him and tossed them in the garbage can. She quickly put the gown on him and covered him to his waist with a thin blanket.

"He's healthy?" The attending doctor, Dr. Amy Lewis, asked when she came in and began her examination.

Casey nodded. "Yeah. No health problems, no allergies." She was holding his hand, rubbing her thumb in circles in his palm. He was babbling softly, but not coherently.

"Drugs? Alcohol?"

Casey shook her head. "No."

"Let's get a tox screen anyway," Dr. Lewis said. "Just to be thorough." Casey nodded her approval, knowing that the test would come back clean.

"How much does he weigh?" The nurse holding his chart asked.

Casey did the math quickly in her head. He weighed about one hundred and eighty-five pounds. "About eighty-four kilos."

Dr. Lewis examined the blisters. "Has he ever had the chicken pox?"

"I don't know."

Dr. Lewis nodded. "That's what it looks like. I'm about ninety-nine percent sure."

"You're right. It didn't even occur to me. His temperature jumped four degrees in less than an hour. You think the fever spike caused the seizure?"

She nodded. "Oh yeah, more than likely, but I'm going to run some tests, and send him up to radiology for an MRI, just to be sure he doesn't also have encephalitis."

"That's remote, isn't it?" Encephalitis was an inflammation of the brain usually caused by a virus. It was very serious and could be fatal.

"Yeah," Dr. Lewis said, "but we have to rule it out." She gave him another once over. She smiled. He was softly singing.

"I'm gonna give him some Diphenhydramine and keep him over night. It'll help him sleep and hopefully take care of the itching. If it's just the chicken pox, then he should be fine to leave in the morning. I'll get him admitted and moved to a room."

She looked at his chart again. "He's a little dehydrated, so we'll get him hooked up to an IV, and let's get him a catheter, so we can measure his output. You can put it in when he gets upstairs."

Casey nodded. "Okay. Thank you, Dr. Lewis."

Within a half an hour of Michael's arrival at the hospital, he was officially diagnosed with the chicken pox and nothing more.

Casey inserted an IV line into a vein in his right arm in order to administer fluids and medications to reduce his fever. He opened his eyes and looked at her. "Hi, Casey," he said softly.

"Hi, Michael."

"I need some eye drops."

"Oh, shoot," she said. "I forgot about your contacts. I'm just going to take them out, okay?" He nodded and Casey carefully removed the paper-thin lenses from his eyes. "Fraud," she whispered.

He didn't respond with his usual smile. "I've got a headache, and I'm thirsty."

She rubbed his forehead and noticed that he felt considerably cooler, but she was sure it was because he was out from under the hot lights. "I know you do, honey." The nurse handed her a paper cup filled with water and she held it to his lips, slightly tipping it so he could drink from it. She put the cup down and took a syringe filled with the medication Dr. Lewis had ordered from the nurse. "I'm going to give you something to help you sleep. You'll feel much better in the morning." The nurse watched her administer the Diphenhydramine, and she noted it in his chart.

"It burns," he said.

She rubbed his arm where the drugs were entering his system. "That will go away in a minute."

"My head feels heavy."

She nodded. "See, it's starting to work. Just relax and go back to sleep."

"Casey?" He said sleepily. "I itch."

"Do you want me to bring you some calamine lotion?" The nurse asked. Casey nodded and the nurse left the room, only to return minutes later with the pink lotion. She left again, leaving Casey alone with Michael.

Casey pulled down Michael's gown to expose his chest. "I'm gonna put this lotion on you, sweetie. It'll help some." The blisters were getting larger and multiplying. She rubbed the lotion on his neck and chest. There were no blisters on his arms or legs or face yet.

He began to scratch himself between his legs. Casey grabbed his hand to stop him. "You can't scratch."

"My balls," he said almost incoherently.

"Is that a come-on line?" she joked. When she removed his clothes, she had not given in to temptation and stared at the only part of him she had never seen, so she wasn't sure to what extent the rash had spread down his torso. She pulled back the blanket, lifted his gown, and peered underneath. The rash had indeed spread to his genitals. She snapped on a pair of latex gloves and emptied some lotion in her hand. He moaned softly as she touched him, and she guiltily pulled her hand away. She stripped off her gloves.

"Go to sleep, Mike," she said softly, running a hand down his face to close his eyes. She kissed his forehead, pressing her lips to his warm skin for several seconds. She adjusted his blanket and stayed by his bedside, holding his hand, until she was sure he was asleep.

She found Reed, Jason, Max, David and Chuck in a private waiting room that was being guarded by Al and Jake. They jumped up from their chairs. Their eyes were all pleading for answers. She motioned for them all to sit down. "He's going to be fine." She took a chair and reached out to Max for the can of soda he was drinking. He handed it to her.

"What's going on, Casey?" Reed asked. "What happened to him?"

"His seizure was caused by his fever jumping so high so fast." She handed the can back to Max. "Thanks."

"What caused the fever?" Max asked. "The flu?"

She shook her head. "He doesn't have the flu after all. He has the chicken pox."

"The chicken pox!"

She nodded. "I guess he's never had them before. Anyway, chicken pox in adults is very dangerous. That's what the red

bumps were on his chest. He's gonna be okay. The doctor said he should get out of here in the morning. Have all of you had it?" She was answered by affirmative nods from everyone. "Good." She looked at Chuck. "You should let the crew know, in case someone else gets sick."

"How long is he going to be out sick?" Chuck asked, pulling a notepad and pen from his pocket. "I need to do some rescheduling."

She shrugged. "Let's see, today's Thursday; I'm not going to release him back to work until Monday night at least. He's gonna need the rest."

Chuck nodded. "That's fine. I've got to make some calls." He looked at his watch. "Umm, I've got to arrange for hotel rooms for all the crew for tonight. Tell Mike I'll be by to see him in the morning." Chuck left the room.

"Is he awake?" David asked.

Casey shook her head. "He's been in-and-out, mostly out. I just gave him some Diphen -- some Benadryl, which has a sedative effect, so I imagine he'll be out-of-it for most of the night."

"Does he know what happened to him?"

She shook her head. "He doesn't know what's wrong, but he did tell me that he had a headache and his balls itched." Laughter filled the small waiting room.

"He won't remember the seizure. He probably won't remember riding in the ambulance, or being in the ER, but that's all normal." She met each one's eyes with her own. They looked worried, and she wondered how she looked. "He's gonna be fine, guys. I know it was scary, but he's going to be all right."

Jason nodded. "I'll feel better when I see it for myself."

"Did anyone call his family yet?" Casey asked.

"I talked to Birdie," Reed said, referring to Michael's

mother, "but I didn't know anything. She wants to talk to you or the doctor." He handed her a slip of paper with a phone number on it.

"Can we see him?" Max asked.

"They're moving him to a room now. You can see him once he gets settled." She left the waiting room and walked outside the hospital. She bummed a cigarette from someone else that was smoking and pulled her cell phone from her pocket. She dialed the number on the paper.

"Hello?" An anxious voice answered on the first ring.

"Mrs. Brooks?"

"Yes?"

"Hi, this is Casey Russo. I'm calling to give you an update on Michael." She explained to Michael's mother his condition, reassuring her that he was going to be just fine, and convincing her that he would be out of the hospital before she could make it there.

"He'll be back on stage the first of the week," Casey said.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." She hung up the phone and re-entered the hospital. She saw Dr. Lewis at the desk. "Has he been moved?"

The doctor nodded. "Room 424."

Casey, Reed, Max, Jason and David took the elevators to the fourth floor. She entered the room first and went over to the bed. She felt his forehead; still warm, but cooler than before. He was sleeping. She opened the door and the other four entered the room.

"He's sleeping," she said. Each of the others approached the bed and looked at their friend, but no one spoke. One-by-one they sat down, Max and Reed in the two chairs and David and Jason on the other bed that was in the room. Casey leaned against the windowsill.

"You all can go on back to the hotel," she said. "I'll stay

here with him.”

“We’re not going anywhere.” David said. “Not for a while anyway.”

She nodded. “I’m going to get us a cup of coffee. It’s going to be a long night.” In the cafeteria, Casey bought five cups of coffee, a dozen Krispy Kreme doughnuts and a pack of cigarettes. She carried it all back to Michael’s room and handed out the steaming paper cups.

“Oh, Casey,” Jason said, eyeing the box of doughnuts. She knew they were his favorite and the single biggest thing he missed eating.

“Go ahead. Just don’t go overboard.” She took one of the pastries out of the box for herself before handing the box to Jason. “I’ll be back,” she said, taking her coffee and cigarettes out to the solarium on that floor.

She met the charge nurse outside the door to Michael’s room when she returned. The nurse was holding a Foley catheter insertion kit. Upon hearing that Casey was his private nurse and having to call extra security to clear the mob of fans that had stormed to hospital, the chief of staff, Dr. McCrane denied access to his room from the other nurses in order to protect Michael’s privacy. Unless there was a medical emergency, Dr. McCrane was the only hospital employee allowed in the room. A security guard had been posted outside the door.

“Here you go,” the nurse said. “Just ring if you need some help.”

“Thanks.” Casey took the kit from her and entered the room. She put the package down at the end of the bed and washed her hands. “Okay guys, we’re going to need a little privacy. David, can you pull that curtain please?” He did, shutting Michael and Casey off from the rest of the room. She pulled back the blanket and lifted his gown, fully exposing him.

She tore open the catheter insertion kit and washed her

hands again. When inserting a catheter, it was imperative to keep as sterile environment as possible. She slipped on the gloves and used the iodine that came included in the kit to clean him. She gently held him in one hand and slowly inserted the tube with the other. Using a syringe of sterile water, she inflated the balloon that would hold the catheter in his bladder. She taped the tube to his leg. The tube filled instantly and began to empty into the bag that Casey hung off the side of the bed. She adjusted his gown and covered him with the blanket. She opened the curtain and threw the empty kit and used supplies in the trash can.

"What did you do?" Jason asked. He saw the bag. "Oh." His eyes grew wide as he realized exactly what Casey had done. "Oh."

"He's gonna hate me, huh?"

Max wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in for a hug. She could feel the tension in his body as well as her own, and she was suddenly aware of how much she needed the hug. She clung to him. "He'll get over it," he said.

"I'm sure he'd rather you do it than a stranger," Reed said. "I know I would."

She pulled away from Max. "You guys should go on back to the hotel. I'm going to stay here with him."

They offered no resistance to her suggestion, leaving her in the room alone with nothing to do but watch Michael sleep.

She had just come back into the room from smoking another cigarette when she saw his eyes slowly open. "Hey there, sleepyhead," she said. She took his hand.

He looked at her and blinked his eyes a couple of times. "Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital."

"What happened?"

"You got sick, but you're going to be fine."

He frowned. "You've been smoking."

She nodded. "It's your fault."

He managed a lopsided grin. "I love you, Casey."

His words surprised her, but she attributed it to the medication. She pushed back his hair and kissed his forehead. "I love you, too, Mike."

"Good. I'm going back to sleep now."

She watched him drift back off to sleep. She checked his IV and the Foley bag. She noted his output in his chart. She sank into the chair next to his bed.

Panic seized her when she opened her eyes. She hadn't meant to fall asleep.

"Good morning, sunshine," David greeted her. He ruffled her hair.

She pushed his hand away and stood up. She looked around him to Michael's bed. He was awake and the other guys were all standing around him. She squeezed in next to his bedside between Max and Jason. She could see that the rash had now spread to his face and arms.

Michael smiled weakly at her. "My hero."

She shook her head. "You gave us quite a scare. How are you feeling?"

"I've got a headache, and these bumps itch. What's wrong with me?"

She looked around. "Y'all didn't tell him?" They shook their heads.

"He just woke up," Jason offered.

"You have the chicken pox," she said as she grabbed his hand, stopping him from scratching his chest. She explained his condition to him, why he had the seizure, what to expect, and why he couldn't scratch himself. She assured him that not being able to remember the episode was normal. She pulled her thermometer from her medical bag and stuck the probe in his ear. Overnight, his temperature had dropped to within normal limits.

He lifted the blanket and pulled his gown to the side so that only he could see himself. He looked up at her. "Did you do this to me?"

She nodded slowly. "I did."

"Can you take it out?"

She nodded again. "I can."

"Will you?"

She smiled. "I will." She pulled the curtain closed, washed her hands, and pulled on a pair of gloves.

He unabashedly exposed himself. He saw her surprised expression. "What? You've already seen it."

She stood at the side of the bed, and as she worked, she explained what she was doing. He closed his eyes when she grabbed him gently with her fingertips. She quickly pulled out the tube. She untaped it from his leg, freeing him from the contraption. She covered him with the blanket.

"What about this?" He asked, holding out his arm.

She tapped the pump that was delivering him a steady infusion of medication. "When this is empty." She took off the gloves and opened the curtain.

"So when do I get to leave here?"

"We'll get you out of here later this morning, but you'll have to take a couple of days off work at the very least. And you'll have to hang out with me."

"Fine, but I'm not peeling any potatoes."

Chapter Eight



“**Y**ou didn’t want to go downstairs and lose all your money?” Michael asked.

He had been released from the hospital that morning and he and Casey were in the hotel room. Instead of getting Casey her own room, Chuck had decided that she should share Michael’s suite for the two days they would be there.

The other guys had not been bothered at all to cancel shows for the next three nights and spend two extra days in Las Vegas. Jake, Al and Chuck would certainly earn their money as bodyguards chasing Max, David, Jason and Reed from casino to casino.

“Nah, I better not.”

“I’m fine, Casey. You don’t need to baby-sit me.”

She shook her head. “Oh, it’s not that. I’m pretty tired. I think I’ll go catch a nap.”

“Can you wait a little while? I’m going to go take a bath in

that oatmeal stuff and I'll need you to put that lotion on my back when I get out."

"I thought you didn't need me to baby-sit."

"Well, if you're gonna be here."

She smiled. "Sure."

Casey left his bedroom and headed to the second bedroom of the suite. She had never been in such luxurious place as the MGM Grand. The suite they were in was bigger than apartment she and CJ had shared. She lay down on the bed and flipped on the television. She tuned it to a talk show and closed her eyes.

"Casey, I'm ready!" Michael called.

She moaned and opened her eyes. In the hour he had been in the tub, she had drifted off to sleep, leaving an ear open for him. She slowly climbed out of the bed and entered the bedroom. Michael was lying on the bed on his stomach. He was wearing only his boxers. She took the bottle of calamine lotion from the dresser and crossed over to the bed.

"You want to turn on the television?" She asked as she spread the lotion on his back. She grabbed the remote control and handed it to him. He stopped it on the same channel Casey had been watching in the other room. A couple on a daytime talk show was arguing loudly about sex.

"That feels so good. Thank you."

My pleasure! "No problem," she said nonchalantly. "That's what I'm here for."

He sat up. "Casey, I don't want you to think I'm taking you for granted. I really do appreciate you doing this for me."

She nodded. "I know you do. I'm sorry. I'm just tired." She went into the bathroom to wash her hands. He patted the place beside him on the bed when she came back into the room.

"You wanna watch TV with me?"

She yawned. "I'll fall asleep."

"I will to." He beckoned her over. "Come on. Please?"

"Okay," she relented. She sat back down on the bed and fanned his back, trying to make the lotion dry so he could lie down.

He shook his head in the direction of the TV. "I wonder why people would stay together if they were so damn miserable."

"You believe in divorce?"

"I don't *believe* in it. I wouldn't want to go through it. What I believe in is love and respect and honesty and friendship. These people don't have any of that." He paused. "That's not what being in love is supposed to be like."

"You've been in love?"

He shrugged slightly. "Yeah. Well, not will-you-marry-me love, but in love all the same."

"How long ago?"

He hesitated before answering. "It's been a while." He studied her for a moment before speaking again. "I bet many men have loved you."

She raised her eyebrows. "What do you mean? I haven't been with that many men. Only three."

He shook his head. "No, I don't mean that. I mean you're the kind of woman that men want to love."

"Do they?"

He nodded. "Yeah." He grinned, breaking the serious mood. "I bet you hear 'I love you,' more that I do."

"I doubt that. Actually, though, a man told me that he loved about two o'clock this morning."

He looked puzzled, then he raised his eyebrows and put his hand on his chest. "Me?"

She nodded. "I'm sure it was the medication talking. You were pretty doped up."

He shook his head. "I don't remember, but I do love you, Casey. I'm glad we're friends."

"Me, too." She tried to hide her disappointment that he was only thinking of her as a friend.

"So, how long will it be before I look normal again?"

"The blisters will scab up and start to fall off in about a week or so, so if you have any photo shoots this week, I'd reschedule."

He shook his head. "No, I don't." He was distracted by a teaser on the television for an entertainment news show: *One Quintessential member collapses at a concert. Find out the surprising cause next on EXTRA.* He frowned. "God, they want people to believe that I'm on drugs."

"They just want people to watch their show, Michael." She stretched out on her side on the bed. "I was there when Dr. McCrane gave his statement to the press. There's no way the media can spin this to make it anything more than it really is."

He took off his glasses and stretched out on his stomach next to her. "You obviously haven't found yourself on the cover of a tabloid." He buried his face in a pillow.

She yawned and slid across the bed so that their bodies were almost touching. She put her hand on the small of his back and began kneading the muscles of his lower torso. "It will be okay, Mike." She continued rubbing his back until they both fell asleep.

When she woke up a couple of hours later, Michael was still asleep, but they had shifted position so that they were nested together with his arms wrapped tightly around her waist and his chin resting on top of her head. *How easy would this be to get used to?*



"What's on your mind, Casey?" David asked.

It was a week later. Michael was fully recovered, except for

the few ugly scabs that hadn't fallen off, and the tour had been back on schedule for four days. David had stayed behind on Casey's bus after breakfast.

"Hmm?" She said absently.

"What's on your mind?"

She sighed. "Nothing." She shook her head. "Nothing I can talk to you about anyway."

"Why not?" David asked.

"I think you probably know why not."

"Mike." It wasn't a question. "So why can't you talk to me?"

"Because you're Mike's friend. You're too close."

"I'm your friend, too. What's the problem?"

She shook her head. "I'm just tired of this dance that we're doing."

"What dance?"

"This dance around each others feelings. I can't tell how he feels about me."

"How do you feel about him?"

She blushed and couldn't help but smile. "I really like him." She wanted to elaborate. She wanted to tell him how she had never felt this way about someone, how she smiled every time she saw him, how her heart skipped a beat whenever he looked at her, and how her insides quivered whenever he flashed her that wickedly sexy grin. But she wouldn't confess those feelings to anyone.

"Then why are you dancing? If you like him, let him know."

She shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm not opening myself up to that. You can't take it back once it's out there, and you can't pretend it's not there. We've still got seven months left on this tour. I'm not going to make it uncomfortable for him, much less me. I don't guess you could enlighten me any." He shook his

head.

"Do you feel like maybe he feels the same way?" David asked.

"I don't know. It's so hard to know what he's thinking."

He nodded his agreement. "So what are you going to do about your little problem?"

"I'm gonna cook three meals a day and make sure you all stay reasonably healthy. I'm going to go to the shows and play cards at night. I'm gonna ride it out and see where it goes." She sighed. "What do you think?"

David shrugged. "Personally, I think that he'd be a fool not to be in love with you. If I didn't have Shannon, I would be. Hell, I am anyway." He smiled. "And Mike's no fool."

She sighed. "So what about you? Are you gonna marry that girl?"

"That's my plan," Reed said.

"Have you asked her?"

He shook his head. "We've talked about it. Shannon's still got a year of school left."

"What's stopping you from asking?"

"What if she says no?"

"I guess that's just a chance you have to take."

"But you're not into taking chances?"

She shook her head.

"You want me to talk to him?"

"No, I don't. I shouldn't have said anything to you guys."

If Michael's interested in me, I wanted it to be something he figures out for himself and not because of an idea that someone puts in his head. And I don't want him taking advantage of my feelings for a purely physical relationship.

"Don't worry, Casey. I won't say anything."



She sat the bag of sandwiches on the bed and knocked on the door to the room that was adjoining hers, wondering who her neighbor was. After a few seconds, Max appeared, shaving cream on his face and a towel wrapped around his hips.

"You want some food?" She asked, knowing he would say yes. She took a couple of meatball sandwiches that she had made especially for him into his room and sat them down on the table. "You got a date?"

He nodded. "Yep." He returned to the bathroom.

"Anybody I know?" she asked, again already knowing the answer.

Max usually had company during the night the times they stayed in hotels. Very rarely, it was a girl who had come to the show, but more often than not, it was with one of three girls on the road crew: Paige, the hair stylist, who seemed to be his favorite; Carrie, one of the five dancers that were part of the show; or Roxanne, the woman who controlled the lighting.

"Maybe," he said, but didn't elaborate. Casey decided not to press the issue. It wasn't any of her business after all, no matter how curious she might be.

"I'm doing laundry tonight. Do you need anything washed?"

He stuck his head out of the bathroom. "My laundry bag is on the bus."

She nodded and left the room. She retrieved the bag of food and walked directly across the hall and knocked on the door. Jason swung it open. She went in the room and put the bag down. Reed and David were sitting on the beds. The door between that room and the next were open.

"Gonna play cards tonight, Casey?" Reed asked.

She shook her head. "Nope. I've got to do laundry. One more day and I'll be naked."

“Well, now there’s nothing wrong with that,” David said, winking at her.

She smiled. “Is there anything you guys need washed? I’m already doing Max’s.”

“Bag’s on the bus,” Jason said with no hesitation.

“Mine, too. Mine, too,” Reed and David echoed.

She entered David and Michael’s room through the open doors. “Mike, are you here?” She could hear the water running in the shower. The bathroom door was open. She walked closer to it. “Mike!”

“What?”

“I’m doing laundry. Want yours done?”

“I’ll bring it down myself,” he said. “Thanks anyway.”

Casey had cleaned their bus the night she rode with them. Her own bus was always immaculate, but she wasn’t surprised that the guys didn’t keep theirs the same way. The biggest messes were the piles of dirty clothes all over the bedrooms. She recognized most of the T-shirts, shorts and jeans because she had seen them being worn in the few days before, but she was stumped when it came to the socks and underwear.

There was one thing she did know, however, from watching the costume changes during the show: Michael and Jason were the only ones who wore boxer shorts. As far as the rest of underclothes went, she determined whose was whose by their proximity to their beds.

The next day, she had gone to the store and bought some heavy canvas material and set about the work of making laundry bags for each of them. She had stitched their names on the fronts, and she was pleased that they were actually being put to use.

She lugged four of these bags, as well as her own, down to the laundry room, and now ten of the fifteen washers were running. It was the nicest facility she had seen so far. In addition to

the thirty washers and dryers, there were also several vending machines, a couch, a couple of armchairs, and a television. She sat down on the couch with the book she was reading, and was quickly lost in the novel.

"Good book?"

Casey jumped, startled. "Oh, Mike. I didn't hear you come in. Yeah, it's pretty good." She turned back to the story as Michael loaded two of the remaining washers with his clothes. He sat down in a chair across from her. No sooner than he sat down, his cell phone rang.

"Hello?" He rolled his eyes. "Hello, Melissa."

Casey wasn't sure who Melissa was, but she could tell that Michael was less than thrilled to be talking to her. She concentrated on her book and tried not to listen in on his conversation. After only a few minutes, he hung up the phone. He shook his head.

"She's going to drive me nuts."

"Who?"

"My cousin Melissa. She wants to fix me up with one of her friends."

"You're not interested?" *Please say no.*

"No. Melissa's only eighteen and I doubt that her friend's much older. Besides, it's probably not a good idea to date a fan."

"Probably not." Casey yawned. "Anyway, she wouldn't be interested if she knew you spent your Saturday nights doing laundry."

He flashed her a grin that Casey found incredibly sexy.

"Probably not." He reached for the remote to turn the television on. The last patrons had left the set on the Playboy Channel, and when the picture came in they were subjected to a video of two naked, busty blonde women obviously enjoying each other's company. Michael watched for a few seconds, then changed the channel.

Casey smiled. "You can watch it if you want to," she said. She meant it as a joke, but her mind was already considering what could happen between the two of them if he left in on that channel.

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

They sat in silence for a few minutes; Michael trying to find something on TV, and Casey reading.

She looked up from her book and studied him. They had become close, closer than she had become with any of the others. Sure, she was good friends with David, Max, Reed and Jason, but she and Michael spent hours and hours away from the rest of the group getting to know each other better. She noticed that he never mentioned anything about his former girlfriends, and although she was curious, she didn't pry because she didn't want him questioning her about CJ.

It took a little over two hours to finish the laundry, and it was a quiet night for the two of them. He eventually stopped on MTV, and stretched out on the couch with his head in Casey's lap. He promptly fell asleep and Casey sat holding her book with one hand and stroking his hair with the other. She woke him when the dryers stopped. He helped her fold the clothes and he carried the bags, now full of clean laundry, back to the buses.

He walked her to her hotel room. "Well, another enjoyable evening comes to an end," he said.

She unlocked the door and swung it open. "You want to come in?"

He shook his head. "I better not. I'm tired, and the woman who cooks for us is a real bitch about getting to breakfast on time."

She smiled. "Why don't you ride with me tomorrow. We'll watch some TV, listen to some music..."

"Peel some potatoes?"

She laughed. "You like to eat the potatoes don't you?"

He nodded. "Okay, then. You gonna sing for me?" He had been relentless about trying to get her to sing, but she wouldn't. She was more than happy to play the piano for him, because she was comfortable with her ability. She knew she wasn't that bad of a singer, but it was fun holding out on him, and she suspected that he knew she was playing a game with him.

She shook her head. "No."

"Oh, come on, Casey. Just one little song. Please? I sing for you."

"That's not the same. I don't ask you to cook."

He smiled and conceded. "So, I'll see you in the morning."

She nodded and stood on her tiptoes for the usual kiss on the cheek she gave him. "Good night, Mike." She entered the room and closed the door behind her. She leaned against the back of the door. *God, something has to happen here. He's got to do something to let me know before I go crazy.*



"Beautiful!" Casey declared the next morning after skillfully icing a cake for dessert that evening. Her cell phone rang and Michael slid it across the table to her. "Hello?" She answered as she swatted his hand away from the chocolate frosting.

"Hi, Casey. It's Penny." Casey was surprised to hear her former mother-in-law's voice.

"Hi, Penny."

"I hope you don't mind me calling you. Your mom gave me your number."

"No, that's fine. What's up?"

"I was calling to tell you that my job has been transferred to Texas. I just wanted to know if there was anything of CJ's that you wanted." After CJ died, Casey had packed most of his things in boxes and stored them his mother's house.

“Actually, yeah,” she said, remembering the contents of the many boxes. I’m glad you called. There are a few things that I need.” She glanced at the wall calendar. “Can I come in a week?”

“Who was that?” Michael asked after she put down the phone.

“That was CJ’s mom. She’s moving to Texas, and I want to get some of CJ’s things from her house, so I’m guess I’m going to drive up there while we’re in Charlotte.”

“You don’t sound exactly thrilled.”

She shook her head. “I’m not.”

Chapter Nine



A week later, the buses pulled into the parking lot at Paramount's Carowinds, the amusement park where Quintessential was performing a mid-afternoon concert. A rental car waiting for Casey. Leaving her kitchen at the mercy of five hungry men, she drove the two and a half hours to Penny's house.

"Hello, Casey." Penny said as she opened the door. "It's good to see you."

"You, too. " Casey hesitated before entering the house. Even before CJ's death, Penny had turned her home into a shrine to her only child. After his death, Casey could hardly stand to call on her. 'Worshipping at the altar of the church of CJ' is what she deemed a visit.

"His things are in his room."

Casey entered the room and looked around. She had spent many afternoons in this room, on this bed. The color of the walls

were still the same shade of blue that they had been twelve years earlier when she and CJ had started dating, and the same posters still hung on the walls. Being there brought back a flood of memories, and it almost brought her to tears.

"Your mom told me about your new job. It sounds exciting."

Casey nodded. "It is. It's a lot of fun. We just happened to be in North Carolina today and tomorrow."

"Here in Chapel Hill?"

"No, Charlotte. We'll be back for a show in Chapel Hill in December."

Penny nodded. "Oh, good. So how are you doing, Casey? Are you seeing anyone?"

"No. I have, but not now."

"CJ would want you to move on."

Casey half laughed. She turned around to face Penny. "You and I both know that's not true."

"CJ was good to you."

"I know what he was!" Casey snapped.

"He never treated you badly. He loved you. You never appreciated him. You always wanted more. He gave you everything he had, but you weren't happy."

"He didn't give me anything. I was the one working 60 hours a week so we could save for a house. I was the one doing all of the sacrificing, and he was the one doing all of the dreaming, and the one thing that I really wanted out of life, he wouldn't let me have."

Penny shook her head. "You can't have kids, Casey. Remember? You can't get pregnant. You'll never be a mother. CJ didn't deny you anything that God hadn't already thought to do."

It took all of Casey's willpower to keep from reaching out and slapping the woman across the face. "You think you're a

good mother? You made CJ into the control freak that he was, and I'm guessing you don't even know who his father is, because if you did, you're just bitchy and ruthless enough that you'd hound him for money until the day that he died."

Casey didn't even see Penny's open palm swing at her, and she heard the crack of skin against skin before she felt the sting. Tears filled her eyes as she lifted her hand to her burning cheek.

"Well, I will say one thing for CJ; he never hit me. I guess that's one lesson he didn't learn from you."

Penny was holding one hand with the other, and Casey suspected that it stung a bit from the blow she had just delivered. "He loved you. God only knows why, but he did. I told him he should have never married you. I don't know why you two thought that after you got married the arguments would stop."

Casey nodded. "You're right. He loved me, and I loved him. I don't care how much we fought, I'm glad I married him. I'm happy for the time I had with him, and I'm ecstatic that you wasted ten years of your life being pissed off at the world because CJ was in love with me."

Penny stood taller. "Take what you want and get the hell out of my house. Anything you don't take is mine, and I don't ever want to see you again."

Casey continued opening boxes trying to find the ones she wanted. She had come to get a couple of things in particular, and now she would be leaving with more than she planned. Most of the things of his that she wanted to hold onto forever like his medical school degree and a few select pieces of clothing, had never made it Penny's house. They were safely put away in her parents' attic, but out of spite, she did take things that she knew Penny would want for sentimental value like his letterman's jacket, his high school diploma, and his favorite baseball cap.

As she turned to leave the room, she saw the large manila envelope that she had gotten from the hospital after the accident.

It was the main thing she had come for. Casey knew that CJ's wallet was inside as well as any other personal items he had on him. Casey had never opened the envelope, but her mother had, to retrieve CJ's wedding band. Afterwards, per Casey's request, Marjorie had sealed the envelope and signed her name across the seal. Casey picked up the envelope and turned it over. The seal hadn't been broken. She carried the selected boxes and the envelope out to the car.

David was sitting in the floor outside his hotel room door talking on his cell phone when Casey returned. She gave him a small wave and used her key card to open the door right directly across the hall. She dumped her things on the bed and headed straight for the bathroom. When she emerged, David was standing at the foot of her bed.

"How did you get in here?" She asked. She kicked off her shoes and pulled her hair up into a pony tail.

"I didn't let the door close all the way," he explained. He picked up the manila envelope, turned it over, the dropped it back on the bed. "Did you have a good visit with your mother-in-law?"

"Former mother-in-law, and I've never had a good visit with her."

"Never?"

Casey wrinkled her nose. "She never liked me much. CJ was her only child and she raised him by herself. His parents were never married and he didn't know his dad. Anyway, her whole world was CJ. I was never good enough." She pulled a pair of denim shorts and a t-shirt out of her bag. She went back into the bathroom to change.

"Did you have a good show?" She called through the partially cracked door.

"Pretty good. Nothing special. Hot as Hell, though."

"Well, what did you expect? It's the middle of August."

She came out of the bathroom. "Where is everyone? Sleeping?"

"Mike is." He pointed with his thumb toward the closed door, indicating that Michael was sleeping in the room directly across the hall. "Reed, Max and Jason are in the park with Al and Jake."

"Why didn't you go?"

"Too hot."

"Oh, don't tell me that a good ol' Southern boy like you can't stand a little heat?"

He shook his head. "Nope." He scowled and put his hand on his stomach. "I'm starving! That chick that cooks for us ran off this afternoon and left us stranded."

"You should fire her," Casey joked. "You know, I'm hungry, too."

"Let's get Mike up and go get something to eat," he suggested.

"Can I get him up?" She asked. "I want to talk to him about something."

He nodded and handed her the key card to the room he was sharing with Mike. "Everything okay?"

"I just want to talk to him. Give us a few minutes, please."

She opened the door and gazed down at Michael. She watched him for a moment. He was lying on his stomach hugging his pillow and wearing only his boxers. *Oh God, I think I might be in love with him.* She went to him and knelt by the bed. She ran her fingers up and down his bare back. He began to wake up, and she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"That better be a hot girl," he mumbled, not opening his eyes. He rolled over onto his back and opened his eyes. He smiled. "It is." He pushed himself up in a sitting position, and she sat on the bed next to him. "Something wrong, Casey?"

"I had a big fight with her, Michael."

“About what? CJ’s things?”

Casey shook her head. “About CJ, and our differing opinions of him.”

“I imagine her opinion is that he could do no wrong, so what’s yours?”

He listened quietly as she told him about CJ’s need to control everything, how he had made all the major decisions in their life, and how they fought almost everyday. She didn’t tell him that they had dated for the better part of eight years before getting married, that she had cheated on him, or that she and CJ weren’t planning on ever having children. She finished her story by telling him about the fight and how Penny had slapped her across the face.

“Oh no, Casey.” He reached out and touched her cheek where it had been hit. “But you don’t ever have to see her again, do you?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m done with the Russo family. Maybe I should just change my last name back to Johnson and forget they ever existed.”

Michael leaned over and kissed her forehead. “I’m sorry, Casey.”

David banged on the door. “Can we go now?”

“All right!” Casey called back. “We’ll be right there.”

Michael stood up and pulled on a pair of shorts that were lying next to the bed. “Maybe next time we have one of these talks, you can strip down to your underwear, too,” he joked.

Casey smiled. “If I did that we might not do much talking.”

He pulled and shirt over his head and opened the door. “Well, now, there is nothing wrong with that, either.”



Casey was cleaning up the kitchen when there was a soft rap

on the door. She looked at the clock: 8:00pm. She peeked thorough the window before opening the door.

"Michael."

He smiled shyly. "I was wondering if you wanted to go for a walk."

"A walk?"

"Yeah, around the park. Jake said he'd drive us over."

"Isn't it closed?"

He nodded. "Yeah, but they're letting us in for an hour. The other guys are already there, or still there, I should say."

"Sure, I'll go. Let me put on my shoes. Come on in."

Michael stepped inside her bus. "It's so quiet in here, peaceful. Not like our bus. It seems loud even when it's empty."

She slipped on her shoes. "I've got an extra bed. You can come live with me." She stepped inside her bathroom and applied lipstick.

"Yeah," Michael said. "You'd like that wouldn't you? Someone to do all your grunt work."

Oh, I'd like it all right, she thought, and you wouldn't have to do a damn thing but sit around and look delicious. He held the door open and Casey stepped out onto the asphalt. As they walked toward the back gate of the amusement park, Michael put his hand on the small of her back and guided her to where a security guard was waiting to let them in.

"Did you come here often?" He asked as they walked around the empty park.

Casey nodded. "Yeah. Especially in high school." She pointed toward a large roller coaster, which was running. "Max and Jason."

He nodded. "Did you want to ride anything? We can catch up with them."

"You don't ride roller coasters?"

He shook his head. "I've got a problem with heights."

"Is that why you don't like to fly?" She had learned early in the tour that the reason they traveled by bus was because of Michael's fear of flying.

He nodded. "I suppose."

"I don't want to ride anything. It's nice just to be able to walk around." Michael nodded his agreement. "Do you ever get tired of it?" She asked.

"Of what?"

"Of not being able to go out and do things like regular people."

He shook his head. "It's not so bad. We're not so recognized on an individual basis. As a group, it's harder. Most people are pretty respectful, though, and let us have our space." He shrugged. "You've got to take to good with the bad."

They spotted David and his girlfriend Shannon, who had surprised him by driving up from Atlanta, sitting on a bench several yards away. From the way he touched her face, the way he said her name, the look in his eyes, Casey knew that he loved her deeply. Michael had told her that David had racked up thousands of miles on his car making the 400 plus mile drive from Orlando to Atlanta several times a month.

"He loves her," Casey said quietly.

"Yeah, I don't know how he does it," Michael said. "Reed either."

"Does what?"

"How he can stand being away from her. I couldn't do it.

Something would have to give." He shook his head. "But I guess you know all about being away from the person you love."

"I don't know. Maybe. But it's different with me. I know I'm not going to see CJ again. I think maybe the anticipation is the hardest part; knowing that you're going to get what you want." She shook her head. "Maybe not. I don't know. But CJ

has been gone for two years. I'm not still in love with him."

"You still wear his ring," Michael said.

Casey's hand flew to the chain around her neck and fingered CJ's wedding band dangling from it. "He was my husband." She held out her left hand. "And I don't wear mine anymore."

"When did you take it off?"

"I use to take it off to wash dishes. One day just a few weeks after he died, I just decided not to put it back on. I wasn't married anymore."

"You don't believe you'll see him again?"

She shrugged then shook her head. "Probably not. CJ didn't believe in God. It was definitely an issue with us, but not one we talked about. CJ was so smart, so analytical, so science-based. If it couldn't be proven scientifically, then it couldn't be true. I'd say that the fact that we're all here, that this world even exists is proof enough. There has got to be a greater power." She shook her head. "How can there not be? Anyway, it wasn't a big problem really before we got married. And after we got married, we just didn't bring it up. I got out of the habit of going to church."

"He didn't want you to?"

"He never said I couldn't go, but I could tell that he thought it was unnecessary. He wasn't a Christian." She paused. "So, no. I don't believe that I'll see him again."

"Do you believe in Hell?"

"It's kinda scary, isn't it? Fire and brimstone, suffering and torture. All that's fine for evil people, but CJ wasn't a bad person. He just didn't have faith. Maybe his soul died, too, and that's a sort of hell, not to have everlasting life. I don't know. I was raised to believe that non-believers go to Hell, but I don't want to think of him there."

"Maybe he'll be there," Michael suggested. "In Heaven."

Casey smiled. "Then I'll get to tell him, 'I told you so'."

Michael laughed. They walked in silence for a few minutes,

both content with the other's company. Their fingers brushed together as they swung their arms, but neither stepped even a millimeter away from the other. Finally, Michael caught Casey's hand in his own. She relished the feel of her small delicate hand inside his large strong one.

"So why is it we always end up talking about me?" She asked, breaking the silence.

"I don't know. I guess it's because you're so darn interesting and I'm so boring."

She shook her head. "Now, I don't believe that."

He yawned. "I'm sorry," he said covering his mouth. He looked at his watch.

"Why don't we get Jake to drive us back to the hotel," Casey suggested. "You're tired."

"A little, but I'm not ready to say goodnight. You want to watch a movie or something? I'm sure we can find something on pay-per-view."

Once inside Casey's room, he kicked off his shoes and emptied his pockets onto the dresser. She took off her shoes, too, and sat against the headboard of the bed. Michael settled down on the bed beside her and flipped on the television. They made their decision quickly, deciding on a comedy with slight romantic overtones.

After a few minutes, Casey stretched out on her stomach. She was startled to almost immediately feel Michael's hands on her back. She buried her face in the bedspread and arched her back to his touch.

"I'm reciprocating," he said. Ever since Casey had had to spread calamine lotion of his rash, the back rubs had almost become a nightly ritual, and almost every night Michael fell asleep while Casey expertly soothed his tired muscles.

His massage was the perfect mixture of softness and firmness. His hands worked every muscle in her back, shoulders,

and neck. She wasn't sure if it was deliberate or accidental, but his fingers kept slipping underneath the hem of her shirt, touching her bare skin. He then moved to her feet, gently and slowly rubbing each one. She tried to keep her breaths steady as his hands moved to her calves. One hand slipped upwards of her knee, and he began to massage her thigh. She felt his fingers slide under her shorts.

She rolled away from him and sat up. His eyes grew wide and she knew his slip had been accidental. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "Your turn."

He hesitated, pulled off his shirt, removed his glasses and lay down on his stomach. Casey tried to concentrate on his back and shoulders, but her eyes kept drifting to his waist and the fact that his shorts were riding low on his hips. She couldn't forget the fact that she had seen him naked already, and although it had been two weeks, the likeness of him was still fresh on her mind. *No, Casey.* She shook her head, trying to rid it of the image. *No, no, no.*

"You know you'll put me to sleep," He said, lifting his head from the bed. She stopped and lay down next to him. He turned on his side and faced her. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"Don't worry about it."

"I didn't mean to...I just hope I haven't ruined anything."

"Mike, stop." She shook her head. "It's okay, really." They could hear Jason and Max loudly coming into the adjoining room.

"The kids are home," Michael joked. He pointed to the television. "Are you watching this?" She shook her head and Michael flipped through the channels. He stopped it when he caught a glimpse of his own face on *Entertainment Tonight*. The segment was about Quintessential having their newest single top the chart for five weeks and for signing a huge multi-million commercial deal with Coca-Cola.

"So is Coke your favorite drink?" Casey asked.

"It is now."

Casey laughed. "What do you do with all your money?"

Michael smiled. "Drugs, prostitutes, gambling." He shook his head. "I don't do anything really. I built a house right before Christmas. I'm not like those other guys, Casey."

"How are you different?"

"I don't spend my money on lots of toys. I only have one car, the Durango; it's brand new, mind you, but it's not a sports car, and I have a boat. I like to stay at home and read and watch movies. I'm not a real clotheshorse. I don't like to go to parties, I don't like big crowds, and I don't like the music too loud." She laughed at the irony of his statement. Their concerts generated extremely large crowds not to mention the music could be deafening.

"I shop at Wal-Mart," he continued, "and I use coupons when I go to the grocery store."

Casey laughed. "You're so funny." Just then there was a banging on the door. Michael frowned and got up from the bed, pulling his shirt back over his head. He unlocked the door and opened it.

Max came into the room. He spotted Casey on the bed. "Oh, am I interrupting something?"

"Just our peace and quiet," Michael retorted.

Jason entered the room. "What's going on?"

Michael shook his head. "Nothing. What's up?"

"We're gonna order pizza. Want some?"

Casey wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Nope," Michael said.

"Suit yourself," Jason said. He and Max left the room.

Michael shut the door behind them. He yawned. "I should go on to bed. I've got to room with Max tonight or try to talk Jason into it, so I can room with Reed, you know, so David and

Shannon can have some privacy.”

“Why don’t you just stay here?” Casey suggested. “It’s no problem.”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “I shouldn’t.”

Yes, yes, you should! “Okay.” She walked him down the hall to Reed’s room.

“Thanks for hanging out with me tonight,” he said, stopping in front of the door and leaning on it.

“No problem. I had a good time.” Customarily, she ended their evening together with a kiss on the cheek, but Michael surprised her by kissing her lightly on the mouth. He stepped back, bit his lip, and raised his eyebrows. She could read the question of appropriateness and the pleading for approval all over his face. She smiled and his face relaxed.

“Good night, Mike. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Chapter Ten



“Mail time!” Chuck called the next evening as he came onto her bus.

“Payday, you mean.” Casey took the envelopes he was offering her. “Thanks, Chuck.”

“See ya,” he said, leaving the bus. He turned back. “By the way, you’re hair looks great.” She had gotten Paige, the group’s hair and make-up artist, to cut it for her earlier that day. Her waist length mane was now cut into more stylish chin length tresses.

“Thanks.” She had been receiving compliments on it since Paige had finished.

Michael and Jason boarded the bus as Chuck left. “I’m starving,” Jason said as he sat in a chair. “What’s for supper?”

“You’re not going home?” They were back in Orlando for a short layover, and Casey had assumed she wouldn’t have to cook for them that night.

Jason and Michael both shook their heads. "Are we supposed to?"

"We've been home," Jason said. "We're just pulling your leg. We came by to see if you wanted to go out to eat with us."

"Sure," Casey said. "Do I have time to take a shower?"

"No." Michael said, pulling her arm. "We're really hungry."

"Let me change my clothes at least." She pulled away and stepped into her bedroom and changed into a light yellow sundress and sandals. She applied a little make-up. "I'm ready," she said, grabbing her purse.

"You look great," Michael said, ruffling her short tresses. "I love you hair that way."

"Thank you." She scowled. "I don't like yours at all." Paige had added platinum tips to his newly spiked hair.

He gave a small smile and shrugged his shoulders. "What's this you've got here from Starship Enterprises?" He held up an envelope.

"What's Starship Enterprises?"

"It's a management company for some other entertainers."

"I don't know." She took the envelope from him as well as the other one that Chuck had brought her. "We'll open it at supper. Let's go."

"So what is it?" Michael asked at the restaurant. The only menu item was a massive buffet, and they had just sat down with their food.

Casey pulled the two envelopes from her pocketbook. Just to keep Michael waiting, she purposely opened the one she knew was her paycheck stub and took several long seconds to look it over. She could feel Michael's eyes boring into her. He sighed loudly.

"Okay," she said, grinning. She opened the envelope from Starship Enterprises. She read through it quickly.

"What is it?" Michael asked. He pushed his glasses up on

his nose.

"Why are you so worried about it?" She shook her head. "They want to know if I'd be interested in working for Daybreak this summer." Daybreak was a "rival" pop group that appeared on the scene at about the same time as Quintessential. The two were often compared, and the media would have you believe that the members were enemies.

"Doing what?" Jason asked.

"The same thing I'm doing for you. Their tour starts in June. It's only three months, though."

Michael shook his head. "You can't do that."

"Why not?" Casey was amused at his vehement reaction. She had no intention of taking the job, of even talking to Starship about it, but she was enjoying the reaction she was getting out of Michael.

"Because," he spat out. "You work for us."

"Are you scared I might be like a spy, maybe a double agent, working both sides?" She rolled her eyes, eliciting a laugh from Jason.

"Your loyalties have got to lie somewhere," Michael continued.

"You don't own me," Casey said, "and I work with you and not for you." She handed him her paycheck stub on which a copy of the actual paycheck was attached. "You don't employ me. You don't sign my check."

He glanced at the paper. "This is what they pay you? For one month?"

She nodded. "You don't think I'm worth it?"

He handed it back to her. "Every penny."

She sighed. "You're sweet. Don't worry, Michael, I'm not going to work for them. I don't know what I'm going to do when this is over, but it's not that."

"Good." Michael stood and left the table again.

“Are you all and those guys in Daybreak really enemies?”
She asked Jason

“No, we’re nice to them in person, of course, but you know, if they broke up tomorrow, we wouldn’t be upset.”

“Why?”

Jason shrugged. “I don’t really care for them that much as people. They act sort of complacent, like they are so much better than everyone else. Carmen’s opened for them before, and she says they don’t interact with the fans at all, on or off then stage. Plus, I’m sure they feel the same way about us.” He smiled. “Mike’s pretty uptight, isn’t he?”

Casey smiled back. “Oh, I love pushing his buttons.”

Michael returned to the table with a plate piled high with buffalo wings and Jason left to fill another plate.

“Are you staying on the bus tonight?” Michael asked her.

She nodded. “That was my plan. It’s easier. When I wake up, I’m already at work.”

He shook his head. “I don’t like the idea of you staying on the bus by yourself, especially since Jake’s not going to be there. There are crazy people out there, Casey. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Are you suggesting that you come stay with me?”

“No, I’m suggesting that you come stay with me at my house. You don’t have a reason to say no. I know for a fact that you don’t have to cook breakfast in the morning.”

“Will I have to if I come stay at your house?”

He shook his head. “I’ll take you out.”

“Denny’s?”

He smiled. “Where else?”



“And, of course, this is the kitchen again,” Michael said,

ending the tour of his house. Casey was impressed with his five-bedroom lake front home. It wasn't a mansion, but it was large. It was secluded with a gated driveway, and a large front porch surrounded by azaleas. Huge oak trees surrounded the property, their branches creating a canopy over the carpet of grass.

"Too bad we already ate, or you could show me what you can do in the kitchen," she said.

"What's that got to do with eating?" He asked suggestively.

Casey felt her face flush. "You gonna show me the back yard?" She followed him out the back door, across the deck, by the pool, past the basketball court, and down to the beach.

"I had sand hauled in here," he said. "It was real rocky and muddy."

"It's really nice," she said looking around.

He nodded. "I don't ever plan on living anywhere else." He pointed to a string of lights in the distance. "See those lights? That's Reed's place."

"Cool." They returned to the deck and sat in patio chairs.

"This is the kind of place me and CJ..." her voice trailed off and she shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk about him."

"It's okay, Casey. He was your husband. You can talk about him if you want to."

"I don't," she snapped.

"Why?"

"Why? Why should I? We were married, we loved each other, we fought a lot, and he died."

Michael held up his hands. "Sorry. I didn't know he was such a sore subject."

She bit her lip and cursed herself for being short with him. "I'm sorry, Mike. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"It's okay," he said, but Casey wasn't sure that it was. She didn't want to tell Michael anymore about her marriage to CJ. Although there was plenty of good things about their relation-

ship, she didn't want to get into a conversation that could lead to Michael finding out about her affair. It was a secret she was prepared to take to the grave.

He looked at his watch. "I'm supposed to go over to my grandparents' house and visit with them for a few minutes. You want to ride along?"

She shook her head. "No, I think I'll just stay here and take a swim in your tub. If that's okay."

He nodded and stood up "I should be back in about an hour. Don't drown."

She watched him leave the deck in the direction of the garage. Seconds later, she heard his Durango start and pull away.

She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed Annie's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Matt. How are you?" Casey liked her brother-in-law. He was funny and kind, and despite the animosity between Casey and Annie, he had always been nice to her.

"Hey, Casey. I'm fine, and you?"

"Pretty good. How are the kids?"

"Well, Rebecca's got another ear infection, and Gabe's teething, and Caleb fell off the top bunk and broke his wrist, but other than that, they're great."

"What did the doctor say about Rebecca's hearing?" The five-year-old had been plagued with frequent ear and upper respiratory infections since she was born. It was an unfortunate byproduct of coming into the world four weeks early. The ear infections had been so incessant and severe at times that her hearing was being threatened. Casey knew that she had been scheduled for a hearing test that day. It was the main reason she was calling.

Matt sighed loudly. "He says that she's got a moderate loss

in her right ear and a severe loss in her left.”

“Oh, Matt, I’m sorry.”

“Well, we just have to pray that it doesn’t get any worse.”

“I’ll pray for her. Mom told me about Caleb’s wrist. He doing okay?”

“It hasn’t slowed him down at all.”

“Well, tell everyone I called and give them my love. Rebecca’s in my prayers, and you and Annie, too.”

“You know, she doesn’t hate you, Casey.”

“I know,” she lied. “I’ll talk to you later.” She clicked off the phone.

In Michael’s bathroom, she started the water in the huge Jacuzzi tub. She dumped some shampoo under the running water. She wandered around the first floor of the house while she waited for the tub to fill. When it had, she sank beneath the bubbles and relaxed against the jet sprays pounding into her back.

“Casey? Hello?” Michael’s voice was getting closer, and she heard him stop outside the bathroom door which she had left open a crack so she could hear him when he came in.

“Here I am,” she called.

He peeked around the door. “I’m back.”

She opened one eye and looked at him. “Okay, I’m getting out.” She opened the other eye and looked around. “Shoot, I forgot to get a towel. Could you get me one?” She knew that she was safely concealed under the bubbles.

He stepped into the room and grabbed a large white bath towel from the cabinet. “Here you go,” he said, placing it on the edge of the tub. “Hey, that’s not fair,” he said, raking his hand through the bubbles. “You got to see me naked.”

“That’s my job,” she replied. “Besides, you wouldn’t want to see me naked. There’s not much to look at.”

“Oh, I’ll be the judge of that.”

She shook her head. “No, you won’t.”

His sigh was exaggerated. "Okay, whatever." He left, and Casey noticed that he left the bathroom door open. She stepped out of the tub and dried off. She wrapped the towel around her body and left the room. She could hear the sound of a piano coming from somewhere in the house. She walked across the hall to the bedroom Michael had given her and changed into the same T-shirt and shorts she slept in every night. She found Michael playing the piano in the room he called his studio. She sat on the bench next to him. He was playing a piece that she recognized as one of Beethoven's symphonies. He stopped playing. She applauded. "That's real music," she joked.

He smiled. "I guess that other stuff I do is pretend." He paused. "So did you have a nice, long bath?"

"It wasn't as long as you think," she said. "I called Annie's house. Rebecca had her hearing test today."

"How did it go?"

She shook her head and repeated the diagnosis that Matt had relayed to her. "And to top it off, she's got another infection."

Michael wrapped an arm around her shoulder and kissed her temple. "I'm sorry, Casey."

"Yeah, me too." She stood up and walked across the room to the filing cabinets where Michael kept all of his sheet music. She pulled a folder from the cabinet. She sat back down next to him and placed her fingers on the piano keys. "Will you sing for me?"

She played the first few notes of the song she had selected, "If Only," a very slow and soulful song that Quintessential had recorded for a movie soundtrack. It wasn't a part of their show, and Casey never heard them perform it live.

"This song is so sad, Casey." He looked in her eyes and must have been able to see the sadness that she was feeling. He kissed her temple again. "Of course, I'll sing it."



The clap of thunder caused Casey's eyes to fly open. The lightning illuminated the whole room even though the drapes were drawn. She slid off the bed and went to the window. She parted the curtains and looked out over the backyard. The rain was coming down as hard as she had ever seen it and the wind was twisting the thick branches of the oak trees into grotesque shapes. She was convinced they would snap at any second. She turned away from the window after watching the wind lift the patio table three feet off the ground and hurl it across the lawn. The thunder boomed again, and panic took over her body; her heart was racing, her hands were shaking and she felt the tears forming in her eyes.

Get a hold of yourself, girl. You are a grown woman. She couldn't help it. She had been afraid of storms since childhood. Another flash of lightening sent her running for the door. Because Michael's house was built into the side of a hill, he had something almost all the other houses in the area didn't: a basement, and she planned on waiting out the storm in there. She stepped out of the room and looked across the hall into Michael's room through his open bedroom door. She wasn't surprised that he was still sleeping soundly.

Maybe he'll go with me. She walked to the side of his bed and gently shook him. He slowly opened his eyes.

"What's wrong, Casey?" He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He reached for his glasses. She shook her head and sat on the edge of the bed. She was ashamed to tell him, but the thunder boomed again. She jumped and couldn't hide her fear. "Are you scared of the storm?"

She nodded. "It's bad. The wind's really whipping."

"Do you want to stay here with me?"

She shook her head. "I want to go to the basement."

He didn't question why, and he took her hand to lead her through the dark house and into the unfinished basement. He flipped on the light at the bottom of the stairs. The large room was empty except for the washer and dryer, a big screen TV, and a futon. Casey knew that he intended on turning the basement in to a game room. "Let me go back upstairs to get a couple of blankets and pillows. I'll be right back."

She nodded and sat down on the futon. It seemed to take forever before she heard his footsteps on the stairs again. "You want to tell me about it?" He asked after they had settled themselves on the futon. He protectively wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she rested her head against his chest.

She sighed. "I'm just scared. I have a fear of tornadoes."

"You have a lot of tornadoes in North Carolina?"

"If we have one, that's one too many." She tensed as the thunder once again shook the house. He kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair. "When I was five we had a tornado. We all hid in Alex's closet, because we didn't have a basement. I have never heard such noise. I thought the world was ending. When it was over we went outside to check out the damage. A tree had landed on our house and put a big hole in the roof, but the house across the street was gone. I don't mean it was badly damaged; I mean it was gone, nothing left but the foundation. Anyway, I've been scared ever since."

He tightened his embrace and kissed her hair again. "Well, we'll just stay down here and wait it out." He covered them both with a blanket. "It will be okay."

She looked into his eyes. "I'm glad you talked me into coming here. I would have gone crazy in the bus."

He bit his lip and stared at her silently for a moment. "I want to kiss you."

"Okay." She tilted her head toward his and he met her lips with his. It wasn't like it had been on the night Max had dared

them to do it. That night the alcohol had induced urgency and unbridled passion in the kisses. This kiss was softer, sweeter, and made time stop.

He pulled away. "Okay?"

She nodded. "Do it again," she whispered. He did, this time some of the fervor of their first kiss returned and it left Casey wanting more, much more. She let her breath out slowly and opened her eyes. "What do you think this means?" she asked.

He cleared his throat. "I think it means we not just friends anymore."

"I was hoping that's what it meant." Several loud claps of thunder caused her to cling to him.

He began to stroke her hair again. "It's okay, Casey. Let's try to get some sleep and when we wake up, it will be all over."

She nodded and agreed. She closed her eyes, but couldn't fall asleep as quickly as he did. It was comfortable there in his arms, and she tried to relax, but the storm was peaking outside and the depth of the basement hardly muffled the roaring. She must have eventually fallen asleep because when she woke up she was alone on the futon. She folded the blankets before going upstairs. Michael had made a pot of coffee, but he was nowhere in sight. She poured herself a cup and looked out through the glass doors. Michael was standing by the pool, fishing out leaves with the skimmer.

"Good morning," he said with a smile.

"You're up early."

"I woke up about an hour ago and had no idea what time it was, so I went ahead and got up. Are you okay...with everything?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm great." Her stomach growled loud enough for him to hear.

He laughed. "I was just thinking the same thing," he said. "Let's go to Denny's."



“You want to come back to my room?” Michael slid the empty cooler into the empty storage compartment under the bus and slammed the door shut.

“Sure,” Casey said. “You can’t very well go to sleep without your back rub.”

It had been almost three weeks since Casey had spent the night in Michael’s guest room and they had been spending a good deal of time together every night. The quick pecks on the cheek that had usually ended their evenings together were replaced with more significant kisses on the mouth. Still, Casey was unsure of where the relationship was going. Michael had been the one to say they were no longer “just friends,” but he had not professed any deeper feeling for her. Casey was sure she was in love with him, but she didn’t want to be the first to speak up.

They began walking toward the hotel. She hadn’t gotten a hotel room for herself, deciding to stay on the bus for the night instead.

“You’re spoiling me.” He took her hand. “I was thinking maybe I’d do something for you.”

“Like what?” She asked, her voice full of caution. Having just returned from delivering food to their hotel rooms, she knew that each of the guys had opted for his own room that night.

Michael opened the door to the room and stepped back so she could enter. “Whatever you want.”

She turned around to face him. “You know what I would really like to do?”

He nodded. “I hope so.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I’d love to take a hot shower.” The buses were equipped with functioning showers,

but the stalls were tiny, the water pressure was weak, and the water temperature was iffy.

"I'm guessing you mean alone."

"Yeah." *Not if you would just say it.*

"Allrighty, then, I'll be out here."

Casey entered the bathroom and left the door ajar. She heard him turn on the television as she started the water.

What is it you want him to say, Casey? That he loves you? That's asking a lot. That he wants you? That's not enough. Then what? That he thinks he could love me and he's serious about wanting to try. Yeah, that's it.

She stripped off her clothes and stepped into the hot water. When she emerged about fifteen minutes later, she noticed that the door was open a few inches wider than she remembered leaving it. She could see Michael sitting on the bed presumably watching television, but she knew that if she could see him, he could see her. She didn't close the door and she didn't move from his line of sight. She took her time drying off, her whole body tingling with the exhilaration of knowing she was being watched. She wrapped the towel around herself and left the bathroom.

"That didn't take very long," Michael said.

She sat on the edge of the bed. "I didn't want to be rude. Do you have a T-shirt I could borrow?"

"I'm sure I can find something." He rummaged through his bag and pulled out a white T-shirt with *Nike* written across the front.

She took the shirt from him. "Thanks." She returned to the bathroom and slipped it over her head. It hung to nearly her knees.

"Feel better?" Michael asked as she returned from the bathroom once more.

"Loads. You ready for that back rub now?"

"I told you I was going to do something special for you." She took a deep breath and again sat on the edge of the bed.

Michael crawled over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. He rubbed them gently and she began to relax. He kissed her below her ear and she tilted her head away from him, giving him full exposure to her neck. He continued kissing her neck, then put his fingers on her chin and turned her face toward him. He kissed her lightly on the mouth.

She turned around on the bed and tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling him into another kiss. He gently laid her back on the bed. His hand ran up her leg and he rested it high on her thigh. She slid her hand under his shirt and stroked his chiseled abdomen and chest. He pressed his body into hers and she felt his arousal. He slid one hand under her shirt, pushing it up around her waist. His fingers fondled one of her breasts. He pressed his other hand against her crotch.

"Touch me," he commanded. Without hesitation she unzipped his pants and felt the hardness of his erection through his boxer shorts. She slipped her hand inside his underwear and wrapped her fingers around him. He moaned at her touch. He slid his hand beneath her panties.

Panic seized her. *I can't do this. Damn it, it can't be like this.* "Wait, wait, wait," she said as she pulled away. "If we don't stop, we might do something we might regret." She couldn't believe what she was saying.

He shook his head. "I don't know if that's possible." He kissed her again, but moved both his hands to her waist.

"Mike, please, no." She said between kisses.

He sighed and rolled away from her. "Casey, you're killing me."

She pulled her knees to her chest. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I care about you, Casey."

She nodded, but it wasn't enough to make her consent. "I

know. I care about you, too. That's why I don't want to screw anything up. I just want to take it a little slower."

He ran his hand through his hair. "I thought that's we had been doing."

"I'm just not ready yet. I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Yeah, whatever."

Casey got her things out of the bathroom. "I'm going back to the bus. I'll see you in the morning." He grunted and turned away from her. She frowned. She knew he was upset, but she couldn't go any farther with him. As badly as she wanted to be with him, she couldn't give in to her desire unless she knew that it was going to be serious. Her feelings for Michael were strong and until he let her know that he was serious about her, too, she wasn't going to be just a pawn he used for sex.

Chapter Eleven



The knock came just before the door to the bus swung open. “Hey, Casey,” Michael said as he entered. “Do you have any popcorn?”

Casey nodded and opened a cabinet, revealing a huge stash of snack foods. She pulled a bag of microwave popcorn out of a box and handed it to Michael. He ripped the plastic wrapper off and shoved the bag into the microwave. As he waited for it to pop, he studied the pictures Casey had stuck to the two refrigerators.

There were several snapshots she had taken at the concerts. There were professional pictures of a gaggle of children that he knew were her nieces and nephews. There were also a couple of pencil drawings that Reed had done and she had displayed, much like a mother would do with her kid's artwork.

His presence on her bus was suffocating. It wasn't that she didn't want him there, but she was scared to breathe, much less

talk, petrified that she would say or do something that would scare him away. So she kept silent and pretended to be busy as he waited for his popcorn.

“Do you mind if I stay here?”

It surprised her. She and Michael hadn’t been alone together since she had left him in his hotel room nine nights earlier. She had missed him. She couldn’t close her eyes without feeling his hands on her body. It had made for several restless nights of sleep.

“Sure,” she replied. *Yes! Please!*

“Casey,” Jake said over the intercom.

Casey pushed the button to reply. “Yeah, Jake?”

“Is Mike on board?”

“Yeah. He’s riding with us.”

“Allrighty then,” Jake replied. “We’re rolling.” Within a few seconds, the bus began to pull out of the rest area where they had stopped for lunch.

“So what deep intellectual subject are we going to discuss today?” Michael pushed himself up onto the counter. He pulled open the bag and the aroma of the heavily buttered popcorn filled every corner of the bus.

Casey eyed him suspiciously. “I don’t know.”

“I just want to talk, Casey. I miss you.” His eyes were soft and his voice filled with emotion.

She smiled. “Okay, but we’ll probably just end up talking about me.” She ran a dishcloth along the length of the already clean counter.

“My favorite subject.”

“I don’t think there’s anything left to tell.”

He popped a piece of popcorn in his mouth. “Sure there is.” He raised his eyebrows and smiled. “We’ve got all afternoon.” He hopped down off the counter. “Let’s sit down.” He walked to the table.

She shook her head. "Let's go back here." She pointed toward the bedroom in the back of the bus. "It's more comfortable."

"Woo hoo!" Michael joked as he followed her. He kicked off his shoes and settled himself at the foot of the bed.

Casey sat at the head of the bed and hugged a pillow to herself. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Just talk to me. Tell me about your family."

"I talk about them all the time."

"Tell me again. I don't care."

She sighed. "They live in Utah," she volunteered. "But you know that."

"Utah is a long way from North Carolina. How did they wind up there? Is that where your family is from originally? See, this is the stuff I don't know."

"Matt, my brother-in-law, is from Utah. Annie met him when he passed through town, and they started talking and writing back and forth, and the next thing we know she's going off to Utah to college. Well, she lasted about a week in college, married Matt and went on to have eight kids in fourteen years. When my dad retired a few years back, they moved to be closer to their grandkids. I was in college when they moved."

"I see. Did you like college?"

She nodded. "I did. I loved nursing school. CJ said I should have been a doctor." She shook her head. "Not me. I like the hands-on work. Doctors get all the glory, but the nurses do all the work. CJ thought that maybe we'd open a practice one day."

"You met in college?"

She shook her head. "No, we met in high school."

"So was he the one? When you were fifteen?"

Casey blushed. "You remember that? I thought you were too drunk."

"I haven't forgotten anything about that night, or any night,

or anything you've ever said."

She could feel her face burning and she knew she must look like a red-faced idiot. She cleared her throat and nodded. "Yeah, it was him. CJ and I started dating when I was a freshman. He was a junior. We ended up both going to Carolina. He was in his second year of med school when I graduated from nursing school. We went ahead and got married since I was gainfully employed and could support him. He graduated in May of 1999 and was killed six weeks later."

"God, that must have been hard for you."

Casey nodded. "It was. He was on his way home from work. It was a drunk driver. I had gotten off work about an hour earlier and was at home watching television. Just like any other Thursday night. At the time, I didn't think that I would ever get over it. I was all alone. There I was in North Carolina and my entire family was in Utah. I spent the better part of the next two weeks drunk. I didn't know what to do. I had been waking up next to him for two years. I had seen him almost everyday since I was fourteen. I was lost. But you know, you get up everyday and do what you have to do, and you get through. I miss him sometimes."

"Well, I'd be worried if you didn't, Casey. You were together for ten years." He put his hand on her knee. "Do you think you could love again the same way?"

She shrugged. "I could never love anyone like I loved CJ, because there's no one else like CJ, but, yeah, I could fall in love again." She met Michael's eyes. "And I hope I do." She shook her head. "I can't hang on to him forever. I don't want to." She fingered the gold chain around her neck. "This is just habit, I guess."

He squeezed her knee. "So then you went on to cooking school?"

Casey nodded. "I had plenty of money from the insurance

and the settlement, and I decided that since I didn't have to work, I'd do something totally different. I graduated May from Brighton and went to Utah to look for a job, and that's where I was when I got the call."

"What call?"

"The call from my school advisor saying that one of those "boy bands" was looking for a chef to go on the road with them for a nine month tour, and she put my name in the pot because she knew I was looking to do something different. And here I am."

"And you're a damn good cook."

"Thank you." She stretched out on her side and he did the same. "So what about you?"

He shrugged. "You would think that my life would be really interesting, but...I don't know. I was born right outside Orlando. I lived there with my parents. I'm an only child. My mom, you know is the pianist at our church, and she gives lessons, my dad was a carpenter.

"When I was 12 years old, me and some buddies skipped school and went to DisneyWorld. I had this huge crush on this girl named Julie Newman. So I went to one of those recording booths, where you pay them whatever and they let you record a song. So I recorded a song for her. Well, someone important, I guess, by some fluke happened to hear me, and the next thing I know I've got an agent and a job at Universal Studios. I did that for several years. It's the only other job I've ever had. I didn't do it so much in high school because I mainly concentrated on basketball. We won the state championship two years in a row. It wasn't long after high school that I heard about this."

"You didn't go to college?"

He nodded. "I went to Florida State for a year. I went on a basketball scholarship, actually, but I was a music major."

"You left school for Quintessential?"

He shook his head. "I left school when my dad got sick. It

was more important to be with him.”

“Sick?”

“He died when I was nineteen. You didn’t know?”

Casey shook her head. “I had no idea, Mike. You talk about him like he’s still alive. What happened?”

“He was diagnosed with lung cancer when I was in high school, but the tumor was removed and he went into remission. Anyway, he got sick again and the cancer had metastasized to his lymph nodes.”

“Metastasized? That’s a big word.”

A smiled spread easily across his face. “Pretty impressive, ain’t it?”

She resisted the urge to kiss him. “Especially for a basketball-playing-teeny-bopper-pop-idol-teen-heartthrob.”

He laughed, but Casey saw a distant look in his eyes and she knew that he was thinking about his father.

“When did he die?”

“Four years ago.”

“I’m sorry. Was he a smoker?”

“Yeah. Two packs a day for as long as I can remember. Anyway, I didn’t go back to school, then I heard about this...and here I am”

“And you’re a damn good singer and dancer and probably a hell of a basketball player.” She paused. “But you’re leaving stuff out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your...umm...your love life.”

“Or lack thereof, is more like it.”

“That bad, huh? It didn’t work out with Julie Newman?”

He shook his head. “Not hardly. There’s really nothing to tell. I had a couple of girlfriends in high school, a girl in college. After that, not really much action, so to speak.”

“Until you became a celebrity.”

He shook his head. "I'm not a player, Casey." He studied her face for a moment. "Can I tell you something?"

Casey nodded and put her hand on his arm. "You can tell me anything."

"There are women, girls, offering themselves to us all the time...every night. You see them out there. Max, you know, he's got his girls; David and Reed have girlfriends back home; Jason's a virgin. I don't have a girlfriend, and I'm not 'saving myself,' but I can't do that."

"What do you mean?"

"This is so stupid." He rolled over onto his stomach and hid his face in the comforter. He sighed and lifted his head. "I can't stand the thought of having sex with a stranger."

"God, Mike, there's nothing wrong with that."

"Yeah, but Casey, I haven't had sex in a long time." He paused. "I've met a girl, that I really like. I thought maybe she liked me, too, but I'm not having a lot of luck."

She took a deep breath. "Maybe she needs to know that you care for her as much as she does you and that you're not just looking for someone who's convenient and readily available if you want sex."

He met her eyes. "I'm not. I do care for her, a lot. I told her that." She could see the honesty in his eyes. He shook his head and looked away. "She probably thinks I'm pretty pathetic, though."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because I'll be twenty-four years old next month and I'm up on stage every night singing love songs to little girls half my age. She probably thinks that I'm a real loser because the only people dreaming about me are twelve-year-olds."

"You're not pathetic or a loser, and it's not just little girls dreaming about you."

He reached out and touched her face. When his fingers

dropped, Casey sat up on the bed. "I've got to stir the soup."

She slipped out the door into the kitchen. She tended to the pot on the stove and reached for a glass. She filled it with ice, and as she shut the freezer door she caught a glimpse of Michael's picture taped to the front of the refrigerator. Her heart melted. She had been sure that she had ruined whatever they had had by not going to bed with him, but now here she was...here he was...in her bed! She wouldn't make the same mistake again. She was ready and willing to make the jump.

She held the glass against her forehead and took a deep breath. She filled her glass with water and slid the bedroom door open.

"Casey, you're so beautiful." He was holding a picture of Casey and CJ that she had taped to the window over the bed.

He looked up from the picture and met her eyes. "You...are...so...beautiful," he repeated.

She felt her cheeks flush. "Mike."

Leaving the glass behind in the kitchen, she took a step toward the bed. He stuck the picture back on the window and held his arms out to her. She went to him, falling into his embrace as their lips met. She fell onto the bed and he rolled over onto his side, knocking the bag of popcorn onto the floor. He tangled the fingers of one hand in her hair and placed the other on her stomach. She clasped her hands around his neck and pulled his face to hers.

He pulled away from her. "Are you going to ask me to stop?"

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

"You sure? This is your last chance to say no."

She pulled him to her again for a deep kiss. "Don't stop," she whispered.

He slipped his hand inside her shirt and ran his finger along the bottom edge of her bra. She moved her hands down his

chest until she reached the hem of his shirt. She pulled it over his head. With one quick move, he stripped her shirt off of her. He cupped her breasts in his hands and lowered his face to the space between them. She shivered as he ran his fingers along the lacy cups and pulled down the straps to expose her. He touched her breasts, but quickly replaced his fingers with his mouth.

“Oh, Mike,” she moaned.

Just then the bus stopped. They hadn’t even noticed it slowing down. Mike sighed and laid his head down on her chest.

“Damn! I’m really good at this.”

She smiled. “I bet you are.” She sat up and pulled the curtain aside and looked out of the tinted window. “We’re at a rest area.” She pulled her shirt back on and ran her hand through her hair. “I’ll see what’s wrong.”

Michael nodded and looked down at himself. “I’ve got a problem.”

Casey glanced down at the erection straining against his shorts. She resisted the urge to reach out and touch him. “I’d say.”

She slipped out of the bedroom and into the kitchen just as the door to her bus opened. “What’s wrong, David?”

“Jason’s sick.”

Casey jumped down off the bus and followed David. Jason was lying on his bunk, shaking, sweating, and unable to talk. Casey knew he had been fighting a fever and a cold for the past couple of days. Max was sitting with him. She rushed to his side.

“Where’s his bag?” Casey asked, referring to the bag that contained his blood sugar testing kit. It appeared by her side.

“Someone get me some orange juice, quick.” She knew that the test would reveal his glucose level was dangerously low.

“I’ll get it,” Michael’s voice replied as he came onto the bus.

“Help me sit him up.” Casey and Max sat Jason upright on the bed. Max sat beside him to support him while Casey knelt in

front of him. She lifted the bottle of orange juice to his lips and forced him to drink. "Come on, sugar, drink it."

She handed the juice to Max. "Here, make him drink it." She dug his testing equipment out of his bag, slid a testing strip into the machine, poked his finger, and wiped a drop of blood on the test strip.. She wrapped a bandage around his finger. She looked at the meter.

"Yeah, his sugar is way down. How much juice has he had?"

Max held up the bottle. "He drank half."

Casey wiped Jason's forehead with a tissue. "Feeling better?"

Jason nodded. "A little. Casey, I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "You haven't been eating."

"I wasn't hungry."

"You have got to eat, sweetie. I think you should come ride with me."

He shook his head. "I just want to sleep here, please. I'll be okay."

Casey bit her lip and studied him. "No. I'd feel better if you came with me. I don't want you to not be able to perform tonight."

He sighed. "Come on, Casey."

"Jason, just go," Max said. "She's not going to make you peel potatoes."

"Yeah," Casey said. "We're not even having potatoes tonight. You're gonna chop carrots." Everyone except Jason laughed.

"We've been spotted," Michael said.

They all turned to look out the window. A charter bus full of teenagers was emptying into the rest area. Jake and Al were standing guard in front of the doors to their respective buses.

Casey stood up. "Let's go."

Jason stood up, doddering. Max and David grabbed him to keep him from falling. They walked him to the door. Casey peered out at the teenagers who were milling around the buses. She called out the door to Jake who escorted Jason to Casey's bus.

"Jason!" Several girls yelled.

She smiled and turned to Michael. "You want to come back?" She whispered.

He nodded. "God, I want to." He shook his head. "I shouldn't."

She planted a kiss on his mouth and glanced around. Max, David and Reed were hanging out of the bus door, happily waving to the screaming teenagers. Casey was sure they weren't listening to her. "I'm getting a room tonight. Maybe you could drop by."

"You can count on it."

She boarded her bus. Jason was lying on her bed. "Jason! I love you!" She mocked. Because their fan base was mostly girls under eighteen and Jason was the youngest of the group, it seemed that he was the "favorite" with the fans. His irresistible good looks and virtuousness didn't hurt, either.

"Shut up, Casey," he said, rolling over and burying his face in her pillow.

She laughed, sat down at the end of the bed and pulled off his shoes. She dropped them on the floor. "I want to check your sugar again in about a half a hour."

"Don't wake me up," he said into the pillow.

She crouched in the floor to clean up the popcorn that she and Michael had spilled earlier. "I'm going to attribute your bad mood to your low blood sugar. I'm hoping once you get right, you'll be in a better humor."

"Don't count on it," he growled.



Casey checked her reflection in the mirror for what seemed like the billionth time. She had come back to her hotel room as quickly as she could following the concert to take a shower. She put on a pair of white lace panties and turned on the hair dryer. She was surprised at the natural curl her hair had now that it wasn't weighed down.

She applied a minimal amount of mascara and lipstick and slipped into the Nike T-shirt she had gotten from Michael. She didn't own any sexy lingerie, so that would have to do. She sighed as she cupped a hand over each of her breasts. She had always wished they were bigger; she barely filled the A-cups she wore when she even bothered to wear a bra, but she had never received any complaints. *They'd do*, she decided.

It was after midnight. The concert had been over for almost two hours, but Casey knew that it could take up to a hour for the guys to shake themselves free of the media and fans with back-stage passes. She picked up the remote control and turned the television to the last few minutes of "The Tonight Show."

There was a light knock at the door. She hurried over, took a deep breath and opened the door. Michael smiled at her. "I made it."

She opened the door wider and stepped aside. He entered the room. She followed him as he crossed the room to the bed, where he stretched out casually. He picked up the remote for the television. "Did you want to watch a movie or something?"

She shook her head. "Not particularly." She crawled up the length of the bed starting at the foot, dragging herself up the length of his body and finally straddling his hips. She kissed him on the lips.

"Well, hello there," he said. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her again and again, each kiss getting longer and

deeper. She could feel his arousal. She moaned at the pressure of it between her legs. He bucked his hips slightly, sending chills through her.

“Oh, Mike,” She moaned between kisses. “I want you so bad.”

“Me, too.” He found the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head. His hand slid down her flat stomach and his thumb found the most sensitive part of her body. She felt the goose bumps raise on her skin. He put both hands on her waist and flipped her over so that she was on her back on the mattress. He stood and stripped off all his clothes and returned to the bed where he kissed her again on the mouth. He let his mouth travel down her neck, her chest, her stomach. He kissed her through the thin, translucent material of her panties. He ran his hands up her legs and underneath the flimsy material. She lifted her hips slightly as he tugged the panties free.

He moved back eye level with her. He propped himself up on his elbow and gazed down at her. They didn’t speak for several minutes, each of them just looking into the other’s eyes. There was no hurry. She reached out and touched his face. He was growing a goatee, the look she preferred on him. She outlined his mouth with her finger, feeling the short dark bristles of his mustache and beard. She ran her finger over his lips and he parted them slightly, kissing the tip of her finger.

“You’re so beautiful,” she said, repeating the words he had spoken to her earlier that day. She put her hand on the back of his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. As they kissed, she could feel his hardness against her leg. He pulled away and positioned himself on his knees between her legs. Grabbing her by the hips, he slowly eased himself into her. They both gasped as he entered.

“Oh, God,” she breathed. His thrusts were slow at first, gradually building up speed. She wrapped her legs around his

waist and tried to pull him even deeper inside her. She felt the orgasm building up inside her and she begged him not to stop. She held out as long as she could, waiting for signs that he was close to climax as well. She felt the muscles in her groin begin to twitch. She moaned loudly as she convulsed against him. Her orgasm sent him over the edge as well and she could feel his warmth spread inside her.

He stretched out on his back beside her. "That was amazing, Casey."

"Yes, it was." She lay there listening to their rapid breathing slow.

Suddenly, he sat bolt upright. "Oh, shit."

"What's wrong?"

"I forgot the...we didn't use..."

Casey shook her head. "It's okay. I took care of it." It was a lie.

He exhaled in relief. "Good." He lay back down on the bed and took her in his arms. She could feel his heart beating against her back. She pulled his clutches tighter and closed her eyes.

Chapter Twelve



Casey woke up to sunshine breaking through the blinds. She sat up and glanced at the clock: 7:30. She and Michael had stayed up until three o'clock before they had settled down long enough to fall asleep. She looked longingly at his sleeping body.

She stretched, knowing she had to get up and start her day. The guys were always hungry the morning after a show. She pulled herself out of bed, pulled on her panties, bra, jeans and blouse, and slipped on some sandals. She kissed Michael on the cheek, eliciting a moan, and headed for the bus.

"Mornin' Casey," Jake greeted her. He was inspecting the wheels of the bus.

"Good morning, Jake," Casey said with a yawn. "You want a cup of coffee?"

"I helped myself. Hope you don't mind."

She shook her head. "Not at all." She entered the bus and

was greeted by the smell of coffee. She grabbed a mug from the cabinet and poured herself a cup. She turned on the television and sat down at the table, waiting for the guys to arrive and begin placing their breakfast orders. After a few minutes she was joined by Jason.

"Mornin' sweetie. What can I get for you?"

"Just some juice right now. I'll wait for the others. I know Reed and Max are just getting up and I think David's taking a shower. I haven't seen Mike since he went to your room after the show. Have you seen him this morning?" There was more to his question than just innocent curiosity.

Casey felt the color rise in her cheeks. "Yeah." She put the juice glass down on the table in front of him. "You got something on your mind, Jason?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Does my relationship with Mike bother you?"

He shook his head again. "I like you and I like Mike, and if you two are happy, I'm happy."

"I'm happy, Jason."

"I'm happy, too, Jason," Max said as he came onto the bus and flopped down in a chair. "What are we so happy about?"

Casey smiled. "Everything."

They were distracted by breaking news on the television. At 8:48am a plane had crashed into one tower of the World Trade Center, buildings that were visible to them from their position at a airport hotel in Newark, New Jersey.

"Oh, my, God," Casey breathed as she covered her mouth with her hand.

"Holy shit!" Max exclaimed, as they watched live video of a second plane hitting the other tower.

The three sat in a stunned silence as they watched the towers flaming. The newscasters kept saying the same words over and over: apparent terrorist attack.

Casey put her fingers to her temples. "Those poor people," she whispered.

David and Reed entered the bus. "You can see it." David said quietly. "You can see the buildings burning."

Everyone turned to look at him and the realization of what he said hit. Just the night before they had stood in the parking lot admiring the city's skyline. Of course they'd be able to see it. Max and Jason jumped up and ran outside.

"Get your video camera, Casey," Reed suggested, his own camera hanging from a strap around his neck.

She went back to her bedroom and grabbed her camera from her dresser drawer. She handed it him and went outside.

Michael was standing with Jason and Max looking at the smoke rising in the horizon. She went to him. He wrapped a strong arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him, and she felt safer and protected.

"Come on, guys. Let's go inside. I'll fix you breakfast."

Not a word was spoken during the meal. All eyes were glued to the television. Airlines were grounded across the nation. The Pentagon was hit by another hijacked plane. The south tower of the World Trade Center collapsed, surely killing everyone still trapped inside, scrambling to save their lives; surely killing the firemen and police officers who were there trying to help.

"Just stop!" Casey burst out, as she threw a frying pan into the sink, causing everyone to jump. Without looking back, she went into her room and slid the door shut. Michael followed her. He took her in his arms not saying anything, just nuzzling her hair with his face, and kissing the top of her head several times.

She pulled away. "I'm sorry, Mike. I shouldn't have done that."

"Done what? Got upset? Good grief, Casey." He pointed toward the window. "You can go outside and see smoke. We watched the building burn. Can you imagine how many people

died today?"

Tears filled her eyes. "What is going on, Mike?"

He embraced her again. "I don't know, honey. I don't know."

Casey heard her cell phone ringing in the kitchen. "That's mine," she said as she pulled away from him. She slid the door open and stepped out into the kitchen. The other four were sitting around the table, eight eyes still glued to the television.

She picked up her ringing phone. "Hello?"

"Casey, sweetie! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Mom, I'm fine."

"It says here on your schedule that you're supposed to be in New York today. Are you there?"

"No, Mom. We're still in Newark. We're okay. We could see the buildings burning. I don't know what we're going to do. I'll let you know."

"All right, sweetie. You take care."

"Bye, Mom. I love you."

"I love you, too, Casey." She turned her attention back the dirty breakfast dishes, trying her hardest to both listen to and ignore the television.

Chuck entered the bus and looked around. His face was pale and his eyes looked dark. Casey knew he was from New York City and his family, including his two young children, lived there.

"Okay, good. I'm glad you're all here. This is the deal. Obviously, we're not doing our New York gigs this week. We're headed back to Orlando. We're going non-stop, except for fuel. So I need both drivers on one bus, which means, one bus. Decide which one you want to take. It's going to be a long drive, like 20 hours or more, so decide what's more important, food or sleep."

"I'm staying here, and going on into the city to be with my

family. The road crew went on into the city after the show last night, so I don't know where your set is or when it's coming back. So the deal is, one bus, the six of you and Al and Jake, non-stop to Orlando. Which bus? I'm taking the other with me."

"I vote for this one," Max said. "We're talking 20 hours non-stop. We've got to eat."

"Me, too," the others agreed.

"Okay, great. Get whatever you left in the hotel so we can check out and you guys get whatever you can't live without off the other bus. We're pulling out in a hour."

"Mike," Casey said as the other guys filed out of the bus. "Can you get my bag out of my hotel room and check me out? I want to get a shower before the bus gets too crowded."

"Sure." He kissed her quickly on the mouth. "I'll be right back."

Casey turned on the water as hot as she could stand it and stepped inside the stall. How could such a wonderful day and night be followed by such sadness? She felt the hot tears form in her eyes and roll down her face as she recounted the events of the morning. She thought about the firemen running toward the building while everyone else was running away. *Trapped in a burning building, just like Alex.*

She stayed in the shower until the water began to run cold, letting the hot torrents beat the thoughts out of her head. She grabbed a large towel, dried off and wrapped the it around herself. She heard a muffled voice coming from her room, so she cautiously slid open the bathroom door. Reed was sitting on her bed talking on his cell phone to whom she presumed to be his girlfriend, Dana. He stood up to leave, but she waved him back down. She pulled some clothes from one of drawers and stepped back into the bathroom to get dressed. She returned to the kitchen barefoot.

She was alone in the front of the bus. She loaded the last of

the juice glasses and coffee cups into the dishwasher and turned it on. She opened the refrigerator and cabinet to see how they were running on basics. Bread. They needed bread. She took a few dollars from the coffee can where she stashed her poker playing money. She returned to her room long enough to get a pair of shoes.

"Where are you going?" David asked. He was approaching the bus with a large duffel bag.

She pointed to the convenience store across the street from the hotel. "We need bread."

"You shouldn't go by yourself, Case. I'll go with you."

"No, you shouldn't."

"Casey, I'm going." He threw the bag onto the bus.

They walked across the parking lot in relative silence. David spoke first. "So...umm...How's it going with you and Mike? I guess you two got over whatever little problem you were having."

"Mike didn't tell you what our problem was?" She knew he wasn't one to "kiss-and-tell," but the other guys had to have noticed the abrupt ending to their romance.

"We pushed him a little and he told us that you started to...umm...you wouldn't...umm...that you left him in a bad way."

She nodded. "I did."

"But last night...?" He raised his eyebrows.

She smiled and blushed. "I didn't"

"So did he finally 'fess up?" He asked as they waited for traffic to slow so they could cross. "Or did you just get tired of dancing?"

"Well, he hasn't professed his undying love...yet, and I was tired of waiting." She led him to the back of the store where the bread shelves were. She made her selections and turned around catching a glimpse of the cashier, a plump girl with bright purple streaks in her hair that was staring at David. "I think you've

been spotted.”

“I see.”

They walked back to the register and Casey put the three loaves of bread on the counter. “I also need a pack of Marlboro Lights in a box,” she said. She plucked a disposable lighter from a display and laid it on top of one of the loaves.

The cashier handed her the cigarettes and rang up her purchase, her eyes never leaving David. “Are you the guy from that group? Quintessential?” Casey suppressed a smile.

David nodded. “That’s right, Angel,” he said, reading her name off of her name tag. “I’m *the* guy.”

Angel slid a piece of paper across the counter at him. “Could I have your autograph? I went to the show last night.”

David took the pen she was holding, and looked around. He picked a copy of a teen magazine on which their picture graced the cover off the rack. He scribbled something across the glossy cover. *To my Angel, Love David Jacobs*. He tossed a five dollar bill on the counter as payment for the magazine and picked up the brown paper bag of bread.

“That was sweet,” Casey said as they left the store. “You probably made her whole year.”

“I hope not.” He paused. “He will, you know.”

“He will what?”

“Profess his undying love.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he’s crazy about you, Casey.”

Casey shot him a sideways glance. “How do you know that?” She asked as they crossed back to the parking lot.

David shook his head. “Everyone knows that. Everyone...Chuck and the crew and the band, Shannon, Dana, everyone. In fact, I’d guess you were the last one to find out. You’re all he talks about, all he’s been talking about for this whole trip. It’s been so hard for us not to say anything,”

"You all knew?"

He nodded. "Yeah, and we think it's great. It's awful convenient for Mike, though."

Casey frowned. "You been missing Shannon?"

He nodded. "Yeah, but at least I get to spend the next few days with her. That's one good thing, I guess," he said looking up at the smoke billowing up into the air. He took the bag of bread into the bus. Casey stayed outside and tore into the pack of cigarettes she had purchased. She leaned against the bus, lit one, and took a long drag.

"There you are," Michael said as he came off the bus. He frowned, but didn't say anything about the cigarette. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "How about you?"

"I'm okay. Can I have one?" The question surprised Casey.

"You don't smoke." She shook her head. "They're bad for you."

"You, too."

"I don't have an image to uphold," she reminded him. "There could be paparazzi lurking in these bushes right now snapping thousands of pictures of you."

"Yeah?" He looked around. "Then I'll give them something to take pictures of." He grabbed Casey by the waist and jerked her to him. He grabbed her cigarette, threw it on the ground and picked her up. He swung her around and pinned her between himself and the bus. He found her mouth with his. She wrapped her legs around his waist pulling him closer.

She pulled her face away from his and gazed over his shoulder. "I can't believe it," she whispered.

He let her down slowly and turned around to look again at the smoldering skyline. He pulled her close to him. "Unreal," he said.

"Okay, guys," Chuck said loudly. "Ten minutes!"

"You think it would be rude to just lock ourselves up in the bedroom?" He asked, taking her hand and pulling her toward the bus.

Casey smiled at the thought. "Probably." She entered the kitchen. She immediately began making several sandwiches for the drivers. She put the sandwiches and several canned drinks in the empty brown paper bag. She knocked on the bus' passenger side door before opening it.

"Hi, Jake," she said as she climbed in. "I brought y'all some food. She unloaded the bag into the small refrigerator in the driver's sleeping compartment.

"Thank you, Casey." He nodded toward the horizon. "Do you know anyone over there?"

Casey shook her head. "I don't think so. You?"

"No, ma'am. My family is all back in Georgia. I'm the only one who made it off the farm."

"Are you going home?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I'm getting off in Georgia and Al's gonna drive y'all the rest of the way in."

"Have a good trip, Jake."

She joined the other guys in the kitchen. "Anything new?" She asked as she slid into a chair between Reed and Max.

"The north tower collapsed, and another plane crashed in Pennsylvania," Jason said. "In a field. They suspect it was headed for the White House."

"Some passengers tried to overtake the hijackers," Max said.

"Some people called home on their cell phones," Reed said, his voice cracking. "Called their wives."

Casey crossed her arms on the table and lowered her head, hiding her face.

"Can you imagine what that must be like?" Reed continued. "To be on the phone with your wife, knowing that you're going

to die, and knowing there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

She began to sob as she was transported back to the night of CJ's death. She knew what it was like to trust that her husband would return home to her, only to have to say goodbye in a heartbreaking phone call. She knew what each of those women were going through: the agonizing dread of waiting for the moment it was all over, the painful hope that it wouldn't happen at all, or that he might survive, and the fear of the uncertain future.

Max put a hand on her back. "You okay, Casey?"

She sighed and lifted her head. She wiped the tears from her face. Michael was sitting across the table from her, and she locked her eyes onto his. He reached across the table and took her hands.

"I've never told anyone this," she began slowly, "but I know what that's like. That call." She sniffed and used a napkin to wipe her nose. "When CJ was in the accident, he wasn't killed right away, and he was lucid enough to know that he was going to die. He called me from his cell phone. He said, 'Casey, sweetie, I've been in an accident and I'm hurt real bad. I'm not going to make it.' And then he said, 'I have loved being your husband. I hope you were happy.' I kept the line open until I heard rescue there, and then I headed for the hospital. He was already dead."

Michael squeezed her hand. "Oh baby, I'm sorry," he whispered, his own eyes rimmed with tears.

She pushed her chair away from the table and looked at the clock. "I'm gonna lie down for a while. If I'm not up in a couple of hours, wake me, so I can get you all some lunch."

"Casey, we can get our own lunch," Reed said.

She looked around at her spotless kitchen and envisioned the mess they would make in it. "No, just get me up." She sat on her bed and flipped on the television. The coverage of the attack was on almost every channel. She left it on CNN and muted the

volume. She fingered the chain around her neck.

"Oh, CJ, I'm sorry." She took off the necklace and dropped it into her lingerie drawer. She removed the picture from the wall and buried it in the drawer too. She lay down on the bed and hugged a pillow to herself. She allowed the tears to fall as she drifted off to sleep. She woke later to find that she was not alone in her bed. Michael was asleep beside her and Reed was lying at the opposite end. She slid over to Michael and curled herself into a ball against his body.

"Hi there," he said, his eyes fluttering open.

"I don't remember you coming in."

"You were sleeping." He ran his fingers over her temple, pushing back her hair. His fingers followed the shape of her face down to her neck. He kissed the back of her head. "Are you okay? I thought maybe you've been thinking about Alex."

She nodded. "Yeah, I have. I'm okay." She felt the tears form in her eyes even as she said the words. He tightened his arms around her as she began to cry. She turned around so that she was facing him. "I hurt so bad for those people."

He kissed her forehead, but didn't say anything. He didn't need to. His holding her close to his body was enough. She lay there in his arms in silence until Michael's breathing steadied, signaling that he was again asleep. She got up and stepped back into the kitchen. Max, David, and Jason were all lying crosswise on the bunk sleeping. Max was lying on his stomach, his snoring muffled by a pillow, but it was still loud. She shook her head in amazement that Jason could sleep with his own head only inches away from the rumble.



They had arrived in Orlando the next morning just before noon. Michael had asked Casey to stay with him, and she had

offered no objection. They had spent the afternoon cuddled up on the couch watching the news coverage of the rescue effort between catnaps. She woke up from one nap that evening to find herself alone in the room. Michael was sitting by the pool drinking a beer.

"Hey," she said, sitting down next to him and putting her feet in the water. "You okay?"

He nodded and offered her the bottle. "Just got tired of the news."

"Anything new?"

"They're not finding anyone. I keep thinking that they'll come across a stairwell or something that didn't collapse and find hundreds of people alive, but..." He shook his head. "I just feel like there's something I should be doing."

She nodded. "I know what you mean." Her stomach growled. "I'm hungry. You want me to cook something?"

"I doubt there's anything in there to cook. We can order a pizza." She nodded and he picked up the cordless phone that was next to him. He had the pizza parlor on speed dial. "Mom called," he said when he hung up the phone. "She wants us to come over for supper tomorrow night."

"Meet your mom, huh? That's a big step."

He smiled, the first smile she had seen out of him all day. "My grandparents, too."

"I like it when you do that."

"Do what?"

"Smile." She leaned toward him. He met her halfway for a kiss. "I'm so glad we finally got our act together," she said. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but right here, right now, with you."

"Hey, I had my act together the whole time," he argued. "You were the one who didn't know what you wanted."

"You're wrong. I've known what I wanted since that night

on your bus when we played Truth or Dare.”

“I could have had you that night,” he said, tipping up the bottle again.

“You think?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but you were drunk and I didn’t want to take advantage of you. I’m a nice guy like that.” He paused. “But I could have had you.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I’m sorry for jerking you around and teasing you like I have been. I just wanted to make sure it was going to be something real.”

“Did I give you any reason to think that it wouldn’t be real?”

“You weren’t exactly open about how you were feeling.”

“And you were?”

She sighed. “You’re right.” She paused. “So David tells me you’ve had it bad for me since we met.”

He shook his head. “David talks too much.”

“So did you put Max up to daring you to kiss me, or was that all him?”

“That was all him. He thinks it’s funny to embarrass me. I’m glad he did.” He kissed her again. “I’m really glad he did.” He looked at his watch when he pulled away. “We’ve got about twenty minutes before the pizza gets here.” He nodded toward the house. “You wanna go inside?”

“Very much.” He took her hand and led her into the house and to the bedroom.

Chapter Thirteen



She said a quick prayer for relief before downing the two pain relievers. Casey was nervous about meeting Birdie, Michael's mother, and her anxiety was manifesting itself in the form of a headache. She chased them down with a tall glass of water and held her head over the sink.

This meeting could put a quick end to what was just getting started between her and Michael. She knew that Birdie's opinion was very important to him, and Casey couldn't shake the feeling that she was getting ready to be tested..

"Michael seems to really like you," Birdie said. The two women were washing dishes after supper. Michael was visiting with his grandparents in the living room.

Casey smiled at her. "I really like him."

"He told me you were a widow. It's a hard thing losing your husband."

Casey nodded. "Yeah."

"You know, Bill's been gone for four years now, and I'm just now thinking about dating. I'm kinda surprised that you're ready to jump back in the saddle, so to speak."

"I guess the right guy came along."

"Is Michael the right guy, you think?"

Casey took a deep breath and plunged her hands into the dishwater. *The test*. "Yeah, I think we have something pretty special."

Birdie smiled and patted Casey on the back. "I think you do, too. He's very happy."

Casey smiled and relaxed. "I'm glad."

"You know, Casey," Birdie began, "Michael was really close to his father and I like to think that we're really close. He loves the idea of a family. He always has. Even as a teenager, he would often say that the thing he looked forward to most was getting married and having a family. Looking back now, I wish we had had more kids, so he would have had a bigger family." She shook her head. "But you know, sometimes we make selfish decisions and don't always consider what others might want one day."

She squeezed some lotion out of a bottle she retrieved from the windowsill and rubbed it on her hands. "His father and I set a good example for him. He's gonna make a wonderful husband and father."

Casey nodded, suddenly uncomfortable. "I know he will," she replied.

The things Birdie had said penetrated Casey's thoughts all night, keeping sleep away. She knew his mother was right. Michael was going to make someone an amazing husband and an awesome father. He must have confessed some deep feelings for Casey to his mother. He was serious. Her head began to pound as questions raced through her mind.

Can I be what he wants? Can I give him what he needs?

Can he accept me for what I am, and what I'm not?

Michael found her in the kitchen drinking coffee at seven o'clock the next morning. "You're up awfully early," he said, not knowing that she had already been up for hours. He poured himself a cup and sat at the table with her.

"I couldn't sleep."

He held up the mug. "This isn't going to help."

She smiled slightly.

Michael covered her hand with his. "Something bothering you?"

Yeah, your mom just pointed out to me that there's no point in our staying together because I can't be the woman you want me to be. She shook the thought out of her head.

"Nothing in particular. I just keep thinking about those people on those planes." It wasn't exactly a lie. The thoughts of the tragedy had kept her from sleeping soundly since it had happened.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, I'll be okay. You should go on back to bed."

"The bed seems awfully empty without you in it. It didn't take me very long to get used to you being there." He blew across the surface of the hot drink before taking a sip. He stared at her for a moment. "Do you want to be alone?"

She hesitated then shook her head. "No. Let's get dressed and go get some breakfast, and let's do something fun today."

"Okay," he agreed with a nod. He thought for a moment. "I know what. I want to take you DisneyWorld. I can't believe you've never been there."

"Sounds great," she said, thinking that a trip to the amusement park was exactly the thing she needed to get her mind off the conversation she knew she was going to have to have with Michael.



Casey crossed her arms in front of her in response to the cool breeze blowing in off the lake.

“Cold?”

She nodded. “A little.”

He stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her. “Better?”

“Much. I had fun today.”

“Good. Maybe you’ll sleep better tonight.”

Doubtful. “I should. I’m exhausted.”

They stood in silence, Michael gently swaying them in time to the soft music that was coming from the house.

“What do you want?” Casey spun around to face him.

He raised his eyebrows. “Right now?”

She shook her head. “Out of life, Mike. What do you want?”

He shrugged. “It’d be selfish to ask for more that I’ve got.” He drew a circle in the sand with his toe. “I don’t know. Marriage. Kids. I’ve already got the big house and a boat.” He glanced at her. “What about you?”

She stared at the sand. “I don’t know. I don’t want to be alone.”

He reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her to him again. “You won’t be.”

She took a deep breath. “So what are you looking for now? With me?”

He pushed her away and held her arms by her sides. “I think you know, Casey. I’m not playing games here. I’m not looking for a fling. It might look like that I’ve got this great life, but you know, I don’t consider it much of a life at all. All I ever wanted was to find someone to build my world around; someone that was going to be beside me everyday; someone that I lived my

life for. I was thinking that it might possibly...that it could possibly be you."

He stared at her. "Is there something on your mind?" He looked deep into her eyes as if trying to read her thoughts.

She shook her head. "I'm just not sure how serious we should get."

He dropped his hands from her arms. "What? After all this?" His heartbreak was obvious.

Her eyes filled with tears. "Mike, let me explain."

"Is this about CJ?"

"No."

He shook his head and stepped away from her. "Then maybe you don't need to explain. Ever since you were hired, I have tried my damndest to get next to you because I like you. I spent months trying to get to get to know you better and trying to get you to like me. When we finally slept together, I thought..." his voice trailed off.

"You know what, nevermind. I guess you were just trying to fuck someone in the band."

She grabbed his arm. "Mike, you know me better than that."

He jerked away from her. "Do I?" He turned around and walked back to the house without a backward glance.

She covered her face with her hands, and fell to the sand. She didn't know how long she sat there, crying and staring at the water, but when she returned to the house it was dark and quiet. She peeked in the master bedroom. Michael appeared to be asleep, but she sensed that he really wasn't. She waited in the doorway for a moment to see if he would acknowledge her presence. He didn't, and she turned away and headed back to the kitchen.

She found a notepad in a drawer and sat down at the table to compose the letter that she knew she had to leave.

Dear Michael,

You are so totally off base in your accusation of me. Maybe you've been hurt in that way before, I don't know, but that was not my intention. It's not that I don't want to get serious with you, because I do, and it would be wrong to say that CJ isn't part of the reason, but not because I'm still in love with him, you know I'm not. I'm afraid. I gave every part of myself to someone once and he was taken away. The fear of that happening made me scared to love again. But you make me want to love again. You have made me feel things that I have never felt. I love everything about you: your mind, your heart, your sense of humor, your body. I love who you are.

Mike, I'm not sure that you want to get serious with me because there is something about me that you don't know and it may affect how you feel about our future.

I know that you want to grow old with someone and have a big house full of grandkids, but the fact of the matter is that it might not be possible with me. I may not ever be able to get pregnant. I may not ever have children. I understand that you are looking for a serious relationship that could quite possibly progress into something much more, but maybe you shouldn't waste your time on me. I may not be able to give you what you want, and it was wrong of me lead you on.

I'll be returning to the bus. If you want me to pack up my things and leave, I'll go. It's been a great ride and I've had the time of my life.

Love, Casey



She heard the tapping at the door. She jumped up from the bed and looked at her reflection in the mirror above the bathroom sink. Her face was pale, except for her eyes, which were red and swollen from crying all night. She flung open the door knowing that it would be Michael. He was the only one who knew she was there.

“Max.”

“Oh, God, Casey. You look like shit.” He stepped onto the bus and engulfed her in a massive bear hug. She felt the tears begin again. He squeezed her tighter as she cried.

“How did you know I was here?” She asked as she pulled away.

“I went to Mike’s to bring you these recipes of my mom’s.” He pulled a handful of index cards from his back pocket. “He said you came back here.”

“Did he say why?”

“He said that you had a fight and that you left.”

She shook her head. “He didn’t give me much of a choice.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Did he tell you what we fought about?”

Max shook his head. “No, but he was really upset, too. It must have been some fight. So, do you want to talk?”

“No. I don’t want you to feel like you need to take sides.”

Max pulled her to him again and kissed her forehead. “It will be okay.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, Max. He was awfully mad. He said something pretty hateful.”

“What?”

She looked down at the floor. “He accused me of just wanting to sleep with one of you.”

Max took a deep breath in through his nose and exhaled through his mouth. He shook his head. “He didn’t say that.”

She nodded. "I don't know why. I'm the one that kept walking away. I could have slept with him a month ago if that's what I wanted. "

"Listen, Casey. He didn't mean it." Max shook his head. "I guess there's something about Mike you ought to know."

He pulled out a chair and sat down. He rubbed his hand against his forehead. "Right after Thanksgiving last year, Mike was seeing this girl, Sherry. You know, Mike's a pretty serious guy, he's not into casual relationships. So he just assumed she was serious about him, too. Well, one day I came over to his place and he wasn't home, but she was there. She made it pretty clear that she was available if I wanted to partake, if you know what I mean. Mike's like my brother. I, of course, turned her down, and I told him. Needless to say he was pretty upset. I don't think he's been with anyone since."

"I wondered why he would say that to me," she said shaking her head. "It just didn't make sense."

Max put his hand over Casey's and squeezed it. "Mike's pretty stubborn and he has a lot of pride, but he loves you. He'll come around. That is, if you still want him to."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I wasn't looking for this, Max."

"But the question is, do you want it?"

She raised her eyebrows and shook her head. "I think the ball is in his court."

Casey had just fallen asleep when she felt the warmth of someone in the bed next to her. She inhaled deeply and breathed in his scent. It had to be a dream. She felt the familiar pressure of his lips on her mouth. *Dear God, don't let this be a dream*, she prayed, scared to open her eyes.

He grabbed the hem of her nightshirt and pulled it over her head. His mouth quickly found her breasts. She tangled her fingers in his hair and opened her eyes. It was pitch black in the

room, but she knew by his smell, his touch, his warmth who it was.

His mouth traveled down her stomach. She felt his fingers grab the waistband of her panties and rip them off her body. She gasped as his mouth reached her most intimate spot. She covered her face with her hands and was surprised to find tears rolling out of the corners of her eyes. She reached down again and grabbed his hair, pulling his face to hers. She found his mouth quickly. She wrapped her legs around his waist and was surprised to find that he was already naked. The rolled over and she lifted her body slightly to lower herself onto him. He slid his hands down to her waist as they moved in motion with each other.

At the end, it was more than just a physical release. Casey felt as if an anvil had been lifted from her. She slid off him and curled up in the fetal position, her back against his chest. He wrapped his strong arms around her.

“I want you come home with me, Casey.”

“Are you sure?”

He kissed the back of her head. “I should have never said what I said. Casey, I’m sorry and I love you.”

She choked back the tears of relief. “I love you, too, Michael.”



“I think we should talk about the note you left,” Michael said, leaning against the dresser. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Casey nodded. “Me, too.”

“So what’s wrong with you? Are you sick?”

She shook her head. “Not sick, just all screwed up.” She picked at a lint ball clinging to the blanket. “It’s my reproductive

organs.”

“I figured that, Casey. You know, believe it or not, I know a couple of things about how the human body works. What’s wrong?”

“I only have one ovary and it doesn’t work.”

Michael shook his head. “What’s wrong?” He pressed. “What happened?”

She sat up on the bed and crossed her legs in front of her. “When I was fourteen, I started having this bad pain on my left side. I had never started my period yet, so my mom thought that is what it was, I was getting ready to have my first one. Well, a couple of weeks later, the pain was a lot worse. I couldn’t go to school; it hurt to walk around, so my parents took me to the doctor, who then sent me to a gynecologist, Dr. Arnold. She found a cyst on my ovary the size of a grapefruit.”

“A grapefruit?” Michael held his fingers in the shape of a “C” approximating the size. He came over to the bed and sat down.

“Yeah. It was making me look about four months pregnant. So Dr. Arnold operated to remove it.” She pulled up her shirt and showed him the light scar on her abdomen. He rubbed his thumb over the mark. “Evidently, it had grown around the ovary and she had to remove the whole thing. So I only have one.”

“And it doesn’t work?”

She shook her head. “So a few years passed and I still hadn’t started my period. The right one is supposed to be enough, you know like you can survive with one kidney, but for some reason, it just didn’t. When I was seventeen, I still had never had a period, so the doctor put me on birth control pills to at least make me have a cycle. I guess that’s important.”

“So you’re on the pill?”

“No. They made me sick and gain weight and I didn’t want to take that pill everyday, so I didn’t.”

“Did you ever start your period?”

“When I was nineteen, I finally got one naturally, and now I might get one or two a year. CJ and I started having sex when I was fifteen. We never used any kind of birth control. I never used any with Tuck, either. That’s eleven years of unprotected sex and I never got pregnant.”

“I see. So you feel like we’re protected?”

“I do, but if you still want to use something, then we can.”

He shook his head. “No, eleven years is proof enough for me.” He looked down at his feet. “So there’s nothing you could do? If you wanted to get pregnant, I mean?”

Casey shrugged. “I don’t know. I never really investigated it.”

He shook his head again. “So you were ready to throw it all away on something you hadn’t even investigated?”

“Mike, I left it up to you. I didn’t want to end it, but I thought that maybe you wouldn’t want to be with someone who could possibly not be able to have kids.”

“You don’t have to get pregnant to have a family.” He bit the inside of his cheek and took a slow deep breath. “What were you and CJ going to do?”

“CJ didn’t want kids.”

“He didn’t?”

Casey shook her head. “No. It’s not that he didn’t like them, he just thought that the world was too terrible and overpopulated as it is. Plus, our work schedules were going to be so erratic, it would be unfair to them. He was disgusted by Annie and Matt.”

“That was okay with you?”

“I guess it had to be. I was his wife, and I wasn’t going to get pregnant anyway.”

“Do you want to have children?”

Casey smiled and nodded. “I do.”

Chapter Fourteen



Casey looked up from the laptop when Michael, Max and Jason burst into the kitchen. She tilted her head for a kiss on the cheek from Michael.

“What’cha up to?”

“Christmas shopping.”

“Christmas?” Max exclaimed. “It’s only September.”

“I like to get an early start. My list keeps getting longer.” She closed the computer. “So what going on with this benefit?” They had just returned from a meeting with Neil Black. Quintessential had been invited to participate in a benefit for the survivors and families of the victims of 9/11.

“October 12,” Max said. He opened a drawer, removed a fork and tasted the potato salad Casey had made earlier.

“Where?” Casey asked. She shooed Max away from the food.

“Los Angeles,” Jason answered. “It’s going to be a pretty

big deal. Televised, of course.”

“Where are we supposed to be then?” Casey looked at Michael and raised her eyebrows. “Are we going to be in LA anyway?”

He shook his head. “No. That’s the same time we’re supposed to be doing those two shows in Minneapolis. We’re pushing back the show that was on the twelfth until the thirteenth.”

Casey shook her head. “So you’re flying to LA?” He nodded.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “We’re doing the show on the eleventh, Thursday, then flying to LA that night, doing the benefit Friday evening, then flying back to Minneapolis for the other show.”

“You okay with this?” Casey asked Michael.

He nodded. “Yeah, I’ve got to do this; I want to do this, and if flying is the only way to get there, then that’s the way I’ll get there.”



Casey pulled the T-shirt over her head, exposing the bright blue bikini underneath. She and Dana, Reed's girlfriend, had decided to try and soak in a few rays before sunset. She settled down on the lounge chair beside Dana's and looked toward the basketball court, where the guys were engaged in a rough game of after dinner basketball.

Michael and Jason were playing against David and Reed. Max was sitting on the grass beside the court, making jokes and awaiting his turn to play.

“So, what was the fight about?” Dana asked. She adjusted her sunglasses and dumped some oil onto her already tanned legs.

Casey frowned and twisted the top off the wine cooler she had brought with her from the kitchen. “It was about me not

saying what I meant and him not meaning what he said.”

“So just general miscommunication all around, huh?”

Casey nodded. “But it worked out.”

They were silent for a few moments; both absorbed in their own thoughts. The women had never met before this unexpected layover in Orlando, but Casey found her easy to be around. She knew Michael considered her a good friend. “So Max says Mike accused you a pulling a Sherry.”

“If that means he accused me of just trying to see who I could sleep with, then yeah.”

Dana shook her head. “She really screwed him over. What did he tell you about her?”

“Mike hasn’t ever mentioned her name. Max told me that she tried to get him to sleep with her and that’s why they broke up. She sounds like a real peach. Did you like her?”

Dana shrugged. “At the time I guess I did, but I was glad when they broke up even before I knew the reason. I wouldn’t have wanted him to marry her, I mean, even if she hadn’t been cheating on him, she’s not the kind of girl I wanted Mike to end up with.”

“Do you think he would have married her?”

“I don’t know, Casey. I do know that he wants to find someone and get married. He doesn’t like to date around. He likes to be in a relationship.”

“So, she was cheating on him?” Casey shook her head. *He can never know about Chris.*

Dana nodded. “Oh, yeah.” She looked across the yard. The game was over and the teams were switching up, leaving Michael the odd man out. “She really did him wrong, and I hate her for it. I don’t think I’ve ever said I hated anyone before, but I think the world of Mike, and it makes my blood boil to think about what she did.”

Casey sensed there was more to the story than just her

cheating on Michael and propositioning one of his best friends. "There's something I don't know, isn't there?"

Dana took a long drink from her own wine cooler and glanced at Michael to make sure he wasn't coming toward them. "A couple of weeks after they broke up she calls him up and tells him that she's pregnant and the baby is his."

"Pregnant? For real?"

Dana nodded. "Yeah, she was really pregnant. She had Mike so jacked up. He didn't know what to think or do. I think the biggest part of him didn't want the baby to be his because he just wanted rid of her, but I think a little part of him wanted to be a daddy. I mean, I know he wants kids."

"What happened?"

"Well, he insisted on a DNA test, but they couldn't do one until the baby was born."

"So is Mike a father?" Casey asked, scared of what the answer would be. Dana shook her head, and Casey was relieved.

"She had a lot of problems with the pregnancy. The doctor suggested bed rest, but she didn't listen. Anyway, around the end of April or the beginning of May, she went into labor. She didn't call Mike until after the baby was born...and died. He still wanted to know if it was his, so he arranged for the DNA test anyway. Sherry didn't want him to do it, because she knew what the result would be."

"So the baby wasn't his."

"No. There was no genetic possibility."

Casey shook her head. "What did she want from him? Why would she do that?"

"I guess it was just the money. I don't know. I never could understand why she didn't love him. How could you not love him?" The affection in her voice for Michael was strong.

"You and Mike are close?"

She nodded. "Yeah, he lived here for a while with us while

he was waiting for his house to be finished. I helped him with the decorating and we spent a lot of time together shopping and stuff.”

They both watched as Michael started across the lawn toward them. “So what kind of girl would you like him to end up with?”

“I just want him to be with someone who’s going to treat him with the respect that he deserves.” They were silent as Michael closed the distance between them.

“Hello, ladies,” he said. He sat down at the end of Casey’s chair and took the bottle away from her. He took a drink and wrinkled his nose. “Too sweet.”

“There’s more beer in the fridge,” Dana offered.

Michael stood up. “Need anything?”

“Yeah,” Dana said, holding up her bottle. “Bring me another one of these.” He went into the house. “Don’t tell him I told you any of this.”

Casey nodded. “Okay.” Michael returned with a beer and another wine cooler for Dana. He handed the bottle to her and again sat at the end of Casey’s chair.

“So what are you two talking about?”

“You,” Dana answered simply.

“You never told me that you lived here with Dana and Reed,” Casey said.

He nodded. “It was only for a few weeks.”

“Months,” Dana corrected. “But he was the perfect roommate: he’s neat, he cleans up after himself, he’s quiet, he doesn’t mind helping out...”

“Okay, okay,” Casey said, holding up her hand and winking at Michael. “I’m sold.”



"Hey, Dr. Klein," Casey said into the mouthpiece. "I want to talk to you about Jason."

"How's he doing?"

"Well, he was doing pretty good with the Dymelor. He was sick about three weeks ago and didn't eat much and he had a bout of hypoglycemia. It was the first time it had ever happened to him, so it scared the bejesus out of all of them, but I gave him some juice and he was okay."

"Then he was fine for a while, but this week he has had a fasting level of around 200 every morning. It goes down after he gets some exercise, but then it's right back up a few hours later. It's like the Dymelor isn't working anymore."

"Sounds like we're going to have to step up his treatment. Have you talked to him about insulin?"

"Umm, hmm, and he's not very receptive."

"Yeah, he never liked the idea. Okay, here's what I'm going to do. Stop the Dymelor. Well try him on Glucophage, instead. I'll call in a prescription to a local pharmacy and have it delivered there. I'll also order the insulin and syringes. I'll fax you detailed instructions, but basically, start him on the Gluc today. You'll have the insulin there if he needs it. If the Glucophage works, then great, but he might have to start with daily injections.

"All right, Doc. Thanks a lot." She hung up the phone. "Yeah, thanks a lot," she repeated. She pressed the intercom button. "Hey, Jake. Be on the lookout for a pharmacy delivery."

"Sure thing, Casey."

She pulled two whole chickens out of the refrigerator and cut them up in the sink before returning them to the fridge. She then pulled a bag of potatoes out from under the sink and sat at the table to peel them. She was almost finished when she heard the computer beep, signaling that she was receiving a fax. She finished the task at hand before looking at the laptop's screen.

He's not going to like this. She pulled the curtain over the sink back and watched as the other bus pulled up. Max and David jumped off and opened the storage compartment under the bus. Reed and Jason joined them and together they pulled a disassembled portable basketball goal from under the bus. Within minutes, they had it assembled and the game began.

"Hey, sweetie," Michel said as he entered the bus. They were in Los Angeles and had just returned from a morning of taping some scenes for a music video to what would be their next release.

"How'd it go?"

"Pretty good. No singing, no dancing, just a little acting." He pushed himself up onto the counter and rested his back against the refrigerator.

She frowned at the thought of the acting he had been doing. It had been the cause of an argument just a week before. The video director had faxed them a copy of the script and the guys were discussing it over supper. Michael was the lead singer of the song, therefore making him the lead role in the video. The script called for him to kiss the voluptuous actress playing his girlfriend several times.

"Why do you have to kiss her," Casey had asked, "and why four times?"

"It's not real, Casey. It's just acting."

"So you're not really going to be touching her with your lips."

"You're being unreasonable," he had argued. "I have to do it. It's part of my job."

"I thought you were a singer -- a musician."

"I am, Casey. It doesn't mean anything,"

"Would you like it if the tables were turned?"

"I'd understand. Look, I knew you wouldn't like it, and I asked if you could do the part. All you would have had to do is

act like you're in love with me."

"But?"

He had acted like he didn't want to answer. "They said you didn't fit the part," he replied, avoiding her eyes.

"I didn't fit the part of your girlfriend? That's bullshit."

"What do you want me to do, Casey?"

Frustrated, Casey had thrown up her hands. "Kiss her. I want you to do your job and kiss her."

She had regretted the fight knowing that she had been being unreasonable, but not wanting to watch him kiss on another girl had kept her at the hotel for the day.

He saw her dour expression. "I didn't kiss her."

"Why not?" She asked, wondering if he could sense her relief.

He shrugged. "It just didn't seem right."

Casey smiled. "Good."

"So did you have a relaxing day all by yourself?"

"It was okay. I'm glad to see you."

He raised his eyebrows. "Why?"

"Because I'm getting ready to have a big fight with Jason."

"You need backup?"

She shook her head. "No, I should talk to him alone, but you're a good distraction for now."

"What's for supper? I'm starving!"

Casey took the chickens out of the refrigerator. "Fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, fried apples, steamed broccoli."

He wrinkled his nose at the last menu item. "Deviled eggs?" He asked hopefully. He loved eggs.

She took a carton of eggs out of the refrigerator. "And deviled eggs."

"So, you coming to the sound check?"

She nodded. "Yeah, and I'm gonna see if Chuck can get me a seat in the front row for the show."

"Why?"

"I've never seen the show from the audience, and if you're going to be singing to someone out there, I want it to be me."

She positioned herself between his legs and ran her hand down his chest. She lifted her chin for a kiss. He leaned down and met her mouth with his. He lowered himself from the counter and backed her up against the opposite wall. He pinned her against the oven. Taking her head in his hands, he kissed her softly on the forehead, then the nose, and finally her mouth.

"I love you."

Her knees felt weak every time he said it. "I love you, too."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her face into his chest, trying to breathe in everything about him.

"Hey, Shorty!" Max yelled inside the bus from the door that he had just flung open. "How much longer until we eat?"

"About an hour," Casey called back, her voice muffled because she still had her face pressed into Michael's chest. She pulled her head back. "I have work to do."

He eased up on her. "Okay."

Casey began cooking while Michael sat at the table with the laptop, checking his email. She could hear the steady beating of the basketball on the pavement outside the bus.

She stuck her head out of the door. "Jason!" He looked over at her from his position on the makeshift basketball court. "Come in here when you have a second."

Just then Jake appeared, carrying a large bag. "This just came for you, Casey."

She took the bag inside and opened it. She pulled out a large orange prescription bottle of big white pills. She sat it on the counter and took several vials of insulin from the bag. She sat one vial on the counter and placed the others carefully in the refrigerator. Next, she took out a box of syringes.

"Is that what I think it is?" Michael asked, looking up.

She nodded. "Yep."

"It sucks to be you," he said, thinking of Jason's reaction.

"Thanks a lot."

"What, Casey?" Jason said as he entered the bus. She picked up the testing kit that he had left on the counter that morning before breakfast. She quickly pricked his finger, collected a drop of blood, and applied a bandage. "Okay, go."

He jumped back off the bus to rejoin the basketball game. Casey waited for the results to display on the meter and shook her head at the numbers. "What did he eat today?"

Michael shook his head. "I don't think he did. Maybe he had a Coke, maybe a Diet Coke, I don't know. His sugar is still up?"

She nodded. "Can you go take his place?"

Michael left the bus. Seconds later, Jason came in and flopped down in a chair. "What now?"

Casey tried to ignore his attitude. "I talked to Dr. Klein today." Jason shook his head, but he didn't respond verbally. "I told him that we were having a little trouble maintaining your glucose levels. He wants you to stop the Dymelor and he prescribed a medicine called Glucophage. What that does it help your body use your own insulin more effectively."

"Is it a shot?"

Casey handed him the bottle of pills. "You'll take two of these with your evening meal."

"That's not so bad," he said opening the bottle and looking inside.

"Well, it can cause some side effects that you may not like, but they'll go away in about a week or so."

"What kind of side effects?"

"Nausea, gas, diarrhea."

"Fun." He looked up at her. He spotted the box of syringes and the vial of insulin on the counter. "What's that?"

"He sent the insulin, just in case."

"I'm not taking any shots."

"You will if you need them."

"I won't!" He stood up.

"Damnit, Jason!" Casey raised her voice. "Would you just get over yourself? You have a disease, and you have to keep it under control. You need to grow up and get over this fear or this denial or whatever it is that's got you so screwed up. If you don't, you're gonna lose your sight, you're gonna lose your kidneys, you're gonna lose your legs, and you're gonna lose your life. You'll take the damn shot if you need it."

He raised his arm. She ducked, but the pill bottle still narrowly missed her and smashed against the wall behind her. He stormed off the bus.

She picked up the bottle and stuffed it in her pocket. She returned to her cooking. When it was done, she set the table and called out the door to the guys. Four of them quickly boarded the bus and lined up at the kitchen sink to wash their hands.

"He's not coming," David said with a shake of his head.

Casey nodded. "I figured." She picked his plate up from the table and loaded it with extra large helpings of everything. She covered it with foil. "Go ahead and help yourselves," she said. "I'll be right back."

She knocked on the door of their bus before opening it. "Jason," she called as she entered. He was sitting on the couch playing a video game. "I brought you something to eat." He wouldn't look at her. She sat the plate down on a table. "I'm sorry."

She pulled the pill bottle out of her pocket, opened it and placed two pills on the table next to his plate. "If the pills work, you won't have to have the shots." She left the bus.

"So what's going on with him, anyway?" Casey asked as she slid into her place at the head of the table.

"He doesn't like to think of himself as sick," Reed ex-

plained. "He's been trying to control this so he could stop with the medications all together."

"Is he scared of needles?" Casey asked. "It seems like he's awfully worried about getting a shot."

"Maybe," Reed said. "It's never really come up."

"Well, he's going to have to get over it," Casey said.

Michael shook his head. "Don't say it like that, Casey. If he is scared, you've got to respect that. Fear can be powerful."

"I understand that, Mike, but it doesn't have to be debilitating. Look at you. You're scared to fly, but you've done it. You've flown all the way to Europe. You'll be flying back here to LA next week."

"I don't know, Casey," David said. "It is debilitating. Flying with Mike is not a fun experience."

"Why? What's it like?"

"Well, first," David continued, "we have to get him drunk. Then during take-off he wears his headphones so he can't hear the engines. He usually falls asleep pretty quickly and he'll sleep through the whole flight, but when he's awake, he's all nervous acting and jittery. He throws up two or three times."

Casey smiled at Mike. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "I can't help it. I don't like to fly, and just maybe Jason's scared of needles."

"Don't worry, Casey," Max said. "We got Mike on a plane and we'll get Jason to take his shot if he needs it."

"How long do you think he's going to be mad at me?"

Max shook his head. "He's not mad at you. He's just angry over the whole situation. Don't worry."

Chapter Fifteen



“All right, guys,” Casey said. “Go make some noise.” She left the backstage area and Chuck led her to a seat in the front row. She looked around at the crowd. The energy in the room was overwhelming.

“Can you believe it?” The teenage girl next to her said, grabbing her arm. “The front row!”

Casey smiled. “I know. I’m Casey. What’s your name?”

“I’m Monica! I’m so excited! I’ve got a backstage pass. I won it off the radio. I get to meet them!” She flashed a laminated card that was hanging on a cord around her neck. It was similar to Casey’s own credentials, featuring a picture of the band, as well as their logo. The only thing it was missing was the word CREW written in bold black letters across the bottom like Casey’s. Monica didn’t notice the slight difference.

“Me, too!” Casey said as if she had never met them before.

“So who’s your favorite?” Monica asked.

Casey cocked her head to one side. "Hmm, I don't know. They're all real cute, but I guess I'd have to say...hmmm...Mike."

"Oh, Mike," she said dreamily. "He so hot." She put her hand over her heart. "But Jason...oh my God...I just love him so much!"

Except for the singing along, Monica kept quiet during most of the opening act, but when Quintessential took the stage, her screaming started. She grabbed Casey's arm. "There they are!"

It was easy to lose herself in the excitement of the show. She was surprised how close they actually were to the stage. Three songs into the act, the music slowed and Michael took the center stage. The crowd quieted and Casey's heart filled with pride.

As he sung, he looked down in the audience and found her eyes. She smiled up at him.

"He's singing to you!" Monica said.

Casey smiled and blew him a kiss. He returned her smile and winked at her.

"Oh, my God!" Monica exclaimed excitedly. "He *was* singing to you."

Close to the end of the show, the music slowed for another ballad, which Casey immediately recognized as "The Chance."

Jason caught her eye during the chorus. "*Give me the chance to make it right baby. I'm so sorry, girl, for hurting you. I never meant to make you cry. I just want to prove I love you.*"

"It looked like Jason was looking right at you, too!" Monica said.

Casey took a deep breath, accepting Jason's serenade as an apology. "He was," she breathed, not sure if Monica heard her.

"Backstage is going to be awesome!"

After the concert, Casey and Monica found their way backstage. Monica showed everyone they met her backstage pass, oblivious that because she was with Casey, not one questioned their right to be behind the scenes.

"Where do you think they are?" Monica said looking around. There were dozens of people running around, security, crew members, wardrobe people...all of whom Casey knew. Everyone was too busy busting down the set to stop and talk.

Casey saw Chuck walking from the stage area. "Excuse me," she called out to him. He turned around. He raised his eyebrows, but didn't say anything. "We have these backstage passes," she said, showing him the credentials hanging around her neck and careful to cover the word CREW. "We want to meet them!"

Casey could see the confusion in Chuck's eyes and then the sudden realization as the game Casey was playing had become obvious to him.

"Okay, ladies, follow me." He led them to the dressing room where the door was closed. "Wait here for a minute." He disappeared into the room and Casey knew that he was inside letting the guys in on Casey's charade.

Seconds later he returned. "Okay, ladies. They're ready for you." He held the door open for them.

Casey followed Monica into the room. It was a scene she had seen many times before. The guys were all there. Reed, Max and Jason were sitting in directors chairs in front of the mirror, all shirtless and still wearing the pants they had hand on during the last part of the show, and David and Michael were sitting on a sofa, fully dressed in shorts and T-shirts. David was wearing flip-flops and Michael was in his sock feet.

Casey hung back close to the door while Monica rushed into the room. "Oh, my God!" she gushed. She looked around the room, unsure of whom to talk to first. Casey covered her mouth with her hand and tried not to laugh. Although the fans' reactions to meeting them always amused her, she enjoyed watching the interaction. The guys were always very kind and gracious.

Max stood up. "Hello," he said. He pulled a clean T-shirt

over his head and extended his hand to the girl.

"H..h..hello," she finally managed to squeak out.

"What's your name?" Max pressed, taking her hand and leading her to the chair where he was just sitting.

"Monica," she said, gazing up at him.

"Did you enjoy the show, Monica?" Reed asked.

She nodded at him. "Oh, yes."

"You want a drink?" Max asked, moving toward the refrigerator. "Coke? Water? Juice?"

She nodded. "A Coke would be great."

Jason looked over at Casey, who was still standing by the door. "Who's your friend?"

"That's Casey," Monica said. "I just met her."

"Hi, Casey," Jason said. "I saw you out there." It was the first he had spoken to her since their fight.

"You did?" Casey asked.

"It looked like you were singing right to her," Monica said.

"Maybe I was." Jason's eyes never left Casey's.

Casey took a step closer to him. "If you were singing to me, I probably would forgive you for anything."

He smiled and reached out his hand to her. She took it. He mouthed the words, "I'm sorry." She squeezed his hand.

"I saw you out there, too," Michael said. He tossed the small orange plastic ball he was holding into a miniature basketball hoop hanging on the back of the bathroom door.

She dropped Jason's hand. "You did?" She stepped closer to the couch.

He nodded, but didn't look at her. "You blew me a kiss."

"You winked at me."

He patted the arm of the couch. "Why don't you come over here and sit next to me."

"You're her favorite!" Monica exclaimed.

Casey's back was turned to Monica, so the younger girl

couldn't see that Casey could barely contain her laughter. She retrieved the ball from the floor below the hoop before sitting on the arm of the couch. She held it out to Michael then jerked it away as he grabbed for it. She tossed it into the basket. Michael stood up to get the ball, and Casey fell into his place on the couch.

Michael tossed the ball to her. "I'm your favorite?"

She threw the ball at him. He caught it before it hit him in the nose. "I thought maybe so," she said. She looked over at David. "But David's one good-lookin' guy."

"David's got a girlfriend," Monica interjected.

Michael shook his head at Casey. "You're that fickle, huh?" He threw the ball to David, who caught it. "Well, it's your loss. I was gonna ask you out."

"Now, let's not get hasty," Casey said holding up her hand. "If you take me out, you'll be my favorite."

Michael wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "Too bad it's not important to me who you like most."

"Oh, well," Casey said. "It's *your* loss." Everyone laughed, except Monica who looked horrified that Casey would let Michael slip through her fingers.

"Can I use your bathroom?" Casey asked innocently.

"Yeah, I guess. Let me show you." He opened the bathroom door and followed Casey inside the two stalled room.

She hopped up on the counter and Michael stood between her legs.

"Are you having fun?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am." She put her hands on his shoulders and pulled him closer for a kiss. "I'm so proud of you," she said.

"For what?"

"You are so hot...I mean talented. I mean it, Michael. You are meant to do this, and they love you."

He smiled and pressed his forehead against hers. "I better go back out there and help entertain our guest. She's gonna want a picture, you know." Michael slipped through the door. Casey waited a few seconds, decided she actually did have to pee, and then returned to the dressing room. There were three other fans in the dressing room along with a reporter and cameraman from an entertainment news show. She left the room unnoticed.

"Casey."

Casey turned around and faced Chuck. She smiled.

"What?"

"You're too funny," he said falling into step beside her. "Umm, Jake and Al are taking the buses to the shop for an oil change in the morning. So you don't have to cook breakfast. They can go to Denny's or order room service. So get yourself a room and sleep in the morning."

"Thanks, Chuck."



"How's school going?" Casey asked Dana. It was the day before the big benefit in Los Angeles. Dana had flown to Green Bay the night before and had arrived just before the show started. She and Reed were riding on Casey's bus with Casey and Mike as it traveled from Wisconsin to Minneapolis. Since meeting, Casey talked to Dana two or three times a week, but there was always new tales out of high school to be shared.

"Pretty good. Our football team is undefeated and the kids are really revved up. They're having big pep rallies every Friday, which is good and all, but it cuts into my class time. And I have got to get my sophomores ready for the state writing test." She sighed. "But other than that, I can't complain." She took the tomato Casey handed her and sliced it.

Jake's voice came over the intercom. "Hey, guys. We're go-

ing to be stopping in about two minutes for lunch. We're making pretty good time. It's about one o'clock now. Take an hour for lunch, and we should be in Minneapolis by four. According to my handy dandy thermometer, it's about 20 degrees outside, so I wouldn't advise getting off the bus."

Casey and Dana set the table, forcing Michael and Reed to suspend their chess game. "I think it was warmer than that when we left this morning," Casey said. She steadied herself against the cabinet as the bus slowed to a stop.

The door swung open and Max, Jason, and David hurried in, bringing with them a gust of cold air. "Damn, it's cold," Max said, sliding into his spot. "What's for lunch, Shorty?"

"Something to warm you up, I hope," Casey said lifting a pot of Brunswick stew from the stove and placing it on the table.

As she ladled it into bowls, everyone else began making themselves sandwiches from the bacon, lettuce, and tomatoes she and Dana had put on the table. Casey sat at her place at the head of the table and they held hands as Jason said grace.

"This is good, Casey," Dana said, blowing on her spoon before taking another bite. "You'll have to make up a batch for me to put in the freezer."

Casey's cell phone rang. She could tell by the personalized ring tone that the call was coming from Annie's house. "Hello?"

"Casey, Mom's been in a car accident."

"Is she okay?"

"I don't know. Daddy just got the call. She's on the way to the hospital. They had to cut her out of the car. I guess someone will call when we know more." Annie hung up before Casey could ask another question.

"What's wrong?" Michael asked.

"Annie says that mom was in a car accident."

"Is she okay?"

"I don't know. She didn't know." Casey stood up. "I'm go-

ing to try to get some more information.” She went to her bedroom and dialed Annie’s number. Matt answered.

“Matt, what’s going on?”

“We haven’t heard. Annie just left for the hospital.”

“How bad is it?”

He signed. “I don’t know. I do know that they had to cut her out of the car.”

“Shit,” Casey breathed.

“She’s alive, though,” Matt said reassuringly. “We know that much.”

So was CJ. “Thanks, Matt.”

She clicked off the phone and returned to the table. She sat in her chair, but pushed her plate away. “No one knows anything.” She laid the phone on the table and stared at it, willing it to ring. Ten minutes later, it did.

“Hello? Daddy?” She answered anxiously.

“Casey, she’s okay.”

Casey sighed, relieved. “Oh, Daddy. Thank you.”

“She’s in surgery, now. Her left arm was crushed, and she’s got some bumps and bruises, but the doctor said that she was going to be fine.”

“Okay, Daddy. I’ll call you later.” Casey clicked off the phone and looked around. She felt her eyes brim with tears. “She’ll be okay.”

Michael squeezed her hand. “That’s great, Casey.” He shook his head. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “It just brings back...” She bit her lip and looked at Michael. “How mad would you be at me if I went home instead of going with you to LA?”

He looked surprised, then shook his head. “I wouldn’t be mad at all, Casey. If it were my mom, I’d be on the next flight out.”

“Then I’m going home.”



"Did your Dad call back yet?" Dana asked. They were standing outside the dressing room. The guys were inside getting last minute instructions from Chuck.

"Yeah. Mom's out of surgery. He talks like she'll get to come home in the morning." The surgeons had used two steel rods to repair the damage.

"That's great, Casey. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you. Does she know you're coming?"

Casey shook her head. "No."

"Did you get your flight arranged?"

Casey nodded. "Yeah, it doesn't leave until two hours after you all, though, and I've got to change planes in Denver, but I still should be there before sunrise."

"When are you coming back?"

"I'll be back here in time for the show Saturday night."

Dana nodded. "Good." The door to the dressing room opened and everyone filed out of the room, heading for the stage.

Michael approached Casey and took her hand, pulling her back into the dressing room. He looked sad. Even though he had said he understood why she was going home, and had encouraged her to do so, she knew that he really wanted her to accompany him to California.

"So, I'm thinking that maybe I should start drinking now and work myself up into the stupor that I need to be in to fly, rather than drinking a whole lot right before we take off."

Casey smiled. "Have you had anything to drink?"

He shook his head. "Why?"

"Don't. I've got something for you." She pulled a pill bottle out of her pocket and handed it to him.

"What's this?" He looked at the label, then at Casey.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking about this problem of yours, and I talked to Dr. Klein this week, and he prescribed these for you. It's an anti-anxiety medication. It'll take the edge off, and you won't have to get drunk."

"That's a plus. So what do I have to do? When do I take it?"

She looked at her watch. "Let's see, they may make you drowsy, so take one right after the show, then another right before you get on the plane. You might sleep the whole flight, or you may not, but either way, I doubt you're going to freak out."

"Thanks, Casey. You're too good to me." He kissed her on the forehead before stepping across the room to put the pills in his duffel bag. "You can't drink, though, at all." She knew that this wouldn't be a problem for him. Although he did treat himself to the occasional beer, Casey had only seen him drunk once.

He took her hand again and they walked to the stage. "Go make some noise, babe."



Casey let herself into the empty house. She assumed her father was at the hospital with Marjorie. She didn't even bother taking off her clothes before falling into the bed. She woke up to the sound of her cell phone ringing. She pulled it out of her pocket.

"Hello?"

"Were you sleeping?"

"Uh-huh. What time is it?"

"It's seven here in beautiful, sunny, warm Los Angeles."

Casey's eyes flew open and she sat up. "Oh, crap. I didn't mean to sleep this late." She rubbed her eyes. "So what are you doing up so early?"

"I feel great, Casey. I went running with Max this morning.

Getting ready to get my Grand Slam Breakfast.”

Casey got off the bed and went into the bathroom. She turned on the shower. “I think this obsession you’ve got with Denny’s borders on psychotic.”

Michael laughed loudly, and Casey could tell that he was in a good mood. “So I take it the pills worked out for you.”

“They helped a lot. Thank you.”

She sat on the toilet and pulled off her socks. She stood back up and unzipped her jeans. “What’s your day looking like?”

“We’re supposed to be at the Staples Center at nine and we’ll be there rehearsing and stuff with everyone until the show at five.”

“You know I wish I could be there.”

“I know, Casey. I love you.”

“I know.”

She sped through a shower and was standing in the kitchen buttering a piece of toast when the back door opened and Annie and Emily entered.

“Casey. What are you doing here?” Casey could tell that Annie was not surprised. She was angry.

“I came to see Mom.”

Annie shook her head. “You can’t let me have this?”

“Have this?”

“Yeah. You’re always there, the first one to the rescue. You were there for them when Alex died. You were there when Grampa died. You were there when Mom had to put Granny and Pop in the nursing home. Let me have this, Casey. Just go on back to wherever you came running from and let me handle this.”

“I didn’t know we were in some sort of competition.”

“Well, now you do,” Annie snapped.

Casey shook her head. “I’m here until tomorrow afternoon. Deal with it.” Annie glared at her, then turned and stormed out

of the back door, slamming it behind her. Casey looked at Emily.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Why aren’t you in school?”

“Teacher workday.”

“Oh. Where are your brothers and sisters?”

“They’re with Grandma and Grandpa Morris, except Rebecca. Daddy had to take her to the doctor.” She frowned. “I don’t think Mom is very happy about you being here.”

“You don’t?” Casey sighed. “Were you supposed to be going with her?”

Emily shook her head. “No. She wanted me to come over here and clean the house so Grandma and Grandpa wouldn’t have it to worry about.”

“That’s a good idea, Em. You know what? I’m going to make your mom happy and not go to the hospital. I’ll stay here and help you. They’ll be home around lunch time, I’d guess.”

She and Emily quickly straightened up the already clean house. She then sent Emily upstairs to her room to retrieve videotape she had brought for the family to watch. She returned to the living room with the tape.

Casey nodded toward the VCR “Start it.”

The things on the tape were innocent enough and the language was mild enough – no worse than Emily heard at school, for sure. The “Casey cam,” as the guys had dubbed it, had recorded them rehearsing their dance moves, singing at sound checks, goofing off in the dressing room, eating on Casey’s bus, eating in the hotel rooms, eating at Denny’s, and of course, performing. She had taped them playing basketball; she had caught them all sleeping on their bus late one night when they stopped for fuel; and there were several shots of one or more of them singing a cappella in bathrooms all across the country.

Of course, the camera had been turned on her, too, mostly

by Max. His favorite prank was to stand outside the bathroom door with the camera and startle her when she opened the door. She jumped every time and he never tired of it.

Michael had picked up the camera and caught an argument between David and Casey one morning at breakfast. David had a habit of coming onto Casey's bus in the middle of the night on the nights they stayed over in a hotel to fix himself a snack. He also had a habit of not cleaning up after himself. It had come to a head one morning when she boarded her bus and found that he had stuck a knife covered in peanut butter in the jelly jar. It wasn't a big deal, she could admit, but she had blown a gasket, and Michael had caught it on tape.

The last few minutes of the footage had been filmed just a few days before. Casey had the camera at the hotel's indoor pool videotaping the guys as well as Al and Jake playing water basketball, trying to dive, and generally just cutting loose and enjoying a break from work. She hadn't been aware that Jason had picked up the camera after she had joined them in the pool and he had taped Casey and Michael huddled together in a corner in the shallow end of the pool. They were kissing. It was nothing graphic and obviously nothing Casey was ashamed of doing in front of someone else, but she hadn't told her family that her relationship with Michael had rocketed past the "just friends" stage.

Emily hadn't missed it, and she picked up the remote to rewind the tape and watch the last few seconds again. She looked from the television to Casey, her eyes wide. "Casey, was that you with Mike Brooks?"

Casey smiled and nodded. "Mike and I are dating, I guess you could say."

"You mean, he's your boyfriend?"

Again, Casey nodded. "Yeah, he's my boyfriend."

"You're in love with him?"

"Oh, I am, Emily, but I think what's more important is that he's in love with me."

Emily opened her mouth to ask another question, but they were interrupted by Dan, Marjorie, and Annie coming in the house.

"Casey!" Marjorie said. "What are you doing here?"

Casey saw Annie roll her eyes. "I wanted to come and see you, Mom."

Marjorie sat gingerly in a chair. "You could have just called, sweetie. I hate for you to miss work."

"Yeah, you could have just called," Annie echoed.

Casey ignored her. "I'm just here until tomorrow, Mom. I thought that maybe I could help out some, maybe cook a few meals to put in the freezer."

"She doesn't need your help," Annie said. "Daddy's here with her. I live a couple of blocks away. She's got friends around."

Marjorie sighed. "Please, girls. Don't fight."

Annie looked at her watch. "I've got to go and get Rebecca so Matt can go into work this afternoon." Casey could tell that she hated to leave and have Casey win this battle.

"I'll go get her," Casey offered, knowing she was adding fuel to the fire, "and I'll take her to the grocery store with me. You stay here with Mom." She looked at Dan who was already half asleep on the couch. "I'm sure Daddy needs a nap. You can relieve him for a while."

"Girls, I don't need a baby-sitter," Marjorie said, but her protests were ignored.

Annie clenched her teeth then surprised Casey by relaxing her face. "Okay. You go get Rebecca."

Matt was grading papers at the kitchen table when Annie knocked on the back door. "Casey." He was obviously surprised to see her.

"Hey, Matt. I came to get Rebecca. Annie wanted to stay with Mom."

"Oh. She's taking a nap. She should be awake soon."

"How is she doing?"

He sighed. "She keeps pulling out her hearing aids; she hates them. She doesn't understand what's happening to her, and it frustrates her. We're supposed to start sign language lessons next week."

"I'm so sorry, Matt. How are you and Annie dealing with all this?"

"One day at a time." He shook his head and looked at the papers in front of him. "You remember anything about Calculus?"

"Uh, no."

He put his pen down, obviously not interested in correcting the tests. "So what's going on with you? Margie never says because she knows Annie doesn't want to hear it. Still having fun?"

Casey nodded. "I am. The tour's about half over now. I'm going to miss it."

"Emily is the envy of the school. Everybody thinks that she knows them personally. Shoot, I've even become more popular. I cannot believe the influence those guys have over those kids."

"You know, Matt, they are really good guys, and they know that they're serving as role models and they try to live up to that. I can't think of two bad things to say about any one of them. I proud to be a part of it."

He nodded and accepted what she had said as the truth. "You look great, Casey. Happy. I think this job has been good for you."

She smiled. "It has, but it's not just the job. I've been seeing one of them -- Mike. We're pretty serious. I think we're in this one for the long haul."

"So does that mean you're not coming back here?"

"No, I'm not. I'm staying in Florida, and you know that will

be better for everyone. Obviously, Annie needs to feel important and needed, and she doesn't feel that way with me around. I haven't been living here, so it's not like you all would miss me."

Matt leaned forward and frowned. "I'm sorry, Casey. I wish I could explain why, but I can't. I don't know why."

They were joined in the kitchen by Rebecca, who was carrying her hearing aids in her hand. "Here, Daddy," she said handing them to him. "Hi, Aunt Casey."

Casey smiled. "Hi, Rebecca." She watched as Matt put the hearing aids in her ears. "You wanna go with me to the store so your Daddy can go to work?"

The girl nodded happily, and Casey took her hand and led her out to the car. An hour later they were back in Marjorie's kitchen. Marjorie and Dan were both sleeping, so Annie took Emily and Rebecca home, leaving Casey alone in the quiet house. She spent the afternoon cooking. After several hours, Dan came down to the kitchen in search of food. "What can I get for you, Daddy?"

He rubbed the back of his neck and sat at the table. "Pour me a cup of that coffee," he said, nodding to the pot Casey had been drinking out of all afternoon. "Coffee in the afternoon," he said. "You get that from your mother."

"How is she doing, Daddy?"

He shrugged. "She was upset, obviously, but she's been so heavily medicated since the paramedics got to her that I can't tell."

Casey began spooning a large helping of chicken and dumplings into a bowl. Dan shook his head and accepted the bowl from Casey.

"I was so scared, Casey," he said, his voice heavy with sorrow. "I don't know how you did it."

Chapter Sixteen



“Good morning, Casey,” Jason said as he boarded the bus first. One look at scowl told Casey that he wasn't happy. “What's wrong?”

He frowned at her. “205,” he said, handing her his glucose meter.

She looked at it then at Jason. She shook her head. “I'm sorry, Jace. It looks like we need to start with the insulin.”

Jason frowned. “Damn,” he muttered. “I don't want to do this, Casey.”

“I know you don't, honey, but we don't really have much choice. I've put it off as long as I could. You diet is good, you get plenty of exercise, you're obviously not overweight, you're young, but for some reason, your sugar is high. We've got to do this.”

“I know,” he sighed.

“Are you scared of needles?”

He shook his head, then nodded. "I guess that's what you would call it. They make me nervous. And I don't like pain."

"Well, I wish there was another way," she said.

"Not half as much as I do."

She retrieved one of the syringes and two small bottles of insulin. "All right, this is what we're going to try. It's going to be a combo, part short-acting insulin that gets into your system quickly, but only lasts a few hours, and part longer-lasting that takes longer to get into your system, but will stay with you for twenty-four hours or so."

Jason watched silently as she filled the syringe part way with a cloudy substance then followed with a clear liquid. "We're going to start with just one injection before breakfast, but if that's not enough, we'll add another in the evenings."

"All right," she continued, thumping the needle to get rid of the air bubbles, "we need to pick a couple of injection sites. We inject into the fatty tissue between the skin and muscle. It's called subcutaneous tissue, or sub Q. I think we should use places on your abdomen since you use your arms legs so much while dancing."

"Why does that matter? 'Cause I'll be sore?"

She shook her head. "That too, but they say that insulin may be absorbed too quickly from places where the muscles are vigorously exercised." She tugged on his arm, and motioned for him to stand up. "That means we can do it here, or here, or, of course, your butt." She ran her index finger across his stomach just below his belly button, turned him around and touched him along either side of the small of his back and then patted his rump.

He gave a little jump and laughed. "Which is better?"

"If you do it in the front, you can do it yourself. I'll teach you how. You'll have to have me or someone else do an injection in the back. But you'll need to rotate and not use the same

spot over and over. So where do you want to start?"

He lifted his shirt and exposed his stomach. "I don't like this at all."

"Take a deep breath and exhale as I stick it in. Close your eyes if you want to. You won't feel a thing."

Jason laughed. "Is that the line Mike used on you?"

She laughed, too. "Funny. Let's do it here," she said touching him through his jeans to a spot just below and to the left of his navel.

"You just want me to take off my pants," he joked, unzipping his jeans. He held them around his hips with one hand and used the other hand to push down the waistband his underwear enough to expose the spot Casey had suggested.

She used a pre-moistened alcohol wipe to clean the area. She pinched a fold of skin gently between her fingers and quickly inserted the needle. She pushed in the plunger, emptying the syringe. She pulled the needle out and tossed it into the sink. A drop of blood formed at the injection site. She held an alcohol wipe against it.

"Liar," he said. "I did feel it, but it wasn't so bad."

Casey lifted the wipe and waited to see if the bleeding had stopped. "Good," she said, dropping the alcohol pad in the garbage can, "And if it works like I want it to, then we'll only have to do it before breakfast every day."

Jason zipped his jeans. "Thanks, Casey."

She looked at her watch. "We'll check again in a little while to see what's going on." She moved to the counter and began cracking eggs.

That evening, as the buses headed to their next destination, Casey and Michael sat on opposite ends of the bed, each deeply engrossed in the newest novel by John Grisham.

She put her book aside and looked at Michael. "Mike."

He didn't look up. "Casey."

"I want to talk to you about something."

Michael closed his book. "This can't be good."

She smiled. "No, it's nothing bad. I want you to think about coming home with me for Thanksgiving. I'd like you to meet my parents." She was flying home the morning before Thanksgiving to spend the holiday with her family.

He nodded. "I was thinking maybe you were going to ask me that sometime soon."

"So how were you going to answer?"

"We'll have to fly." The medication that Dr. Klein had prescribed took the edge off his anxiety, but it didn't make him *want* to get on an airplane.

"I know. I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't important to me."

"I've been thinking about it, Casey. I was going to tell you that I would love to go with you to Utah and meet your parents."

"Are you still going to tell me that?"

He nodded and opened his book again. He smiled slightly. "I suppose."

Jason and David boarded the bus first the next morning. Casey came out of the bedroom, still dressed in her pajamas. She slid the door shut behind her. "Good morning. I overslept." She started the coffee maker and got a glass out of the cabinet. She sat the glass in front of Jason and poured it full of orange juice. "What will it be this morning?"

"I want pancakes," David said.

"Me too," Jason said.

Casey nodded and hurriedly got the ingredients together. Max and Reed boarded the bus.

Max looked around and frowned. "Where's Mike?"

"He's still asleep. Y'all want pancakes, too?"

"Sure, fine," Max said. He pushed past Casey and opened the door to the bedroom. "Get up!" He yelled at Michael.

"What the hell is your problem?" Michael yelled back.

"It's not fair that we all have to haul our asses out of bed at eight o'clock if we want to eat and you get to sleep all freaking day because you're screwing the cook." He turned to Casey. "No offense."

"None taken," she said. Although his statement had stung a bit, she understood his problem. Ever since Michael had taken up permanent residence on her bus, he had taken advantage of the situation by sleeping late in the mornings, most of the time missing breakfast all together.

"Screw you," Michael said.

"What!" Max lunged toward the bed and tackled Michael who was just sitting up. He landed a punch squarely on Michael's jaw.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" Casey yelled. She started toward the open bedroom door, but David and Jason pushed past her and pulled Max off of Michael.

"What the hell are you doing?" She heard Michael say. Max came back into the kitchen, followed by David and Jason. They sat down at the table and Casey poured him, David and Reed a cup of coffee.

"So did you roll out of the wrong side of the bed or what?" she asked Max. "What's your problem this morning?"

She suspected that his outburst had more to do with being tired than being angry. He shook his head and didn't answer. Michael came out of the bedroom and sat down at his usual place. Casey inspected his chin before she sat a cup of coffee in front of him. Max turned away from him.

Michael sighed loudly. "You're right. I'm sorry." Max still didn't respond.

"So, you going home for Thanksgiving, Casey?" Jason asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

She nodded. "Yeah, we're flying in on Wednesday morning and we'll be back in Orlando Friday night."

"We're?" David asked. He looked at Michael. "You going with her?"

Michael took a sip of his coffee and nodded. "Yep."

"That's a short trip," Reed said. "We don't have to be back until Sunday."

"Yeah, well, it's long enough for me."

"Gonna meet the parents," Jason sang in a teasing voice.

Casey sat a stack of plates on the table. "That's right, and I think two days is more than enough torture. He may decide that he wants rid of me after he meets them." She winked at Mike. "Actually, it's not my parents I'm worried about."



Casey pulled the rental car into her parent's driveway. "We're here," she said.

Michael nodded. "Yep."

"Feeling okay?"

"A little tired."

"Are you nervous?"

"A little," he admitted.

Casey squeezed his knee. "Don't be. My parents are pretty cool."

"Is your sister here?"

Casey shook her head. "I don't know." They got out of the car and Michael followed Casey to the door. The front room was empty.

"Mom? Daddy?" Casey called.

"In the kitchen, Casey," Marjorie's voice rang out.

Casey led Michael into the kitchen. Marjorie was rolling out a pie crust on the table. She turned and wiped her hands on her apron. "Hi, sugar," she said, wrapping her arms around Casey.

She turned to Michael. "Mike, it's good to meet you." She

held out her hand.

Michael smiled and took her hand. "It's nice to meet you too, Mrs. Johnson."

She clasped his hand in both of hers. "Oh, please, call me Margie, and when you meet Casey's dad, call him Dan."

"How's your arm, Mom?" Casey asked. Marjorie had had the cast removed just the day before.

Marjorie looked down at her scarred forearm. "The doctor says the bone's healed, but I'm supposed to be going to physical therapy a couple of times a week."

Casey looked around. "Where's Daddy?"

"He took Matthew and Sam to Wal-Mart to buy one of those basketball goals. The boys have really gotten into it. We wanted to get one for them for Christmas, but Annie said no, so he got mad and took them to buy it today. We'll put it up at our house, of course."

"Why did Annie say no?"

Marjorie shook her head. "Who knows, Casey? Maybe because one of them might get hurt. Maybe because they might get dirty. Maybe because she doesn't want them outside. Hell, I don't know."

Casey smiled. "So why is Daddy buying it?"

"You know why. You would have bought it, too. You and your father were definitely cut from the same piece of cloth."

"What are you making?" Casey asked, pinching off a piece of the dough and rolling it between her fingers.

"Sweet potato pie." She looked at Michael. "You like sweet potato pie?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Marjorie picked up the flattened dough and laid it gently on top of the pie plate before pushing it into shape. "Well, I hope you like my cooking. I know you're used to eating pretty good."

"You're not going to make me cook?" Casey asked.

Her mother shook her head. "You're on vacation, sweetie, but if you want to make those mashed potatoes that I like so much, I won't stop you."

Michael covered his mouth as he yawned. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. I'm sure you two are tired. Flying will do that. Why don't y'all go on upstairs and take a nap and freshen up. You're not going to miss anything around here."

They returned to the car to retrieve their bags. "Your mom seems nice," Michael said.

"My mom is very nice." She led him down a long hallway to the bedroom that her parents had designated as hers. "Do you need anything to drink? I'm thirsty."

He rubbed his forehead. "I have a headache. You think I can get some Tylenol or something?"

She nodded and left the room. Her mother was just placing two pies into the oven. "Mom, do you have any Tylenol?" She asked, opening a cupboard and pulling out a glass.

"There's a bottle on the window ledge above the sink. You got a headache, honey?"

"Not yet." She shook her head. "Mike does. I think he's just tired, though." She filled the glass with ice and water. She retrieved two of the pills from the bottle and returned to the room.

Michael had removed his shoes and was lying on the bed. "Here you go, sweetie." She handed him the medicine.

He sat up and took a sip from her drink. "Thanks."

Casey opened her bag and found her sweatshirt and gym shorts. "I think I'm going to get more comfortable." Michael followed suit, removing all his clothes down to his boxer shorts. He got into bed and rolled onto his side, facing away from Casey. She wrapped her arm around his waist, pressing her body close to his. She kissed his shoulder. "Good night."

"It's like eleven in the morning." He sighed. "Good night."

She lay there listening to his steady breathing. She was glad

he was relaxing. His nervousness about flying had caused him to toss and turn the night before and Casey wasn't sure that he had even gotten a full hour of rest.

She had witnessed first hand that morning just how much Michael hated to fly. It was the main reason the group traveled mostly on the bus. The other guys didn't mind flying, but Michael had feared and detested it even before the tragedy on September 11. Even though he was using the anti-anxiety pills Dr. Klein had prescribed, it took a while for the medicine to take effect. He had been nervous and edgy and had paced the floor incessantly in the hours before leaving for the airport. He had calmed down just before boarding the plane and had slept the entire flight.

Sometime later, Casey's eyes flew open. She felt like she was being watched. Michael was still sound asleep beside her. As she sat up, she saw movement at the door. She heard it click shut. She got out of bed and hurried across the room, flinging open the door, expecting to see her mother in the hallway.

"Emily."

The girl froze and turned around. "Hi, Aunt Casey," she said nervously.

Casey shut the door and went to her. She embraced her niece. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." She bit her bottom lip. "I'm sorry for peeking, but I couldn't help it. Michael Brooks is in your bed."

Casey smiled. "I know." They began walking back down the hall toward the kitchen.

"I can't believe it."

"I can't either sometimes," she said with a shake of her head, "but you're going to have to believe it, Em. Tomorrow he's going to be sitting at the dinner table with you."

Emily sighed. "I hope Mom doesn't ruin this." They entered the kitchen where Annie was sitting with their mother at the table.

"Me, too," she said. She sat at the table across from her sister. "Hello, Annie."

"Where's the golden boy?"

"Annie," Marjorie said, shaking her head in warning.

"Mike's still sleeping," Casey explained. "We were taking a nap."

Annie turned to her mother. "Are you letting them share a room?"

"They're adults."

Annie glanced at Emily then back at her mother. "Don't you think that's sending a bad message to my kids?"

Marjorie patted Annie's hand. "The ones who are old enough to even put it together are smart enough to figure it out, and they probably don't care anyway." She turned to Emily. "Honey, does it bother you that Casey and Mike are sleeping in the same room?"

Emily shook her head. "Nope."

"See." Marjorie said. She stood up and opened the oven door. The smell of a chocolate pie wafted into the kitchen.

Annie sighed loudly and rolled her eyes, bringing them to a rest on Casey. "Do you get paid more for the extra services?"

Casey bit her lip and shook her head, disbelieving the hatred that Annie exhibited. She leaned forward, closing the distance between them and lowered her voice to a whisper. "You can't even imagine."

Annie clenched her jaw. "Come on, Emily. We're going home." Emily kept her seat in silent defiance. With a final glare at Casey, she turned on her heel and left through the back door.

A shuffling behind them directed their attention from the departing Annie. Michael appeared, dressed in jeans and a maroon Florida State sweatshirt. He met Casey's eyes and flashed her a grin, pushing the bad feelings about Annie from her mind.

"Holy, crap," Emily muttered when she saw him in the

doorway. She dropped her glass of tea in the floor. The plastic cup bounced twice, spraying the amber liquid across the wall.

Casey covered her mouth to try and stifle her laughter. It didn't work. She took a deep breath and crossed the room to Michael. "Mike, this is my niece, Emily."

He wrapped his arms around the girl, surprising and thrilling her with the hug. "I've heard a lot about you," he said. "I'm glad to finally meet you."

"Me, too," she said.

Casey handed Emily a dishtowel. "Here, sweetie." Emily bent down and began to wipe up the tea. Michael grabbed another towel from the kitchen counter to help her. Casey went to the back door and stepped out onto the patio. She watched her father toss the basketball into the hoop. Matt and Sam raced for the rebound.

"Hey, Daddy," she called.

"You're up." He joined her by the door, greeting her with a kiss on the cheek.

"Daddy, I want you to meet Mike." She opened the back door and led him into the kitchen.

Michael jumped up from his chair and extended his hand to Casey's father.

"Good to meet you, son," The older man said, shaking Michael's hand. "Casey has spoken highly of you."

"Of you, too, sir."

Dan looked down at his younger daughter then back at Michael. "Are you sure you know what you're getting into? Casey can be stubborn and hard-headed."

Michael chuckled. "Yeah, but, boy, can she cook."

Dan laughed loudly. "Ha, a man who has his priorities in order. I like that."

Matthew stuck his head in the back door. "Grandpa? You coming back?"

"Hey, Matty, don't you want to meet Mike?" Casey asked.

"Can he play ball?"

Dan nodded toward the door. "You want to play?"

"Sure," Michael answered. He followed Dan outside.

Casey heard Sam's voice. "He's on my team. He's tall!"

She smiled and turned to her mother. "You need any help with anything?"

"Emily," Marjorie said. "Why don't you go outside with them. Let me talk to Casey alone." Marjorie waited until Emily had shut the door behind her.

"Have you been to see Dr. Arnold lately?"

"I saw her in May. I went by after I left here on my way to Orlando. Why?"

"I was just wondering if anything had changed."

Casey shook her head. "No, Mom. My reproductive organs are just as screwed up as they always were."

"Have you told Mike?"

Casey nodded. "Yeah, we've talked about it."

"What did he say?"

"He's still around." Casey watched her mother remove the chocolate pie from the oven and place it on the counter next to the sweet potato pies. "We've only known each other five months, only really been together for three. We haven't made any life decisions."

"I was just wondering if his attitude was anything like CJ's. I just don't want it to be unfair to you. I know you want children one day."

"Yeah, and he does, too. You really believe that I'll have kids, don't you?"

"I do. I watch the news; I read magazines. There are infertile women giving birth everyday. I'm sure there is some sort of drugs or some procedure that can be done to help you." She shook her head. "But you know, there's always adoption."

Casey nodded. "I know Mom, and we've talked about that, but like I said, it's all so new."

"I just don't want you to get your heart broken, honey."

Casey shook her head. "If it ends, Mom, there's no way it won't be broken. I love him."

Chapter Seventeen



“Well, I’ve got to admit,” Annie said the next evening during dinner. “I was wrong about you, Mike.”

Damn, everything had been going so well. Dinner is almost over, Annie. Please don’t...don’t screw this up. She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and said a quick prayer that Annie would keep the evening civil.

Michael raised his eyebrows. “How so?” Casey held her breath, scared of what her sister would say next. She glanced around the table at her mother, her father and Emily who each seemed equally apprehensive.

“I thought you would be real stuck-up or something, but you seem to be real down-to-earth.”

“Thank you,” Michael said. Casey sighed, relieved.

“I just hope Casey doesn’t screw you over like she did CJ when she cheated on him with Chris Baker.”

No, no, no! Casey's heart pounded against her chest. Tears formed in her eyes. She left the room in a hurry, knocking over her chair as she went.

"Damnit, Annie," she heard her father's voice boom.

She flung open the front door and stepped out into the cold night air. The neighbors across the street had a swing in their garden, and Casey headed for it. From that vantage point, she could see her parents' house, but she was concealed by the darkness. No sooner than she sat down the sobs racked her body. *I didn't want him to know! If he knows I'm a cheater, he won't love me anymore.*

After a few minutes, the front porch light came on and Dan stepped out. He lit a cigarette and looked around. He didn't call out her name, and she knew he knew her well enough to know she wouldn't have answered anyway. He went back inside.

Within a few minutes, Annie, Matt and the kids filed out of the front door and piled into their van. Still, she sat. It was cold; the weatherman had mentioned the possibility of snow, but Casey couldn't feel it. All she could feel was anger and humiliation and shame.

The front door opened again and Michael appeared on the porch. He zipped up the heavy parka she had given him for his birthday and headed for the street. He stopped at the edge of the road and looked around. His gaze stopped on her. *How can he see me?* He walked toward her.

"Hey," he said when he reached the swing. "Can I sit down?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry, Michael. I shouldn't have left."

"It's okay."

She shook her head. "No, it's not."

He nodded and squeezed her knee. "I understand why you are upset. I talked to your mom."

"You did?"

“Yeah, I helped her with the dishes. She tried to explain about you and Annie.”

“Did she come up with anything good?”

He smiled. “Not really.” He took off the coat and wrapped it around Casey’s shoulders.

Casey stared at her hands. “Did she say anything about Chris Baker?” *Well, this is it. This is where he decides if he stays or if he goes.*

He shook his head. “No.”

She met his eyes. “Do you want to know?”

He shrugged. “It’s your business.” He paused. “Do you want to tell me?”

Not really. She nodded reluctantly. “I think I should. It’s true. I did cheat on CJ.”

“Who was this guy?”

“He used to live next door when I was growing up. We were the same age and we were best friends. CJ didn’t like it, and after we started dating, he wouldn’t let me see him, but he lived next door, so I could see him when CJ wasn’t around. Anyway, we kept in touch throughout college. It was the single biggest thing me and CJ fought about. He didn’t want me to be friends with him, he didn’t want me to be friends with anyone, but I was adamant about Chris and I was willing to keep fighting about it.

About a year and a half after we were married, CJ went out of town one weekend for a funeral. I was supposed to try and change my schedule and go to the funeral, too. I didn’t want to go, so I lied to him and said I couldn’t change my schedule, even though I had. I called Chris. I wasn’t looking for an affair. I just wanted to see him. I hadn’t seen him in person in years. So I called him and we went to dinner and to see a movie. He was my oldest and closest friend. I missed him. He took me back to his place and we were talking, catching up, you know. I had a

drink, then two, then three and the next thing I know, I'm waking up in his bed."

She looked Michael for a reaction. "And I've never seen him since."

He nodded. "Did CJ ever know?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. He never confronted me with it, and I didn't tell him. The only reason Annie knows is because Chris told his sister and she blabbed to Annie. I told my parents. The guilt was killing me and I needed to tell someone."

"So you felt bad?"

"I've never felt worse."

He was silent for a few moments. He nodded toward Casey's parents' house. "Why don't we go inside and go to bed?"

"Okay." *So he wants to sleep on it.* "Are you afraid that I'll cheat on you?"

"Are you going to?"

"No."

He stopped at the front door and turned to her. "I think that maybe the biggest reason people cheat is because the person that they're with isn't giving them everything they need. I'm not going to leave you needing for anything."

"Is that a promise?"

He nodded and leaned down to kiss her. "Absolutely."

She threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you."



Michael unlocked the door and swung it open. "God, it's good to be home," he exclaimed.

They stepped into the kitchen and dropped their suitcases on the floor. He pressed the button on the answering machine to

play back the messages from the previous two days. Casey casually flipped through the mail he had retrieved on the way up the driveway. She plucked out a copy of *Entertainment Weekly* and leafed through the pages.

Michael rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Okay," she said absently as she read through an article about Brad Pitt. The phone rang; the caller ID displayed Birdie's information.

"Hello?"

"Casey? It's Birdie. How are you? How was your trip? Did Michael behave himself on the plane?"

"He did great and my parent's loved him."

"Of course they did. Listen, I was wondering if you two wanted to come over for some leftovers tonight."

"Let me ask Mike." Casey slid off the barstool. "He's in the shower." Casey carried the cordless phone into the master bedroom. The door to the bathroom was open and steam was rolling out into the bedroom.

"Mike!" she called over the sound of the water. She held the phone against her stomach. "Your mom's on the phone and she wants to know if we want to come over for leftovers."

Michael opened the shower door. Casey raked her eyes over his body. It was a sight she wasn't sure she'd get used to. "If you want to." He stepped out and grabbed a towel. He wrapped it around his hips.

Casey put the phone back to her ear. "Yeah, we'll be there. Thanks." She clicked the phone off and grabbed the towel, yanking it from his body.

"You see something you like?" He asked, catching her gaze in the mirror.

"You are so hot."

"So, you just want me for my body?"

“Yep.”

He turned around and easily lifted her. He carried her to the bed. He languidly undressed her. Their lovemaking was slow and deliberate and satisfying.

She thought about their conversation the night before. He had taken her confession of infidelity well, so well it made her feel uneasy. She hadn't planned on telling him about it -- ever. She was scared that by telling him, she had lost some of his trust, and she was scared that he would compare her to Sherry. She tried to rise to get out of the bed, but Michael tightened his grip around her waist.

“Stay,” he whispered.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“What’s bothering you, Casey?”

She relaxed against him. “Just thinking about last night.”

“Which part?”

“Mike, I’m just so scared that you’ll think you can’t trust me.”

“When I was talking to your mom last night, she told me about you and CJ. She said he was very demanding of you.” He paused. “Were you really happy with him?”

“I loved him,” Casey offered meekly, knowing she sounded as weak as the trashy talk-show guests they made fun of week after week. “I was with him since I was fourteen years old. I didn’t really know anything else. He was good to me. We had a good time together. Everyone expected us to get married.”

“But were you happy? I suspect that you weren’t. And if you were, how long would it be before the baby issue came up?”

“But how can you still trust me? I cheated on my husband.”

“But you were remorseful. You knew it was a mistake.”

“I’ve never been more sorry for anything in my life.”

“Then that’s all that matters.”

"I wish I could believe that."

He squeezed her tighter. "Believe it."



They were mid-way through supper when Casey's cell phone rang. "Sorry," she apologized and she rummaged through her purse. "Hello?"

It was Annie. "Casey. Is she with you?"

"What? What? Who?"

"Emily. Is she with you?"

"No. What's going on, Annie?"

"She's gone." Annie hung up the phone with no further explanation. Casey held out the phone and stared at it.

"Casey, what's going on?" Michael asked.

Casey shook her head. "I don't know. That was Annie. Emily's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yeah. I don't know." Casey dialed her parent's phone number. Her mother picked up after the first ring. "Mom! What's going on?"

"Oh, Casey. Emily's gone. We think she ran away."

"Ran away?"

"Yeah. She never came home from Tracy's. That's where she told Annie she was going, but Tracy said she never came over. She said something about some boy she's been hanging out with."

"How long has she been gone?"

"She left the house before nine this morning. She could be anywhere. We don't know where she's heading. Maybe she's on her way to you."

"Did you call the airlines? Did you call the police?"

"Yeah, the police came and took a report, but they're treat-

ing it like a runaway, which is probably what it is. We called the airlines, but there was no way she could have afforded a plane ticket. We called the bus station, too, but there were no tickets sold to her or the boy."

"Oh, God, Mom. What do you need me to do?"

"Just stay by the phone in case she calls. Listen, I don't want to tie up the lines, okay?"

"Yeah. I understand." Casey hung up the phone and looked at Michael and his mother. "They think she ran away."

Casey waited up all night by the phone. It rang twice; both times her mother, checking to see if Casey had heard anything from Emily. Michael, scheduled to leave before sunrise, sat in the kitchen with her talking quietly over coffee.

"I've got to go," he said when they heard two sets of footsteps on the back deck.

She slid off the barstool and stood between his legs, pressing her forehead to his. "I'll catch up when I can," she said, just as Reed entered the kitchen through the back door.

Michael held her face gently in his fingertips and kissed her softly on the lips. "It will be okay." He pushed away and stood up. "I'll call."

"Casey, she'll turn up," Reed said as he came to her for a hug. "I know she will."

"Thanks, guys. Y'all take care of yourselves. Make sure Jason takes his meds, and don't fall off the stage." She pointed her finger at them. "And don't trash my bus."

She followed them to the back door and watched them leave in Reed's car. She returned to the bar and took another sip of her coffee. She immediately felt that sip along with the rest of the cup back up in her throat sending her to a kneeling position in front of the toilet. She longed to take a shower, but was scared of not being able to hear the phone.

She spent the day cleaning the already spotless house. She

alphabetized Michael's expansive CD collection. She changed all the linens on all the beds. She scrubbed the bathtubs, showers, and toilets. She took down the drapes and washed them. She rearranged all the food in the pantry. She refolded all the clothes in Michael's drawers.

Her day was interrupted frequently. Michael called twice, her mom called twice, Dana came by to check on her, and Matt called once to report that the boy, Howie, had turned up back home. Before she knew it, it was midnight. Emily had been gone for thirty-eight hours.

Casey dozed off and on in Michael's recliner watching reruns of old sitcoms on *Nick at Night* and waiting for a phone call that never came. Dana showed up with breakfast just a few minutes after she got up and they busied themselves by assembling and decorating Michael's massive artificial Christmas tree.

After lunch, Dana talked her into taking a quick shower, assuring her that she wouldn't let her miss any calls. After her shower, she stretched out on Michael's bed. A migraine had developed over-night and it had caused her to be nauseous again that morning. *If I could close my eyes for a minute, the pain might ease up.*

She fell asleep. Later, she woke up with a start. Dana had come in and pulled the drapes making the room almost completely dark. She had also been covered with a blanket.

Someone was calling her name. She sat up in bed and looked at the clock. It was almost 4:00pm. She had been asleep for over three hours. She turned to the door. Dana was standing there holding Casey's cell phone out to her.

"I think it's her."

Chapter Eighteen



Casey jumped off the bed and grabbed the phone.
“Emily!?! Where are you?”

“I’m at the bus station, Casey. Here in Orlando. Can you come get me?”

“I’ll be there as quick as I can.” She looked at Dana. “She’s here in Orlando. At the bus station.” She slipped on a pair of shoes and grabbed her purse. “Can you take me?”

“Of course.”

Once inside the car, Casey immediately started making phone calls. She dialed Annie’s phone number as they sped up the driveway.

“Hello?” Matt answered.

“Matt, it’s Casey. She called me. Emily called. She’s here in Orlando.”

“That’s great, Casey,” he said through choked back sobs.
“Is she okay?”

"I don't know. I'm on my way to pick her up at the bus station. I'll have her call." She hung up the phone, then turned it back on and dialed Michael's cell phone number.

"Big Mike's big bus."

"She called, Mike," Casey said breathlessly.

"I know. Dana just called Reed."

Casey glanced over at the driver who was talking animatedly into her phone. "She's at the bus station, Mike."

"Call me later, okay?" Michael said.

Casey pushed open the door to the station and scanned the room. Emily was sitting in the corner looking quite small and quite scared. Casey walked over to her and held out her hand. "Come on, Emily. Let's go."

In the car, Casey quickly introduced Emily to Dana then handed Emily her cell phone. "Call your parents."

She shoved her into the backseat and slammed the door. She climbed back into the passenger's seat and listened carefully to Emily's end of the conversation. She determined that Emily had never gone to Tracy's house on Friday morning and she had been on a bus for fifty-two hours. Emily held the phone out to Casey.

"She wants to talk to you."

"Hey, Annie," She said into the phone.

"Hey, Casey," Annie said, almost sounding cordial. "I guess we need to figure out how to get her home."

"She's been on a bus for two days, Annie. I'll take her back to Mike's house, let her get a good meal, a hot bath, a good night's sleep. We'll take a flight tomorrow morning to Utah."

"Yeah, I guess that's best," Annie agreed. "Listen, Casey, don't be too nice to her. No special stuff. Don't take her anywhere; don't give her any gifts. She's in trouble."

"Oh, I completely understand, Annie. You don't need to worry." Casey clicked off the phone.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?" Emily asked in a whisper.

Casey nodded, but didn't look at her. "Why shouldn't I be, Em?"

"I guess you should, but I thought you would understand."

"Understand what?" She shook her head. "Let's just talk about this when we get home." They were silent for the rest of the ride. Dana dropped them off at the back door.

"Are you hungry?" Casey asked as they entered the kitchen.

"Starved." Emily looked around the vast room in wonder. "Mike here?"

Casey shook her head. "No, they left yesterday morning."

"I didn't think that you had to be anywhere until tomorrow night."

"Something came up. Schedules change. What if I hadn't been here, Emily? What would you have done?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't think it through, I guess."

"I guess not."

"Does Mike live here alone?" Emily asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

Casey nodded. "Yeah, you can look around while I fix us something to eat." As she pulled vegetables for a salad out of the refrigerator, her stomach growled loudly. She dialed Michael's cell phone number on the speaker phone as she cooked.

"Hello?"

"Hey, sweetie. What are you doing?"

"I am standing in your kitchen ravaging through the snack cabinet."

"Are you in Columbus yet?"

"Yeah, it's not that long of a trip. We've been here about thirty minutes or so. I'm just looking for something to eat. I sure wish you were here. That would make my decision easy."

Casey laughed and looked around to see if Emily was with-

in earshot. "I'll be there tomorrow night."

"Great. So how are things going?"

"We haven't really talked yet. I'm flying her home tomorrow morning. I'm furious, Mike. I thought when I saw her, I'd just be happy that she was safe, but God, I'm mad."

"It's okay. What she did was unacceptable. Did she say why?"

"No." Casey checked the strips of chicken that were sautéing. "I've gotta go, I'm going to burn our supper."

"Yeah, me, too," he said. "Call me later."

"Okay." Casey clicked off the phone and prepared the chicken salads. She set the table and walked through the house. She found Emily in Michael's studio. Like the other rooms on this end of the house, there was a spectacular view of the lake through huge tinted windows. This room contained a piano as well as an electric keyboard, a drum set, and a guitar stood on a stand in the corner. Gold and platinum records hung on the wall along side poster-sized blow-ups of the three album covers.

"Supper's ready," Casey said. Emily jumped, startled.

"I didn't hear you." She stood up from her seat on the piano bench. "It's a beautiful house," she said as she followed Casey back into the kitchen. They sat down at the table.

"So you want to tell me about Howie?" Casey asked.

"Tracy told."

"Of course she did. So who is this Howie?"

Emily sighed. "He's a boy I've been kinda talking to, like a boyfriend, I guess."

"How old is he?"

"Sixteen. He goes to my school, and comes over to the house sometimes, but Mom and Dad don't really like him much."

"So you decided to run away together?"

Emily shook her head. "Not like that. We thought it would

be fun to go to Salt Lake City for the day, so I told my mom I was going to Tracy's. Tracy said she would cover for me."

"When did going to the city for the day turn into running away to Florida?"

"I was mad at Mom for ruining Thanksgiving, among other things."

"What happened at Thanksgiving was between me and your mother. Emily, you shouldn't have run away. Everyone was very worried. So, you went with this boy to Salt Lake City. Then what?"

"He wanted to go by the bus station and see how much a ticket to San Diego would be. His dad lives there and he wanted to go live with him. So we were at the station and I saw on the schedule that a bus was leaving for Orlando in the next few minutes. So I bought a ticket." She dug the ticket stub out of her pocket and handed it to Casey.

Casey shook her head as she looked at it. "You gave them my name? How on earth did you ever pay for this?" She asked, looking at the receipt for one hundred and fifty dollars.

"I kinda had to give them your name." Emily pulled something out of her back pocket and handed it Casey. It was a new issue of Casey's debit card.

"Where did you get this?"

"It came for you a couple of weeks ago. Grandma had me take your mail to your room one day and I took it out. At first I didn't think it was real, but Tracy thought it was. I was going to give it back."

"Why didn't you call someone?"

"I wanted her to hurt, just like she's always hurting you."

Casey shook her head. "But you scared so many people, not just your mom, but your dad, all your brothers and sisters, your grandparents, me, Mike, even people you don't even know were scared for you. You don't need to worry about her hurting my

feelings. I'm a big girl."

"I just thought that she might be nicer to you if she got her feelings hurt for once. Besides, I was mad."

"Emily, do you have any idea how dangerous this little stunt was?"

Emily shook her head. "You know, I'm going to get all this when I get home. I don't need it here, too." She pushed her plate away.

"So you think I shouldn't be upset? You not only worried me half to death, you stole from me." Casey studied her for a moment. "Is there anything you want to tell me, Emily? Have you gotten yourself into any kind of trouble?"

Emily's eyes were evasive. "What do you mean?"

"Are you pregnant?" *Please say no*, Casey's mind screamed.

"No."

"Are you using drugs?"

Emily stared at her feet. "No."

It was an obvious lie. Casey sighed. "Oh, God. What kind?"

"I said I wasn't."

"And I don't believe you."

Emily chewed on her bottom lip. "I don't use drugs. I've tried marijuana."

"Just once?"

Emily's shoulders slumped. She shook her head. "No, but it's not like I do it everyday."

"Not yet."

"Come on, Casey. It's no big deal. Everybody has done it. I bet you have. I bet Mike has."

"Well, you're wrong. Everybody hasn't done it. I haven't done it, Mike hasn't done it."

"Lots of people do it all the time and nothing bad happens." She argued.

Casey nodded. "You're right. A lot of people try it and nothing bad happens, but a lot of people don't know when to stop. Then they try other drugs and before you know it, you're selling yourself on the street corner trying to get drug money."

Emily rolled her eyes.

Casey ran her hand through her hair. "Do you have any drugs with you?"

"No."

Casey stared at her and determined that she was telling the truth. "You know, if you bring drugs into this house, you'll never be invited back."

"Okay, okay." Emily pulled her plate back toward her picked at her salad. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"How old were you when you did it for the first time?"

"Did what?" Casey asked, unsure if they were still talking about drugs.

"Sex."

"Oh." Casey rubbed her hand over her mouth. *This is not my place. I shouldn't be having this conversation with her.* "I was fifteen," she replied reluctantly.

"Why did you do it?"

She shrugged. "Because I was in love. And CJ wanted to. It just seemed like thing to do."

"It was with CJ?"

Casey nodded. "Of course."

"Weren't you scared of getting pregnant?"

Casey shook her head. "No. We were stupid and just assumed it wouldn't happen to us." She paused. "Are you having sex, too?"

"No. Howie and me...well, he wanted to, but I was scared. I'm such a chicken. Everyone else is doing it."

Casey leaned forward and shook her head. "Emily, you

have got your whole life to have sex. You're too young."

"And you weren't?"

Casey nodded. "Oh, I was, but like I said, I was stupid and I thought that it was okay since I knew one day we were going to get married."

"How did you know that?"

Casey smiled. "He told me. He told me that night. It was my birthday. He said, 'I'm going to marry you, Casey Johnson.' He was so sure of himself. He always was. He knew exactly what he wanted." She looked at Emily. "I wish you could have known him better. He was a nice man, and I was lucky to have gotten to love him."

"So what Mom said wasn't true?" Emily shook her head. "I didn't think so."

Casey looked down at her hands. "Actually, it was true."

"Who was the other guy? Were you in love with him, too?"

She shook her head. "Sometimes people make mistakes. I made a big one. You don't really need to know the details."

"You didn't love CJ anymore?"

"I still loved him; I always loved him, but...Look, it's complicated and I don't expect you to understand, but what I did was a mistake. I do you want you to understand that."

"Yeah, I understand," Emily said, but Casey wasn't convinced that she had. "I want to take a shower. Which bathroom do you want me to use?"

Casey led her upstairs and showed her to one of the guest rooms and adjoining baths. "You can sleep here."

She went to Michael's room and opened one of the drawers he had emptied for her. She pulled out a brand new pair of cotton pajamas and took them back to Emily's room. She picked up her dirty clothes out of the floor and carried them downstairs to the laundry room.

She quickly cleaned up the kitchen then called the airline to

arrange flights back to Utah for the two of them, then a flight from Salt Lake City to New York where she would meet the guys. Their flight was scheduled to leave at eight, and Casey knew they would have to arrive to the airport a couple of hours earlier. She sat in Michael's recliner and clicked on the television.

Emily emerged from the bedroom, wearing the pajamas and drying her hair with a towel. "Thanks for the pajamas, Aunt Casey."

"No problem. Your clothes are in the wash. We'll need to be at the airport early. Our plane leaves at eight."

"You're not wasting any time getting rid of me, are you?"

"I have to go to work, Emily. I've already missed two days."

"You won't miss two days' pay."

Casey bit her tongue to keep from telling Emily that she sounded just like her mother. "It's not about that. It's about responsibility. People depend on me."

"It's just cooking."

"You don't get it at all." She pointed toward the bedroom. "Go to bed." Emily sighed dramatically and stomped up the stairs.

After cleaning the kitchen and putting Emily's clothes in the dryer, she changed into her pajamas and crawled deep into Michael's bed. She tried calling his cell phone, but got his voice mail. She left a message and turned on the television. She quickly fell asleep. She was awakened later by the phone ringing.

"Hello?" She answered sleepily.

"Were you sleeping?"

"Umm, hmm."

"I'm sorry. You want me to let you go back to sleep?"

Casey pushed herself up in bed. "No. Where were you?"

"Oh, I took this girl back to the bus and had wild sex with her for hours."

"That's funny."

He chuckled. "I left my phone on the bus and we just got back. We went to Denny's after the show."

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Of course. How was the show?"

"Not the same without you here. So what's going on with Emily?"

"Oh, God, Mike. She's smoking pot. She might be having sex. She stole a credit card from me to finance this little trip. She's heading down the wrong path, I think."

"Sounds like it. So what did you say to her?"

"I told her that if she brought drugs here, she wouldn't be invited back and she had plenty of time to have sex, and God, I'm such a hypocrite."

Michael chuckled. "You told her that?"

"Pretty much. She asked me when I lost my virginity and I told her that I was only fifteen, only eight months older than she is. Maybe Annie's right. Maybe I have been a bad influence."

"Casey, don't do that to yourself. You are a good person and a good aunt. It's not your job to raise her."

"But Michael you know all about being an unintentional role model. You still try to live your life a certain way because you have this 'good-boy' image."

"No, I have this 'good-boy' image because of the way I live my life, I hope. It doesn't matter, though. You have to live your life for you first, and if you've made some mistakes, Emily should learn from them rather than imitate them."

"You're right."

"I know." He paused. "So why did she run away?"

"She was mad at Annie for saying what she said about...well, what she said about me at dinner. She didn't believe it, though."

"Did you tell her the truth about that, too?"

"I've never been a good liar, Mike."

"It's not a bad trait, Casey. So, what time will you be arriving in New York tomorrow?"

"I'm supposed to be arriving at La Guardia at 5:12. When are y'all getting there?"

"Well, we're rolling out of here at midnight and driving all night. I think Al said if we were lucky we'd be getting to the hotel around nine. We pushed back everything we were supposed to be doing in the morning until Tuesday."

"Are you still planning on going to 'ground zero' tomorrow night?" Casey asked, referring to the site in Manhattan where the World Trade Center towers used to stand.

"Yeah. You want to go?"

"I don't know. It still makes me so sad."

"Yeah, me too." He cleared his throat. "Well, I guess I should say goodnight. Good night. I love you."

Casey smiled into the phone. "I know."

She hung up the phone and got up out of bed. She slipped upstairs to the room she had given to Emily. Her bed was empty. Casey glanced into the bathroom. It was empty, too. She quickly searched the house, her panic increasing every second. She opened the back door and stepped out onto the deck. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Emily's form sitting next to the pool.

She walked across the deck and sat down next to her.

"The water's warm," Emily said. She had her pajama pants pulled up around her knees and her legs dangled in the water.

Casey nodded. "It's heated."

"It's so warm and pretty here. There's snow on the ground at home. Are you coming back to Utah after the tour?"

"No."

"You're staying here with Mike?"

She nodded. "I'm staying in Florida. I love Mike, Emily. I

want to be with him. He wants to be with me.”

“You don’t love us? You don’t want to be with us? I need you there, Casey. I can’t take my parents anymore.”

“Emily, I know that your parents are strict, but it’s not my place to change that. Maybe you can talk to Grandma and Grandpa about maybe staying with them. I don’t know.”

Emily swirled her foot around in the water. After a few seconds of silence, she spoke. “I lied to you.”

“About what?”

“Me and Howie...we did do it. Just once. It was Friday morning before we went to Salt Lake City.”

Casey didn’t respond immediately. “Did you use any protection?” she finally asked.

Emily nodded. “Yeah. I told him that I wouldn’t do it unless he used a condom.”

“Oh, Emily, why? I’ve never even heard of this boy before and you had sex with him? How long have you known him?”

“I’ve known him since the beginning of the school year. We sit next to each other in Geometry class. We usually hang out together at the library after school, and he comes over to the house sometimes to do homework. I really like him.”

“You’re just so young. I don’t want you to screw up your life.”

“I don’t want to screw up my life either, Casey. I just wanted to do it.”

“Out of curiosity?”

Emily shook her head. “Not just. I like kissing him and when we’re making out, I just feel like we should be doing something more. You understand that, don’t you?”

Casey nodded. “I understand. Believe me, I do.” She sighed and shook her head. “Are you going to keep doing it? Do you really like him?”

Emily nodded. “I do.”

"Maybe you should talk to your mom about some birth control. Not that you shouldn't use condoms; you should use both."

Emily laughed. "Talk to my mom? Right, Casey. She'd ship me off to boarding school."

"Your mom was your age once. She knows what you're going through."

"I'm sure she doesn't. She told me she was virgin when she got married and that I should be, too."

"She told you that?"

"It's not true?"

Casey shrugged. "I don't know. I guess she was if she said so. She might be a lot of things, but she's not a liar."

"Well, it doesn't matter. I'm not a virgin anymore." She sighed. "I guess I just ruined my chances with Jason, huh?"

Casey smiled in spite of her heavy heart. "Just don't be stupid about this, Em."

They sat in silence for a few moments. "Can I come visit you this summer?" Emily asked.

"I'm sure. You know, you really should get to bed. We've got to be at the airport pretty early."

"I'm sorry, Casey. For everything. I'll pay you back the money I took and for my plane ticket."

Casey shook her head. "That's not necessary. Just do me a favor and be smart."



"What did you do there all by yourself while you were waiting for her to call?" Michael asked. Casey had finally made it to New York and they were having a quiet dinner alone at the hotel restaurant.

"Oh, I cleaned everything. I refolded your clothes, changed your sheets. Yesterday I put up your Christmas tree."

Michael seemed surprised. "You did? How did you manage to drag it downstairs?"

"Determination." She shook her head. "Dana helped. How tall is that thing anyway?"

"Nine foot, I think."

"I hope you don't mind that we went ahead and did it."

He shook his head. "No, I think it's great. It'll be nice to go home and already have it up. I was probably going to get Mom or Dana to do it anyway. I'm not really good at that kind of thing."

"The ornaments are beautiful. Did you pick them out, or did your mom?"

He frowned. "Neither. Last Christmas, Sherry called someone in." He bit his lip and shook his head like he was cursing himself for mentioning her. It was the first time he had ever mentioned her name to Casey.

Casey ignored his reaction. "She hired someone to come in and decorate?"

He nodded. "Yeah, Dana and I went shopping one night and she helped me pick out some ornaments and stuff, and she was going to help me decorate the house. She's good at that sort of thing. Anyway, Sherry got all bent out of shape about it and she hired someone to do it before me and Dana got a chance to. She took the ones I bought back to the store."

"She didn't like Dana?"

"I don't think it was so much that she didn't like Dana as she was mad at me for not asking for her help." He shook his head. "You know about Sherry." It was more of an accusation than a question.

Casey nodded. "Yeah, but not because you told me. Max did, and Dana, too. Were you ever going to tell me about her?"

"You said they told you."

"I want you to tell me, Mike." She shook her head. "You

know everything about my past...every boyfriend I've had, every relationship I've been in. I don't know anything about yours. I don't even know how many girls you've slept with."

"Before you? Four."

"So tell me about them."

He sighed. "Well, I guess my first real girlfriend was this girl named Beth. We started dating when we were freshmen in high school. It was after basketball season, so it was close to the end of the school year. We dated until the next Christmas and she moved to Ohio, or somewhere. Anyway, we were both sixteen, both virgins, so the night before she left we did it, just to see what it was all about."

"Then the next school year, my junior year, I started dating Mary. That lasted until we graduated from high school and I went up to Tallahassee. We tried the long-distance thing, but it didn't work, which was okay, because I had met this girl in my dorm, Kendra, and as soon as it was over between me and Mary, I asked her out. She dumped me after a few months."

"Why?"

"Her father didn't want her dating a white boy."

"Oh."

"But you know, it's just as well, because Dad got sick and I came back home." He paused. "He died in June and I didn't even really care about seeing anyone for a few months. In September, I joined Quintessential and we were busy, but that December, I was at a Christmas party at church and Mary was there. We started dating again. We dated for another two years, and we didn't have any real problems, but something was off. I could feel it. It's like I was always waiting for something to happen, and then it did. It was right after our second CD dropped, and she became obsessed about how much money I was making. I mean, really obsessed. She quit her job and started asking me to pay her rent and crazy stuff like that. She had to go."

"You didn't live together?"

"No. I was living with David and Reed, Max and Jason. I think she thought that I'd move in with her if I was going to be paying the rent anyway. So I dumped her."

He paused while the waiter brought their food. "I met Sherry at a party in June of last year. She seemed really nice and I liked her, obviously. My mom didn't like her at all, and I should have trusted her judgment. I bought my house the first week of December. She wasn't living with me, but she was there a lot. I guess Max and Dana told you how it ended."

Casey nodded. "So how can you be so okay with my cheating on CJ when the same thing happened to you?"

"It wasn't the same thing. When I confronted her with what Max had said, she didn't deny it, and she admitted to sleeping with a couple of other guys. She tried to make it my fault because I was always working." He shook his head, and Casey could see that he was disgusted all over again. "She didn't love me. You loved CJ. You were sorry for what you did. She had absolutely no remorse. She didn't care."

"And then there was the pregnancy."

Michael nodded. "They told you that part, too?"

"Yeah. Did you want the baby to be yours?"

He shrugged. "I don't know what I wanted. It still hurt, because it was possible that it was mine, and I had been preparing myself for that." He held out his hand, palm up. "She was no bigger than my hand. She looked like a doll."

"A girl," Casey said under her breath.

He nodded. "But it doesn't matter. She wasn't mine, and that's that."

"I'm sorry, Michael."

"I haven't been very lucky."

She winked at him. "Well, you're gonna get lucky. I promise."

Chapter Nineteen



“Casey,” Mike called as he shook her awake. “We’re leaving.”

Casey opened her eyes. “What time is it?”

“Seven. We’re going to the arena. See you there?”

Casey nodded and sat up. “Yeah. I’ll be there.” She watched him leave. She went into her bathroom and washed her face. “What is wrong with me?” She said aloud. For the past week, her energy level had been so low that in the evenings, she fell into bed for a nap before supper was over. She went to the kitchen and was pleased to see that the table had been cleared and the dishwasher loaded.

“Casey,” Jake’s voice sad over the intercom. “Are you ready?”

She leaned toward the intercom box on the wall to respond and in the process bumped her chest against the back of one of the chairs. A pain shot through her breasts.

“Yeah, Jake,” she squeaked out. She held her arms across her chest until the pain subsided. “What is that all about?”

She and Jake were heading to Wal-Mart for some shopping. In addition to the groceries, she was looking for supplies to restock the medicine cabinets and first-aid kit. As she reached for a bottle of rubbing alcohol, she caught a glimpse of a display of tampons. She nodded and dropped the alcohol in the cart.

That’s what it is. She plucked a box from shelf. *I must be getting ready to start my period.* She dropped the box into the cart and walked away.

When the bus stopped at the arena, Casey took the bag of things she had bought for the guys and left them in neat piles on each of their beds: shaving cream and deodorant for each, socks for David and Michael, underwear for Max, razors for Jason, film for Reed, shampoo for all.

Backstage, she was surprised to see Carmen Montgomery sitting on the sidelines watching Quintessential perform. At seventeen, Carmen had begun her career singing gospel music, but now, two years later, her faith-based songs were becoming increasingly popular on the “pop” charts. She hadn’t opened for Quintessential that night, but she had several times this tour and she would several times again.

“Hey, Carmen,” Casey said as she slid onto one of the stools that she knew they would be kicked off of mid-way through the show.

The girl smiled at her. “Hello, Casey.”

“I’m surprised to see you here.”

She nodded. “Little Rock’s my hometown. Jason asked me to come by. We’re going out after the show.”

“Oh. That’s good.” She nodded toward the stage. “Have I missed anything?” From what she could tell they were only two songs into the show.

Carmen shook her head. “No. How have you been?”

“Good.” The two women chatted, each keeping one eye on the stage. They were booted from their seats when there was a break in the show and the stagehands were supposed to take the stools onto the stage.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Michael said, pulling a sweaty shirt over his head. “You made it.” He grabbed a bottle of water and took a long drink out of it. “I gotta change.” The wardrobe crew was standing a few feet away with changes of clothes for the guys.

Casey was amazed at how quickly they could strip down to their underwear and dress again. Michael planted a kiss on the top of Casey’s head as he walked by her on his way to the stage.

“That’s sweet,” Carmen said.

“What?” Casey asked, unsure of whether Carmen was talking about her and Michael or something Jason had just said to her.

“You and Mike. Y’all are so comfortable with each other, like you’ve been married for years. It’s sweet.”

Casey smiled and listened to the crowd responding to Michael’s dialog. “He’s sweet.” She looked at Carmen whose eyes were following Jason’s every move. The next song on the program was a ballad, and Casey was sure that she saw Jason steal several glances at Carmen as he sang.

“I think he’s singing to you,” Casey said.

Carmen’s smile broadened “I think so, too.”



“Is everything okay, Casey?” Michael asked the next morning as he poured a cup of coffee for himself.

“Fine. Why?” She opened the oven and took out a pan of blueberry muffins.

Michael sat down at the table. “Well, you just seem out-of-sorts.”

Casey chewed on her bottom lip. "Do I?" She shook her head. "I'm fine."

"Okay," he responded, sounding less than convinced.

Jason boarded the bus and flopped down in a chair. "I'm not eating this morning, Casey. I don't feel good."

"Have you checked your sugar?"

"Yeah." He recited an astronomically high number. "I checked it twice. I thought maybe it was a mistake."

Casey opened a drawer and pulled out a glucose meter. "Let's check it again." The number was only a few points lower. "Have you gotten your insulin yet?"

He shook his head. "I didn't know if you wanted to do something different."

She thought for a minute. "I want you to ride with me today. Let me keep an eye on it. What happened, by the way?" She mixed a syringe of insulin.

Jason shook his head and accepted the syringe from Casey. He took a deep breath and plunged it into his abdomen. "Carmen's mom made this cherry dessert stuff and it was so good. I started not to eat any of it, but I didn't want to be rude and decline, and then I just couldn't stop."

"It stills seems awfully high. How much did you eat?" A glance at Jason's guilty face revealed that he had been voracious the night before. She shook her head and began to scramble the eggs she knew Michael and David would want. "Why don't you go take a swim or something. Try to work off some of that sugar." He turned to leave. "Wait, wait, wait," she said. She got a paper cup out of a cabinet. "I need you pee in the cup first."

Jason took the cup and disappeared into the bathroom.

"Why does he need to pee in a cup?" Michael asked.

She folded down the bunk above the kitchen table and pulled out the large first-aid kit. She opened it and searched for the package of testing strips Dr. Klein had sent for just such situations.

“Umm, do you want the long medical answer or a simple one?”

“Shoot, I’ve got all morning. Give me the long answer.”

“When your body doesn’t have enough insulin, like Jason now, it can’t break down glucose, so it breaks down fats instead to use as energy.”

Jason came back into the room, and he sat the cup down next to the sink. He leaned against the counter and listened to her. “When fats are broken down, these waste products called ketones are produced. Your body tries to get rid of them through urine.”

She looked at Jason. “You’ll probably be peeing a lot today. Anyway, your body can’t tolerate large amounts of these ketones and they build up in your blood and can cause a condition called ketoacidosis -- or a diabetic coma.” She pulled a pair of latex gloves over her hands and dipped a thin strip of paper into the cup.

“So what are you testing for?” Michael asked. “How long he has before he passes out?”

She shook her head and withdrew the strip from the cup and compared the color changes on the paper to the legend on the side of the packaging. “I’m testing to see if he has ketones in his urine and he doesn’t.” She looked at Jason. “You can go now.”

Michael waited until Jason had left. “You’re smart.”

She smiled and closed the medical bag. She hoisted it back up onto the bed, but left the bed folded down since Jason would be riding with them that morning. “Thank you.”

“You’re a good cook, Casey, but you’re a great nurse. Maybe that was your real calling.”

“Maybe.” She sat down at the table and took a sip of her coffee. “Dr. Klein offered me a job.”

Michael’s eyes grew wide. “Really? In his office?”

She nodded. “Yeah, he’s opening a another office down-

town and he wants me to work there.”

“Are you going to do it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. He said I had time to think about it.”

David, Max, and Reed entered the bus and Casey stood up.

“All right guys, what will it be today?”



“Casey, can I ask you a question?”

Jason’s question startled her. They had been on the road for a couple of hours and he was lying on the bunk above the table. She had thought he was sleeping.

“Sure.” She pushed herself onto the counter and leaned against the refrigerator. Michael was in the bedroom talking to his mom on the phone.

“What’s it like to be married?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know if I’m the one you should be asking that.”

“Why? You were married.”

“Yeah, but I’m still not sure what it’s supposed to be like. I look at my parents who have been married close to forty years and I don’t think my mom or dad has had to work at it a single day. Their marriage just happens. Everything just falls into place, you know?”

“It didn’t with you and CJ?”

She shook her head. “No. He was very demanding of my time and attention. He wasn’t abusive to me or anything, but he just expected everything his way. Everything we did, everywhere we went, where we lived, how we spent our money, everything was his idea. His choice. He had control. Granted, he made good decisions, and he took good care of me, but I think I lost myself somewhere along the way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I started dating him when I was fourteen years old. Before him, I had a life. I went to sleepovers and I went to the mall with girlfriends. After him, there was none of that. I didn’t do anything without him. The only times we weren’t together were when I went to church and when I had piano lessons. At the time, I was okay with it. He was popular and he was cute. He was smart and he was funny. Everybody liked him. Every girl in school wanted to be me. We had a good time, and I loved him. He was my whole world. But that’s all I was...CJ’s girlfriend. I was never anything else, until, of course, I was CJ’s wife.”

“So he was it?” Jason asked. “You never dated anyone else?”

“When I was a junior in college, CJ and I had a fight, and we broke up for about six months. I dated a couple different people during that time.”

“And you said you dated someone after he died.”

She nodded. “Yeah, Tucker. We were exclusive, but not serious. We went out about once a week, but both of us knew that it wasn’t going anywhere and neither of us were really looking for anything more serious. We were really good friends.”

“How did you meet him?”

“At the grocery store. He worked for a beer company and he was there every Wednesday morning stocking the cooler and setting up displays. I did my grocery shopping on Wednesday mornings. One day, he spoke and we talked and he asked me out. It was fun. I had a lot of fun with him. We did some of the same kinds of things that I used to do with CJ, but Tuck let me decide where we were going to go or what kind of food we were going to eat.”

She paused to switch gears. “I don’t think being married should be hard. It should be natural, just like breathing or being right-handed. I loved CJ, but being married to him was hard for

me. I constantly felt like I was trying to be someone I wasn't, and trying to find out who I was."

"Is being with Mike any easier?"

"It's a lot easier. I think that what I have with Mike is how things are supposed to be. We get up every morning and we just fit together. He does what he has to do and I do what I need to, and at the end of the day we are happy to be together. He makes everything that's bad good and everything that's wrong right. And I love him."

"You gonna marry him?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'd like to think so." She paused. "I probably didn't help you much. Why are you asking, anyway?" She raised her eyebrows. "Carmen?"

He smiled. "I really like her, Case. She is such an exceptional person. She's a good person."

"What does she think about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you can say what you want about not having sex until you're married, but that doesn't stop you from getting up there on stage and grinding your groin every night. What does she think about that?"

He laughed. "She said she liked the show. Besides, a little bumping and grinding never hurt anyone."

Casey laughed and looked at her watch. "Let's test again."

She hopped off the counter and grabbed the testing equipment. He hung his arm off the bed and she pricked his finger. She nodded her approval at the number displayed on the digital screen. As she turned around to walk away from Jason, she felt woozy and lost her balance, banging her head on the corner of the cabinet as she fell to the floor.

"Oh, God, Casey!" Jason said jumping off the bed. "Are you okay?" He crouched over her. "Mike!"

"I'm okay," Casey said, sitting up. "I just turned around too

fast.”

“What happened?” Michael asked. “Casey, you’re bleeding!”

She brought her hand up to her head and felt the sticky blood. “Great,” she muttered. With Michael and Jason’s help she stood up. “Oh, I’m going to be sick,” she said as she felt her breakfast backing up in her throat. Knowing she had no time to make it to the bathroom, she held her head over the sink and vomited.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” Michael said as he led her back to the bedroom. She sat on the bed. He brought a towel and several washcloths out of the bathroom. She held one of the wet cloths over her injury while he washed her face with another. He moved her hand. “Let me see,” he said. He gently cleaned the wound. Casey clenched her teeth, trying not to wince in pain.

“Oh, it’s not bad,” he said. “Let me get the first-aid kit.” He returned with the bag. “You sure you’re okay?” He began to apply a bandage.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Casey, maybe you should go to the doctor. You’ve been really tired lately and now this.”

She shook her head. “I’m okay, Mike. Maybe a little tired.”

She didn’t really believe it herself. She knew that there was something wrong, and Michael didn’t know the half of it. He didn’t know about the occasional bouts of nausea, the migraines, and the intermittent abdominal cramping. The day before she had attributed it to PMS, but she had lost a great deal of sleep that night turning her symptoms over in her head. PMS fit, but it seemed to be an extreme case, and she had never suffered from it before.

He kissed the bandage lightly. “Why don’t you take a little nap? I’ll go out there and hang with Jason.”

She nodded. “Okay.” She lay on the bed, but couldn’t sleep.

She searched her mind, trying to assess her symptoms, but nothing else she came up with made sense; almost nothing, but the one other thing that fit was impossible. She shook the thought out of her head, but it bounced right back in.

A week later, the tour took them in to Casey's hometown in North Carolina. It was the town where she had grown up, gone to college, and worked with CJ at the hospital. It was where they had been married and where he had died.

They had arrived in Chapel Hill around noon, and after fixing a quick lunch for the guys, Casey had set off to run several errands, including visiting her maternal grandparents in the nursing home they had been living in for several years. She had considered bringing Michael with her, but they had been scheduled for a radio interview and a television spot that afternoon.

The fatigue Casey had been feeling was easing up, but it seemed the bouts of nausea were getting more and more frequent. She had ruled out PMS because she hadn't started her period, and every search came back to the same diagnosis. There was nothing left to do but visit Dr. Arnold.

Casey paced back and forth in the exam room. She looked at her watch: 4:07. She needed to be back to the bus by five o'clock in order to finish the pre-concert dinner. She heard Dr. Arnold's footsteps outside the door and Casey hopped up on the table.

"You look like you already know what I'm going to say," Dr. Arnold said.

"Well, I came for a reason."

Dr. Arnold nodded. "You're pregnant."

Casey leaned back on the table and covered her eyes with her forearm. "How could this happen?"

"Casey, surely they taught you that in nursing school," Dr. Arnold joked.

Casey sat up. "You told me when I was fifteen years old that I wouldn't be able to get pregnant."

Dr. Arnold shook her head. "I told you that it was highly unlikely that you'd ever get pregnant on your own, but I never said it was impossible."

"No, I believe you said it would be a miracle."

"Maybe it is," Dr. Arnold suggested.

"But why now? Why with Mike and not CJ? CJ and I were married. Mike and I...we just got started." She looked at the doctor and shook her head.

"I'm a doctor, Casey, not God."

"Am I gonna be able to carry it? Is it just a fluke that I got pregnant?"

Dr. Arnold patted Casey on the knee. "Let's do an ultrasound and see how things look. We'll go from there, okay?"

Casey had seen dozens of ultrasounds before, but it was a surreal experience to see a life growing inside her.

"Looks great, Casey," Dr. Arnold said as she moved the transducer slowly across Casey's stomach. "Strong heartbeat. The amniotic sac and placenta look perfect. Looks like you're about ten weeks."

Ten weeks. The first trimester almost over. The risk of miscarriage was dropping more and more each day. A strong heartbeat. A baby. Her baby. Michael's baby.

"That puts your due date around July 5th, give or take a week. Congratulations, Casey. I have to say that after you told me that CJ never wanted kids, I never thought I would be giving you this news." She studied Casey's face. "Is this good news?"

Casey nodded and smiled. "Yes. It's very good news." She paused. "Dr. Arnold, it took eleven years to conceive this baby naturally. What if I want to have more? Do you think that's possible or will I just have to wait and see if that's God's plan?"

“I always thought that you would respond well to fertility treatments. You’re about ten weeks now, and it looks great. I think with a little help from me and a lot of luck, then you should be able to have as many as you want.” She stood up to leave the room. “It is a miracle, Casey, and it’s all God’s plan.”

Chapter Twenty



It was almost five o'clock when she stepped out of the doctor's office, but she knew that she needed to make a stop before heading back to the bus. The cemetery was empty except for a man paying his respects about a hundred yards away. Casey knelt by CJ's grave and ran her finger over the engraved name: Clark James Russo. She looked to the empty space next to his grave, the plot that was to be hers one day. She felt a pang of guilt, knowing that she would never be buried there.

"CJ, I really did love being your wife. Everything that was good about you outshined the bad. I wouldn't change anything about our time together, but now God has given me an opportunity to be a mother and that wouldn't have happened with you. I hope you understand that I'm moving on. I'm sorry."

That night's show was the last one before the Christmas break. Their schedule resumed on New Year's Eve with a live

televised concert in Times Square. For the past two weeks the stage had been adorned with huge Christmas trees, candles and twinkling lights. Also, a portion of their regular show had been cut, and the group was singing songs from the holiday album they had released earlier in the year.

Christmas was Casey's favorite time of the year and she thought the performance was better than ever. She was especially revved up about this show because it was being held in her hometown.

She walked quickly down the corridor toward the dressing room. She had been watching Carmen's opening act, and Chuck had asked Casey to get Jason because he was going to sing a duet with Carmen to close her set.

"Casey."

She stopped in her tracks and turned around. In shock, she dropped the water bottle she was holding. The nearly empty plastic container bounced across the floor.

"Hello, Casey."

Chris Baker! She took a deep breath. "Hello, Chris."

"I heard through the rumor mill that you might be here tonight."

She nodded, knowing that the "rumor mill" was Annie. "How did you get backstage?"

"I'm head of Special Activities here at the Smith Center. I booked them."

"Oh. Good choice. They get quite a draw."

He nodded and rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, I should have tried to get two shows. The tickets sold out in an hour." He shook his head. "So how have you been?"

"Good." She glanced down the long hallway leading to the dressing room. "Listen, Chris, I have to go. Come find me after they take the stage, okay?"

He nodded. "I will."

She watched and waited as he walked a few paces down the hall before going into the dressing room.

"Hey, Jace," she called. "They're ready for you." She followed him down the hallway. She was accompanied by David, who was the only other one ready for the show. They stood in the wings and watched Jason and Carmen.

"So this is your old stomping ground, huh?" David asked.

Casey nodded. "Yep. Have y'all ever played here before?" She was referring to the building. The concert was being held in the Dean E. Smith Center, a dome-topped building that was home to the University of North Carolina's men's basketball team.

"You mean here in the Dean Dome?" He shook his head. "Nope. So what did you do this afternoon? Visit some friends?"

She nodded. "I visited my grandparents at the nursing home. I went to the cemetery."

"Oh. CJ doing okay?"

Casey smiled. "He wasn't very talkative. I left some flowers...said goodbye."

David nodded solemnly. "Anything else?"

"Went to the bank, went to the doctor."

"The doctor? Everything okay?"

She nodded. "I've been real tired all the time, you know. I just wanted to get checked out."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. The doctor says I'm fine. Guess I'm just tired."

"You sure?" David questioned. He shook his head slightly and Casey wasn't sure that she had convinced him.

They were joined by Michael, Max and Reed. "So Casey, you got anymore fascinating stories for us about this place?" Max asked. All week, leading up to the show in Chapel Hill, Casey had talked their ears off about her many adventures in college.

"Actually, I do have one more. This is a good one." She pushed her hair back behind her ear. "You know that I dated CJ in college. Well, we broke up during my junior year for about six months, and I started dating this dude on the basketball team. Well, one night on one of our dates, he brought me here. He told the security guard that he had left something in the locker room so he would let us in. The place was empty, no one was here, you know, and we ended up having sex in the locker room with the security guard right outside the door."

Max shook his head. "That's not true."

She nodded. "It is."

"You never told me that," Michael said.

"I told you about him," Casey insisted.

"You didn't tell me that you sex in the locker room."

"Oh, it's not important, not even that big of a deal. Just something crazy I did once. It was fun, dangerous, exciting, you know."

After Quintessential took the stage, Casey returned to the spot outside the locker room where she had run into Chris. He joined her after a few minutes. "You want to take a walk?"

She shook her head. "I need to be out there with them."

"I'll walk you." They began to stroll to the stage area. "So how have you been? You feeling better?"

"Feeling better than what?"

"Oh, I heard you've been sick."

She glanced at him, surprised that he knew that about her, but then again, he had known she would be there that night. "I feel fine," she replied her anger at Annie starting to percolate. "How have you been?"

"I've been okay." He seemed oblivious to her hostility. "So I hear you're a chef."

She nodded. "Yep."

"You always were good in the kitchen."

Casey winced at his remark. Their one-night tryst had begun with a lovemaking session on his kitchen table. "And in the living room and bathroom and bedroom, I suppose," she said dryly.

"I don't regret what we did," he said.

She stopped walking. "I do. I was a married woman."

"Aw, hell, Casey. CJ was an asshole. You deserved so much better than him."

"You know, I really don't want to talk about this. I'm trying to move on with my life." She watched her feet as she walked. She had known Chris since they were in diapers, and she had never been uncomfortable around him. When she was married, she risked her marriage to be his friend. Now, he was that last person she wanted to see.

"So, what are you going to do after this is over?"

"You don't know? You know everything else."

"Come on, Case. Don't be mad."

"You've been talking to Annie about me!"

He nodded. "Yeah, chatting online." His casualness made Casey's stomach roil. "You like your job?"

"I love cooking for these guys."

"You're not going back to Utah?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm staying in Florida. Maybe I'll just sit on the beach until fall. I don't have to do anything. How long have you been working here?" She tried to steer the conversation in his direction.

"About a year. It's cool. I get to go to all the home games and all the concerts that come here. I've met a lot of the acts. Are you seeing anyone?"

Casey nodded, frustrated that he had ping-ponged the conversation back to her life. "I am."

"Is it serious? It's not the beer guy still, is it?"

Casey shook her head, more in disbelief of the details he knew about her, than as an answer to his question. "No, it's not

the beer guy, and yes, it's serious." She thought back to her doctor visit. "Very serious."

"It's one of them, isn't it?" He said nodding to the door that would lead them out into the stage area. She nodded and stopped at the door. "Yes, as a matter of fact, but I'm guessing you already knew that." She pushed the door open and he followed her into the wings of the stage.

He watched the show for a minute. "Which one?"

Casey pointed toward Michael, who, at the moment was gyrating his hips and grabbing his crotch, driving the girls in the audience to scream. She smiled. "The one in the red shirt. Michael."

"He's just a boy, Casey."

"He's twenty-four," she snapped.

Chris shook his head. "I wish you would have called me after CJ died. I would have been there for you. We could have been together. I've always wanted to be with you, Casey. Ever since we kissed each other in my tree house when we were eleven, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind."

She looked at him. "Don't say that, Chris. We weren't supposed to be together. I'm with who I'm supposed to be with."

"I love you, Casey. We've known each other for twenty-six years. I would be so good for you. You've only known this joker for six months. He can't possibly love you like I do."

She shook her head. "I love him. I don't love you, Chris. I've never been in love with you. Sleeping with you was a mistake. I think you should just go."

He sighed. "I see." He held out his arms. "Can I at least get a hug before I go?"

She walked into his hug and stood rigid while he embraced her. "I have missed you, though." It was a lie. *Why did I just say that?* She had tried not to think about him since their affair and was more than happy not to have him complicating her life.

He took her hand and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Well, if this doesn't work out, let me know." He held on to her hand a few seconds longer than he should have before dropping it and walking away.

She turned her attention back to the stage and saw that Michael had stopped dancing completely and was looking directly at her.



"Who was that guy?" Michael asked. They were on the bus traveling from the Smith Center to the hotel.

Casey quickly debated lying to him. She shook her head and resigned herself to telling him the truth. "That was Chris Baker," she said, her voice a whisper.

Michael let the information sink in. "How did he know you were here?"

"He's in charge of booking the shows at the Dean Dome."

"No, that's how he knew Quintessential was here. How did he know *you* were here?"

"I guess Annie told him."

"What did he want?" It sounded more like an accusation than a question and instinctively Casey's hackles went up.

"We were just talking, Mike. We *were* friends, you know."

"And he was also the man you cheated on your husband with." His face was becoming distorted with agitation.

"You don't trust me?"

"You know, I thought I did, but seeing you with him, honestly, I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't know," he repeated. "What if I'm not satisfying you? What if you need someone more exciting than me? I heard that story you told about your wild sex with the basketball play-

er. Maybe I'm too boring for you, too."

"Too? You think I cheated on CJ because I was bored?" She was infuriated. She knew he had a tendency to be jealous and proud, but she couldn't stop the anger from bubbling up inside her.

"I don't know."

"Well, know this. You're going to be sleeping by yourself tonight, because I'm staying on the bus."

"Fine!" Michael yelled as the bus stopped. He didn't even wait for Jake to turn off the engine before he jumped off.

Casey stomped into the bedroom, and slid the door shut, wishing she could have slammed it. She sat on her bed fuming for the better part of an hour. Then she began to cry. She didn't know if they were tears of anger or sadness. She didn't know if she wanted to go to Michael and continue their fight or apologize and beg him to forgive her. She left the bus knowing she had to see him either way.

At the front desk she asked the clerk which room Michael was staying in. "I'm sorry, there's no Michael Brooks staying here," the lady politely said. Casey shook her head and gave the woman Michael's pseudonym, William Carter, which he occasionally used if he thought there might be a problem with fans.

She woman sighed. "I'm not supposed to give out that information. I can call to his room and tell him he has a visitor."

She picked up the phone. "Mr. Carter, you have a visitor in the lobby." She paused. "Yes, it is." She held the phone away from her ear. "He hung up."

Casey turned away from the desk and spotted David walking across the lobby heading toward the bar. "David!" She called out. He slowed his pace and she caught up with him.

"I'm going to get a drink, Casey. Care to join me?" She followed him into the dark bar and they sat at a booth in the corner.

He ordered drinks for the both of them. "So you gonna tell me?" He asked.

"Tell you what?"

"What the fight was about."

She shook her head. "What makes you think we were fighting?" She sighed. "I screwed up."

"I'm sure you didn't. Tell me."

"If I tell you this story, David, you might see me in a whole new light, in a bad way, and I don't want you to think bad of me."

"That's impossible, Casey."

The waitress brought their drinks. Casey picked hers up and brought it to her lips, then sat it back down on the table without drinking it. "To make a long story short, I had an affair while I was married to CJ." She wasn't surprised that he didn't know. Michael was not one to tell secrets, and she trusted David with the information, knowing he was almost as tight-lipped as Michael.

"It was a one night stand and Mike knows about it. I thought we had gotten past it. Tonight, the guy that I had the affair with was at the show. He works at the Smith Center. Anyway, Mike saw me talking to him and he got mad."

"Oh."

"It's bad, I know."

David shook his head. "Maybe not. What's Mike's problem?"

Casey shrugged. "He doesn't know if he can trust me. I didn't seek him out, David. He found me."

"Were you just talking to him?"

Casey nodded. "He kissed me on the cheek when he left. I have no desire to be with that guy, David. I love Michael. I want to be with Michael."

"So go talk to him."

"He doesn't want to see me, the desk clerk won't give me his room number, and I'm sure he wouldn't answer his cell phone if I tried to call."

David held out his own phone. "You can call from mine."

Casey shook her head. "I don't want to trick him. And I don't want him mad at you."

"He's in room 313."

They looked up as someone approached their table. "Casey, I want to talk to you."

She slid out of the booth and followed Michael to another table. He waved the waitress away as she approached. "I can't apologize to you," he said.

"I'm not asking you to."

"I can't apologize for the way I feel. I guess I thought I was okay with it until it was thrown in my face."

She shook her head. "So you don't trust me? You can't?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know what it is I feel."

"You don't love me?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I love you more than anything, but I can't let myself get hurt."

"I'm not going to hurt you, Mike. I love you. You're the only person I want to be with."

He sat there, staring down at his hands, which were folded on the table, shaking his head. "I'm sure you said the same thing to CJ." He sighed. "I can't, Casey."

She felt a tear roll down her cheek and she knew the dam was going to burst. "So this is it? It's over?"

"I'm sorry."

She returned to her bus. She lay down and sobbed. It was over, but she and Michael would forever be tied together—tied together by the baby he didn't even know existed. The hours passed slowly, the sound of the ticking clock overpowered by the sound of Casey's crying. At about three in the morning, a

wave of nausea hit, sending her to her knees in front of the toilet.

"I can't let this happen," she told her reflection as she washed her face.

She entered the practically empty lobby of the quiet hotel. She rode the elevator to the third floor and found room 313. She banged on the door. "Michael!" He didn't open it, and she kept banging. She heard the doors on either side of Michael's open. With her peripheral vision she could see Max, Jason, Reed, and David watching her sleepily. She ignored them. "Michael!"

He flung open the door and grabbed her arm, pulling her into the room. He grabbed her roughly by the back of the neck and jerked her to him. He crushed his face into hers. As they kissed, she hoped his body would relax. It didn't. He pushed her away from him and onto the bed. He began to remove his clothes.

She quickly stood up. "What are you doing?"

"This is what you came for isn't it? You think maybe if you get back in my bed, I'll just forget about everything. That's not the way it works, Casey. I can't get the vision of him touching you out of my mind."

She shook her head. "I didn't cheat on you, Mike. I cheated on CJ. There's a big difference there."

"I know that, Casey, but it doesn't change the fact that you promised him that you'd be faithful and you weren't."

"Damnit, Mike! Last month when you found out about this, you said it didn't matter. What the hell happened?"

He threw his arms up in the air. "You were with him. Right in front of me, throwing it in my face. Were you trying to show off or something?"

She shook her head. "No. I was just talking to him."

"About what?"

"My job," she said, her tone lower. "You."

"What did he say to you?" He had also lowered his voice to

a normal level.

“He told me that he loved me and wants me to leave you for him. I told him that it wasn’t going to happen.”

Mike sank down onto the bed and covered his face with his hands. He looked up at her before he began to speak. “You know, I don’t want to be the kind of guy who has to be in control of his girlfriend’s every move; I know CJ was like that, but God, I was jealous. Even before I knew who he was, it hurt just to see you talking with him. I could tell just by looking at him that he wanted you.”

She sat on the bed next to him. “Mike, I’m not willing to give up on us so easily.” She thought about the baby. “I can’t.”

He sighed and took her hand. “You think this is easy? This isn’t easy for me. Nothing about this is easy.”

“Do you really want to end this?”

He shook his head. “I just wish things were different.”

“I can’t change what I’ve done, Mike. I can only promise that I won’t do them again.” She picked up his hand. “And I do. I’ll never hurt you like that.” She pulled his hand up to her mouth and kissed it.

“Casey, I’m sorry.” He pulled his hand away.

She stood up. “I am, too. If I had known that I’d end up being with you, I would have never slept with anyone else – ever. Believe me or don’t believe me, trust me or not, but I’m not willing to give up, and I don’t think you are either. I’ll go back to the bus. Let me know what you want.” She walked to the door, hoping Michael would stop her from leaving.

She opened the door and paused before stepping out into the hall. He didn’t call her back. She took a deep breath, gathering all her strength, and left the room. She was halfway to the elevator when she heard a door open. She looked behind her. Michael was standing in the hallway. They stood facing each other, a distance of some fifteen yards separating them for several seconds.

“So?” She finally said.

“I’m making a pot of coffee,” he said. “You want some?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want coffee.”

“I don’t really want coffee, either,” he said. “I just want you to come back.”

Chapter Twenty-One



They had stayed up all night apologizing and making promises to each other, trying to repair the damage that had been done the night before, finally sleeping in each other arms for a couple of hours before breakfast.

Casey had wanted to tell him about her pregnancy, but decided to wait, wanting more solid ground beneath their relationship. She wanted Michael to be absolutely sure of his feelings for her before she hit him with the news that would bind them together for at least the next eighteen years.

“What’s this, Casey?” Michael asked, holding up the sealed envelope Casey had retrieved from Penny’s house. He was helping her pack her personal things into boxes. They were due back in Orlando that evening and the buses had to be emptied so they could be cleaned.

“Oh. That’s CJ’s stuff...his personal belongings... the things that were in his pockets when he died.”

“Have you opened it?”

Casey shook her head. “No. Afterwards, I couldn’t, didn’t want to. There was nothing in there I needed.”

Michael shook the envelope. “Why don’t you open it now? I’m not trying to force you into anything, but maybe it’s time.”

Casey took the envelope from him and slid her finger under the flap, breaking the seal. She turned it over the contents out on the bed between them: CJ’s watch, his checkbook, his hospital ID badge, his wallet, his pager, seventy-two cents in change, a half of a pack of cigarettes and the gold Zippo lighter engraved with his initials.

She picked up his wallet and opened it. She smiled wistfully at the picture of her that he had carried around since they had started dating.

“That’s me when I was fourteen.” The usual things were in his wallet, his driver’s license, his credits cards, sixty-two dollars in cash. But there were two things there that Casey never expected to find. Tucked in behind her picture was a slip of paper with a name and a phone number and folded into the wad of bills was a condom. The name on the paper was Lily Martin. Casey knew the name. She was a nurse who had worked briefly in the ER before being transferred to the ICU.

Michael saw her remove the condom. “Oh, boy. What do you think this means?”

“I think this means that he was cheating on me.” She fiddled with the condom packet. “This is new. He hadn’t been carrying it around very long.”

Michael picked up the phone number. “Do you think this is her?”

“I’m gonna find out,” Casey said, and dialed the number written on the slip of paper.

“Hello?” A woman’s voice answered.

“Lily Martin, please.”

"This is her."

"Lily, this is Casey Russo. I don't know if you remember me."

"Of course, I remember you, Casey. What can I do for you?"

"Were you having an affair with my husband?"

"Wow, this is unexpected." Lily answered. Casey detected a hint of amusement in her voice. "You're kinda slow on the uptake, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

Lily laughed. "CJ's been dead for two and a half years, Casey, and you're just now finding out about me? Christ, we were sleeping together for months before he died."

The words hit Casey like a kick in the stomach. "You were?" She finally managed to squeak out.

"Listen, Casey. You're a nice person, but why the hell did you stay married to him?"

"I didn't know about you."

"Well what about Grace Taylor in Radiology or Lisa Metcalf in the NICU, or Susan Powers right there in the ER, or..."

"Stop!" Casey commanded. "He cheated with all those women?"

"Yeah, and I'm sure there's more I don't know about." Lily paused. "If it makes you feel better, he never said anything bad about you. I think he did love you, in his own way."

"Yeah, that's just great." She clicked off the phone without a good-bye or thank you and looked across the bed at Michael. "She said he loved me." The sobs overtook her body.

He took her in his arms. "Aren't you tired?" He asked after her crying had subsided to just sniffles and an occasional tear.

She looked at him dubiously. His question didn't seem to fit. "Tired of what?"

“Tired of trying to pretend that you and CJ were happy. You fought all the time, he wouldn’t let you out of his sight, you were both screwing around on each other.”

“I loved him, Michael. Yeah, we may have had our problems, but I wouldn’t have married him if I hadn’t loved him.” She shook her head. “Besides, who are you to say that we weren’t happy?”

“God, Casey, I’m not an idiot. I can see that you couldn’t have been. Who could be happy like that? Do you think you would have still been married had he lived?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. We both believed in marriage and didn’t like the idea of divorce...we didn’t like the idea of failure.”

He gave a half-hearted chuckle and shook his head. “You think it was a success? Successful marriages don’t include adultery. Maybe...” He bit his lip, cutting off his own statement.

“Maybe what, Michael? Maybe that’s something I need to learn? Maybe I drove him to another woman? Maybe what?”

“Maybe you’re standards weren’t high enough,” he said. “Maybe you let him treat you the way that he did.” He shook his head. “You know, Casey, I love you and I don’t want to say anything to hurt you. God knows, we fought enough yesterday, but he played you, Casey. He got you when you were young and didn’t know any better and kept you right where he wanted you, while he lived the life he wanted with the trophy wife.”

She didn’t say anything and Michael continued. “I’m sure he loved you, Casey. I can’t image that he didn’t, but he wasn’t in love with you. He would have never treated you the way that he did if he had been. You are so much better than that, and he was a fucking idiot not to see it.”

She held her head in her hands. “Can I be alone? I need some time to digest all of this.” She didn’t like what Michael was saying to her. She knew that he was right, but she was right,

too. She had loved CJ. Their marriage had not been a bed of roses, as the term was often used, but rather a true bed of roses: beautiful on the outside and marred by prickly thorns once you delved in the thicket.

Michael nodded and stood up. "Yeah, maybe that's a good idea. I'll get Jake to pull over so I can get on the other bus. I've got to pack my stuff anyway." He leaned over and kissed her temple on his way out of the bedroom. He stopped at the door and turned back to look at her. "Don't try to be so strong, Casey. Let me carry you some."

She nodded. "Okay." She wiped away the tears that were again beginning to fall. When she was sure he was out of earshot, she whispered, "Oh, and I'm having your baby." She fell back on the bed and covered her face with her pillow.



"I wish you were coming with me," Casey said. It seemed like the obligatory thing to say. She and Michael were at the airport. It was two days before Christmas and she was flying to Utah to spend the holiday with her parents.

"I wish you were staying here." He leaned against the wall and wrapped his arms around her. She buried her face in his chest and relaxed against him. She had known about her pregnancy for three days and she still hadn't told him. Every time she thought she might, she couldn't find the words.

Casey's boarding call was announced over the loudspeaker. "That's me," she said, picking up her bag. She turned back to Michael. "I'll be back Wednesday."

"I know." He kissed the top of her head. "I'm going to go crazy without you here, you know."

She shook her head. "You won't even miss me. You'll be busy with your mom and your grandparents and cousins and

eating and presents.”

“I’ll miss you at bedtime.”

She smiled. “Maybe one day you’ll love me for more than just sex.”

“Well, you’ve got the cooking thing going on, too.”

She gazed longingly into his eyes. “I do love you.” She touched his face. He was hardly recognizable as Mike Brooks, member of Quintessential. He had a baseball cap pulled low on his head hiding his blond streaked “pop star” hair. Of course, he was wearing his glasses, and he hadn’t shaved in three days. “I trust all of this will be gone when I get back,” she said, running her hand down his cheek.

“All of it?” He rubbed his chin. “I thought you liked the goatee.”

“You know what I mean.”

He caught her hand in his. “Listen, Casey. I’m really sorry for all that shit between us. I was so stu...”

She placed her fingers on his lips, cutting him off. “It’s forgotten. It’s all forgotten. I just want to start over, forget all about CJ and forget all about Chris. My life starts over right now.”

He pulled her to him and embraced her. “Don’t go,” he whispered.

She closed her eyes and sighed. “Don’t make this harder than it is, Mike.” She didn’t want to leave; she wasn’t feeling a strong urge to go home for the holidays, but something told her that she and Michael needed the break. Their relationship had been on a roller coaster ride in the past three days and she felt like the time away from each other would center them and make them focus more on their present relationship, rather than on the past.

Her flight was announced again. “I’ve got to go.”

He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips. “I love

you.”

She smiled. “I know.”

Casey let herself into her parents’ empty house. Marjorie and Dan had taken Emily, who had moved in with them after Thanksgiving, and flown to North Carolina to visit Marjorie’s parents. Their return flight had been delayed, and they wouldn’t be arriving home until late that afternoon, giving Casey the house to herself for the next three or four hours.

She took her bag up to her room. She had done one hundred percent of her Christmas shopping over the Internet and the overwhelming majority of it was stacked in piles around the room.

She dropped her keys and her purse onto the dresser then removed all of her clothes except her panties in front of the full-length mirror.

She turned sideways and stared at her profile, trying to imagine what she was going to look like nine months pregnant. Her cell phone rang, causing her to jump. She pulled the phone out of the pocket of her jeans. “Hello?”

“You still think this is a good idea, me being here and you being there?”

“You should have come with me.” She lay down on the bed.

“So what are you doing?”

“I was just changing my clothes.”

“Oh, so you’re gettin’ naked.”

“Yeah, see, don’t you wish you were here?”

“No, I wish you were here.” He sighed dramatically. “So what do you have going on this afternoon?”

She glanced around the room at the mounds of boxes. “I have got a butt-load of presents to wrap,” She said. “How about you?”

“I’ve got a rehearsal with Mom at the church tonight. I guess I’m going to eat over there.”

“What time are you leaving for Tampa in the morning?”

“About nine or ten, I guess, whenever I get up. Don’t be calling here early in the morning.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be lucky to roll out of bed by noon. I’m so tired.” She yawned as she said it. “So don’t be calling here when you get up.” She yawned again. “So is Ted coming over to your Mom’s for Christmas dinner?”

Michael groaned. He didn’t like the idea of his mother dating. Ted Brubaker was a member of their church, who had divorced three years earlier. He had sold his ranch in Montana and moved to Florida. Michael had met the man several times, but didn’t know him well. “Yeah.” He didn’t sound excited.

“Your mom’s a young woman, Mike. She’s only forty-five years old. She shouldn’t have to spend the rest of her life without love and companionship...and sex.”

“You had to say that.”

“Grow up, Mike. If you don’t think she should date, maybe you don’t think I should either.”

“Come on, Casey.” He sighed. “I know you’re right. It just freaks me out.”

“Don’t worry so much, Michael.” She paused. “Well, sweetie, I need to go. It’s going to take me until my parents get home to wrap these gifts and I wanted to have supper ready for them.”

“Okay. I’ll call you tomorrow night sometime, okay?”

“Okay. I love you.”

“I know.”

She had most of the presents wrapped by the time she needed to go start supper. She had just checked the meatloaf in the oven when the back door opened and her parents came in. “Hi, guys,” she said cheerfully. “How was your trip?”

“Fine, fine,” Dan said. “I’ll be right back down.” He left the room with the suitcases. Emily and Marjorie sat the kitchen

table. Casey poured coffee for her mother and herself before joining them.

"Dad says you came to visit," Marjorie said. "That was nice of you, Casey."

Casey nodded. "Yeah, of course I did. I was there in town." She shook her head. "Granny's not doing too well, is she?"

Marjorie looked sad and shook her head. Casey thought that she might cry. "Yeah, I don't imagine she's going to be with us too much longer, but Daddy's doing good. I'd love to have him come out here and live with us, but your Uncle Ken would never have that."

Casey looked over at Emily who had not spoken since coming in the door. "Hey, Emily. How's it going?"

"Okay," she answered, sounding anything but okay.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Emily's missing her boyfriend," Marjorie explained with a small smile. "Go on upstairs and call him, sweetie."

Casey waited for her to leave the room. She turned to her mother. "So, is she doing okay living here with y'all?"

Marjorie nodded. "Yeah, she's been keeping up with her school work pretty well. She's been really respectful; we haven't had any problems with her."

"Is the boyfriend that Howie? Is he still coming around?"

Marjorie nodded again. "Yeah, he's here about everyday. He's a nice boy, Casey. He's gone to California to visit his father for Christmas so you won't get to meet him."

"But you approve?"

"Yeah. Your father has been teaching Matthew and Sam how to use the wood working tools, and Howie goes out there to the shop and hangs out with them some."

Casey nodded. "Well, good." She checked the meat loaf that was in the oven. "Looks like supper's ready."



“So what did you get Mike for Christmas?” Emily asked. It was after supper and Emily was sitting cross-legged on Casey’s bed watching as Casey wrapped the last of the presents that she had bought.

“I bought him some clothes, because he hates to shop for clothes, and I got him a new watch. I bought him a really nice leather jacket and a pool table.”

“A pool table?”

“Yeah, he’s going to make his basement into a game room this spring and he wanted a pool table.”

“So what did he get you?”

Casey shrugged. “I don’t know yet. We aren’t exchanging gifts until I get back.”

“You know it’s going to be something good,” Emily said. “He can afford anything.”

Casey shook her head. “I’m not sure that the best gifts cost a lot of money.” She finished wrapping the present she was working on. “So how is everything going with you and Howie?”

Emily smiled. “Good.”

“Are you being safe?”

Emily blushed, and Casey could tell she was embarrassed. “Yeah, Casey. I won’t do it if he doesn’t have them.”

Casey nodded. “That’s good. What about the marijuana?”

Emily shook her head. “I haven’t done that since I told you about it. I’m not going to. Howie doesn’t like it.”

“So he’s not the one who gave it to you?”

“Oh, no, Casey,” Emily said. “That was Keith, Tracy’s brother.”

“And you’re doing well in school?”

Emily nodded. "All A's, except in History. I got a B."

Casey smiled and tossed the last of the presents into the pile at the end of the bed. She yawned and looked at her watch. It was only nine-thirty, but she felt like she had been up for days. "I'm tired, Emmy. I think I'm going to take a shower and go to bed."

Emily nodded and got up from the bed. "Yeah, it's about time for me to call Howie again anyway. I'll see you in the morning."

Casey went into the bathroom. She started the water in the shower and opened her make-up bag and pawed through it for her cold cream. She pulled out a small box wrapped in purple foil. "What's this?"

She ripped the paper off the box and opened it. Inside was a set of keys attached to a key ring with the Jeep emblem. Under the set of keys was a note.

Casey clutched the keys in her hand and opened the letter. *It will be waiting for you in your space in our garage when you get home.*

She had spent several hours over the past few weeks "window shopping" on the Internet for a new car. She had been excited about the newest style of SUV offered by Jeep, and she had dragged Michael to the dealership the day before to test drive one. She knew these were the keys to the red one she had fallen in love with. What she didn't know was whether she was more excited about the car or the note. She reread it. Her space. Their garage. Home.

"What am I doing here?" She asked her reflection. She found her phone and looked at the clock. It was almost ten -- midnight in Orlando. She dialed Michael's home number.

He picked up on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Were you sleeping?" She asked, knowing that he hadn't been.

"Nope. I'm surprised you called."

"No, you're not. You knew I'd call after I found it. You were waiting by the phone. It only rang once."

He chuckled. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, well the car must be from my other boyfriend. Let me give him a call." They both laughed.

"Merry Christmas, Casey. It's the red one."

"Thank you, Michael. You know I love it."

"Good."

"So, do you want me to take the room across the hall from yours or do I get to pick one upstairs?"

"Whichever one you want, but I was kinda hoping we would just share mine."

"I'd like that, Mike," she said seriously.

"I want you there, Casey. It feels so right when we're together and so wrong when we're not."

"I know. I won't leave you again, but I had to this time."

"I know, and I know I've been giving you a hard time about you going to Utah, but I do understand why you did it. The past few days I've been so concerned about things that went on years ago, and you wanted to give me a chance to think about what was really important."

"Yeah," she said softly, "something like that."

"I know what's important, Casey. I don't give a damn about that stuff. You're not the same person you were then."

"And you're not CJ, so there's no reason to think we'd have any of the same problems."

"I know. I love you, Casey."

"I love you, too, Mike."

She took a quick shower after hanging up with Michael. She found her parents watching TV in the den. "Mom, Dad, there's something I want to talk to you about."

Dan turned the volume down. "What is it, honey?"

Something wrong?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, something is really right. I'm gonna live with Mike. He's asked me to move in with him."

"So it's really serious, huh?" Marjorie said.

Casey nodded. *You don't even know the half of it.* "Yeah, Mom. I think this is it. I think he might be the one."

"I hope so, Casey," Dan said. "He seems to make you really happy."

"More than CJ did, right?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." Casey bit her lip. "CJ was cheating on me when he died, and he was probably cheating on me the whole time we were married and before. Our marriage was a train wreck." She shook her head. "Why didn't you talk me out of marrying him?"

"Would you have listened?" Marjorie asked.

Casey shook her head and a wistful smile played on her lips. "Probably not. I loved him."

Dan cleared his throat and frowned. CJ Russo was his least favorite subject. "That's all beside the point, Casey. He's gone now, and the fact of the matter is that he wasn't a very good husband."

Casey sighed. "And I wasn't a very good wife, Daddy, not to him." She shook her head. "I'm flying back to Orlando in the morning."

"Why?" Her parents asked in unison.

"I want to be with Mike. He has this big thing at church Christmas morning and I want to be there. I don't want to be apart from him anymore. Besides, it's Christmas and I don't want to get into a fight with Annie. I don't want to ruin Christmas for everyone."

Her parents nodded their understanding. "Have you talked to

her since Thanksgiving?"

"Just the one time on the phone before I brought Emily home."

Marjorie shook her head. "I'm not trying to sway your decision to go to Florida, because I understand that you want to be with Mike, but I think you should see her before you go."

"Why, Mom? So we can have one more argument to finish out the year?"

"Casey, it's Christmas," Dan said. "Go see your sister."

She was up early the next morning trying to arrange a flight to Orlando. The earliest flight she could get would put her in Florida at 5:00pm. She had couple of hours before she had to leave for the airport, so she decided to take her father's advice and see Annie.

As she approached the back door, through the window she could see Matt and Annie sitting at the kitchen table. Several papers were spread out in front of them, along with a calculator and their checkbook. Matt was staring straight ahead at the wall and Annie was holding her head in her hands. It was obvious that they were discussing money. Casey shook her head. *They shouldn't be worrying about money. It's Christmas Eve.* She knocked on the door. Matt opened it.

"Casey, good morning. This is a surprise."

She went into the house. Annie was pouring a cup of coffee. She sat it on the table. "Here you go, Casey. It's decaf, of course." She smiled slightly and Casey noticed a softness in her eyes that she had never seen directed at her before.

Casey sat at the table and Matt excused himself to check on Gabriel. "Kids still asleep?" Casey asked.

Annie nodded. "Yeah. So what are you doing here so early?" She sounded pleasant and almost happy to see her.

"I came to say hello and good-bye."

"You're leaving?"

Casey nodded. "Yeah, I'm going back to Orlando today. I want to spend Christmas with Mike." Annie nodded, like she understood, and Casey offered no further explanation. "Is something wrong, Annie?" She nodded toward the papers on the table.

Annie shook her head and her shoulders slumped slightly. "No, we were just going over some bills."

"Are you sure?"

Annie covered her mouth with her hand. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes. She had never been good at hiding her emotions. She looked toward the door then back at Casey. "We don't have any money," she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, until Matt gets paid in a couple of weeks, we don't have any money."

"What happened?" Casey asked.

"Matt's insurance didn't pick up on Rebecca's hearing aids, so we had to pay for them. That was over \$2000. We never really recovered from that, so we were late with the mortgage, and a car payment. Then we had to use up what was left of our savings to buy Christmas presents. Everything just snowballed and we kept getting farther and farther behind." She shook her head. "Of course, you don't understand anything about this."

Casey shook her head. "You're wrong, Annie. CJ and I struggled with money and rent and credit card bills. I didn't make that much more than Matt does and we had medical school to pay for. Money was tight, and there were times we had to dip into our savings, so don't think that I don't understand just because I happen to have a lot of money right now."

She pulled her checkbook out of her purse. "I want to write you a check, to help you out."

Annie held up her hand and shook her head. "Put that away, Casey. You know we won't take any money from you."

“So you’re just not going to have any money for two weeks. This is stupid, Annie. What’s the point of my money just sitting in the bank when you need it? I don’t have anyone else to give it to; I’m not going to spend it on myself.”

Annie sighed, and Casey could tell that she wanted her to write the check. “Matt would say no.”

“Let met talk to him alone,” Casey said, “and if he says no to me, then I won’t offer again. What could it hurt? If he gets angry at me, I’m leaving in a couple of hours.”

Annie nodded. “Okay. Let me go get him.” She left the room. A few minutes later, Matt entered. He was frowning.

“I don’t like Annie talking about this with you.”

“Matt, I’m family. Please let me help you. Think of it as a gift -- a Christmas gift.” Matt shook his head, but Casey continued. “What are you going to do if you don’t let me help?”

He shrugged. “I thought about getting a part-time job.”

Casey shook her head and uncapped her pen. “How much do you need? I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Casey, I’m not taking your money. The Church will help us if we need it.”

“Why don’t you let the Church help people who don’t have rich sisters?”

“It doesn’t feel right.”

“Does not having any grocery money feel right?”

He sighed and Casey knew she had won this battle. She wrote a check out for the amount to reimburse them for the hearing aids plus a few hundred extra. “Will this be enough to tide you over?”

Matt reluctantly took the check. “This is more than enough. This will catch up the mortgage and be enough for groceries. Thank you, Casey.”

Chapter Twenty-Two



The taxi stopped at the top of the driveway and Casey jumped out of the backseat to unlock the security gate. The driver dropped her off in front of the house. She let herself in the front door and deactivated the alarm system. She watched on the security monitor as the taxi driver approached the gate and left. She pushed a button that remotely closed it and reactivated the alarm. She wondered how long she had until Michael would get home. She knew he would be having dinner with his father's side of the family, but she was certain that he told her that they usually ate early.

She carried her bag into the bedroom to unpack her things. When she had stayed with him before, he had cleared out a couple of drawers in his dresser for her to use. She was surprised to see that in the short time she had been gone he had a matching dresser delivered. She pulled open a drawer. He had already put what few clothes she had there neatly inside.

She opened the door to the huge walk-in closet. Before his clothes had been spread out, now they were clustered closer together and one whole half of the closet was empty, except for the few garments of her own that she had hung in there. She quickly put her things away and walked through the house. She opened the door that led out into the garage. It was empty. She closed the door again and looked around the kitchen.

"I'm hungry," she said aloud. "I hope he brings back some leftovers." She opened the refrigerator door, peered inside, sighed, then closed it. She didn't really feel like fixing herself anything to eat.

The house looked practically the same as it had when she left the morning before. She wandered back down the hall to the guest room that was across the hall from the master bedroom. This was probably the room she would make into the nursery. She sat on the bed and tried to imagine it. She knew Michael would let her do anything she wanted, and she wanted to do most of the work herself. She wasn't the kind of person to hire a decorator.

Dana will help me. Dana! Dana and Reed are getting married in June. I'm supposed to be a bridesmaid. She shook her head and put her hand on her stomach. *I'm going to be eight months pregnant in June. She sighed. Pregnant. I've got to tell Mike that I'm pregnant.*

She left the room and walked back into the master bedroom. It was a room designed for sleep. Michael had the windows tinted in addition to the heavy, opaque drapes. The walls and even the ceiling were painted a midnight blue. The bed cover was the same shade of blue as the paint, and the furniture was a dark cherry. It was a dark room, with the only exception being the white carpet.

She went into the master bath and started the shower. This room was the exact opposite of the bedroom. Everything was gleaming white and accented with dark blue accessories. She

removed her clothes and stepped into the hot water.

I love this house. She closed her eyes and leaned into the water. *This is my house. My house. I have a great boyfriend, a new car, a good job, good friends, a baby on the way.* “I love my life.”

She had been there for three hours, and she couldn’t stand it any more. She had to know how much longer it would be before she would see him. Using her own cell phone, she dialed his, and prayed that he had it turned on.

“Hello?” He answered.

“Hey, sweetie. Where are you at?”

“I just left my grandparents house about a half an hour ago. I am so tired. I am going to crash when I get home.”

She smiled. *No you’re not.* “So how bad do you miss me?”

“Oh damn, girl, I would give anything if you were at the house when I got there.”

“Oh, really? Well, if I were there what would you want me to be doing?”

“There’s a couple of loads of laundry that need washed, and I meant to run the vacuum in the living room. You could be doing that.”

“Are you for real?” She asked. “If you could have me doing *anything*, you would want me to do your laundry?”

“Hey, this is my fantasy. You asked. You could be doing it naked, if that makes you feel better.”

She laughed. “Seriously, what would you want?”

“I was being serious,” He protested, laughing as well. “Okay, you want the romantic answer?”

“Yes, please.”

He laughed. “Okay, let’s see. I’d come in and you have a fire going and the tree lights would be on and some music playing softly.”

“And what would we be doing?”

“We’d sit on the rug in front of the fireplace and drink

coffee and talk. You'd be wearing that long black gown and I'd take it off of you and we'd make love right there under the Christmas tree."

"Now, that's a better answer."

He sighed. "Yeah, but the reality is I'm going to bed alone again. I don't like this, Casey. I don't like it at all. I want to go to bed with you every night and wake up with you every morning."

"Well, once I get back, that's the way it will be, honey. We're going to be together. After I get all settled down in that big house of yours, you're going to have a hard time getting rid of me."

"Ours, Casey," he corrected. "That big house of ours, and good. I don't want you going anywhere."

"I'm not." She looked at the clock. It was eight o'clock there in Florida -- dinnertime in Utah. "Listen, Mike, I've got to go. Dinner's ready. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Okay. Love you, Casey."

"Love you, too." She hung up the phone. "Black nightgown, music, fire, coffee," she murmured to herself. "I can do that."

She found the sheer lace and satin nightgown in a box of clothes she had taken out of the bus. She slipped it on and went into the bathroom to touch up her makeup and hair. She returned to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. In the living room, she lit the gas logs and loaded several Christmas CDs into the disc changer. She looked at the clock. She had a good forty-five minutes before Michael would be home.

She returned to the kitchen and turned on the small television on the counter. She settled herself on a barstool and kept one eye on the TV screen and the other on the security monitor that would let her know when he pulled into the driveway.

The minutes seemed to drag by, and with every moment her anticipation of seeing him, and seeing his expression when he

found her there grew. Finally, she saw the Durango stop at the top of the driveway so Michael could open the gate. She turned off the television and poured two cups of coffee before turning off the kitchen light and settling herself on the rug in front of the fireplace.

From her position, she would be able to see the back door when it opened, but he wouldn't be able to see her sitting on the floor. He would, however, smell the coffee and hear the music.

The back door opened and she heard Michael's keys hit the countertop. "Oh. My. God." He came into the living room. "Casey...I can't...I can't believe it."

"Believe it," she said. She stood up and went to him. "I've got everything you asked for: the music, the lights, the fire, the nightgown."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her body tight up against his. "How come it feels like it's been forever since I've seen you?" He picked her up and carried her to the couch. "I am so glad you're here."

"Me, too, Mike."

He kissed her and gently pushed her into a lying position. He lowered himself on top of her and continued kissing her. His lips traveled from her mouth to her neck to her breasts.

"I thought we were going to do it under the tree," she said.

He lifted his head. "We are -- we're gonna do it on the couch, under the tree and we might just stop off in the kitchen on the way to the bedroom." He lowered his head again, and this time slid his hand between her legs.

She closed her eyes and moaned. "Oh, please don't stop."

No sooner than the words had left her mouth, his cell phone began to ring. He unclipped it from his waistband and tossed it across the room. It finally stopped ringing. Seconds later, the house phone began to ring. He made no move to answer it. The answering machine on the kitchen counter came on.

"Hi, you've reached Mike. Leave a message and I'll call

you back.” BEEP.

“Michael.” It was Birdie. Michael groaned and reluctantly sat up. “I just tried calling your cell phone with no answer. I didn’t even get your voice mail. I thought you’d be home by now. Give me a call as soon as you get home.”

He shook his head and reached for the phone on the end table next to the couch. “I better call her before she worries herself to death, or worse yet, comes over here.”

With one hand he held the cordless phone and punched the number with his thumb. He used his other hand to rub himself where his erection was straining painfully against his jeans.

“Hi, Mom,” he said into the phone. Casey sat on his lap straddling his hips and began kissing his neck. “No, I just walked in the door.” She playfully nipped at his earlobe. “Yeah, I know,” he said, trying to keep his breaths steady. “Breakfast with Grandma and Grandpa at seven. I’ll be there...yeah, mom. I’m fine...bye, Mom.” He let the phone fall out of his hand. “You’re bad,” he said to her.

She smiled and stood up. She stripped off all of her clothes and he did the same. He sat back down on the couch and she sat in his lap again facing him with her legs wrapped around his waist.

He used his hand to guide himself into her. She put her hands on his shoulders and began to grind against him. He met each of her thrust with one of his own. Just as Casey began to feel the familiar sensations of the orgasm building, she felt a warmth inside her.

“Oh, no,” Michael said. He shook his head. “I’m sorry.” He closed his eyes, obviously disappointed his lack of control.

She pressed her forehead against his and smiled. “It’s okay. I guess you’re really are excited to see me.”

He nodded. “You want to go take a shower? I’ll make it up to you.”

“So where’s my new truck?” Casey asked. They had

emerged from the shower and were again seated in the living room.

She was wearing her regular pajamas and he had on a pair of red silk boxer shorts that had been a Christmas gift from Casey. He was sitting on the floor, his back against the couch and she was seated just above him, rubbing his shoulders.

"That's probably why you came back early," he said. "You just wanted that car."

"Yep," she replied.

"It's being delivered on Wednesday," he said. "I would have picked it up yesterday, but I had them put in the six-disc CD changer."

"That was thoughtful of you. You know, I didn't come back because of the car. I came back because of the note." She wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her chin on his head. "I was stunned."

He turned around to look at her. "Stunned? Why?"

She shrugged. "Things were so uncertain, you know?"

He shook his head. "No, Casey. They weren't."

Tell him! Tell him right now. Open your mouth and say the words, Casey. Tell him! "Mike, I've..." She was cut off by the phone ringing.

"Probably Mom again," he said, picking up the phone from where he discarded it earlier.

"Hello, Mom...okay, yeah, I'll bring it. Oh, Mom, I'm bringing someone with me in the morning. Casey's here...Well, I guess she thought she'd rather spend it with me. Okay, see you later." He hung up the phone. "She wants me to remember her casserole dish. So, what where you getting ready to say?"

She shook her head. The moment had been ruined. She wasn't sure of the best way to tell him anyway, and she knew that she wanted the moment to be just right. "Did you tell your mom that I was moving in?"

He nodded. "She assumed that you would be anyway."

“She’s okay with it?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, but it’s really not her business. I mean, I respect her opinion and all, but I make my own decisions.”

“So what’s her opinion?”

“She likes you. She likes that you make me happy, and that you take care of me. She says she doesn’t worry so much about me anymore.” He paused. “So did you tell your family?”

Casey nodded. “I did. They’re really happy, and they totally understood why I wanted to come back here today.”

“How was your visit home, besides short?”

“I visited Annie and we didn’t even fight.”

Michael raised his eyebrows, encouraging her to go on with her story. “I went over to Annie’s house this morning to say hello and she acted happy to see me, which kinda weirded me out, but I figured it was because it was Christmas. Anyway, Matt leaves us alone in the kitchen and she tells me that they are having some serious money troubles. So I wrote them a check for \$2500.”

Michael looked shocked. “They accepted it from you?”

Casey nodded. “Well, they didn’t want to, but I don’t think they had much choice, really. She told me they were broke until payday and they had wiped out their savings. Before I left this morning, I left them another check for the same amount.”

“What happened to their money?”

“The insurance didn’t pay on Rebecca’s hearing aids, so they had to pay out-of-pocket. Then Christmas, you know. I imagine it’s expensive playing Santa to eight kids.”

He nodded and rubbed his forehead, a sure sign that he was tired. “We should probably go to bed,” he said. “We’ve got to get up early in the morning.”



“You look beautiful,” Michael said, coming into the bathroom. “Very Christmasy.” She was wearing a red velvet dress and was just finishing her make-up.

“Thank you,” she replied.

“But there is one thing that’s missing,” he said. He came up behind her and put a gold necklace around her neck. Hanging from the chain and resting heavily against her chest was a heart shaped pendant made of diamonds and trimmed in rubies. It was obviously very valuable and very old. She touched it gingerly as he fastened the clasp.

“God, Mike, it’s beautiful.” She turned around to face him. He smiled and pushed a lock of hair out of her face. “My grandma Brooks gave that to me yesterday to give to you. Her grandmother gave it to her. Grandma didn’t have any daughters or granddaughters. My dad’s only got one brother and he has two sons. Anyway, she gave it to me, and I’m giving it to you.”

“Are you sure, Michael? This is an heirloom.”

He ran his fingers down the side of her face and lifted her chin. “I’m sure,” he whispered before he kissed her. He stepped back. “So how about me? Do I look okay?”

She nodded. He was wearing a very sharp and conservative-looking double-breasted suit and red satin tie. It was the first time she had ever seen him in dress clothes, at least in dress clothes that didn’t sparkle or shine. “You look very nice. You should dress up more often.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m used to a little flashier duds, though.” He ran a comb through his hair. “You ready?”

“I’m ready.”

It was a thirty minute drive to Michael’s grandparents’ house outside of Orlando. Although she had slept well the night before, she dozed in the car. “Casey, we’re here,” Michael said, gently shaking her.

She opened her eyes. “Oh, was I sleeping? I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You must be tired.”

She nodded. "I'm always tired it seems."

"Yep," he agreed. He opened his car door and she did the same. "You sure you're okay?" He asked as they walked up the sidewalk. "You think maybe you should call Dr. Klein tomorrow?"

"I'm sure I'm fine," she said. He opened the door to his grandparent's house and they were greeted warmly not only by Michael's family, but also coffee and fresh baked cinnamon rolls.

A couple of hours later, Michael pulled the car into a space in the church's parking lot. "This is my church."

"I know. You brought me here back in September."

He raised his eyebrows. "You're right. I forgot." They climbed out and stood in the parking lot waiting for other members of the family to arrive.

"Well, I guess I'll see you after the service," Michael said after his mother parked her car next to his. He leaned down to kiss her.

"Go make some noise," she whispered as she met his mouth with hers for a quick kiss.

"This must be so thrilling for them," Casey whispered to Mrs. Carter. They had taken their seats in the first pew and were watching as Birdie assembled the youth choir. Michael was sitting at the piano, which had been moved to center of the stage and he was looking over his music. He occasionally glanced up to wave hello to someone.

The older woman shook her head. "No, Casey, you're wrong. These kids have grown up with Michael. When he's in town he's here every Sunday. He never misses. He used to be a counselor at the church summer camp. These kids knew him when he was just Mike."

Casey nodded. "I didn't even think about it like that. Everyday, I see girls crying just because they got the chance to see him in person."

“Unbelievable,” Mrs. Carter said with a shake of her head. “Don’t get me wrong, I think he’s extremely talented, and definitely worthy of the admiration, but you know, he’s just Michael. Maybe you don’t know. He’s been a celebrity the whole time you’ve known him.”

“But, I do.”

Mrs. Carter smiled at Casey. “I’m sure you do, honey.” She looked over Casey’s shoulder. “Oh, brace yourself. Here comes the president of his fan club.”

Someone slid into the pew on the other side of Casey. “Hi, Granma,” the newcomer said.

“Hello, Melissa. Have you met Casey?”

Melissa looked at Casey. “I thought you must be her.”

Casey nodded. “I’m her.”

“Melissa, be nice to Casey,” Grandma Carter directed. “She’s our guest.”

“Whatever,” Melissa mumbled.

Casey looked down at her shoes and smiled. Michael began to play the piano and Casey looked up at the stage. He caught her eye and winked at her.

“Oh, please,” Melissa whispered. “This is not a love song. It’s ‘Silent Night’ for Pete’s sake.”

Chapter Twenty-Three



“Oh, I am so glad to be home,” Michael said as they came into the house. He tossed his keys on the counter. “There’s a message,” he said and pressed the button on the answering machine.

“It was David,” Casey said, looking at the caller ID.

“Hey, Mike,” David’s voice said. “I know you’re not home, but was just calling to tell you that I did it. I asked her to marry me, and she said no.”

“No?” Michael and Casey said in unison.

“I’m just kidding,” David’s voice said after a pause. “She said yes. So this makes it two down, three to go. Talk to you later, buddy. Bye.”

“Well, that’s great,” Casey said. “I’m so happy for them.”

Michael nodded. “Yeah, me too, but it’s really no big surprise. They’ve been together for, what? Three years?”

“So, still a proposal is good. Nothing is better than a

romantic proposal at a time when you least expect it.”

“And a big fat diamond ring, right?”

Casey nodded. “Well, you know, they are a girl’s best friend.”

“I’ll remember that,” he replied with a smile. “I am going to get out of these clothes,” he said, stripping off his jacket.

“Yeah, me, too,” she said stepping out of her heels. “My feet are killing me.” They went into the bedroom to change into their pajamas.

“You want to go downstairs and play a game of pool? My girlfriend surprised me with a pool table for Christmas.”

“Really? How did she pull that off?”

“Oh, she ordered it online and Dana let the delivery men into the house to set it up. Easy really. I haven’t been home a lot.” He led her down through the kitchen and down the basement stairs.

“Yeah, it was easy. I still can’t figure out how you got the keys to that Jeep and got them in my bag without me knowing.”

“That wasn’t so easy.” He racked the balls. “After we came home from test driving it, you came downstairs to do the laundry and I called the dealership and told them that I wanted it, and they gave me a price. So I called the bank and had them cut a check from my account and send it by messenger to the dealership. I told the dude from the dealership to send the keys over to Reed’s.”

“When we went over there that evening to take them to the airport, Reed gave me the keys. While you were taking a shower, I wrapped them and put them in your bag.” He shook his head. “I guess it wasn’t that complicated.” He leaned over the table and forcefully shot the cue ball to break the balls.

“Oh,” she said with a nod. “You’re pretty resourceful.” She watched the balls scatter across the table. “You want stripes or solids?” She asked, after watching one of each disappear into

the pockets.

He eyed the table. "I'll take the solids." He shot at the six ball and missed.

She looked at how her balls were positioned on the table. "I'm going to try the ten ball in the corner." She leaned across the table as far as her short stature would allow and shot the ball. It went in. She walked around the table. "Fifteen right over there," she said.

Michael shook his head. "You'll never make that."

She did, but she missed the next. He made his next two shots before missing. She went again, sinking the eleven, and scratched when she tried to knock the fourteen ball in a corner pocket. They alternated like this until there were only three balls on the table, the one ball, the nine ball, and the eight ball.

"Hmm," Michael said, eying the table. "I'm not really set up too good here." He missed, and the cue ball landed in the perfect position for her to make her last shot. "Damn," he muttered.

She made it, then sank the eight ball. "I win," she said. "You want to play again?"

"Yeah," he said grabbing the rack again. Once again he broke the balls and once again Casey beat him. "I'm not going to play with you anymore," he said, putting his stick on the table. "I'll wait till Jason can come over and play. He sucks."

Casey laughed. She looked around the room. It was a huge open space, nearly as big as the first floor. "So what are you going to do down here?" She knew in addition to the pool table, he wanted to add several large video game and pinball machines.

He leaned against the edge of the table and rubbed his chin. "I'm going to put a bar over there, I think," he said motioning to spot near the stairs.

"Ooh," Casey interrupted. "Put in a soda fountain. That would be cool."

He nodded. "Okay, done. What do you want to do? This is your house, too now."

"I think it would be neat to section off the back half of the room, you know, build a wall here." She walked across the large room and waved her arms beside her, "and make a separate TV room. You know, put a big projection TV in there and surround sound and lots of seats, and it would be like our very own theater."

"Hey, that sounds like a good idea. That way if we had like a party or something, people could go in there and watch a movie or stay out here playing pool or whatever and not be bothering each other."

He turned and looked across the room. "I was thinking that I would build a another guest room over in that corner, and put in a bathroom for down here."

"Close in the laundry room," Casey added. "And get rid of that futon."

He walked over to the futon. "This futon?" He lay down on it. "This is where it all started, baby. Me and you, right here."

She stretched out next to him. "I remember. I was scared of the storm."

"You were so vulnerable. I had never seen you like that. I was so in love with you and I didn't know how to tell you. I didn't know if you were ready for a new relationship, or if you were even interested in me."

"Oh Mike, you had to know I was interested. I've been falling in love with you since we met. This is such a good thing we have here. I'm glad we didn't screw it up the other day."

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pressed his forehead to hers. "I love you, Casey. I want to be with you forever."

Okay, this is it. Tell him now.

"I don't want anything to change," Michael continued. "If

everything stayed exactly as it is right now forever, it would be perfect. I don't need anything but you."

It felt so good having his undivided affection, so good, that she decided not to tell him about the pregnancy. She wanted all of his attention to be directed at her and not at the baby. *I can tell him tomorrow.*

"I want that, too, Mike. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

He fingered a lock of her hair. "I'm glad you're letting your hair grow back out."

"You told me it looked good short."

"It did, but I like it long."

"Then I'll keep it long," she said.

He ran his fingers down the side of her face. "You are so beautiful." He kissed her forehead. "I am so lucky to have found you."

She nodded. "Yes, you are." She kissed his lips. "I love you."

"I know." He sat up. "Let's go to bed."

"I'm not really that sleepy," she said.

He flashed her a grin. "Me, either."



"Casey," Michael called down the basement stairs. "Your car's here."

Casey pulled the clothes out of the dryer and threw them into the basket. She quickly climbed the stairs and joined Michael in the garage where he was signing some papers for the delivery men from the dealership. She stayed in the garage while Michael went back into the kitchen to watch the men leave and to remotely close the gate. He came back out and sat in the passenger's seat.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it, Mike. It’s so cool.”

“So you want to go for a ride?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I do.” She ran her hand across the dashboard. An idea struck her. “You got anything planned for the next couple of days?” She asked.

He shook his head. “No, why?”

“Let’s pack a bag. There’s somewhere I want to take you.”

“Where?”

“I’ll tell you when we get there.”

They went into the bedroom and Casey threw a couple of changes of clothes for each of them into a small suitcase. She grabbed her make-up case from the bathroom. “You about ready?” She asked.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“We’re going to North Carolina, aren’t we?” He asked about an hour into their trip.

She nodded. “Yeah. There’s something I want you see there.”

It was close to midnight when they arrived in the coastal college town of Wilmington, North Carolina. Michael was driving and Casey directed him even farther east to the small town appropriately called Carolina Beach. She had made several phone calls when they stopped for supper to find a room for them to spend the night in. She had made reservations at an ocean front hotel that she was vaguely familiar with. They both fell onto the bed upon entering the room.

Michael stood up and stripped off his clothes. He pulled back the covers and climbed into the bed. “I’m going to sleep now,” he said.

“Yeah, me, too.” She stood up to get her pajamas out of the suitcase. She changed and climbed into the bed. “Good night, honey.”

They had slept in until noon, and after having a leisurely lunch, Casey was finally taking Michael to her original destination point. She pulled the car into the empty parking lot. "We're here."

"The pier?"

She nodded and opened the car door. "Yeah." She took his hand and led him to the entrance of the pier. They stopped at looked at the wooden planks that extended 700 feet in front of them. "I want to walk out to the end," she said.

Michael looked toward the ocean and shook his head. There was a small restaurant at the pier's entrance with several outside tables. "I'll just sit right here."

She nodded, understanding why he didn't want to accompany her, and let go of his hand. She walked slowly out to the end of the pier. She leaned against the railing and closed her eyes. The cold wind stung her face. She took a deep breath, taking in the smell of the salt water, and opened her eyes.

"Merry Christmas, Alex." She stayed there for several more minutes staring out at the horizon and thinking about her brother before she returned to Michael. She sat in the chair next to him.

"So what are we doing here?" He asked.

"I want to tell you about Alex."

"I'm guessing this pier has something to do with the story."

She nodded. "He loved this place -- this beach, this pier. He used to come down here and sit and fish for literally days. He'd come home dog-tired and smelling like seawater and fish and beer, but the next trip was never soon enough for him. He even went to college out here so he could go to the beach everyday. He loved this place."

"Right after school got out my sophomore year -- CJ had just graduated -- a bunch of us came down here for a few days. Alex was always looking for a reason to party, so he came with us, and the three of us were sharing a motel room."

“Anyway, one night CJ and I had a fight about something -- I don’t even know what now, but I left the room really upset. I found Alex down here drinking with some friends. He kinda brushed off his buddies and we sat down here on the pier all night drinking beer, smoking and talking. He told me that he didn’t like CJ much, and he didn’t like the way he treated me, and he wanted me to break up with him.”

“Sounds like a smart guy.”

Casey nodded. “He was.” Tears formed in her eyes. “He was the most important person in my world. I just adored him so much. There was nothing I couldn’t talk about with him, no problem that he couldn’t solve for me. I did break up with CJ after that trip, because Alex told me to, and I would’ve done anything he told me to. A month later he was gone, and I went back to CJ.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. “When my grandfather died years ago, he was cremated and we spread his ashes over the farm where he had been born and raised and raised his family. That felt right to Alex, and that’s what he wanted. So, after he died, we had him cremated and early one Saturday morning, Mom and Dad, me and Annie all came down here and scattered his ashes off this pier.”

She wiped the tears from her face. “Anyway, I wanted to tell you that story and I wanted to be right here when I did.”

Michael reached for her hand and squeezed it. “I’m glad you did. You’ve lost so much, Casey. You’ve hurt so much. You know that’s not going to happen anymore. From here on out, it’s nothing but good stuff.”

“You can’t promise that. There’s going to be bad things happen to both of us.”

He nodded. “I know, but as long as we’re together we can get through anything.”

“Okay, that sounds like song lyrics, and not even good

ones," she joked. She stood up and pulled Michael to his feet. "It's cold. Let's get some coffee."

"I'm going to jump in the shower," Michael said when they returned to the hotel room.

"Okay." Casey opened the sliding glass door that lead out onto the balcony. She pulled her coat tighter around her to protect her from the chilly wind and sat in one of the deck chairs. It had been a good day, a little emotionally draining, but good. Sharing her memories of Alex had made her feel a little closer to Michael. He reminded her a lot of her brother. Just like with Alex, she knew there wasn't anything she couldn't tell Michael, and there was no problem that being with him wouldn't fix.

She had to tell him about the baby. She had known for a week. It was wrong of her to keep it from him. How would he react? *I know how he'd react. He'd be really happy -- he'd probably ask me to marry him.*

The thought was enough to make her want to jump up, jerk him out of the shower, and share the joy, but another nagging thought kept her seated. Did she want a proposal under these circumstances? Sure, she wanted to marry him, but she didn't want to force him into a marriage, and she didn't want him to feel pressured.

Maybe he doesn't want to marry me. We've only known each other seven months -- but he did ask me to move it with him; but if he wanted to marry me, he would have asked that instead, right? She sighed and shook her head. *I'll wait just another few days.*

"What's wrong, Casey?" Michael stepped out onto the balcony.

"Oh, nothing -- just looking at the ocean. It's very relaxing."

He nodded and leaned against the railing. "We should come back this summer."

"I was thinking about buying a house here on the beach," she said. He swung his head around, and she could see the flicker of fear in his eyes. "No, I mean like a vacation place. I'm not going to live here. I've got a home -- our home."

"So do you think Alex would have liked me?"

She nodded. "I think so, but I think he would have tested you."

"How so?"

"He would have wanted to take you out fishing and hunting and drinking, you know, to see if you could hold your own. He wouldn't have had any use for you if you couldn't swing a hammer or a baseball bat. You would have done well. You would have passed. He would have liked you."



Casey, Dana and David's girlfriend Shannon sat on the barstools that the guys used part way through the show and faced the stage. It was New Year's Eve and they were at Madison Square Garden. The concert was a pay-per-view special and millions of dollars in sales were already being reported. The tickets for the show had sold out in less than an hour. They had flown to New York the day before and met up with the road crew and Jake and Al who had driven up earlier in the week.

"Is the set list the same as it was before Christmas?" Shannon asked as the first song began.

"I think so," Casey said. "I haven't heard about any changes."

"So how far into the show do we get to keep our seats?" To this point, Shannon had only managed to visit David once during the tour. Casey liked her well enough, but she hadn't felt the instant fondness for her as she had with Dana.

"Five songs," Casey replied.

They were joined by Carmen. "Hey, Carmen," they all greeted her.

"How are things looking over at Time's Square?" Casey asked. Carmen was participating in *Dick Clark's New Years Rocking Eve*.

"Crowded," Carmen replied. "And Ronnie Sartin is just driving me insane." Ronnie Sartin was a member of Daybreak, another act participating in the show.

"How so?" Dana asked.

"He keeps asking me out, and he won't take no for an answer."

"Well, you better not tell Jason," Casey said. "Or there will be a rumble."

"A true battle of the boy bands," Dana joked.

"You know," Shannon said thoughtfully. "I think our guys could kick their asses." Everyone laughed.

"That's what they should put on pay-per-view," Carmen said.

"So are you singing anymore tonight?" Casey asked.

Carmen shook her head. "No, I'm done. I'm hanging out here until the end of the show, and then I'm going back to the hotel with Jason." She shook her head. "That sounds bad, doesn't it?"

Dana shook her head. "Sounds good to me. Jason's a little hottie."

Carmen's eye grew wide. "We're not...you know," she protested over the laughter of the other women.

"Did you see that?" Dana said, nodding toward the stage. "Reed and Max just totally ran into each other." She shook her head. "I can't believe they get paid all that money to go out there and jump around that stage like monkeys."

“Alright ladies, up,” one of the stagehands said when it was time for him to carry the stools onto the stage.

The guys ran back to grab a drink of water and to strip out of their sweaty clothes. Fresh outfits were waiting for them. They trickled back onstage one-by-one and took their seats. When they all had assembled, Max stood up and tried to quiet the crowd, with surprising success.

“I love you, Max!” A voice screamed out. He smiled broadly and pointed in the direction the shout had come from. “I love you, too, baby!” He sat back down.

Reed stood up. “We’re going to slow it down a bit now, but before we go on, we’ve got something we want to do. As you all know, this is our third tour in four years, which means we’ve been on the road a lot. This tour is by far the biggest and longest – a hundred cities, 125 shows -- eight and a half months -- a long time. It’s a long time to be away from home, and our road crew and band and dancers have made the sacrifice and done an outstanding job. We wanted to take this opportunity to again thank them.”

The audience applauded, and Reed hushed them. “But there’s one very important person that goes absolutely unrecognized and we wanted to take this opportunity to acknowledge her.”

David stood up. “When we were preparing for this tour, we asked ourselves if there was anything we’d like to change about our accommodations. You may have seen our bus before. And it’s a nice bus. Plenty of room to sleep, TVs, DVDs, computer, Playstation, fridge, microwave, bathroom. Everything we need. But it is only eight and a half foot wide and about fifty foot long. And there’s,” He pretended to count his bandmates. “There’s five of us. That’s only 10 foot apiece of personal space.” The crowd laughed.

“But, to tell you the truth,” he continued, “we all get along

pretty well, and we're pretty comfortable crammed into one bus, staring at each other 24/7, and not being able to escape, but there was definitely something that needed changing."

Max jumped up. "The food!"

David nodded. "We were so tired of fast food and hotel food and truck stop food. We were dying for home cooked meals...everyday. So we got another bus, put in a kitchen and set out on the quest to find us a chef."

Max began to speak. "Our manager came to us one day and said he'd found two people and we had to decide which one we wanted. Well, we looked at our choices...either Casey, who you are about to meet or this dude with crazy hair and weird shoes. But this job is about the cooking, so we had to let our taste buds decide. Her cooking was unbelievable. So we picked her and we love her. The thing that's different about Casey is that she is the only member of our crew, besides the bus drivers, who travels with us, who lives with us, day in and day out."

"Bless her heart," David piped up.

Max shoved him aside playfully and continued talking. "She has become an important and irreplaceable part of Quintessential." He smiled in her direction. "She's a fantastic cook, a wonderful friend, and an extraordinary person."

Jason stood up. "But she's more than a chef. She's also a registered nurse which is really important because we tend to get hurt a lot." This elicited a laugh from the crowd. "Max said she has become a great friend, and for most of us, she has become like a little big sister." He held his hand out parallel to the floor so the audience could get an idea of her height.

"She's pretty amazing, and she's been able to keep us centered and grounded although she's had some crazy, crazy stuff going on in her personal life. Personally, I don't know where I'd be without her. We chose today to embarrass her because we're on national TV and it's her birthday." He turned

to the side of stage.

“So everyone, give it up for Casey Russo!” Casey stood off stage shaking her head and wiping the tears from her eyes. She couldn’t believe what was going on. Someone gave her a push from behind and she found herself walking across the stage where the five were waiting to embrace her. She hugged each of them. David, Jason, Max and Reed returned to their seats leaving Michael and Casey standing in the middle of the stage. She waved at the crowd and turned to leave.

Michael caught her hand. “Hold on,” he said. “I haven’t said anything yet.” She looked at him questionably. He turned to the audience. “Jason said she’s like a big sister; maybe to them, but I certainly don’t look at her as a sister, and I never have. From the moment I laid eyes on her, I knew that she was going to be my girlfriend and we were going to be together for a long time.”

He looked at her. “I couldn’t let this night pass without doing something special for you. I’ve had a lot of good in my life, but you are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I love you, Casey, and I don’t ever want to be without you by my side.”

Before she knew what was going on, Michael was down on one knee in front of her. The crowd went wild with anticipation.

Casey never took her eyes off of his face. The other four jumped up and waved their arms down, trying to quiet the crowd. When the room was almost totally silent, he began to speak again.

“Casey, I know that in the past few years, you’ve been through a lot, and you lived a whole other life before you came to work with us. The other day you said you were ready to forget that old life and start again. I want to be a permanent part of that new life.” He pulled a box from his pocket. “Will you marry me?”

Her hands flew to her mouth. “Oh, my God,” she breathed.

She flung out her arms. "Yes! Yes!" The crowd erupted in cheers, and Michael slid the ring onto her finger. He stood, picked her up and spun her around, planting his mouth on hers in the process.

He pulled the headset away from his face so only she could hear him. "Thank you, Casey. You have made me happier than I have ever been."

"I love you, Mike." She kissed him one more time before hurrying off the side of the stage.

Chapter Twenty-Four



“Casey, honey? Are you okay?” Michael rapped lightly on the bathroom door. Casey wiped her face with the cool wash cloth. Her morning sickness had hit full force and hiding it was becoming harder.

“Yeah, Mike. I’ll be right out.” She quickly brushed her teeth.

“You sure you feel okay?” Michael said as she came out of the bathroom. He pressed his palm against her forehead. “Are you coming down with something?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know. You’ve been kinda dragging around for a few weeks now. Maybe you’re pregnant.” He laughed off the suggestion and planted a kiss on her forehead before heading into the bathroom himself.

She watched him begin his morning routine. “I am,” she said after a few minutes of silence.

"You are what?" He asked without removing the toothbrush from his mouth.

"I'm pregnant."

He met her eyes in the mirror. "Are you serious?"

She nodded. "Yep."

He dropped the toothbrush and turned around to face her. "How? What? Oh, my God." He crossed the room to her. "Are you sure?"

"Let's sit down." She led him to the bed. "I was feeling kinda weird a couple of weeks ago. You know, real tired, dizzy, nauseous, and I fell; and the thought crossed my mind. I didn't think I was, because this isn't supposed to happen to me, but I knew there was something going on. I thought maybe there was something wrong, another cyst, or something worse. So when we were in Chapel Hill a couple of weeks ago, I went and saw Dr. Arnold. It's for real. I'm pregnant."

"How come you didn't tell me then?"

"Well, we really didn't have time to be alone before the show, then afterwards, you dumped me."

He smiled. "Oh, yeah, but it's been almost two weeks since then."

"I just wanted to wait until I knew it was right -- until I knew that we were really going to be okay. This is big news and I knew that you would be happy about it. I kinda thought you'd propose if I told you and I didn't want to pressure you. I didn't want you to ask me to marry you because I was having your baby. After last night, well, I knew it was right, and I'm glad I waited. You asked me to marry you without knowing. You want to marry me."

"Of course I do." He ran his fingertips down the side of her face. "I love you, Casey." It was evident that he was not going to be mad with her for waiting to tell him.

"I know." She cupped his face in her hands and kissed him

lightly on the lips. "I know." She stood up and got her purse off of the nightstand. "I have a picture." She pulled out the ultrasound picture that Dr. Arnold had given her when she left her appointment. The small figure wasn't much to look at, but she knew Michael would enjoy seeing his baby. He took the picture from her and stared at it. She pointed out the baby's head and legs and arms. She let him have a minute to digest the news.

"Oh, my God," he kept whispering. He finally looked up from the picture. "So, how far along are you? When are you due?"

"Almost 12 weeks. We're due July fifth."

"We're due," he repeated. "God, Casey, how did this happen? I thought you couldn't..."

"I didn't think I could either. It's a miracle, Mike. I never got pregnant before in the twelve years since I started having sex. I got pregnant with your baby a month after we started sleeping together. It's not just a miracle; it's some kind of sign that we're supposed to be together."

He shook his head, obviously still in disbelief. "I can't believe it. Who knows already?"

"You, me and the doctor."

He placed his hand on her still flat stomach. "Is everything okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Dr. Arnold says it looks perfect. You're going to be a daddy."

He kissed her on the forehead. He looked from her to the digital clock on the bedside table and then back. "I've got to finish getting ready." He shook his head. "I don't want to go anywhere."

She pushed him off the bed. "Go on, get ready. I'll still be pregnant later." He disappeared into the bathroom. She heard the shower start. A few seconds later, his rich voice filled the room. She would never tire of hearing him singing. She held her

hand out in front of her, admiring the ring that he had given her the night before. She clasped her hands together and held them over her abdomen. She was struck by the thought that she was dangerously close to having everything she wanted.

"So, when do you think we should get married?" Michael asked, coming out of the bathroom. "I mean, do you want to wait until after the tour, or after the baby comes?"

"I was thinking that it should be sooner rather than later."

"Sooner, like right away?"

She nodded. "Is that a problem?"

"Well, no Casey. If you told me you wanted to do it tonight, I'd be all for it."

"I want to already be married when the baby comes, but I don't want to be waddling down the aisle either. Reed and Dana are getting married this summer and David and Shannon in November. I don't want to steal their thunder."

"So what are you thinking?"

Casey shrugged. "Where do you want to get married?"

"Hell, Casey. I don't know. I really thought we'd have more time." He held up his hand. "Not that I want to wait or that I don't want to do it right now. I just haven't given it much thought."

"Think about it." She turned on the television and was surprised to see a clip of Michael's proposal on MTV. She smiled and shook her head. They had never tried to hide their relationship, but their romance hadn't been publicized. *It is now.*

"I'd really like to have the wedding in my church back home."

"We'll talk about it later tonight, okay?" She glanced at the clock. "We really need to get moving."



"I've been thinking about our schedule," Michael said later that afternoon. "We've got the twentieth through the twenty-third of this month off. We can do it then. The only other time we'll be at home before the end of the tour is in February -- Valentine's Day." He wrinkled his nose at the thought of a Valentine's Day wedding.

"Besides, if we're going to wait that long, we might as well wait four more days and the tour will be over."

Casey nodded. "I've been thinking about it, too. I'd say wait until February, but I'll be like eighteen weeks pregnant, and I'm scared I'll be showing." She shook her head. "Maybe it's silly, but I don't want to look pregnant in our wedding pictures."

He smiled and kissed her forehead. "You're not silly." He poured himself a drink and sat down at the table. "So who do we tell...about the baby?"

"I don't want to tell my family until after the wedding. It's a big deal that I'm pregnant, but I want the focus of our wedding day to be on us, and not on the pregnancy."

He nodded. "I understand, but my mom is gonna ask, I'm sure, especially after I tell her we're getting married in twenty-one days -- three weeks." His eyes grew wide. "Three weeks," he repeated.

"She doesn't know that I can't have kids?" She laughed at the irony of her statement.

He shook his head. "I never told her." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I can't in good conscience have Reverend Moss marry us without telling him."

Casey nodded. "Do you think that will keep him from officiating?"

"No. He's married pregnant people before."

"What about the guys?"

"What do you think?"

She shrugged. "It's hard keeping this secret from people

you're around everyday. I'd rather tell them, but just them...I don't want the whole crew to know."

He nodded. "We can tell them and swear them to secrecy and hope that it doesn't leak out."

"I think it will be okay," she said. "We'll tell them at supper."

He nodded. "Okay. I'm gonna call Mom and get her to make sure Reverend Moss can do it on the twenty-second. Is that okay with you?"

"Are you gonna tell her about the baby now?"

"She's gonna ask. Do you want me to not tell her?"

"No, no. You can tell her."

He smiled. "That's good, because I want to tell the whole world." He picked up his cell phone and dialed Casey's number.

"I'm calling you," he said as her phone began to ring. She answered and then he used the three-way calling feature to call his mother. "Hey, Mom."

"Michael, I've been trying to call you all morning."

"Yeah, I haven't had my phone on all day. We had that charity thing this morning, then we've been napping most of the afternoon."

"Casey seemed pretty surprised last night," Birdie said.

"Oh, you watched the show?"

"Yeah, Ted and I watched it. He's never seen you all perform."

"She was surprised. That was my plan."

"Well, congratulations, honey. I know that's what you've been wanting for a long time."

"Thank you, Mom. It is. So, I called to see if you could do me a favor. We want to get married on the twenty-second. Can you see if Reverend Moss can do it that day?"

"Of this month?" Birdie asked.

"Yeah."

"Isn't that a little sudden?"

"Yeah, Mom, but we don't want to wait any longer than that."

Birdie was silent for a moment. *Here it comes.* She met Michael's eyes.

"Is there anything you want to tell me, Michael?"

"Like what?" He was smiling.

"Is she pregnant?"

Michael's smile broadened. "Yes, Mom. She's pregnant." Again Birdie was silent. "Are you still there, Mom?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Are you sure it's yours?" With that question, Casey clicked off her phone.

"Of course, I am, Mom...July fifth...we're not getting married because she's pregnant. I didn't even know until this morning...she didn't tell me...yeah, I plan on telling him, but I thought that maybe you could see if the church was available before I did...okay, Mom. I love you." He clicked off the phone. He looked at Casey. "I'm sorry. She didn't mean that the way it sounded."

Casey nodded. "I know."

When everyone had been seated for supper and Max had said grace, Casey called for their attention. "Listen guys," she said, "there's something I want...we want to talk to you all about."

"What's up?" David asked. He looked from her to Michael. "Everything okay?"

"Mike and I are wanting to get married on the twenty-second."

"Of this month?" Reed asked.

Michael nodded. "Yeah. We're gonna be home and we want to go ahead and do it. Casey and I both want you all to be a part, if you can."

"It shouldn't be a problem," Max said. "But what's the big

rush?"

Casey and Michael exchanged a glance. "This doesn't leave this bus," Casey said. She drummed her fingertips on the table. "And I'm serious about this."

"What is it, Casey?" Jason asked.

She took a deep breath. "It seems that I'm pregnant."

"I knew it," David said. He pointed his finger at her. "I knew it."

Casey looked at Reed. "I don't want to take anything away from you and Dana." She looked at David, "Or you and Shannon, but we want to do this before the baby comes."

Reed nodded. "It's okay, Casey."

"When are you due, anyway?" Max asked.

"July fifth," Casey answered. She watched as Max counted the months on his fingers. "Six more months and you all will be uncles."

"So how long have you known?" Max asked Michael.

"Casey told me this morning."

Everyone looked at her. "How long have you known?" Reed asked.

She met David's eyes. "I found out before the last show, when we were in Chapel Hill."

"You lied to me," David said.

"I couldn't very well tell you first."

"So, Casey," Jason said, "how is it you didn't know you were pregnant for two and a half months? Didn't you *miss* anything?"

She looked at Michael and raised her eyebrows. He shook his head slightly. *Of course he wouldn't have told them about my problems. They don't know that this pregnancy is completely unexpected.*

"No, Jason. I didn't miss anything. This baby is a complete surprise."

"Well, how much of a surprise could it be?" Max asked.

"Y'all have been having sex all this time, haven't you?"

"I'm very confused," Jason said.

"I'm not supposed to be able to get pregnant," Casey explained. "So this was shocking, to say the least."

Max sat back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He looked from Casey to Michael. "So is this good news?"

A smile spread across Michael's face. "This is excellent news."

"So let me get this straight," David said. "You didn't know that she was pregnant last night when you proposed?"

Michael shook his head. "Nope."

Reed clapped Michael on the back. "Dude, this is cool. Congratulations."

"Yeah, congratulations, you two," Jason chimed in.

"So we can't tell anyone?" Reed asked. "You're telling Dana, right?"

Casey shook her head. "We're not telling anyone else." She looked around the table. "Let's eat guys."



The steam rolled out of the bathroom before Michael stepped out into the bedroom. The buses had been rolling toward the next destination for about an hour. Casey, already in her pajamas, was lying on the bed flipping through the channels.

"Casey, there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Uh-oh. It's only been what, twenty-four hours and already you're changing your mind?"

Michael shook his head and laughed. "No, no. I don't want to have sex again until we're married."

She was shocked. That was the very last thing she expected

him to say. "You know, I saw your mouth moving and I heard the words come out, but I swear, I must've heard you wrong."

He shook his head again. "You heard me right."

"Why?"

"Well, I've been thinking about it, and I've been thinking about that first time we had sex and how good it felt, and I'd like to try to re-create that as much as we can in three weeks anyway."

Casey understood what he was trying to say, and she was up for the challenge. "Okay."

"That's it? Okay? You don't have anything else to say?"

She shook her head. "I don't think you'll be able to do it, though. I don't think you'll last."

He immediately picked up on her competitive attitude. "Oh, I'll last, and to top it off, to make it even harder, I don't want to have any sexual contact with you at all. I don't even want to even see you naked."

"You really know how to make a girl feel wanted," she joked. "So are you going to go back to the other bus, too?"

"I was thinking about it."

"No, Mike. We'll play your little game, but I don't want to be alone on the bus."

He nodded. "Okay, I'll stay, but no funny stuff."

She shook her head and laughed. "You'll never make it."

He waited until she had finished laughing. "Have you talked to your sister?"

Casey shook her head. "No, why?"

"She hasn't called?"

"No, Mike, and I don't really expect her to call and offer up a congratulations. I'm sure this just made her day."

"But you made out like you got along well at Christmas."

Casey shrugged. "We did, I guess, for no longer than I was there. I don't know. I'm having such a good time. I don't want

her to ruin it.”

“Did you talk to your parents about coming down?”

Casey nodded. “Yeah, they’re going to get to Florida on Friday the eighteenth and are leaving on Wednesday.”

“Are they staying at the house?” Michael asked. He pulled a T-shirt over his head and lay down on the bed next to her.

“Yeah. That’s still okay, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah, so why don’t you call Annie and have her and Matt bring the kids down? They can all stay there. There’s plenty of room.”

“That’s a lot of people, Mike. We’re talking a dozen people waiting for us in our house when we get there.”

“It’s okay. If we get tired of them, we’ll get a hotel.”

“I don’t know.”

He shook his head. “So you’re not inviting them to the wedding? That’s crazy talk.” He picked up his cell phone. “What’s her number? I’ll call her.”

Casey took the phone away from him. “I’ll call her.” She dialed her sister’s number then glanced at the clock to do the time zone conversion.

“Hello?” Annie answered, her voice heavy with sleep.

“Hey, Annie,” Casey said. “Were you sleeping?”

“Just dozing on the couch waiting for Matt to get home. He had a meeting at church. Something wrong, Casey?”

“Oh, no. I was just calling to tell you that Michael and I have set a date.”

“Yeah, I heard. Mom told me.”

“Well, I want you to come. You and Matt.”

“Why?”

“You’re my sister, Annie. I’d like you to be there.”

“I don’t know, Casey. Matt probably won’t be able to get off work.”

“Then come without him. Bring the kids, take them to

DisneyWorld. It won't cost you anything. You can stay at our house. Come down for a few days like Mom and Dad are doing. Wouldn't you like a vacation? We're paying for Mom and Dad's trip, too, so don't give me the money excuse."

"I don't know. I've never flown with all the kids."

"Mom and Dad will be on the plane, too. You'll have plenty of help."

"You have a point."

"Does this mean you're coming?"

"I'll ask Matt. I'm sure the kids will want to go."

"Thank you, Annie."

"I'm not promising anything. Oh, Casey?"

"Yeah?"

"Congratulations."

"Thank you, Annie." She clicked off the phone.

"So is she coming?" Michael asked.

Casey shrugged. "I don't know."

He nodded. "She'll come."



It was a week later. The tape of Michael's proposal had been played incessantly on television, and quite frankly Casey was getting sick of hearing about it. She shook her head at the TV.

"Why do people care about this so much?" She picked up the remote and turned off the TV. She sat down at the table. "I'm just so ready for this to be over."

"When are you going to get your dress?" Michael asked.

"Lisa, Paige and I are going to this bridal outlet in Memphis when we're there later this week."

Lisa was the wardrobe mistress for the group. She was in her early fifties and she reminded Casey more of a grandmother than a roadie traveling with the hottest pop group in the nation.

A talented seamstress, she had volunteered to make any alterations to Casey's dress.

Paige, the group's hairdresser, had offered to do the hair and make-up of the bridal party. As a matter of fact, the entire wedding was pulling together smoothly. Carmen and Jason were going to do the music for the service and the group's band would be performing at the reception. In Orlando, Dana was arranging florists and caterers, and she and Shannon were even picking out their own bridesmaid's dresses. The only real responsibility Casey and Michael had was to write their vows.

"So what's being married to you going to be like?" She asked, curling up next to him.

"Unbelievably boring," he answered.

She smiled. "I don't think so."

"Okay, how about unbelievable normal? You'll cook the meals and clean the house and I'll mow the lawn and wash the cars. We'll argue about what color to paint the nursery and whether to watch Leno or Letterman. We'll watch TV together in the evenings and go to bed with each other every night."

"Are you ever sorry that we're not going to have more time just the two of us? After the tour is over, we're only going to have four or five months before the baby comes."

Michael shrugged. "I haven't thought about it really. This is what God has planned for us, though."

"I was planning on going to work in Dr. Klein's office. Are you still okay with that?"

He nodded. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be? I think you should do what ever you want to." She had expressed her penchant to work after the tour, and he had never questioned her desire to have a job.

"What do you think about after the baby comes?"

"I think you should do what ever you want to," he repeated.

Chapter Twenty-Five



“**A**ll the kids asleep?” Casey asked as Annie sat down next to her on the blanket. It had been a warm day for the third week in January, even by Florida standards. It was still sixty-five degrees at eight at night.

“They’re all in their rooms watching movies. Mom’s still rocking Gabe. I can’t believe that those guys took all my kids to DisneyWorld today.”

They had. Max and Jason had taken Matthew and Sam, David and Shannon had been in charge of John and Caleb, and Reed and Dana had guided Rebecca and Sarah around the amusement park. The kids weren’t used to being chaperoned by someone who was able and more than willing to treat them to their every whim. Casey figured Disney had easily made a couple of thousand dollars from their visit that day.

Michael and Casey had taken eleven-month-old Gabriel and pushed him around in the stroller. Annie and Emily and spent

the morning at a salon, getting new hair styles and the afternoon replenishing their wardrobes, all compliments of Casey.

"They really wore them out, and thank you for taking Gabe today. I hope he wasn't any trouble. You all really gave me the opportunity to spend sometime with Emily. It was good for us."

"You're welcome, Annie. I think the guys had fun. They're really good with kids. As for Gabe, Mike and I loved it."

"Thanks again." Annie said. She looked out over the water. "I'd love to have a house on the lake."

Casey drew a picture of a heart in the sand with her finger. "You can, Annie."

She shook her head. "Matt would never let me accept the money from you, and we'd never be able to pay you back. I can't. I'm still shocked that he took the money at Christmas."

"Okay, but you know if you ever change your mind, we'll be happy to help you."

Annie nodded toward Michael who was gathering wood for the fire he was attempting to build. "Did I cause any trouble between the two of you?"

Casey shook her head and lied. "Not much. We muddled through okay."

"I'm sorry, Casey. I don't know what I was thinking." She pulled an orange bottle out of her pocket. "After you brought Emily back, I was so angry that I couldn't stand to look at her. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't even feed Gabe. I had to put him on formula. Emily went to stay with Mom and Dad, but it still didn't help. Mom talked me into going to the doctor. He gave me these." She handed the bottle to Casey. She read the label: Prozac.

"He said I'm depressed."

"Are they helping?"

Annie nodded. "I think so. I don't seem to be in such a bad mood all the time anymore." She took the bottle from Casey and

shoved it back into her pocket. "Are they safe during pregnancy?"

"Are you pregnant?"

Annie shook her head. "Not yet, but you know it's just a matter of time."

"I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I'm thinking that it is pretty safe. Do you want more kids?"

Annie shook her head. "Not really. I really thought Sarah was going to be it, especially after a couple of years passed and I hadn't gotten pregnant. But then, here comes Gabe." She sighed. "I'm tired, Casey. My body is tired. I've done it eight times. We can't afford anymore and we don't have the room. I'm tired of changing diapers, and I'm tired of breast-feeding. I'm tired of sex."

Casey laughed.

"I'm serious, Casey. I know you've probably got this great sex life and you couldn't understand." She looked at Michael. "I mean, really, look at him. Sex with that couldn't possibly be bad."

Casey laughed again. "I can't complain." She shook her head. "Except for the fact that we haven't done it in three weeks."

"Why not?" Annie asked.

"It was his idea. After he proposed, he wanted to wait so our wedding night would be more special. I thought it was silly at first, like a game."

"A game, why?"

"Oh, you know. Like we were seeing who had more willpower. I didn't think it would last a week, but now that it's been three weeks I'm glad he suggested it. It's going to feel really good tomorrow night to be with him."

"Three weeks isn't really that long, Case."

"Oh, I know. I miss him. I don't really miss the sex; I miss

him and the closeness and intimacy that comes with sex." She blushed. "I can't believe I just told you that."

Annie smiled. "We've never really talked about sex before, huh? Shoot, we've never really talked about anything before." She plucked at a piece of grass that was sticking up through the sand. Did you and Alex talk like this?"

Casey shook her head. "We talked about a lot of things, but he didn't want to hear about me having sex."

"He hated CJ," Annie said. "I think he was the only person in the world who did. Well, besides Dad."

"I know." She shook her head. "God, I miss him."

"Me, too." Annie shook her head. "I was so jealous of your relationship with him. I was jealous of everything about you."

Casey sighed. "I hate that, Annie. I hate that we couldn't be close. You know what's funny, though, I was jealous of you. You have the husband and the kids and the happy, perfect life."

"It's not so perfect, Casey. We've got a few problems."

"Money, still? Because you know I'll..."

Annie held up her hand. "No, Casey not money. Problems between us."

"What kind of problems?"

Annie shook her head. "I shouldn't be talking about this."

Casey nodded. "Oh, in the bedroom. You and Matt are in a rut? Sex is...not good?"

"We have eight kids. There's no time for good sex. It's always rushed, and you know how men are, when they're finished, it's over, and to be honest, he's really not into trying anything new. It's the same thing every time."

"Well, what is it that you want him to do?"

Annie shook her head. Casey could tell she was embarrassed. "About thirteen years ago, I guess, I was pregnant with Matthew. It was around Thanksgiving and me and Matt and Emily had come to North Carolina to spend Thanksgiving

with you all. Anyway, Alex was dating that blonde girl with the old woman's name. You remember her?"

"Mildred," Casey offered.

"Right, Mildred. Matt and I were up late, Emily was asleep, and we decided to go outside and sit on the swing in the backyard. Well, when we walked into the garage when we were coming back in, there they were, Alex and Mildred. They were having sex – in the garage! He was standing behind her and she was leaning over the hood of the car. You know Alex, he wasn't embarrassed at all, but Matt was mortified. Mostly, I think because they weren't married, but maybe it was because of how they were doing it."

Casey nodded. "I walked in on them more than once. They weren't very discreet at all."

"Anyway," Annie continued, "as sick as it sounds, I couldn't get that vision out of my head. She acted like she was really enjoying it, and I couldn't help but think, why doesn't Matt do that to me?"

"You mean, bend you over the car?" Casey asked with a smile.

"I mean anything. He just doesn't do anything."

"How does he do it?"

"We've done it in the same position every time for fifteen years, Casey. I don't even enjoy it that much anymore."

"You should talk to him, Annie."

"It would be no use. I've got to play the hand I'm dealt, so to speak." She shook her head. "I just wish he was a little more open, you know? There's no extras, either, if you know what I mean."

Casey understood what she was trying to say. "Wait, wait, wait. He doesn't do it at all?"

Annie shook her head. "He never has."

Casey couldn't believe what she was hearing. "In the fifteen

years you've been married, he's never...?"

"Not once."

"Oh, damn, Annie. Does he expect you to do it for him?"

Annie shook her head again. "Oh no. When we were first married, I started to on a couple of occasions, but he stopped me. I think he feels like it's dirty."

"That's not fair. You've got to talk to him about that. It's obviously not necessary, but it..."

"Feels really good," Annie finished for her.

"How would you know?" She eyed her sister suspiciously. "You weren't a virgin when you got married, were you?"

Annie hesitated. "That's the story I told Matt, so that's the story I'm sticking by."

"Who was it?"

"Hayden Richardson."

Casey searched her mind. The name sounded familiar, but it took Casey a minute to place it. "Mrs. Richardson's grandson? He was old!" Mrs. Richardson had been their piano teacher.

Annie nodded. "He was twenty-five, and I had just turned seventeen. The first time it happened, I had taken you over for your lesson. He was mowing her yard and we got to talking." She smiled. "We spent the next hour out in the shed. We didn't do it but a half a dozen other times, but I learned a lot."

Casey took a minute to absorb this information. "I can't believe Matt doesn't want you to do it for him. I've never met a man who didn't like that. I always thought y'all had a good marriage."

"Oh, we do. We have a great marriage, Casey. I love waking up every morning and seeing him there. He makes me laugh and he's so good with the kids. I know I've probably not been so easy live with, but he's never been anything but good to me. I wouldn't want to be married to anyone else, but obviously, there's a couple of problems."

Casey decided to switch gears. "Have you talked to Emily about sex?"

Annie sighed. "Not really. Have you?"

Casey nodded. "It's come up, but I'm not her mother. It's not my job."

"What does she want to know?"

Casey shook her head. "She already knows a lot, Annie. More than we did at her age."

Annie looked at her. "Are you saying...?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying. From what she says, she's being real smart about it, but you need to take her and get her on some kind of birth control, and while you're at it, get some for yourself."

"I can't."

"Can't what? Get it for her? Listen, I know that you live in a very religious place and you all are very stout in your beliefs, but I think it would be a whole hell of a lot easier to hide birth control pills than a pregnant fourteen-year-old." Casey could see the mixed emotions of Annie's face.

"Listen, if you want, I'll get Dr. Klein to get her a year's supply of pills. He wouldn't have to see her and you can give them to her whenever you're ready. Or you could keep half of them for yourself."

Annie nodded. "Yeah, maybe you should call him, but not for me. For her. I can't use birth control."

"The church is against it?" Casey asked.

She shook her head. "Not for short-term use, but Matt is. You know he's got thirteen brothers and sisters. I've got like seventy-three nieces and nephews. I think it's a status thing with his family, to see who can have the most kids."

"You don't have to have any more kids if you don't want to."

"Yeah, what am I supposed to do?" She shook her head. "It's not like I can get fixed."

“Why not? Why can’t you get your tubes tied?”

Annie rolled her eyes. “The church is against that, and Matt would never go for it.”

“He doesn’t have to know.”

“And how would I keep it from him?”

“I can help you. If you really want to get it done, we’ll find a way. He won’t have to know.”

“There’d be a scar.”

Casey shook her head. “Not that he would ever notice. They go in though your belly button. He’d never see the scar.”

“It’s deceitful.”

“The offer’s there, Annie.”

They sat in silence for a few moments watching Michael piling the wood up for the fire. “Casey, there’s something I’ve got to tell you.” She bit her bottom lip. “I told CJ about Chris Baker.”

Casey shook her head in disbelief. “Why would you do that?”

“I was so tired of you succeeding at everything. I wanted you to fail at something. I thought he’d leave you.”

“Do you hate me that much?”

“It was never about you, Casey. It’s all me. It didn’t work, though. He stayed.” She shook her head. “Why? How did you not break up?”

“He never said anything. I thought he didn’t know.”

“God, he must have loved you.”

Casey nodded. “I have no doubt that he loved me. I loved him, but our marriage was a failure, and it had nothing to do with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Last month, I found out that CJ had been having numerous affairs throughout our marriage.”

“You’re kidding?”

Casey shook her head. "No."

"I thought he was such a good person, a good husband. I'm sorry, Casey."

"Don't be. He was a good person; he wasn't a monster. We both made mistakes and we both kept secrets. Our marriage wasn't going to work. Anyway, he's gone now and I'm definitely over him."

"And you're happy now?"

Casey watched as Reed and Dana pulled their boat up to the dock. "Yes, I am."

Dana joined them on the blanket. "David and Shannon will be here in a few minutes. Has Jason and Carmen and Max gotten here yet?"

Casey shook her head. "Nope." Casey and Michael had decided to spend their last night as an unmarried couple with their friends.

"Your parents coming out?" Dana asked.

"No, they're staying inside with the kids. Birdie's not coming, either. She said she thought it would be more fun without the old folks around."

"Then I should probably go back in, too," Annie said. "I'll just probably bring you all down."

Casey grabbed her arm. "Don't go. Stay and have a good time. You don't ever get to relax."

Annie hesitated. "Okay, for a while."

"Beer's here!" Max's voice called out. He appeared with a cooler. Jason and Carmen were following behind him.

Michael, who had finally got the fire started, and Reed joined them. "I got the fire going," Michael said. "Let's go down there." Casey, Annie and Dana stood up. Casey grabbed the blanket and spread it out again a few yards down the beach.

Michael disappeared inside the boathouse and turned on the stereo that he had installed there. He tuned it to a radio show

where people called in to talk about their loves and losses and the DJ played three hours worth of sappy songs. He returned with a couple more blankets and spread them on the ground. David and Shannon showed up and the ten of them sat on the blankets on the beach talking and watching the fire.

Casey settled herself so that she was sitting between Michael's legs. He wrapped his arms around her waist and put his hands on her stomach, which was becoming rounder by the day. She had been hiding it under baggy clothes for the past two weeks.

"So are y'all nervous?" Jason asked.

Michael shook his head. "Nah, it's just another show."

Casey wrenched her head around to look at him. "Just another show?" He smiled and winked and everyone laughed. A popular ballad by Daybreak came on the radio.

"Turn it!" David yelled.

"No, no," Shannon said. "There is nothing wrong with this song except it's not you singing it." She got to her feet and pulled David to his. "Let's dance."

"Come on Dana," Reed said standing up. Soon, Jason and Carmen followed.

Max looked at Annie. "Would you like to dance?"

She shook her head and acted like she was going to say no. She reconsidered. "Why not?" They stood up and joined the others.

"You're belly's getting big, Mama," Michael said, rubbing his hands over it.

She sighed. "I know. I hope my dress fits tomorrow." She had seen her doctor just that morning. She had gained eight pounds since finding out about her pregnancy -- eight pounds in one month! And she was sure she had gained the bulk of it in the last week.

"I'm sure you'll be beautiful. Do you want to dance?" She

shook her head. "I don't think so. I just want to relax."

"So what were you and Annie talking about? You seem to be getting along pretty well."

"We're just catching up. We've got twenty-seven years to make up for."

Casey watched Max and Annie dancing. They seemed to be getting along very well. She knew Max was a funny guy, but she had never seen her sister laugh as much. Even after the other couples had rejoined Michael and Casey on the blanket, Max and Annie stayed several yards away, sitting together and engaging in their own conversation.

"Well, we probably should get going," Dana said. "I'm sure Mike and Casey want to get some sleep. I want to get some sleep, for that matter, and I still need to make up the guest rooms."

Reed nodded and stood up. "Yeah, the flight from Tennessee gets in at ten." Reed's, Max's, and Jason's parents were all flying in for the very first Quintessential wedding.

David nodded and stood up. "Yeah, my family will be here at nine-thirty. We should go, too."

Max noticed the others were leaving and said something to Annie, who eagerly nodded. He stood up and brushed off his pants. "Yeah, me and Annie are going to go get a cup of coffee."

He gave Casey a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I think we're just going to hang out here for a while, if that's okay," Jason said after everyone else had left.

Michael nodded. "That's fine. Stay as long as you want." He yawned. "We're going to bed." He took Casey's hand and led her into the house.



Casey peeked into the room Annie was sharing with Emily and Sarah. The oldest and youngest of Annie's daughters were curled up together on the king-sized bed, sleeping soundly, but Annie wasn't there. She opened the door to the room Matthew and Sam were sharing. No Annie. She wasn't in the room with John and Caleb and Rebecca, either. Gabriel was sleeping in the room with Marjorie and Dan, and Casey was sure Annie wasn't in there. She checked the whole house, even the garage, and stepped outside and looked around the yard. Annie wasn't there.

Casey returned to the bedroom. "Anything wrong?" Michael asked as she climbed back into the bed.

"Annie's not home yet."

"What time is it?"

"Three. They just went out for a cup of coffee. Do you think something's happened?"

Michael smiled. "She's out with Max, Casey, I'm sure something's happened."

"That's not funny."

"Relax, Casey. I'm sure it's okay."

Casey shook her head. "I'm waiting for her in the kitchen." She got back out of bed.

"Come on, Casey. Come back to bed. You need to sleep. We're getting married tomorrow."

"I'll be okay." She left the room and went into the kitchen where she fixed herself a cup of coffee and sat in the dark at the kitchen table. She heard Annie's key in the back door about an hour later.

"Where have you been?" Casey hissed.

Annie jumped. "Casey, you scared me."

"Well?"

"I was out with Max. You know that."

"Annie, it's four o'clock in the morning. What on earth

could you have been doing?" *I know what you could have been doing.* She shook her head. "I know I've raved about these guys and what good boys they are, but Max...Max, he's..."

Annie shook her head. "I know, Casey. I'm not stupid. I know the kind of guy Max is, but I had a good time tonight, a really good time."

"What did you do?"

Annie smiled. "We went and drank coffee -- real coffee with caffeine, and we talked for hours and laughed. He's so funny, Casey. We did things that I haven't done in a really long time, and some things I've never done."

Casey closed her eyes and shook her head, knowing in the back of her mind what those "things" were. She couldn't -- she wouldn't let herself think about it. If Annie had told Max the same story she had told her about Matt's deficiencies in the bedroom, she knew he would be more than willing to make up for it.

"Oh, Annie, you're married."

"I didn't say we did anything wrong."

"He's only twenty-one. You're thirty-five."

Annie shook her head. "I'm not marrying him, Casey. Besides, even if I did do something with him, I thought you of all people would understand."

"I don't think adultery is right."

"And I didn't say that's what happened."

Casey rubbed her temples. "I'm going to bed. Good night, Annie." She returned to the bedroom.

"So?" Michael asked. "She back?"

"She had sex with Max."

"She said that?"

"She didn't have to say it."

"Then you don't know that she did."

"Honey, I know that she was with Max and she's smiling

from ear-to-ear and she said she had a really good time. What's that say to you?"

Michael flipped over his pillow and laid his head back down. "Sounds to me like she had sex with Max."

"You're not concerned about this?"

"She's not my wife."

Chapter Twenty-Six



“I guess we should get up,” Michael said. “It’s after ten.” Casey opened her eyes. “I didn’t know you were awake.”

He rolled over and wrapped his arms around her. “We could just stay in bed all day.”

“If we did that, we’d never get to have sex again.”

“Whose stupid idea was it to wait anyway?” He asked. One hand traveled down her body and stopped between her legs. She shivered. It was the first time he had touched her there since the night he had proposed.

She moved his hand. “Yours.”

He rolled over on top of her and pinned her arms above her head. “I don’t think it was one of my better ones.” He kissed her.

“I never thought it was either,” she said.

“Then let’s just forget all about it then. What difference does it make? In eight hours we’ll be married and I’ve already

knocked you up.”

She giggled. “No, Mike. Let’s wait. Just think how good it will feel tonight. That’s what you wanted, right?”

He sighed and rolled off of her. “Yeah.” He stood up. “Well, I guess I’m going to take a shower...a cold shower.”

Casey laughed and stood up. She went into the kitchen. Annie was alone in the room. She was sitting at the bar reading the paper. She was smiling. She looked different, younger somehow, and happy.

“Where is everyone?” Casey asked.

“Mike’s mother came by and got Mom and they rode down to the church to make sure everything was right. Emily went with them. Gabe’s sleeping, Rebecca and Sarah are watching *Blues Clues* in the bedroom and Daddy’s got the boys down at the basketball court. Did you sleep well?”

Casey nodded. “Oh, pretty good.” She poured a cup of coffee from the pot that was brewing. “Is this decaf?” She asked before taking a sip.

Annie shook her head. “No.” There was an uncomfortable silence.

“You look good this morning -- refreshed,” Casey observed. “I think a vacation is just what you needed.”

A broad smile spread across Annie’s face. “Yeah, it’s just what I needed.”

Casey knew she was talking about her night with Max, but she decided not to say anything. “Just think of how good you’d feel if you got to take a vacation without the kids.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Case. I think this vacation is pretty good.”

Casey clenched her teeth. “I’ve been thinking that I’d like to send you and Matt on a cruise or something this summer. Mike and I will keep the kids. It will be good for you.”

Annie shook her head. “You don’t need to save our

marriage, Casey.”

“I’m not trying to save your marriage. Does it need saving?”

Annie shook her head again. “Matt and I are just fine.”

“Are you? Have you talked to him this morning?”

“Yeah, I called him before he went work.”

“Did you tell him you went on a date last night?”

“No, because I didn’t,” Annie replied. “I told him that me and you and Mike and the other guys and their girlfriends all hung out down by the lake, and then some of us went out for coffee.”

“It was just you and Max though.”

Annie shook her head. “David and Shannon were there somewhere and Jason and Carmen showed up eventually.”

“Showed up where? He took you back to his place?”

Annie bit her lip and hesitated before responding. “Yeah.”

She looked up at the doorway. Michael was entering the room. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” she said hurriedly. “I’m going to check on Gabe.”

“What’s that all about?” He asked. He poured a cup of coffee.

“What do you think?”

“Casey, this is really none of your business.”

“She made it her business when it was me. He took her back to his place, Mike.”

“So what? So what if he took her back there and he screwed her brains out? Why should that concern you?”

“Because if something happened and Annie and Matt end up getting divorced whose fault do you think it’s going to be? Mine. Somehow it will be my fault.”

Michael shook his head and opened the paper Annie had left on the table. “I think you’re overreacting, Case. I don’t think Annie would cheat on her husband.”

“You didn’t hear the things she told me about Matt last night.”

Michael looked up from the paper and raised his eyebrows. "What?" She nodded her head toward their bedroom and he followed her down the hall. "What did she tell you?"

Casey repeated to him what Annie had confided in her the night before. Michael's eyes grew wide in obvious surprise. "Why?"

Casey shrugged. "He just never has."

"Well, then no wonder she slept with Max."

Casey shook her head. "I can't believe you, Michael. You don't remember a month ago when you broke up with me because I cheated on CJ? Now it's okay that Annie might have had sex with Max?"

He shook his head and held up his hand. "Hey, I didn't say it was right. I just don't think it's surprising, and I still don't think it's any of your business. Remember, I'm the one who said people cheat because they're not getting something they need, whether it is emotionally or sexually or whatever. Maybe you shouldn't be so judgmental. I mean, really Casey, you of all people...Maybe she would like to have someone to talk about this with. She was obviously willing to open up to you last night. Maybe she's trying for the relationship sisters are supposed have, and you're the one being the..."

"Bitch," Casey finished for him.

He smiled. "I didn't say that."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest. "I hate it when you're right."

He returned her hug and kissed the top of her head. "Well, get used to it, babe, 'cause I'm right a lot."

She sighed, "I know."

Reed stuck his head in the door. "Dude, you ready?"

Michael pulled away from Casey. "I've got to go. I'll see you at six o'clock, front of the church. I'll be the good-lookin' guy in the tux."

She smiled. "It's a date."

The wedding was scheduled to begin at six, and Casey arrived at the church with her bridal party around four-thirty. When Casey entered the dressing room Paige and Lisa were already there with Carmen.

Lisa was hanging dress bags on hooks around the room and matching up dresses with shoes and other accessories. "Hello, ladies," she said cheerfully as Casey, Dana and Shannon came in.

"I'll be done with Carmen in just a few minutes," Paige said as she smoothed eye shadow on Carmen's eyelids.

"Who brought the food?" Dana asked, picking up a blueberry muffin from a basket sitting on a table in the corner.

"Chuck had it delivered," Lisa replied. "Pretty nice, huh? There's bottled water in the cooler."

"If you're going to eat or drink anything," Paige said, "do it now before I put your make-up on. I don't want to be touching up make-up all afternoon. I've got to go down the hall and run a comb through the guys' hair, too."

"You want one, Casey?" Dana asked. "I haven't seen you eat anything today."

Casey shook her head. "I'm fine. I had a bowl of cereal this morning."

Shannon sat down in a chair. "So what was your sister doing with Max last night?"

Casey frowned. "I don't know. Did you see them together after they left the house?"

Shannon nodded. "Yeah, David and I went back to the house, you know. We were sitting in the living room watching a movie when they came in. They said they had been to get coffee. Anyway, they went up to the attic. David and I went to bed around one, and she was still there."

"She was still there when Jason and I got there, too," Carmen said. "I guess it was her. Jason went looking for any extra blanket and said he heard a woman's voice coming from Max's room. We went on to bed, so I don't know what time she left."

"She got home around four," Casey said.

"What do you think they did?" Dana asked, taking Carmen's place in Paige's make-up chair.

"I don't want to believe that they did anything. As a matter of fact, I don't want to think about it, or talk about it." She shook her head. "I gotta pee." She went into the ladies' room. On her way out she saw Max go into the men's room. She hurried down the hall and followed him in. "What did you and Annie do last night?"

"Good grief, Casey!" Max turned and zipped up his pants.

"Did you have sex with her?"

"Did she say that?"

"She hasn't said anything. She's just been walking around all day with this goofy grin. What did y'all do?"

Max shook his head. "You're sister's not that bad."

Casey shook her head. "Don't beat around the bush."

"I showed her a good time."

"She is a married woman, Max, with eight kids."

"She's a woman, Casey, who's not getting what she needs."

"It's not your place to give it to her!"

He sighed. "Do you really want to fight with me today? You're getting married in about an hour. Is this really what you want to be doing right now?"

Casey put her fingers to her temples. "Not really."

He sighed and put his arms around her. "Not that it's any of your business, but no, I didn't sleep with your sister. I kissed her, and I felt her up, and she seemed to enjoy herself, but I didn't have sex with her."

Casey stared deep into his eyes. "I'm not sure I believe you." Max shrugged slightly and Casey knew he was lying. Casey pounded her head against Max's chest. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"This isn't about you, Casey. I'm not trying to steal her away from her husband, but she needed someone to make her feel like a woman and not just a wife or a mother. She's gonna go back to Utah tomorrow and she and Matt are going to live happily ever after. If I gave her something to hold on to, a memory to have, then great."

Casey shook her head. "You make it sound like it's no big deal."

"Don't worry so much, Shorty. Go get dressed, go get married, you worry about you and let Annie worry about Annie."

"What's going on here?" Jason said as he entered the room. "You okay, Casey?"

Casey lifted her head from Max's chest. "I'm okay." She backed away from him. "I'm okay," she repeated. It occurred to her that they were already dressed in the tuxedos for the ceremony.

"Y'all look so good. I've never seen you so dressed up."

"Yeah, we clean up pretty good," Jason said, looking in the mirror and running a hand through his hair.

Casey entered the women's dressing room. Paige was just finishing up Shannon's hair and Lisa was helping Dana on with her dress. "I'm almost ready for you, Casey," Paige said, spraying an aerosol can of hair spray wildly around Shannon's head. Shannon coughed and stood up.

Casey sat in the chair and Paige immediately started on her hair. "We're making pretty good time," she said. "We've got about forty-five minutes. That will give me time to get down there and make sure the guys look presentable."

"I just saw Max and Jason," Casey said. "They looked good."

Paige pulled Casey's hair up into the style they had decided on then began her make-up. "I'll do your veil last, after you get your dress on."

"Thanks, Paige." Casey stood up and crossed the room to where her dress was hanging. She took off her jeans and the button-up shirt she was wearing and ripped open a brand new pair of pantyhose. "I hope you brought me an extra pair of these, Lisa, because I always put a run in them trying to get them on."

Lisa nodded. "I did."

David stuck his head in the door to the women's dressing room. "David!" Dana screeched. She stood in front of Casey to block his view. He grinned broadly.

"What do you need, David?" Shannon asked.

"Casey," he replied. He looked at her. "Can I see you for a minute?"

She was dressed only in her bra and panties and had one foot in the hose. "Yeah, I'll be right there." Shannon pushed the door shut. Casey wiggled into the hose and put on the huge shirt she had borrowed from Michael's closet that morning before stepping out into the hall. David was leaning against the wall, his hands in his pockets, and staring at his shoes. "What's wrong?"

He looked up. "It's Mike. He wants to see you."

She felt a pang of panic. "Why?"

"Just come with me." She followed him to the men's room.

He nodded toward the door. "He's in there."

Casey bit her lip and pushed open the door. Michael was sitting on the counter looking at the floor. He was still dressed in the jeans and T-shirt he had been wearing that morning when he left the house. He didn't look up at her.

“Mike?” She walked over to him and stood between his legs. “Mike, what’s wrong?” She lifted his chin.

His eyes were red and tears were trickling down his face.

“What’s wrong?” She asked again.

He shook his head. “I think I’ve lost my mind.”

She wiped the tears away. “What happened?”

He sighed. “I saw Mom come in with Ted. He’s a great guy, Casey, and she seems to be really happy, but I couldn’t help but feel like it wasn’t right. Then, I started thinking about Dad and he he’s supposed to be here with me. I started crying, and I can’t stop.”

Casey ran her fingers down the side of Michael’s face. “Oh, honey. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” He hopped down of the counter. “I just wanted to see you, to get my mind somewhere else.” He put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm’s length. “You look beautiful.”

She shook her head. “I’m not even dressed yet.”

He moved his hands to her waist and picked her up. He sat her down on the counter. “I can’t wait to see you in that dress. I can’t wait to see you out of that dress.” He leaned in an attempt to kiss her.

She pulled away. “Paige will kill you if you mess up my hair or make-up.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he said, putting his hand on the back of her neck and pulling her into deep kiss. “Let’s do it right here, Casey; right here on the counter. We’ve got time.” He began unbuttoning her shirt.

“In the church?”

“I don’t care,” Michael replied. “God will forgive us. I just need you. Now.”

“We’ve waited three weeks, I think we can wait a few more hours.” She pushed him away.

He stepped back and looked at his watch. "We've only got thirty minutes until the big show," he said.

"Just another show, right?" She got off the counter. "Are you going to be okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I just needed to see you."

She smiled. "Well, I'll see you in about a half an hour -- front of the church -- I'll be the one in the white dress."

He kissed her once more. "It's a date."

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She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Lisa had done a good job on the alterations. Between the padding she had sewn into the front of the dress, and her push-up bra, Casey's bust looked twice as big as normal. *Still not much, but I've got cleavage.*

She put her hands on her stomach. Lisa must have noticed that the dress was a little harder to zip than it had been at her last fitting. Eight pounds was a lot of weight for anyone. The skirt was full and it helped conceal her ever-growing abdomen. She sighed.

"You can't tell," Dana said, coming up behind her with the bouquet. They were the only two left in the previously crowded room.

Casey met her eyes in the mirror. "You know?"

Dana nodded. "Reed can't keep a secret from me."

"What about Shannon?"

"She suspects, but doesn't know for sure. I didn't tell her because I figured you and Mike have your reasons for keeping it a secret."

"I just didn't want everyone thinking we were getting married because we had to. You know, he didn't even know I was pregnant when he proposed."

Dana nodded. "That's what Reed said. Did you know he bought that ring in October?"

"What? He did?"

Dana nodded. "Yeah, when we were in Minneapolis, Reed and Mike and I went to this jewelry store. We were looking at wedding sets. He started looking at diamonds, and he bought it. He knew then, Casey." Dana saw the tears form in the corners of Casey's eyes. "No, no, don't cry. You'll mess up your make-up and Paige will kill me." She dabbed at Casey's eyes with a tissue. "So who all knows?"

"I haven't told any of my family yet. Mike told Birdie because she asked, and we told Reverend Moss. Other than you and Reed and David, Max and Jason, that's it."

Dana stepped away from her. "Well, you look beautiful. It's about time to start, so I'll get your dad."

Casey gave a small nod. "Thank you, Dana, for everything."

"It was my pleasure, Casey. June 15th, you can repay the favor." A tear rolled down her cheek. "Oh, look at me." She wiped it away. "I'll get your dad."

Dan sucked in his breath when he came into the room. He took her hands. "You look beautiful, Casey."

"Thank you, Daddy."

"I'm happy for you and Mike. I really like him."

"Better than that other guy, right?"

Dan shook his head. "It broke my heart when you called and said you and CJ had gotten married. I mean, I knew it was going to happen eventually, and I know you loved him, but he's not what I wanted for you." He sighed. "I was looking forward to you living nearby, though."

"Well, Daddy, you know you'll see more of me now than you ever did while I was married to CJ." They heard the first chords of "The Wedding March."

“Ready?” He asked. He held out his arm to her and they climbed the steps to the back of the church. She could see Reverend Moss standing at the pulpit. Michael was standing to his left. Max, Reed and David were standing proudly beside him. Standing to the right of the altar were Dana and Shannon. Jason and Carmen were seated at the piano; Carmen was playing “The Wedding March.” Everyone stood and turned to look at Casey and her father. They walked slowly to the front of the church.

They stopped in front of Reverend Moss who motioned for everyone to sit. He waited a few seconds before beginning to speak.

“Family and friends, we have come here today to celebrate love. We see it in the faces of Michael and Casey who stand before us, but we experience it in our own hearts as well. Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

“Her mother and I do,” Dan said. He kissed Casey on the cheek, before stepping aside and taking his seat next to Marjorie, so Michael could take his place at Casey’s side.

“Michael and Casey have opened their hearts to one another, and today in just a few moments will share their vows of marriage. There is no greater joy than for two human souls to join together to strengthen each other in all their endeavors, to support each other through all their sorrows, and to share with each other in all their triumphs.”

“We hope that the words and spirit of our gathering may be filled with a truth that will deepen with the passing years. We hope, too, that the meaning of the vows that Michael and Casey are about to share with one another will deepen as well, as they discover the endless possibilities of this life together.

“This is a love which need not be tarnished by common events, but which will grow both in the deepest of adversity and in the greatest of joy. We ask that you remember the simple

truth that first brought you together. Love is stronger than your conflicts and bigger than life's changes. It is to love that you must always return."

He looked down at Casey. "Casey, please face Michael and hold his hands, palms up, so you may see the gift that they are to you." Casey turned and handed her bouquet to Dana. She held Michael's hands in her own. Reverend Moss continued. "These are the hands of your best friend, young and strong and vibrant with love, that are holding yours on your wedding day, as he promises to love you all the days of his life."

"These are the hands that will work along side yours, as together you build your future, as you laugh and as you cry, as you share your innermost secrets and dreams. These are the hands that look so large and strong, yet will be so gentle as he holds your baby for the first time."

"These are the hands that will work long hours for you and your new family. These are that hands that will passionately love you and cherish you through the years, for a lifetime of happiness. These are the hands that will countless times wipe the tears from your eyes: tears of sorrow and tears of joy. These are the hands that will comfort you in illness, and hold you when fear or grief wracks your mind. These are the hands that will tenderly lift your chin and brush your cheek as they raise your face to look into his eyes: eyes that are filled completely with his overwhelming love and desire for you."

"Michael, please hold Casey's hands, palms up, where you may see the gift that they are to you." Michael turned her hands over, giving them a small squeeze. "These are the hands of your best friend, smooth, young and carefree, that are holding yours on your wedding day, as she pledges her love and commitment to you all the days of her life."

"These are the hands that will hold each child in tender love, soothing them through illness and hurt, supporting and

encouraging them along the way, and knowing when it is time to let go. These are the hands that will massage tension from your neck and back in the evenings after you've both had a long hard day. These are the hands that will hold you tight as you struggle through difficult times. These are the hands that will give you support as she encourages you to chase down your dreams."

"These are that hands that will passionately love you and cherish you through the years, for a lifetime of happiness. These are the hands that will countless times wipe the tears from your eyes: tears of sorrow and tears of joy. These are the hands that will comfort you in illness, and hold you when fear or grief wracks your mind. These are the hands that will tenderly lift your chin and brush your cheek as they raise your face to look into her eyes: eyes that are filled completely with her overwhelming love and desire for you."

"Let us pray," he said, bowing his head. "God, bless these hands that you see before you this day. May they always be held by one another. Give them the strength to hold on during the storms of stress and the dark of disillusionment. Keep them tender and gentle as they nurture each other in their wondrous love. Help these hands to continue building a relationship founded in your grace, rich in caring, and devoted in reaching for your perfection. May Michael and Casey see their four hands as healer, protector, shelter and guide. We ask this in your name, Amen."

"The bride and groom have written their own vows," Reverend Moss said. "Casey?"

Casey shook her head. "You know, I had this whole speech worked out full of quotes from famous people and the Bible. It was pretty good, but as I stand here today, in front of you and in front of all our friends and family, I can't remember a single word of it. So, I guess I'll have to wing it." She heard a few

chuckles.

She paused and smiled up at Michael. "Two hundred and fifty-two days ago, I counted it up this morning; two hundred and fifty-two days ago, I went on a job interview. It was an opportunity to do something different, new, exciting. As soon as I met you all, I knew there was no way we wouldn't be friends. And as I got to know you better, Mike, I dreaded the day that it would come to an end and I wouldn't see you every day."

"In those early days, I would have never believed that we would be standing here today, but every night I went to bed dreaming about it. You are my favorite person in this world. I know I've told you this a million times, but I love you, Michael. I love you with everything that I am for everything that you are. You have made me feel more happy, more excited, more humored, more fulfilled, more aroused, more special, more loved – more everything than I have ever been." She felt the tears form in her eyes. "I don't want to spend another minute not being your wife."

Michael squeezed her hands, smiled and shook his head. "Casey, I don't think there are words to describe how I feel about you. The first time I saw you, I was overwhelmed. How could so much personality and spirit, so much humor and enthusiasm, so much greatness and glory be packed into such a tiny package? I thought I knew what it was to have a best friend. I have some of the greatest friends anyone could dream of, but you have taken me above and beyond anything that I have ever felt before."

"You are truly my best friend, my soul mate, and I don't think there would be a greater gift in the world than to marry you. You are the finest person I have ever known, and I cannot believe that God has chosen me to be the man to accompany you along this journey. I am honored to be your husband."

He wiped away the tears that were rolling down her face.

“And baby, I love your fried chicken.” A laugh rippled through the crowd.

Reverend Moss began to speak again. “Casey Johnson, Will you have this man to be your husband, to live together in a holy marriage? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?”

Casey nodded. “I will.”

“Michael Brooks, will you have this woman to be your wife, to live together in a holy marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?”

“Absolutely. I will.”

“The wedding ring is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual bond which unites two loyal hearts in endless love. It is a seal of the vows Michael and Casey have made to one another. God, bless these rings, that Casey and Michael, who give them, and who wear them, may live together in unity, love and happiness for the rest of their lives.”

Michael took a ring from Max. “Casey, I give you this ring as a symbol of our vows, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, with this ring, I thee wed.” He slid it on her finger.

Dana handed Casey Michael’s ring. “Michael, I give you this ring as a symbol of our vows, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, with this ring, I thee wed.” She slid it on his finger.

Reverend Moss cleared his throat. “In as much as you have each pledged your commitment, love and devotion to the other, I now pronounce you husband and wife, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

“Michael, you may kiss your bride.”



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