



THE GAME PLAN

A NEIGHBOR FROM HELL NOVEL



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The Game Plan

by

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This book like every book that I have ever written or will ever write is dedicated to my children, Kayley and Shane, who have been with me through this journey from day one.

This book is also dedicated to Jodi Negri, who has been there for me through several books now. She's been a great help, a good friend and totally deserved her own Bradford.

This book is also dedicated to my friend Jenn's husband, Danny Carrion, who amuses me greatly. He's also a great husband, father and a good man, which as everyone knows is what makes a Bradford.

Chapter 1

“I love my wife.”

“Yes, but-” Jodi started to say only to get cut off once again before she could explain why she desperately needed to be released from her lease.

“I love my wife,” Trevor Bradford, her landlord and a man that she suspected was as close to committing murder as she was, stressed for what had to be the hundredth time since he’d arrived at her apartment five minutes ago.

Jodi released an exasperated sigh as she shifted in her seat and tried to think of another way to explain to the large, and basically decent, man that if he didn’t let her out of her lease ten months early that she was very much afraid that she would end up killing his cousin with her bare hands. Since she was pretty sure that a full confession would only come back and bite her in the ass later, she decided to go with a more subtle route to get out of her lease.

“I need to be released from my lease, because your cousin is an asshole and he’s making my life a living hell,” she explained in a calm and efficient manner, neglecting to mention that she’d already thought of twenty-nine different ways to kill the large, and annoying, bastard.

For a moment, Trevor didn’t say anything as he studied her from across the small eighteenth century country kitchen table that she’d inherited from her Great-Grandmother Rose. His eyes narrowed on her in an assessing manner as she did the same to him, refusing to be intimidated. When it became obvious that intimidation wasn’t going to work, he tried another tactic.

“Which cousin?” he asked, feigning ignorance as he leaned back in his chair. Jodi just barely bit back a wince when the chair creaked in protest at having to support such a large man. If she had to guess, she’d have to say the man weighed well over two hundred pounds and every last ounce of him was pure muscle. She really wasn’t sure how much more abuse her poor chair could take before it finally cracked under pressure.

It would probably depress her for a day or two to lose such a treasured item, especially since she couldn’t afford to replace it, even with a cheap knockoff from Wal-Mart on her new salary. Then again, if it meant getting out of the lease from hell and away from the most annoying man on earth then she would just have to suck it up and deal with the loss, she decided.

“You know which one,” she bit out, knowing that he knew damn well

which one of his cousins was driving her to the point of no return.

“There are five of them renting apartments here,” he pointed out, not sounding happy about that fact, but not willing to make this easy on her. “I’m afraid that you’ll have to be a little more specific.”

Granted, all of his cousins that rented here seemed to be arrogant bastards, but only one of them was a complete asshole. The rest of his cousins amused her and yes, they could annoy the hell out of her, but not to the point where she was contemplating murder. That reaction was reserved solely for one man and one man alone.

Danny Bradford.

It was actually kind of funny, because before she’d moved here, she’d thought of herself as a pacifist. Just the thought of a puppy whimpering, or accidentally hurting anyone’s feelings would have had her hitting a pint of Ben and Jerry’s and sobbing hysterically over a Lifetime movie. Before Danny Bradford she’d never gotten truly good and mad. She’d never even held a grudge before she’d met him. She usually let things go pretty quickly and didn’t waste her time on nonsense, but that all changed the day that she moved in and met the bastard living across the hall.

Then again, a lot of things had changed in her life over the last few months, and some of those things might be influencing her reaction to Danny Bradford. But, she was pretty sure that even if she hadn’t been dumped the night before her wedding, lost her job at the museum, been forced to take a job as the town librarian, and humiliated in every way imaginable by her ex, that she would still be developing an all-consuming hatred for the man living across the hall from her.

He was arrogant, cocky, a jerk, too good looking for his own good, a jerk, an asshole, really annoying and did she mention that he was a jerk? It seemed as though he lived to screw with her. It was bad enough that she had to deal with all the crap that he put her through, but that damn cocky smile of his that he wore while he did it just pissed her off in too many ways to actually count. She hated that smile, probably not as much as she hated the man, but it was a close second.

“*Danny*,” she bit out, glaring at the man as she silently dared him to continue sitting there pretending that he didn’t know that his cousin had been having a heck of a time making her life a living hell. He knew, oh, he knew. A week didn’t go by that she wasn’t forced to call him and explain as calmly as

possible that if his cousin kept up his bullshit that she would be forced to kick him in the balls to wipe that cocky smile off his face.

Normally when she was forced to make those calls, which made her feel like a tattling child, Trevor would listen for all of ten seconds, sigh heavily and hand the phone over to Zoe, his wife and the unofficial manager of all the rental properties that they owned. Trevor usually only got involved as a last resort or if his wife was too exhausted from taking care of the couple's children to muster up the energy to deal with tenants. Actually, she preferred to deal with Zoe, because she would listen, sympathize, and after Jodi finished getting it off her chest, the short plump woman would give her a hug, tell her to hang in there, walk across the hall and slap Danny upside his head.

Then with a satisfied sigh, Zoe would smile and go, leaving her to deal with Danny, that damn cocky grin of his, and the knowledge that she'd somehow just set down a challenge for him. Every time Zoe paid him a visit, he always upped his game to drive her insane.

Like last week when she'd been forced to complain about Danny getting her placed on another restaurant's delivery banned list. Zoe had come right over, this time not bothering to see her first before she knocked on Danny's door. When Danny opened the door while eating her hot wings, she'd like to point out, Zoe sighed, reached up and slapped Danny upside his head.

Instead of getting pissed like she would probably be if someone kept slapping her upside the head, Danny had simply shrugged it off and picked up another hot wing. Just as he was about to take a bite, Zoe snatched the wing and the takeout box out of his hands, scowled up at him for all of ten seconds, turned around and stormed off.

That's when Danny finally reacted.

It was also the moment that she'd really wished she hadn't chosen to come out of her apartment to check the mail. Before she could move to make an escape, Danny glared accusingly at her as though she'd been the one who'd stolen his, well, technically they were hers since she'd ordered them, hot wings.

He hadn't said a word as he closed his door. He didn't need to say anything, because that glare had said it all. She'd spent that night tossing and turning in bed, torn between apologizing to save herself from his bullshit, shrugging it off while trying to tell herself that there was nothing to worry about, and getting good and mad at herself for obsessing over something so stupid. When the alarm clock forced her to drag her butt out of bed the next morning

she'd wanted to kick his ass as well as her own for wasting the entire night lying awake worrying instead of sleeping.

Thirty minutes, a lukewarm shower, and three cups of burnt coffee later, she'd still been kicking herself for her own stupidity as she'd left her apartment and mentally prepared herself for the next ten hours of dealing with meetings, committees, story time with the kids, craft hour and a book vendor event. All thoughts of the hectic day that awaited her slowly evaporated from her thoughts when she'd caught sight of the five-foot high cinderblock wall that surrounded her parking space where her car had been parked the night before.

It was at that point that she realized that she needed to either move or find a good defense attorney. Sadly, with the current state of her finances a good defense attorney was out of the question and so was moving, she'd realized. She couldn't afford to break her lease early and she didn't have enough money to cover the first and last month's rent for a new apartment.

Since she didn't have many options available to her at the moment, she decided to try and talk her way out of her lease. Actually, she'd been hoping to have this conversation with Zoe, because she was pretty easy going and probably would have let her out of her lease without a fight. If Trevor hadn't overheard their phone conversation an hour ago, she was pretty sure that she'd already be looking at other apartments.

Unfortunately for her, he did overhear it.

He scrubbed his hands down his face as he muttered, "I'm going to kill that fucking bastard."

"If you do that I'd be willing to stay," she pointed out helpfully.

He chuckled as he leaned back in his chair and she did her best not to cringe when the chair creaked in protest, again. "I like you, Jodi. You're never late with the rent. You keep your apartment clean and you don't cause trouble, but I can't let you out of your lease."

"Why?" she asked, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

"Because if you move out, my wife will just move another one of my asshole cousins in here," he said with a heavy sigh.

"Well, they couldn't be any worse than Danny. So-"

"Believe me, they are," he said, cutting her off as he sat up, causing the chair to creak ominously with the movement. "What if I reduced your rent by a hundred bucks a month?"

“To stay?” she asked, tempted to say yes and give in.

She didn't have much money in the bank and even though she actually did make a decent salary, she didn't have much money at the end of the month once the bills were paid. Fifteen thousand dollars in debt had been her ex-fiancé's parting gift for her, one that she couldn't seem to return, and she desperately wanted to return that lovely gift. She'd been foolish when she'd agreed to open a credit card account in her name for him, and even more foolish for giving him access to her bank account, which he'd drained, legally according to the police department, mere hours before he broke the news publically to her that he couldn't force himself to marry her.

“Two hundred?” he offered, sounding a little desperate.

“Wouldn't it be cheaper just to let me out of my lease?” she asked, struggling with the urge to say yes and make things a little less financially tight for a while even if it meant putting up with Danny Bradford for ten more months.

“Three hundred bucks,” he said, not asked, she noted.

“Three hundred dollars?” she repeated, sure that she'd misheard him.

“Deal,” Trevor said with a firm nod as he stood up and headed for the door, leaving her sitting there struggling to figure out what just happened.

“Wait, what deal?” she asked, scrambling to get out of the chair and rush to the door and block it before he could make his escape, but sadly, her short legs just couldn't manage it.

Trevor had the door open and was halfway down the hallway before she managed to catch up with him, well, get within ten feet of him anyway. “Wait!” she said, hoping that he'd stop long enough so that she could figure out what just happened.

With a sheepish smile, he did, but her relief was short lived as he walked towards her and then kept walking. Before she could ask him what he was doing, he was pounding on Danny's door. Seconds later, and unfortunately before she could make it back to her apartment, Danny, wearing only jeans and looking fresh out of the shower with damp hair, a towel around his shoulders and his large muscles glistening beneath the hallway light, opened the door.

Having a really bad feeling about what was coming, Jodi took a step back, hoping to get to her apartment before-

“Ow!” Danny said, rubbing the top of his head. “What the hell was that

for?” he demanded. His glare shifted away from his cousin and landed on her just as she’d reached her door and was about to sneak inside her apartment, where she planned on hiding until it was time to go to work in sixteen hours.

“Stop being an asshole,” Trevor said with a satisfied grunt before he turned around and headed for the exit only to pause and throw over his shoulder, “You still coming to dinner?”

Danny’s eyes never left her as he answered, “Yeah, what time?”

“Six,” Trevor said, continuing towards the door and leaving her to deal with his asshole cousin. “Bring dessert!”

Danny didn’t respond and Trevor didn’t wait for him to as he opened the door and stepped outside, leaving Jodi in a rather awkward position.

“Tattled on me again?” Danny asked in that deep voice that made her toes tingle.

It also reminded her of just how much she hated him.

Because of him she hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep all night. Now she was tired, cranky, admittedly bitchy, and had to work on re-writing a proposal for the library renovation that had taken her a month, in fourteen hours and without pay. All because the Town Council didn’t feel that the first proposal properly conveyed the importance of the library and its staff, meaning that she had to figure out a way to bring the budget for library renovations down by ten grand or start looking for a new job when they were forced to close the library.

“For your information,” she bit out, taking a step towards him and pretending that he didn’t have more than a foot on her as she glared up at him, “I was asking to get out of my lease. Not that it’s any of your business.”

For some reason that seemed to amuse him, because his scowl was instantly replaced by that smug grin of his that her palm was itching to slap off his face. “Trying to run away from your feelings for me, Tink?” he asked, bringing her rage to a whole new level.

“Did....,” she started to say, only to force herself to take a deep breath before she did something that would involve that defense attorney that she’d already decided she couldn’t afford. “Did you just call me *Tink*?” she asked with barely suppressed rage.

Oblivious to how close he was to certain death, Danny merely shrugged as he grabbed the towel from around his shoulders and dried his face and chest. “Mmmhmm.”

“That’s not my name,” she bit out, her eyes narrowing on that towel as she thought of a whole new way to get rid of the bastard.

“Well,” he said, pausing to rub the towel against the back of his head, “it really should be.”

“It’s not,” she snapped, knowing that if he called her Tink one more time that she would-

“As much as I’d love to stand here and chat with you, Tinkerbelle, I have somewhere to be,” he said with a wink as he shut the door, leaving her standing there, seething with rage and making her wonder how she was going to get through the next ten months without killing him.

Chapter 2

“I’m raising your rent,” Trevor announced as he passed one of the large bowls of mashed potatoes to him.

“And why is that?” Danny asked, picking up the wooden spoon stabbed in the center of the thick white goo and scooped up a large amount.

“It’s either raise your rent or let your future wife move out,” Trevor explained as he squirted ketchup on his meatloaf. At least, Danny thought it was meatloaf, but since Zoe had cooked this meal he really couldn’t be sure of anything.

“She’s not my future wife,” Danny said, sighing heavily as he placed the bowl of mashed potatoes down. “You really need to quit that shit.”

“Then what is she?” Jason, another one of his cousins asked as he gestured towards the bowl of mashed potatoes. “Pass the scalloped potatoes.”

Frowning, Danny looked around the table, but he didn’t see anything that even remotely resembled scalloped potatoes.

“That’s rice,” Trevor said tightly, shooting them a glare with the silent message to shut their mouths and not question the food, something that he badly wanted to do. But since it would just end in a fistfight and with answers that he probably really didn’t want, he let it go and answered his cousin.

“She’s just the woman that rents the apartment across from me and that I torment for my own entertainment when I’m bored or I’m just in the mood to piss her off,” which was every day, but he didn’t bother to point that out since it would just encourage his cousin’s bullshit.

“I see,” Jason said, sounding amused.

“I’m glad that you do,” he said, glad that this bullshit was over wi-

“She’s definitely your future wife,” Jason said, chuckling and pissing him off.

“We could have the wedding in our backyard,” Haley, Jason’s wife and a cute little thing that he wouldn’t have minded spending a little time with before his cousin corrupted her, said, looking hopeful as she pushed her glasses back up her nose.

Zoe sighed, shaking her head as she picked up the bowl of what appeared to be gravy and said, “Bradfords don’t have weddings. Weddings

imply that some planning went into it and the bride was asked when what it really comes down to is a kidnapping, a terrified Justice of the Peace, a quick ceremony and a race across town to have the marriage consummated before the bride comes to her senses and gets the marriage annulled.”

Trevor gasped in outrage. “You said that it was the most romantic night of your life!”

“Oh,” Zoe said, blinking before she added, “It was,” in a placating tone as she reached over and gave her husband’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Keep your lies, woman!” Trevor snapped, sounding pissed, but when Zoe sighed and tried to move her hand away, he quickly snatched it back and entwined their fingers together even as he continued to glare accusingly at her.

“Just because we didn’t have a wedding doesn’t mean that no Bradford has ever had a wedding,” Haley pointed out, picking up a bowl of....well, Danny was at a loss at what the chunky, clear pink gunk was.

“Yes, it does, my little grasshopper,” Jason said as he took the bowl from Haley and with a discreet shake of his head, warned her away from the stuff that not even a Bradford would take a chance on.

“There’s only been three weddings in the Bradford family in the last two hundred years,” Trevor said, picking up the bowl of pink goop and scooped some onto his plate.

“See!” Haley said, sounding triumphant as she moved to pick up what Danny thought was gravy, but another discreet shake of Jason’s head had Haley quickly passing on that to take a sip of water.

“And all three of those marriages ended with divorce in less than a month,” Jason added, receiving a nod of agreement from both Trevor and Danny, because every Bradford knew the family history, traditions and counties that they were still banned from by heart.

Bradford men didn’t propose, because a proposal meant that he wasn’t out of his mind in love. It was the same reason that they didn’t buy rings or plan weddings, because if a Bradford male was thinking rationally enough to do any of that shit, then he wasn’t really in love. A Bradford male might realize early on that he’d found the woman of his dreams, but until he was at the point that he was willing to risk a kidnapping charge, he wasn’t ready for marriage.

“No worries,” Trevor said, scooping some “rice” onto his plate. “After the wedding Aunt Mary will throw a big party.”

“My mother isn’t throwing a party, because there’s not going to be a wedding,” Danny pointed out, doing his best not to let his cousins know how much they were pissing him off since it would only encourage them to keep this bullshit up.

“Well, if he drags her off to Vegas and we get wind of it in time, we can-” Zoe said, sounding hopeful while the rest of them were trying not to cringe.

“We’re still banned from Vegas, sweetheart,” Trevor said, cutting off his wife, who looked more confused than ever.

“Wait,” she said, frowning. “I thought the ban was lifted,” she said, looking around the table and undoubtedly making note of the fact that none of the men at the table could quite meet her gaze.

“There, um,” Danny said, clearing his throat, “was a small incident there a year or two ago that may have resulted in the ban being reinstated for another ten or fifty years.”

“Wait a minute,” Haley said, her eyes narrowing accusingly on her husband. “Didn’t you have a layover last year in Nevada on your way to that convention in Texas for your father’s construction company?”

“I-I might have,” Jason said, swallowing nervously as he threw a panicked look Danny’s way, but Danny was a Bradford and knew a thing or two about saving his own ass even if it meant that he had to shovel questionable food into his mouth to give himself the excuse that he needed to keep his mouth shut. Trevor apparently had the same idea, because he suddenly couldn’t seem to get enough of his wife’s cooking.

“And when I asked you about the breaking news alerts that kept flashing across the bottom of the television screen about the emergency shutdown in Vegas you swore to me that you had nothing to do with that,” Haley said, her murderous glare cute, but a clear warning that Jason and anyone dumb enough to open his mouth was in deep shit.

“Wait a minute,” Zoe said, and just like that, Danny knew that Trevor was truly fucked, “you went on that trip, too!”

Every Bradford male who worked for Uncle Jared went, but Danny didn’t bother to point that out since he was home free. It was times like this that he was actually glad that he wasn’t married, one of the few times he had to admit. Unlike his cousins who had fought going to the altar with everything that

they had, Danny was more than ready to settle down and start a family.

In a few months he was going to be thirty-two years old and he was still alone. He'd always thought that he'd be settled by this point in his life with at least one kid on the way, but apparently life didn't always turn out the way that you expected. He certainly hadn't expected to do half the shit that he'd done so far.

When he'd been a kid he'd always thought that he'd follow in his father's footsteps and go to medical school, join his father's practice and get married, but at seventeen all his plans had changed when he'd fucked up. He'd been a cocky kid, too damn cocky. Not only hadn't he studied for the SATs because he'd been sure that he was going to ace the test right off the bat, but he'd also decided that he'd celebrate a pre-victory the night before by stealing his father's beer out of the refrigerator in the garage and proceeded to get drunk.

Really drunk to the point that if his father hadn't found him passed out on the bathroom floor that he probably would have died of alcohol poisoning. After he was rushed to the hospital and had his stomach pumped, his father, angrier than he'd ever seen him before, dragged him to school and forced him to take the SAT exam when all he wanted to do was to curl up next to a toilet and die.

One month later he'd received his test scores and learned that he scored a pathetic 490, total. He could have taken the test over again, but that would have meant a delayed acceptance to college and starting school in the spring instead of in the fall with all his friends. His pride had taken a hit with that score. Unable to handle the embarrassment of that fuck up, he'd begged his father to sign a release so that he could join the Marines, but his father had refused. His father didn't believe in fixing one mistake with another.

Pissed that the plans that he'd had for his life were ruined and foolishly blaming his father, Danny had stopped trying in school. He'd no longer cared about his grades, his family, friends or anything for that matter and had started focusing on getting the hell away from his father. The morning that he was supposed to graduate, he grabbed a duffle bag, filled it with clothes, emptied his meager savings account and hitched a ride out of town.

A week later with a fake ID in his hand, he walked into a Marine recruitment center and enlisted. It had taken the Marines less than a month to knock him on his arrogant ass and strip away every cocky assumption that he'd ever had about himself. They tore him down and kept him there until he was

ready to grow up and be a man.

Joining the Marines had been the most foolish decision of his life, but it had also turned out to be the best thing for him. Once he'd managed to get his head out of his ass, he'd worked hard to become the soldier that the Marines wanted him to be. They'd also turned him into the man that he never would have been if he'd continued acting like a spoiled brat. He'd worked hard, earning rank after rank until he found himself leading a Special Forces team. He would still be there if he hadn't caught a bullet a little too close to his spine for the Marine's liking and one through his right palm, destroying his ability to pull the trigger quick enough to make him anything more than a liability.

So after ten years of serving his country, twelve surgeries to save his life and to make sure that he wouldn't end up in a wheelchair for the rest of it, he'd come home to a father that wanted nothing to do with him, no education to open doors for him and no hireable skills. If it hadn't been for his family, he would have been truly good and fucked.

His mother, brothers, uncles, aunts and cousins had pulled together and made sure that he'd had whatever he needed to get through the last of the surgeries. They'd brought him to physical therapy when he needed a ride and there had always been someone to hold his hand when the pain became too much. They'd been there for him every step of the way, making the transition from damaged soldier to civilian easier for him and for that alone he was eternally grateful.

He always had an invitation to dinner, someone willing to drop everything to help him out and the reminder that he wasn't alone. It made things a hell of a lot more tolerable for him, but some days...

It wasn't enough.

Some days he longed for a home of his own and not just an apartment that his cousin rented to him for practically nothing. He wanted a wife that looked at him the way that Haley and Zoe looked at his cousins. He wanted children that ate him out of house and home and made him smile even when they were going out of their way to piss him off.

He should be happy that he was alive and had a good job, and he was. He just wished that there was more to his life than work, his books, eating dinner every other night at one of his uncle's or cousin's homes and looking forward to pissing off his cute little neighbor. He needed to get off his ass and start dating again, but he just couldn't seem to force himself to get interested in any woman

long enough to ask her out.

Like most Bradfords, he'd never had a problem finding a woman to warm his bed. Sex was easy, uncomplicated and could be used to scratch an itch. Finding a woman that he genuinely liked and wanted to spend time with outside the bedroom was a bit difficult for him. He just wished-

"I think we should focus back on Danny and his wife," Trevor announced, completely screwing him over.

Bastard!

"She's not my wife," he said evenly, forcing himself to eat another bite of the mushy rice.

"Not yet," Jason pointed out.

"For Christ's sake, she's not even my type!" he snapped, not bothering to point out that he liked taller woman with a hell of a lot more curves than Tinkerbelle had.

Tinkerbelle was pretty, he'd give her that, but she was also too short, probably five-one if that. She was petite, even smaller than Haley. She had blonde hair when he preferred black. Her breasts were small, probably C cups when he preferred large breasts that he could spend hours devoting his attention to and to be honest, she had this kid sister aura about her that just made him want to torment her.

"Doesn't matter if she's your type or not. You know how this works," Trevor said, taking a bite of his meatloaf and noticeably trying not to cringe.

"Because she's my neighbor?" he asked, not bothering to hide his snort of disgust. When his cousins sent him a "duh" look, he explained, "I've had plenty of neighbors that I enjoyed pissing off and I didn't marry any of them so clearly Great Grandpa's theory on Bradford men is bullshit."

"You've had neighbors before," Jason agreed, before he added, "but you've never gone out of your way to make any of their lives a living hell."

"That makes her special," Trevor added with a wink before Zoe said something that sent them all running from the table in search of a trashcan.

"That's not rice," she said, worrying her bottom lip. "That was baked macaroni and cheese."

Chapter 3

“You can’t be serious,” Greg, a man that she’d gone out with a total of three times before he’d finally announced that he couldn’t date her because she reminded him of his kid sister, said as he carefully placed his coffee back on the coaster, well aware that she’d kick his ass if he stained her great-grandmother’s table.

“Oh, no I’m completely serious,” she said, looking over the notes that Mr. Tate had provided her with so that she could “improve the proposal.” She shook her head, refusing to compare their small library to the Louvre. Honestly, Mr. Tate was such a sweet man, but he had a romantic streak a mile wide, always seeing things as he thought they should be.

“You do realize that you’re telling a police officer, *one on duty*,” he clarified before continuing, “about your plans to murder your neighbor, right?”

She blinked at him before asking, “And your point is?”

With a frustrated growl, he reached over and grabbed another sandwich off the small platter that she’d made when he’d called to tell her that he’d be swinging by on his dinner break. They both knew that he was really making sure that she hadn’t snapped and killed the bastard living across the hallway and to grab a quick bite.

She’d learned a long time ago that it was best to keep plenty of deli meat and beer on hand for when her guy friends stopped by. It was either that or hear them bitching about being hungry until she gave in and baked them some cookies. Since baking meant cookies, brownies and cakes, her weaknesses, she made damn sure that her house was always well stocked for company, *guy* company. Unless she was stressed, then she baked like it was going out of style.

“He can’t be that bad,” Greg said, sighing heavily as he reached for more sugar.

“I now have thirty ways to kill him,” Jodi explained as she refilled his cup of coffee.

“You need to get the hell out of here before you do something stupid,” Greg said as though she wasn’t painfully aware of that fact.

“I can’t afford to move,” she said, focusing her attention on the notes once again and after she read the next paragraph, rolled her eyes in disgust.

“You have a good job, Jodi. It even pays more than the museum. You

should be able to afford to buy your own house by now,” Greg pointed out, looking around the kitchen until he spotted the bag of chips that she’d taken out and forgot to put on the table while she tried not to wince.

He had no idea that Jerry had screwed her over financially when he’d walked out on her. If she honestly didn’t believe that he’d grab the rest of the guys and go beat the shit out of Jerry, she probably would have told him. She didn’t want anyone else to pay for her stupidity even if that meant that Jerry got the ass whooping that he’d more than earned.

“Why don’t you ask your Dad for help?” he suggested.

“I can’t,” she mumbled pathetically even though she technically could.

Well, there wasn’t anything technical about it. If she needed money or a place to live, her father would gladly give it to her. If her mother were still alive, she would have already dragged Jodi back home and babied her until she was able to get back on her feet. Some days she was sorely tempted to give in and admit defeat, but then her pride would rear its ugly head and demand that she keep trying.

“Well,” Greg said, getting up so that he could grab the chips off the counter, “you’ve gotta do something. Maybe go back to school.”

She had to snort at that. “So I can be even more overqualified? No thanks,” she said, adding the request for the wall of plaques declaring the members of the City Council heroes and hating herself for it.

“Maybe you could-” he started to suggest only to get cut off by his radio.

“Echo ninety-four, please respond to a twenty-five at 178 Harrison Road.”

Jodi cocked a brow in question even as she stood up and quickly packed the rest of the sandwiches for him.

“Shoplifter,” he said with a heavy sigh as he took the large paper brown bag from her and shoved the large unopened bag of chips inside.

“Well, you have fun with that,” she said dryly, sitting back down in front of her laptop when all she wanted to do was grab the pint of Ben and Jerry’s that she had hidden behind a bag of broccoli and go kill a few hours and a few hundred brain cells with reality television. Anything was better than writing this drivel.

“And try not to kill your neighbor,” Greg said, giving her the customary

pat on the head before he headed out.

“I’m not promising anything!” she called after him, hoping that wouldn’t be considered admissible in court later.

*_*_*_*_*

“Congratulations! You’re getting a raise.”

“Uh huh,” Danny said, using his tee shirt to wipe the sweat off his face as he waited for his Uncle to skip the bullshit and get to the reason why he was about to get screwed over.

“And a promotion,” Uncle Jared said with that forced smile that he knew so well. It was the same smile that Uncle Jared had used when he’d informed him that the stage *The Hunter’s Nest*, the all male strip club in the next town over, had collapsed and he needed Danny to go there and rebuild it.

What his Uncle had failed to mention was that the club would be open for auditions while he was supposed to be working. If Danny had known that, he probably would have turned down the Yankees tickets that his Uncle had offered to entice Danny to take the job. He definitely would have turned down the job if he had known that half the stripper candidates would try to use him and his tools as props as they did their best to outstrip the competition. It had been one of the most disturbing jobs that he’d ever done and he’d sworn then and there that he would never allow his Uncle to bullshit him into anything else.

“Not interested,” he said, in no mood to have a guy named “Blade” invite him home for a more private audition tonight or any other night for that matter.

“You didn’t even let me tell you-”

“That’s because I’m not interested,” he said, cutting off his Uncle as he got to his feet and headed for the closed office door.

“It’s really not that bad,” his uncle called after him.

“Then you should have no problem finding someone else to do it,” he said, absently noting the large stack of files covering what was supposed to be the secretary’s desk and wondering when his uncle was going to get off his ass and hire somebody new. His Aunt Megan, Haley and Zoe usually put in a couple of hours each week to catch his uncle up on his paperwork, but clearly that wasn’t enough.

“This job is perfect for you!” his uncle said as he hurried to catch up with him.

“Not interested,” Danny said, deciding that since his uncle had dragged him away from finishing dry walling the first floor for this bullshit that he was treating himself to another midmorning snack.

“If you don’t take the job then I’m afraid that I’m going to have to fire you,” Uncle Jared said, stepping into line beside him.

“Uh huh, that’s nice,” he said, absently noting the frightened expression on the cashier’s face as she realized that she had two Bradfords in her line an hour before she had to set up for lunch.

As he grabbed a tray and started loading it up, he noted the exact moment when she considered lying her ass off and telling them that she was closed until lunch. Not that he could blame her. If they cleaned her out this close to lunch she’d have to deal with more than a hundred pissed off men, forty of them Bradfords. It wasn’t a fate that he’d wish on anyone. Well, maybe on his neighbor, he mused with a small chuckle.

She was just so damn much fun to torment. It was probably pathetic, but he looked forward to getting her flustered every day. He liked it when she looked close to going for his throat. He wasn’t exactly sure why, but tormenting Tinkerbelle was probably the most fun he’d had in years.

“It’s only for the summer,” his Uncle continued, obviously hellbent on screwing him over with this job.

“Sorry, I have plans,” he lied, hoping that his Uncle wouldn’t remember which nephew he was talking to.

“Bullshit,” Uncle Jared said, stepping in front of him to grab the peanut butter chocolate chip muffin that he’d been eying. “The only thing you have planned this year is the family getaway and that isn’t until October. You have the summer wide open.”

“How about this?” Danny asked, swiftly snatching the muffin off his uncle’s tray. “I just don’t want to do whatever fucked up job you have that will end with me getting violated.”

His uncle gasped in outrage as he stole back the muffin. “I apologized for that!”

Danny snorted in disgust as he grabbed a blueberry muffin, knowing that he’d already pushed his luck once by touching something on his uncle’s tray and really in no mood to end up on the ground in a headlock. “Yeah, cause that made up for being pursued by a two hundred pound stripper.”

“I don’t know why you’re complaining,” Uncle Jared grumbled. “He sent you that really nice cookie basket to make up for the incident in the closet.”

“Which you ate,” Danny pointed out, grabbing two foil-wrapped meatball sandwiches and added them to his tray.

“I was hungry!” Uncle Jared said defensively as he stole one of the sandwiches off his tray.

With a muttered curse about thieving bastards, Danny grabbed another sandwich, which Uncle Jared promptly stole. Knowing what would happen to the food on his tray if he didn’t move his ass, he quickly grabbed another one, five cookies, two waters, three apples, a candy bar, a donut and a large bag of chips and headed towards the very frightened looking cashier.

As she quickly added up his purchases, he couldn’t help but wonder why the guy that owned the coffee trucks that serviced Bradford Construction’s sites kept sending skittish females fresh out of high school to work the trucks. It seemed kind of cruel, especially since they usually ended up quitting after two weeks once they realized that they’d developed an anxiety disorder.....or two.

“I got it,” Uncle Jared said as Danny pulled out his wallet.

“No thanks,” Danny said, quickly pulling the money out and paying for his own food.

“Why not?” Uncle Jared demanded as his gaze drifted down and locked on the stack of cookies that Danny realized he’d have to eat first.

“Because of that bullshit rule of yours,” Danny said, grabbing his tray and headed towards his truck, hoping like hell that his uncle would be too distracted by his overflowing tray to follow after him.

“It’s not bullshit,” Uncle Jared grumbled, following after him.

“Yeah, it really is,” Danny said, resigning himself to the fact that his uncle was joining him for his second midmorning snack.

“If I pay for the food then I should be allowed to have a bite or two,” Uncle Jared explained as he helped lower the tailgate and set his tray down.

“It’s never just a bite or two with you,” Danny argued, not really in the mood to discuss his uncle’s fucked up rules about food, but if that meant that his uncle wasn’t harassing him about this new job, then that was more than fine with-

“You start the new job on Monday,” Uncle Jared said, deftly snatching

a cookie off his tray.

“If it’s a summer job,” Danny began, shifting his tray away from his uncle. He could have snatched the cookie back, but he’d most likely be pulling back a stub so he grudgingly let the cookie go, “then let Jason handle it. He needs the extra money.”

“He can’t take this job,” Uncle Jared said distractedly as he tried to steal another cookie.

Knowing his uncle as well as he did, he shifted the tray further out of his reach. “Why not?”

“You cheap bastard!” Uncle Jared gasped with a pout that had him rolling his eyes and tossing the greedy bastard another cookie. It was either that or put up with his pouting for the rest of the day.

“Well?” Danny demanded as his Uncle took his time to savor the cookie.

“He has to work most of the summer at school,” Uncle Jared quickly explained before he washed down the cookie with one of the bottles of chocolate milk that he’d purchased. “He’s going to take hours working with us when he can, but he has a lot to do before school starts back up in September.”

“Isn’t he the head of the history department now?” he asked, pretty sure that Haley had told him about Jason’s promotion last night while they’d been waiting to have their stomachs pumped in the emergency room.

Jared looked proud as he nodded. “Youngest department head in the school’s history.”

“That’s great,” Danny said absently, wondering if his father smiled like that when he spoke about him, but after a minute common sense kicked in. He doubted that his father even remembered his name, never mind bragged about him. Not that there was much to brag about, he thought as he unwrapped one of the sandwiches he’d bought.

“Why don’t you get one of the other guys to run the project?” he suggested, hoping that he could continue with the status quo by punching in everyday, completing the projects assigned to him and going home. He didn’t want to have to run a project, supervise a team or any of the bullshit that came with a leadership position. He’d led enough men in the Marines and was done with the bullshit of being responsible for another human being.

“My other foremen all have projects to handle this summer. Carl is out

for the summer to take care of his wife while she's on bed rest and Jimmy retired last week," Jared explained.

"So promote someone new. You have plenty of good men to chose from," he pointed out as he was once again forced to shift his tray away from his uncle.

Uncle Jared shook his head as he considered his next food selection. "None of them are as good as you. You know how to handle a team, how to delegate work, you work your ass off and you're fair. You'd make a great foreman."

"What about Trevor?" he asked, touched that his uncle thought so highly of him, but he just wasn't sure that he wanted to do anything more than follow orders.

"He can't," Jared said with a sigh as he settled on a sandwich, "not with his dyslexia."

Danny could only frown in confusion as he asked, "Why the hell not?"

"Because the job is renovating the old library," his uncle said and with that, Danny knew that he was good and fucked.

Chapter 4

“Fuck off!”

“Aw, is little Danny going to cry?” she heard Trevor ask from the safety of the laundry room where the door was tightly shut. She prayed that she’d have one night, just one night, where she didn’t have to put up with-

“I said fuck off!” Danny snapped as the laundry room door crashed open and the only man in the world that could possibly make her day worse came storming in, carrying an overflowing basket of clothes and looking furious.

Chuckling, Trevor continued to walk past the laundry room door, seemingly oblivious to the panicked looks that she was sending his way. “See you bright and early tomorrow morning, *Mr. Foreman!*”

“I fucking hate that bastard,” Danny muttered, focusing all of his attention on violently shoving the basketful of clothes into the only other washing machine in the room.

Deciding to take advantage of the fact that he hadn’t seemed to notice her yet, she placed her empty basket on the dryer that she was planning on using once the washing machine was finished, and walked out of the room casually, hoping that she didn’t draw his attention. When he didn’t say anything to make her want to bash her laundry basket upside his head, she walked down the hallway and let herself into her apartment. She set the timer on her phone for thirty minutes and was just about to dig into some of the Ben and Jerry’s that she’d bought herself on the way home when the rolled up city trash bags that she’d also purchased at the gas station caught her eye.

It was trash night, which meant that her date with Ben and Jerry’s was going to have to wait a little while, unfortunately. Then again, she could always do it later.....

No, no she couldn’t, she thought, knowing that the longer she put off taking the trash out front, the more likely that she was going to decide to put it off until tomorrow morning and then forget to do it all together. Since her two assigned trashcans were surprisingly filled this week, she didn’t have much of a choice. If she didn’t get the trash out tonight then she’d have to wait until next week to get rid of it. She’d also have to put her trash from this week in front of her barrels. That would lead to getting hit with a warning for breaking one of her lease agreements and risking her bags being ripped into by animals, which she

would be responsible for cleaning or risk another warning.

Since she doubted that she'd be able to find an apartment this nice for so cheap, three hundred dollars cheaper now, she decided to just suck it up and get off her ass and get it done. Grabbing the roll of city trash bags, she left her apartment and headed to the back entrance. Five minutes later she was standing in front of her assigned trashcans, frowning down at the overstuffed bags filling her cans.

She really didn't remember filling the bags that much. For a second she wondered if someone else had shoved a bag in her can, but just as quickly she dismissed it. For one thing, even though most of the guys that lived here were arrogant bastards, they weren't pricks. They wouldn't do that to her. Well, Danny probably would, she thought, pursing her lips up, but she knew that he hadn't stuffed her cans full because he used black trash bags while she used the small white kitchen bags.

Realizing that she must have had more trash than she thought, she pulled a city trash bag off the roll and opened it, shaking it loose so that she could fill it with her bags. As she grabbed the first bag, and almost fell over from the weight of it, she couldn't help but think that it was pretty messed up that the city charged two bucks a bag for trash removal when they paid taxes that were specifically allocated for the sanitation department. It just seemed a bit ridiculous to her. The city shouldn't be able to double charge-

"Oh my God!" she shrieked as the bag that she'd been in the process of pulling out of the trashcan suddenly ripped open. The sudden difference in weight threw her off balance. It caused her to stumble back several feet as the gooey contents of the bag spilled out and covered her just as the most repulsive odor that she'd ever smelled hit her, making her gag just before she stumbled back another step, slipped on some goo and went flying, landing on her ass in a big puddle of the smelly, gooey goop.

Too stunned and admittedly busy trying not to vomit, she sat there, staring down at herself in horror, wondering how such a thing could happen when her night suddenly got a hell of a lot worse.

"What the hell are you doing?"

*_*_*_*

"I'm going to say this as nicely as I possibly can," Tinkerbelle said as he caught a whiff of a vile odor that was vaguely familiar. "If you even think

about calling me Tinkerbelle or say anything even remotely annoying right now I will kill you!”

“I see,” he murmured absently as he took in the scene and in less than thirty seconds he realized that his cousin had seriously fucked up.

Bradford's didn't normally throw away food. It just wasn't in their DNA to waste food even if it was past its expiration date and growing penicillin. They simply scraped the fungus off, covered it in ketchup and savored it. They didn't believe in wasting food, none of them did, but since Trevor had fallen in love with Zoe and married her.....

Well, they'd made an exception to that rule since none of them had the balls to tell Zoe that her cooking sucked, especially the bastard that married her. Most nights Trevor was able to force himself to eat what his wife cooked, but some nights like the other night, the man couldn't force himself to do the impossible. When those nights came, Trevor took the coward's way out and found a way to throw the leftovers out without Zoe finding out.

Since he couldn't throw the food away at his house and take the chance of his wife finding out, Trevor usually brought the waste to one of his apartment houses and dumped it in one of their cousin's trashcans, which was no doubt why Trevor had been here today. The only problem it seemed was that Trevor had royally fucked up tonight and placed the trash bags filled with toxic waste in Tinkerbelle's barrels.

The weird, oddly discolored slime covered her from head to toe, the ground that she was struggling to get off, her trash barrels and the trash that had spilled out from the bag. He'd seen a lot of things in the Marines, but this was easily the grossest fucking thing that he'd ever come across. It was also probably one of the most embarrassing moments for little Tinkerbelle, he realized with a reluctant sigh as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone.

“What are you doing?” Tinkerbelle nervously demanded as she suddenly stopped trying to find a way to get out of the slimy mess so that she could watch his every move.

“My duty,” he explained with a heavy sigh as he opened the camera app and did what was expected of him.

“*You son of a bitch!*” Tinkerbelle screamed as she lunged for him, slipped and landed right smack dab in a large puddle of goo.

“Say it with a smile,” he said, chuckling when she looked up. Well,

tried to at least, but with all that goo weighing her hair down in front of her face it was kind of difficult.

“Put the camera away, Danny!” she demanded, struggling to get to her feet only to once again slip in the goo, landing smack dab in the middle of it and forcing him to jump back to avoid the goop that was sent flying into the air with her fall.

“It’s not a camera,” he felt obligated to point out as he angled the phone to the side so that he could catch the goo smeared glare that she was sending him. “It’s a---*son of a bitch!*” he shouted as a big handful of chalk white slime sailed through the air and nailed him in the shoulder.

“Put the phone away,” Tinkerbelle said, swiping up another handful of that slime that he was going to kill his cousin for.

Any other man would have accepted defeat, put the camera away and made a quick retreat, but he was a Bradford as well as a Marine, which meant that he was going to aggravate the shit out of her for the sheer pleasure of it. Chuckling, he ducked out of the way as the goop sailed through the air, snapped a dozen more shots, not really caring if they were good shots or not. The only thing that he cared about right now was pissing Tinkerbelle off.

“Damn it!” she snapped as she once again slipped in the goo, this time landing on her pretty little ass, causing the glob of goo in her hand to slide down her arm, adding an extra layer of slime to her skin and clothes that was going to be a bitch to clean off. When she let out a defeated groan, he couldn’t help but feel bad for her.

With a sigh, because he knew that he was going to miss out on some really good photo opportunities, he put his phone in his back pocket. “Do you want some help?”

“Not from you,” she bit out as she tried to wipe her hands off on her pants, but by this point it was hopeless. She was covered from head to toe in the nasty goop.

“Oh, and why’s that?” he asked, glancing at the garden hose and wondering if he should hose down this mess before the smell seeped inside the apartment house.

“Because I really just don’t like you,” she admitted as she slowly got on her knees to give standing another try.

“Now, you know that you really don’t mean that,” he said, knowing

damn well that she did.

“Yeah, I really do,” she said, finally managing to get to her feet.

“Are you planning on tracking that shit into the building?” he asked, gesturing to the white slime that was slowly traveling down her body, applying another, more even, coat over her body.

“I’ll wash it off,” she said defensively.

“How?”

Her frown said it all. She had no idea how she was going to get that shit off and to be honest, he really wasn’t sure that water was going to do the job. At least cold water wouldn’t be able to get it off, he mused with a frown of his own when he felt a slight burning sensation on his shoulder right where the goop-

Chapter 5

“Stop moving!”

“It’s burning!” she snapped back, slapping his hands when he tried to push her hands away as she frantically tried to wipe off the white glop that felt like it was burning her skin off.

“You need to take this off,” he said, sounding calm and in control when all she wanted to do was scream, again, and freak out, again, but he wouldn’t let her.

As soon as she’d started screaming about her skin being on fire, Danny had snapped into action. He’d grabbed the hose and hit her full force with a jet of ice-cold water, which may have started another round of screaming. It also made the burning sensation a lot worse. Before she could tell him that, probably because he figured it out by her screams, he’d dropped the hose, picked her up and ran inside, straight into his apartment and had her in his bathtub before she could put up much of a fight.

“No, don’t turn the water on!” she screamed in terror seconds before a stream of hot water hit her.

“You need to get this off,” he said, still sounding irritatingly calm as she struggled against the urge to scream as the water caused the white slime on her body to heat up again.

When he grabbed the hem of her shirt and yanked it off, she didn’t even think about fighting him since she was too busy trying not to freak out over the likelihood that the gunk from the trashcan was nuclear waste. She barely noticed when he yanked off her shoes, socks and went for her pants, but she definitely noticed when he went for her bra.

“Hey!” she gasped, slapping at the offending hand.

“That shit soaked up into the material,” he pointed out as her mind registered the burning sensation seeping beneath the bra. “It needs to come off.”

She opened her mouth to.....

To....

To.....

“W-what are you doing?” she managed to choke out while she watched as Danny pulled his shirt off and tossed it out of the shower as he toed off his

boots. Then he bent over and pulled off his socks and tossed them aside. He stood up and quickly undid his pants and shoved them down, revealing a pair of tight fitting black boxer briefs that left very little to the imagination.

When he stood up and ran a hand through his wet hair, her gaze raced to follow the move, taking in the puckered pink scar and the raised straight line that ran through it on an otherwise droolworthy set of abs, up to the Marine tattoo that he had on his chest, the one that she may have found herself thinking about a time or two, and finally up to meet his gaze and immediately regretting it. He looked serious, really serious, and determined as he sent her a hard glare.

“Your skin is streaked red,” he began, taking her by surprise.

She looked down and sure enough, her body was covered in angry looking red streaks and splotches right where her skin burned and itched like crazy. Swallowing nervously, she looked back up at him and found a matching red spot on his shoulder, right where she’d nailed him with a handful of goop.

“Your underwear is coated in that shit and the longer that you keep it on, the more damage that it’s going to do to your skin,” he said, sounding completely rational, which actually frightened her. “We need to get the rest of your clothes off and try to wash the residue off your skin. Now.”

As much as she wanted to argue with him, and she really wanted to argue this one, she couldn’t. With each passing second the burning and itching only got worse.

“Fine,” she said, reaching for her bra strap, “but you don’t need to be in here. I can do it myself.”

“I’m not leaving,” the stubborn bastard said as he reached down and grabbed a large bar of white soap.

“Yeah, you really are” she said, wincing when a sting accompanied her attempt to remove her bra strap.

“Not happening, Tinkerbelle,” he said, gently pushing her hand aside and-

“Ow!” she cried out as he pulled her bra strap up and over her shoulder and as far down her arm as it would go. She had a similar reaction when he did the same with the other bra strap.

“Your back and legs fared the worst, Tink,” he said, startling her into looking down as he efficiently unsnapped her bra and what she saw had her swallowing hard as she tried not to panic.

“Are you allergic to anything, Tink?” he asked, sounding calm as he carefully hooked his thumbs in the waistband of her panties and slowly lowered them to the floor.

“No,” she said, a small cry escaping her when his knuckles accidentally brushed up against her skin.

“Are you having any problems breathing?” he asked, tossing her panties out of the shower.

“No,” she mumbled, trying not to lose it.

“Good,” he murmured behind her as she struggled against looking down.

Every inch of her body was covered in what appeared to be hives, large, angry looking hives that were noticeably raised. There wasn't a spot on her body that didn't itch or burn. Only the fear that she would make things worse was stopping her from scratching every inch of her body. The itching she could understand, but she'd never heard of hives burning the-

“I'm sorry,” Danny said, cutting through her panicked thoughts.

“For what?” she asked before a thought occurred to her and when it did, she was seeing red. “Oh my God! Those bags were yours?” she demanded, moving to turn around and kick his ass when he answered.

“No.”

“Then what are you apologizing for?” she asked, worrying her bottom lip as she snuck another peek down at herself and cringed.

“For this.”

“Wh-*Ouch!*” she screamed as he carefully placed his soapy hands on her back. The pain multiplied, forcing her to slap her hands against the shower wall and grit her teeth together as she thought of another way to kill the bastard.

*_*_*_*_*

“Stop being a baby and just take it,” the bastard that had trapped her in his bathroom ordered, trying once again to force her to take the small cup of Benadryl from him.

“I don't need it,” she stubbornly said even as she resisted the urge to scratch every last inch of her body.

Thanks to the shower that Danny had forced her to endure, her skin no longer felt like it was on fire, but that damn itch wouldn't go away. If she'd been

alone she would have dropped the towel and scratched herself to her heart's content by now, but she wasn't alone because the jackass refused to let her leave until she took some medicine. She wasn't taking it, no way in hell was she taking it.

"I don't see the problem, Tinkerbelle," he said, placing the small cup of medicine on the sink counter so that he could cross his arms over his chest and glare down at her, looking every bit the intimidating Marine that he probably once was. The fact that he was naked except for the towel wrapped around his hips didn't take away from the effect. She could appreciate the concern and bossiness over her well-being, she really could, but that didn't change the fact that she shouldn't take the medicine.

"Look," she said, sighing heavily as she reached up and pushed back her hair, somehow resisting the urge to scratch her face and neck as she did it, "I really appreciate what you did for me tonight. I do, but I don't need any medicine. I'm fine."

He didn't say anything as he continued to stare down at her.

Not one to let some guy intimidate her, she stared back, fully expecting him to back down. So when a minute or so passed and he still kept that glare up, she couldn't help but shift nervously even as she struggled to hold her own in this contest of wills. She would not lose, damn it!

"I-I don't need it," she heard herself stammering nervously before she could stop herself.

Instead of arguing with her, he simply continued to glare.

"I'm not even really that itchy," she rambled on nervously, absently scratching her right arm as she tried not to squirm beneath that glare that was actually starting to freak her out a little bit.

"I doubt that it would help," she continued to ramble on.

"I'll be fine in the morning," she added a moment later, needing to break the silence and hoping that he'd stop glaring at her.

When he still didn't speak or move for that matter, she added, "I react badly to medicine."

An understatement, definitely an understatement.

Instead of asking her to elaborate, he just kept on glaring down at her until she couldn't take it any longer and finally blurted out, "Fine!" She grabbed the small cup of medicine, downed it in one sip and slammed the small

disposable plastic cup on the counter.

Furious that she'd let the bastard intimidate her, she stormed past him, barely aware that he'd stepped out of her way and kept on going. She decided that it was for that best that she didn't look back, because if she saw even a hint of a smug smile on his face she was going to go outside, scoop up a handful of that white slime and shove it down his throat.

*_*_*_*

“Let the dream go, buddy, cause it's not happening,” he absently told the erection making his shorts a little too snug as he searched through the kitchen cabinet by the sink, looking for something to eat and distract himself from the memory of running his hands over Tinkerbelle's incredibly lush body.

With a snort of disgust, he slammed the cabinet door shut and moved onto the refrigerator as he cursed himself for reacting this way, especially over a woman who hated him. He didn't need this complication in his life, but he'd be damned if he could think of anything else right now. That last two hours had been....

Pure hell for him.

He'd never been more terrified in his life. Several times he'd debated calling 911, but the fear that she'd take a turn for the worse during the time that it would have taken to get to his cell phone and make the call had kept his ass in the shower with her. Not knowing what else to do, he'd let his training take over and he'd handled her the way he would have if she'd been one of his men. It had been a good plan, a solid plan, but there had just been one small problem with it.

She wasn't one of his men.

Tinkerbelle was soft, curvy and without question a woman. So, he'd tried a different approach, one that should have worked, especially with her. He'd thought of her as a little sister since she gave off that little sister vibe, but the moment that he'd hooked his fingers in her panties and started to pull them off all brotherly thoughts vanished and were replaced by thoughts that had him gritting his teeth and calling himself a bastard.

Thank fucking God for the pain in his shoulder and hands. It had kept him focused and helped his cock behave since the last thing that either one of them needed was his damn cock getting in the way. He only wished that his damn vision could have been fucked up as well. It would have made things a hell of a lot easier for him and spared him from fantasizing about Tinkerbelle's

small, but oh so fucking perfect body for years to come.

The image of her pert little heart shaped ass, perfect breasts tipped with baby pink nipples and soft blonde curls between her legs that he'd barely stopped himself from running his fingers through was going to haunt him for the rest of his life. It was only the reminder that she hated him that had kept him from trying for something more. He wasn't foolish enough to think that after tonight that Tink was going to suddenly forgive him and see him as something more than the asshole next door.

He was a Bradford after all.

To be honest, he didn't want her to see him as anything more than the asshole next door. He didn't need any complications in his life and he sure as hell didn't need-

Someone knocking on his door tonight.

He was not in the mood to deal with his family, not tonight. As much as he loved them and appreciated everything they'd done for him since he came back broken, he wished that they'd forget about him. He didn't need or want their pity. He was fine, more than fine no matter what any of them thought.

He sure as hell didn't need anyone to fix him.

Chapter 6

8:30 P.M.

“What now?” he asked, sighing heavily when he realized that it wasn’t one of his family members stopping by with some bullshit excuse so that they could make sure that he was taking care of himself. It was his pain in the ass neighbor no doubt coming back to-

“I wanted to thank you for everything that you did for me last night,” Tinkerbelle started, instantly making him frown.

“Last night?” he repeated, sure that he’d misheard the small woman, standing in the hallway, still wearing the towel that he gave her a little over an hour ago wrapped around all those surprising curves that she’d somehow hidden from him.

“Yes,” she said, pushing back a strand of hair curled from her recent shower and obviously still in the process of drying, “I’ve been thinking about this all night and-”

“All night?” he found himself muttering, not entirely sure where she was headed with this.

“I just wanted to stop by on my way to work and thank you for everything,” she said, finishing with a firm nod as she turned and started to head down the hallway towards the front door when she suddenly stopped and turned right back around. “I almost forgot,” she said, walking over to him and-

Forced him to blindly reach out and grab hold of the doorway before his knees gave out and dropped him on his ass from the weight of the cotton towel that she’d tossed over his shoulder.

“Thanks again,” Tinkerbelle, now butt naked, said with a polite smile as she turned around and headed for the front door, leaving him holding onto her towel as his mind raced to figure out what just happened even as his gaze fell to that delectable, softly rounded ass that he’d give anything to-

“I forgot my keys,” Tinkerbelle said with a self-deprecating laugh as she turned around and headed back to her door where she lightly knocked.

“Is there someone inside?” he asked, praying that there was someone behind that door to come take this frustrating woman off his hands.

“No,” Tinkerbelle said with a shrug as she continued to patiently stand in front of her door, waiting for it to magically open.

He rubbed his hands down his face, telling himself that this wasn't happening to him, not tonight. Tinkerbelle went ahead and lightly knocked on her door again. Praying that whatever fucked up side effect the medicine had on her was short term, he dropped his hands from his face, grabbed the towel off his shoulder and prepared himself for a wrestling match from hell.

*_*_*_*

8:45 P.M.

“I don't want it!”

“Too goddamn bad!” he snapped, making quick work of wrapping the towel around the stubborn woman who was driving him out of his fucking mind.

“You're going to make me late for work!” Tinkerbelle snapped once again trying to push past him and walk towards the front door, but before she could make her way past him, he had his arm around her and was carrying her back, unfortunately, to his apartment where he could keep an eye on her.

“Uh huh, that's nice, Tinkerbelle,” he said absently, wondering if tying her to the baseboard would constitute kidnapping.

“That's not my name!” she snapped, wiggling in his arms, desperate for freedom so that she could make another run for the front door where she would no doubt give the neighborhood a show that they would never forget.

“Stop squirming,” he said through clenched teeth, praying that she would stop rubbing those damn curves against him with every wiggle so that he could focus on figuring out how he was going to get her safely back in her apartment and out of his hair. He wanted his solitude, needed it desperately and as soon as he figured out what was wrong with her, he would have it.

“What the hell is going on here?” a man suddenly demanded, drawing his attention to two large, and familiar looking, police officers, who didn't look too pleased to find a half naked Jodi in his arms.

Aw, shit.....

“Greg!” his unwanted load cried, sounding relieved, really relieved, which probably wasn't going to help him in the long run.

For a moment he considered placing Tinkerbelle back on her feet to make it easier for the very pissed off looking officers to slam him to the floor and read him his rights, but then he realized that his unwanted load would take advantage of the situation and make her escape. So, until they ordered him to put

her down and raise his hands above his head, he wasn't releasing her.

"Can you please tell him to put me down so that I can go to work?" she asked, sounding completely rational for a woman being held by a man that she despised while wearing nothing but a towel.

"Work?" the officer that he was assuming was Greg repeated back slowly as he shared a look with his partner that Danny couldn't read, but one he was willing to interpret.

He was about to become big Bubba's bitch. He was holding a woman who hated him and happened to be naked, out of it and most likely a cop's girlfriend in his arms and his only defense was his cousin's wife's fucked up cooking and Benadryl. Oh yeah, his ass was going away for a long time for this one, which wouldn't be so bad once he thought about it.

It meant that he'd get two to five years without his family's interference, constant worrying and babying him. He just had to be careful with the soap in the shower. Not a bad deal when he thought about it.

"Aspirin or cough medicine?" Greg suddenly demanded, taking a step forward as he gestured towards the woman in Danny's arms.

"Benadryl," he answered with a frown, wondering why they-

"Oh fuck no!" Greg said, shoving his partner out of his way as he tried to make his way back to the front door only to have his partner grab him by the collar, yank him back and run for the door.

"Where the hell are you going?" Danny demanded, shifting his unwanted load in his arms.

"As far away from here as humanly possible," Greg shouted over his shoulder as he tried to shove his way to freedom.

Danny couldn't help but shake his head in disgust as he watched the cowards shoving each other, both of them more than willing to leave this woman with a man that she despised.

"One of you needs to stay here and take care of her," he said, rolling his eyes in disgust as Greg's partner managed to shove Greg back inside and took off. "She should be watched by someone that knows her," he said, stressing the point that he was a fucking stranger to this woman.

"Looks like you're doing a good job," Greg said, scrambling to get back to the front door.

“You’re really going to leave your girlfriend with a stranger?” he spat out in disgust, wondering why women like Tinkerbelle settled for losers like-

“We had you checked out before she signed the lease, Sergeant. We know she’s in good hands,” Greg said, taking him by surprise even as the coward backed up, licking his lips nervously. “I-I just can’t go through this again. Not after the last time,” he said, shaking his head and sounding terrified seconds before he turned around and made a run for it, leaving Danny standing in the middle of hallway with his unwanted load.

“Fucking cowards,” he spat out in disgust.

“Fucking cowards,” his unwanted load repeated back with a sigh that had him rolling his eyes and wondering just how long it would take for the Benadryl to do its thing and knock Tinkerbelle out.

*_*_*_*

10:34 P.M.

“Stop squirming,” he said, not bothering to open his eyes as he shifted his head so that he was once again resting comfortably on her stomach.

“I need to use the bathroom,” she said with what sounded like a cute little pout, something that normally would have had his lips twitching in amusement, but not tonight. Not after the last two hours of hell that she’d put him through.

“You’re lying,” he pointed out, ninety-five percent sure that she was lying and not really caring if he was wrong.

For the past two hours this small woman had been driving him out of his fucking mind. She’d made a total of twenty-two escape attempts, three of them successful since she’d managed to get out the door before he could grab her and drag her back inside. She’d set a fire, unintentionally, flooded his bathroom, started a fist fight between him and two of his cousins, got the police called on them a total of nine times, accidentally kneed him in the balls three times and now he was starving, cranky, exhausted and all he wanted to do was to get a little sleep before he had to get up at the crack of dawn and start a job that he didn’t want.

“I’m hungry,” she said, deciding to try a different tactic.

“Too bad,” he said, forcing himself not to care that she might very well be starving. It was either that or take the chance of her slamming his balls into his stomach again as she raced for the door, but not for work this time. Oh no,

Tinkerbelle was no longer worried about being late for work. Her new mission in life was getting to Dunkin Donuts and buying a double chocolate donut. The woman apparently had a craving for a baked treat and was willing to do anything to get it, even turning him into a eunuch.

“Fine,” she said, sighing heavily as she went back to running her fingers through his hair, something that he was not enjoying. He wasn’t, not at all. It sure as hell wasn’t calming something deep inside of him that he couldn’t name and making him doze off. It was-

“Are we having sex?” she suddenly asked, startling the hell out of him enough to make him open his eyes and raise his head so that he could glare down at the woman that was going to drive him to drink.

“Does it feel like we’re having sex?” he demanded, even though he’d already learned a couple hours ago that Tinkerbelle on Benadryl was incapable of having a rational discussion.

She squished up her face in thought before she shrugged and admitted, “I’ve never been able to tell.”

He should just close his eyes, drop his head back on her stomach and use his weight to keep her pinned to the couch and out of trouble, but instead he found himself asking, “How could you not know if you’re having sex?”

“Jerry was really tiny,” she said with a shrug like it was no big deal. “I couldn’t feel anything.”

For a moment he was too stunned to say anything, but she didn’t seem to have that problem. Nope, not Tinkerbelle.

“I don’t think he knew what he was doing either,” she said, scrunching her face up in thought before she admitted, “Granted, he was the only one that I’d ever been with, but I don’t think sex is supposed to be boring. I’m also pretty sure that I should have felt *something*,” she said so matter-of-factly that he knew that she wasn’t being a vindictive ex-girlfriend, eager to trash her ex.

“I.....,” he started to say, but his words trailed off as his mind latched onto all the things that he would love to do to Tinkerbelle and she would damn well feel everything that he did to her.

“I don’t think he knew how to use his fingers or tongue either, because-“

“Goodnight, Tinkerbelle,” he said, dropping his head back on her stomach and squeezing his eyes shut as he prayed that she did just that, because

he honestly didn't think that his imagination could take anymore torture tonight, not with her lying beneath him wearing one of his tee shirts and his body more than willing to show her just how good sex could be.

*_*_*_*_*

2:30 A.M.

“No, I don't want anymore,” his small, unwanted houseguest mumbled with a cute little whine as she tried to roll over on the couch and-

“Ow!” she muttered with a little whimper as she hit the floor, but she didn't make any move to get up and climb back on the couch, he noted with a sigh.

“Let's go,” he said to the drugged-out woman trying to curl up into a ball and go back to sleep on his floor even as he counted his blessings that she was sleeping.

“Comfy,” she mumbled with a little pout as he leaned over and scooped her up.

“The couch is more comfortable,” he gently explained as he placed her back on the couch and quickly tucked her in.

Once she was tucked in, he picked up the small cup of medicine that he'd placed on the coffee table and held it to her lips. “I need you to drink this,” he said softly, giving her a little shake when she started to drift off again.

“You drink it,” she mumbled irritably, blindly pushing the cup away. “I don't want it.”

“I don't need it,” he pointed out as he gently pushed a few strands of her beautiful blonde hair out of the way only to get his hand slapped away in the process.

“Neither do I,” she argued.

He sighed heavily as he crouched down next to the couch. “The hives are starting to come back.”

“No, they're not,” she argued even as she reached up and scratched the hives spreading across her neck.

Too exhausted to argue, he pinched her nose. When she opened her mouth to gasp for air, he poured the medicine in her mouth. He released her nose and covered her mouth with his hand until he was sure that she'd swallowed every last drop.

“I hate you,” she muttered the second that he removed his hand as she tried to glare at him, but the medicine was already kicking in, adding to the drowsiness from the last dose.

Knowing that her level of hatred for him had probably been elevated to a blind murderous rage, he chuckled as he tucked her in. “Goodnight, Tinkerbelle,” he said, gently running his knuckles along her chin as he stood up.

“Rot in hell, you rotten bastard,” she mumbled around a loud yawn as she turned over and curled up on her side.

He couldn’t help but chuckle as he said, “I already am, Tink.”

*_*_*_*

5:55 AM

“How are you feeling?” came the abrupt demand a split second after she managed to open her eyes.

“Um, fine?” she answered, frowning in confusion as she looked around the dimly lit apartment that definitely wasn’t hers.

“Good,” Danny said, scooping her up in his arms and heading for the door before she could sputter an ounce of outrage at being manhandled by the jerk.

By the time she managed to open her mouth to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing, he had her apartment door open. He stalked inside and dumped her ass on the couch before he turned around and stormed right back out. He slammed the door behind him, leaving her sitting on her couch, shaking her head and muttering, “Someone’s not a morning person.”

Chapter 7

“Fuck it,” he said, dropping his bag on the floor and pulling his cellphone out of his back pocket. For another minute he stood there, debating making the call that had the power to make his life a living hell.

In the end, exhaustion and the stabbing pain shooting through his shoulder and his hand, the part of his hand that he could still feel anyway, made the decision for him. Hoping that his uncle was too distracted by the coffee truck to answer his phone, he called his Uncle Jared and waited, praying that voicemail picked up.

Much like last night when he prayed that Tink would stop wiggling enticingly beneath him and put him out of his misery by falling asleep, his prayers went unanswered.

“*Are you stopping to get donuts?*” his Uncle demanded after the third ring, sounding hopeful.

“No, I-”

“*Why not, you cheap bastard?*” Uncle Jared demanded, cutting him off and making him shake his head in disgust.

“Because I’m not coming in today,” he snapped before his uncle could break out into a thirty-minute rant about how all his nephews were nothing more than insensitive cheap bastards.

There was a heavy pause before his uncle asked, “*Are you sick?*”

“No,” he said, biting back a curse as he closed his useless hand in a fist, determined to get through this phone conversation without losing his temper.

Another pause.

“*If you’re not sick then why aren’t you coming into work?*” his Uncle demanded, clearly suspicious and most likely pulling out his personal cell phone at that very moment to send a group text to everyone in the family, putting them on alert.

“Because I spent the night with a woman and I’m exhausted,” Danny said, playing with the truth in order to save himself from an army of Bradfords descending on him to make sure that he wasn’t at death’s door.

There was another heavy pause before his uncle cleared his throat, clearly surprised. “*You spent the night with a woman?*” he asked, trying to hide

his relief, but he did a piss poor job that had Danny feeling guilty about lying to his uncle.

“Yeah,” he said, dropping his head back and sighing, wishing that he didn’t have to resort to doing this, but he was exhausted and needed some sleep and he wouldn’t get that if his uncle thought even for a second that he was sick or hurt.

“*Oh, well, ummmm, alright then. Just, umm, don’t make a habit out of this,*” his uncle said, stumbling over his words and sounding relieved instead of pissed, which only confirmed his suspicion that his family was still terrified that something bad was going to happen to him.

“I won’t,” he promised, because if there was one thing that he knew for certain, it was that he would never have the chance to hold a woman like Tinkerbelle in his arms again.

*_*_*_*

“This is not fucking happening,” Danny said, grabbing the pillow off his head and throwing it against the wall as the pounding on his apartment door continued. He looked at his alarm clock and muttered a dark curse.

Only an hour had passed since he’d called his uncle. He’d thought he’d have more time before he was forced to deal with one of his well-meaning relatives. Apparently he’d underestimated their level of concern as well as his ability to bullshit his uncle. That belief was confirmed less than thirty seconds later when the pounding suddenly stopped. He didn’t bother rolling out of bed. There was no point.

“You lying bastard,” Uncle Jared muttered, sighing heavily as he stepped in the room and leaned back against the wall, his worried gaze moving over him, pausing on his shoulder and hand before his uncle shot him a questioning look.

Danny returned his sigh as he threw his arm across his eyes. “What gave me away?”

“The fact that you’re a recluse,” the annoyingly familiar voice announced, forcing Danny to move his arm and open his eyes in time to see his brother walk into the room.

His gaze shifted from Aidan’s face, noting the poorly concealed concern to the black backpack thrown over his shoulder and muttered a curse. “I don’t need your help, Aidan,” he snapped, wishing that he’d just sucked it up

like all those other times and went to work to avoid bullshit like this.

“You want to tell me what happened to that shoulder and your hand?” Aidan said, sitting on the bed next to him as he placed his bag carefully on the floor by his feet.

“Not really, no,” Danny said, grinding his teeth against the sharp pain as his brother reached over and gently traced his fingers around the grotesque hive marring his shoulder and part of his upper arm.

After a minute of probing, Aidan sighed heavily and reached for his bag. “Zoe’s cooking?”

He looked up in time to catch his uncle’s wince. Somewhat horrified that his brother was able to identify the source of the hive or whatever it was with just a look, he nodded mutely.

With a grumbled curse and a sigh, Aidan opened his bag and pulled out a small vile holding a shimmering gold liquid and a hypodermic needle. “Her cooking usually isn’t dangerous unless it’s been exposed to air for more than two hours. Then,” Aidan shrugged, gesturing towards Danny’s shoulder with a tilt of his chin, “this happens.”

“What exactly is ‘this’?” he asked, looking down at the hive-like thing covering his shoulder.

“It’s a cross between a bacterial infection and an allergic reaction,” Aidan absently explained as he carefully measured out the medicine. “We’ve tried to hit this from both sides, but we’ve found that it takes a combination of antihistamines, penicillin and a vaccination or two to kill it.”

He felt his brows arch as he asked, “Vaccinations?”

Aidan shook his head sadly as he cleaned a spot with alcohol just above the hive. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

No, he supposed he really didn’t.

“The good news is,” Aidan said, pausing as he injected the medicine into Danny’s shoulder, “that you should be immune to Zoe’s cooking now.”

“I wouldn’t chance it though,” his uncle said, sounding thoughtful.

“Neither would I,” Aidan murmured as he pulled the needle free. “But if it accidentally comes in contact with your skin again, your body should be able to fight the infection on its own the next time.”

Deciding that informing them that this time hadn’t been an accident

would only bite him in the ass later, he opened his mouth to....to.....he couldn't remember what he'd meant to say when a loud yawn broke free and his eyelids suddenly felt like they weighed a hundred pounds.

“Did anyone else come in contact with the substance?” Aidan asked, as Danny struggled against the waves of exhaustion pulling him down.

“Tink.....Tinkerbelle.....,” he managed to get out before everything slipped away, leaving him to dream about beautiful green eyes that would no doubt haunt him for the rest of his life.

*_*_*_*

“Who the hell is Tinkerbelle?” Aidan asked with a frown as he checked Danny's pulse.

“My guess would be the cute little neighbor loving across the hall that he's been tormenting for the past two months,” Jared said with a satisfied sigh and a grin as he pushed away from the wall.

Aidan shook his head with a good natured laugh as he stood and pulled the covers up, tucking his older brother in and reminding Jared of all those times he'd seen Danny look after his younger brothers and sister. Before Danny had run off to join the Marines he'd been a great big brother, kind and loyal, but he'd also been.....

Conceited and arrogant.

He loved Danny, had always had a soft spot for the kid, but he'd never been blind to the kid's faults. Things had always come easily to Danny, too easily, girls, grades, friends...life and it had led him to believe that it would always be that way. Danny had never had to work at anything in his life, never had to try. Things had come too easily to him, until that fateful night when he'd raided his father's fridge and drank himself into oblivion.

Watching Danny's downfall had been difficult, but even then he'd known that it was for the best. The kid had always had a game plan for his life, college, med school, a partnership at his father's practice and eventually the perfect family. Every time Danny had talked about the future his parents had nodded approvingly while the rest of the family had simply accepted it as Danny's due, everyone but him.

Jared had never said anything, but he'd never been able to picture Danny as a doctor. His younger brother Aidan? Absolutely, but never Danny. Danny needed something more in life, something challenging, something that

allowed him to grow up and figure his shit out. The Marines had given that to Danny and more.

When he'd discovered that Danny had run off and joined the Marines he'd been scared shitless right along with the rest of his family. They hadn't been able to drive to Alabama fast enough, terrified that something was going to happen to the kid before they managed to kick his ass for scaring the shit out of them. Once they'd made their way onto the base they'd been prepared to drag him home and smack him around a little, but everything changed when they'd spotted Danny, covered in mud, his hair shorn off and that cocky expression on his face finally gone as his CO got in his face and tore him a new one.

They'd stood near a row of Humvees, waiting for Danny to talk back, to mouth off, to walk away and give up as the officer screamed in his face, but to their surprise, Danny took it. When the officer ordered him to drop to the ground and give him a hundred pushups, he'd done it without hesitation. By the time Danny got back in line, looking alone and suddenly terrified, they were turning around and walking away. Ethan had remained for another minute, watching as his eldest son was shoved back to the ground and forced to knock out another hundred pushups. Walking away from him was probably one of the hardest things that they'd ever done, but it had also been for the best. The Marines had made a man out of Danny. They'd shown him the real world and taught him the value of work, dedication and what it meant to be a good man.

"Is this the woman that Trevor and Jason think he's going to marry?" his nephew asked with that long-suffering expression that all the younger men in his family wore until the Bradford curse hit them and knocked them on their asses.

"Only one way to find out," Jared said, already heading for the door, more than curious about his future niece.

Chapter 8

“No, I’ll definitely be in tomorrow,” Jodi said, struggling to ignore the constant itching that only seemed to be getting worse with every passing minute.

“*Do you want me to double check the supplies for the kid’s craft group?*” Jenna, a volunteer who was covering for her at the library, asked as Jodi shifted the phone to her other ear so that she could bend down and take a peek in the oven to make sure the cookies were baking evenly.

“We should have everything but the glitter. Dan is supposed to drop that off along with the glue tomorrow so we’ll be all set by Thursday morning. Besides,” she said, pausing to shut off the oven timer and don a pair of sturdy oven mittens, quickly pulling out the hot cookie sheets from the oven and replacing them with the pans she’d had sitting on the kitchen table, “we’re shutting the library down for the summer. I’d rather use up everything that we already have so that we don’t have to worry about finding a place to store it.”

“*That’s what I figured,*” Jenna said, as Jodi carefully placed the hot pans on the counter to cool.

“Could you please tell Mr. Jennings that I’m working from home today,” she asked, once again thankful that she had a job that allowed her to work from home when needed, and today she definitely needed to work from home.

Actually, what she really needed to do was go to the hospital and have these frightening hives or boils or whatever they were looked at, but at the moment she didn’t have health insurance. Then again, if it got any worse she wasn’t going to have much of a choice in the matter. She’d have to suck it up, go down to the walk-in clinic and agree to a payment plan that she couldn’t afford, which of course was the reason why she’d been cooking ever since the jerk across the hallway had dropped her off, she mused as she looked around the kitchen overrun with cakes, brownies, cookies, breads, and casseroles.

Her refrigerator was already overflowing with food and she had absolutely no idea what she was going to do with all of it. She’d tried calling the guys, hoping they’d come relieve her of some of this food, but for some strange reason none of them were answering their phones. She’d briefly considered packing all the food in the car and bringing it down to the police station, but she’d quickly dismissed that idea. She really wasn’t in the mood to explain why

she looked like she had the plague.

“He already knows and he said that was fine. I hope you feel better, Jodi.”

“Thank you, Jenna. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She hoped she would at least. But as she hung up the phone and contemplated jumping under a hot shower, again, she wasn’t so sure. Trying to ignore the mindless need to itch every last square inch of her body, she picked up her spatula and began the task of removing the cookies when there was a knock at the front door.

Sighing with relief, and hoping that she could talk whoever it was at the door into running to the pharmacy and buy her some calamine lotion, she quickly headed to the door and opened it, only to frown in confusion when she met the curious gazes of two incredibly handsome men. The youngest one looked down at her, looking a little lost while the older man, an incredibly handsome older man that looked vaguely familiar, grinned hugely down at her.

“Tinkerbelle?” the younger man said, sounding unsure as she turned to glare up at him.

She opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind when both men tilted their heads, sniffed the air and, she was pretty sure, groaned in ecstasy.

“God, something smells good,” the younger man said with a wistful smile that may have distracted her from his Tinkerbelle comment.

“Are we interrupting something?” the older man asked, sharing a look with the younger man that she couldn’t quite interpret.

“No,” she said, shaking her head as she crossed her arms in a desperate attempt to keep from scratching. “I just felt like cooking.”

“I see,” the older man said, his expression suddenly smug. “You enjoy cooking?”

“Yes,” she said, eying the two men standing in front of her. “Umm, can I help you?”

“Actually,” the younger man said, gesturing to the things covering her arms, neck and face, “we came here to help you. My name is Dr. Aidan Bradford. My brother told me that you had a reaction to a substance that you came in contact with last night.”

“Your brother?” she asked, eyes narrowing as she looked the younger man over and noted the similarities between him and her tormentor living across the hallway from her.

“Yes, he’s my brother,” Aidan said with a long-suffering sigh that had her biting back a smile and instantly liking the large man. “He’s also the one who told me that you might need some medical attention,” he explained with a charming smile that had her stepping back and gesturing for the men to come in.

With a nod and a smile, the men stepped into her apartment and followed her into the kitchen, just in time it seemed. The oven timer chimed in demand as she hurried across the kitchen and grabbed her oven mitts. She managed to shut the timer off and pull the cookies out of the oven before they burned. As she set them on the counter she caught her unexpected guests’ expressions.

Looking as though they were lost in a dream, they slowly looked around the kitchen, taking in every cookie, brownie and delicious treat that she’d spent the last seven hours cooking and.....

Was that a whimper?

Yup, definitely a whimper, she decided, biting back another smile as she gestured to the food around them. “Are you hungry?”

“Always,” the men said in unison, looking deadly serious as they continued to gaze around them.

“Help yourselves,” she said, gesturing to the food.

“Bless you,” Aidan said, reaching for a brownie only to come up empty handed when the large plate suddenly disappeared.

“You should really be looking her over,” the older man said around a large brownie as he backed away, plate of brownies lovingly cradled in his arms.

“Greedy bastard,” Aidan muttered as he, reluctantly, turned his attention away from the brownies and looked at her. “Can I see your arm?” he asked, looking close to pouting over the brownies, she assumed since he couldn’t stop himself from sending the plate in the other man’s arms a wistful glance.

“*Oh, God, these are so damn good,*” the older man groaned, taking another large bite.

Pleased that he was enjoying the brownie, a recipe she’d created a few years ago, she pulled up her sleeve and tried not to cringe as she showed the incredibly handsome doctor the hive thingies covering her arms. With a frown, he shifted his attention from the brownies to her arm. He gently traced the outer edge of one hive with the tips of his fingers.

“You had prolonged exposure,” he said, sighing heavily as he pulled the backpack off his shoulder and started rummaging through it.

“Is it contagious?” she whispered, throwing the food around them a nervous glance and calling herself all kinds of stupid for not considering that before she offered them any food.

“No,” Aidan said with an unconcerned shake of his head as he searched through his bag. “Tell me, did you take anything after you were exposed?”

“Benadryl,” she answered, looking down at the things on her arm with a frown, wondering if she was going to need to have them surgically removed.

“Are you allergic to anything?” he asked, pulling out a small vial of medicine.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I just-*Ouch!*” she nearly shouted when he took her by surprise and jammed a needle in her bicep.

“Sorry about that, but I needed your muscles completely loose. The medicine seems to work faster if your muscles aren’t constricted as they would be if.....are you okay?” he asked, his words trailing off as he studied her, looking concerned and probably for good reason, she mused as she felt the full force of the medicine work its way through her system.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said, nodding to herself as she looked around the kitchen and wondered why she hadn’t baked anything with jelly. God, she loved jelly.....

*_*_*_*

“Help!” the scream tore him from a heavy sleep. The second scream for help had him throwing his legs over the bed. The third had him muttering a curse and racing to the door as he registered the sound of his little brother screaming for help.

“Danny!” Aidan yelled just as he stumbled to a stop in his living room. “Help us, you bastard!” Aidan demanded as Danny stood there frozen, trying to make sense of the scene before him.

His Uncle Jared was on the floor, his arms wrapped around Tinkerbelle who was squirming wildly in an attempt to get to the front door while his brother wrestled with her legs, struggling to get her to stop kicking their uncle. Tinkerbelle didn’t seem all that concerned with having two large men trying to restrain her. In fact, she didn’t really seem to notice them at all.

But, she did notice him.

As soon as she spotted him she stopped struggling, propped her head up on her hands, sighed dramatically and said, “I need to run to the store and get some jelly.”

It was at that moment when he realized that he was in for one hell of a night.

*_*_*_*_*

“But-”

“No,” he said firmly, rubbing the back of his neck as the small woman sitting across from him continued to glare in his direction.

“But-”

“No,” he said, gesturing to the sandwich that he’d made her. “Eat your sandwich.”

“But-”

“Just accept the fact that they cleaned you out and eat your sandwich,” he said, once again cursing his uncle to hell and back for not only ditching his ass with his drugged up neighbor, but for eating what he’d surmised was an incredibly delicious buffet made by none other than the woman that he was currently stuck with.

“If you’ll just let me go to my apartment I’ll grab some flour and sugar and-.”

“Try to run off to the store again,” he finished for her, in absolutely no mood to deal with this, not tonight.

All he wanted to do was to grab one of his books, sit in a corner and read. That was it. It’s how he spent most of his nights when he didn’t force himself to go over to one of his relative’s houses for dinner, slap a smile on his face and pretend for their sake that everything was okay. It wasn’t, but they didn’t need to know that.

“But, I need jelly to-”

“I’m not letting you near the stove,” he pointed out for probably the hundredth time that night, praying that she would just let it go and pass out so that he could salvage some of this night.

When she didn’t argue, he looked up and swore when he spotted her empty chair. Getting to his feet, he headed towards his front door only to pause, tip his head to the side and listen. With a shake of his head and a muttered

promise to kick his brother's ass, he turned around, got down on his haunches and peered beneath the table to find Tinkerbelle on her hands and knees with that delectable ass that he tried to ignore pointed in his direction. For a minute he watched her as she peered out beneath one of the chairs, no doubt trying to make sure that the coast was clear before she tried to make a run for it, but there was only one problem with that.

She was facing the wall.

It was sad really, he decided as he reached beneath the table, grabbed hold of her hips and pulled her out. She didn't struggle or put up a fight. Instead, she sighed as she turned in his arms, threw her arms around his neck and laid her head against his chest as though it was the most natural thing in the world to do.

For a moment he stood there, holding her in his arms and savoring her touch against his better judgment. He should put her down and put some distance between them. He didn't need to hold her to keep her safe, but at the moment it felt.....necessary.

Since he came back from the war he'd felt lost, felt like something was missing, but right now, for the first time in his life, he felt whole. When she snuggled closer, he absently pressed a kiss against her forehead and headed for his room. He didn't bother turning the light on as he walked into his room. He kept his place clean and organized, a habit the Marines had made damn sure that he would remember for the rest of his life so he wasn't worried about tripping over anything.

Carefully, he laid her down in his bed and pulled the covers over her, hoping that it would be enough to help him resist the need to pull her back in his arms. It wasn't, but he still managed to step away before he did anything stupid. That is until she reached out and grabbed his hand.

"Stay with me?" she asked softly, her beautiful green eyes trapping him on the spot. He opened his mouth to refuse, only to close his eyes in defeat when she added, "Please."

Chapter 9

Oh, God.....

What the hell happened last night? she found herself wondering as she came to the realization that she had her face plastered against a very firm, very masculine chest. Deciding that she'd die of mortification later in the privacy of her apartment, she bit her lip, squeezed her eyes shut and slowly shifted until she found herself turned around, facing away from what she now realized was a slumbering Danny Bradford.

Swallowing, she reached up and placed her hands on the arm trapping her and tried to push it away when she suddenly found herself pulled back against him. He shifted in his sleep, somehow managing to pull her closer as he placed his hand against her stomach, holding her against him.

This was definitely an awkward situation, she had to admit, and one that she had absolutely no experience in dealing with. When Jerry used to spend the night, he'd hogged the bed and would try to spoon her, but it was always so uncomfortable for both of them that he usually gave up after a minute and turned over, shoving her aside in the process. Not that she ever complained. Well, except for the way he hogged the bed and ignored her. She had actually been relieved that she didn't have to spend the night in his arms.

Moments like this when she looked back on the way things had been with Jerry she felt foolish. There had been so many signs that he hadn't been right for her, that he'd never loved her and to be honest, she hadn't loved him or liked him all that much. He could be rude, condescending and dismissive and if she'd been thinking at the time, she would have realized why she'd been with him.

Because no one else had wanted her.

They all saw her as a little sister, someone cute and sweet to spend time with when they were feeling homesick or their girlfriends were busy. They didn't see her as a woman, as someone worthy of spending time with, someone worth the risk of losing their heart. Jerry certainly hadn't wanted her. The only thing that he'd wanted from her was her money and what she could do to help his career. He'd used her, made her feel worthless, and when he was done with her, he'd made damn sure that she knew that he'd never really wanted her.

No one wanted her.

There really was nothing like an extra large helping of self-pity to start the day, she thought with disgust as she made another attempt to push the arm holding her away. Wow, this thing was huge, she mused, biting her lower lip as she tried to pick it up again only to give up with a grunt when that manacle he had the nerve to call an arm tightened around her.

The man that had professed to love her more than anything hadn't been able to stand touching her and the one that she'd been contemplating killing, not that she would ever admit it in a court of law, couldn't seem to let her go. Then again, he probably didn't realize who was in his arms, which would explain why he was holding her like he never wanted to let her go and why that frighteningly large appendage between his legs was pressing rather insistently against her backside....*and* part of her back.

That really couldn't be normal, she thought, struggling against the urge to wiggle against it to get a better idea of just how big he was, but that kind of seemed rude. If she had to venture a guess, she would have to say that he was a hell of a lot bigger than Jerry. She frowned at that thought and sighed. A roll of lifesavers was bigger than Jerry so that really wasn't saying all that much.

She really should be getting up, but she couldn't figure out how to do it without it turning awkward. Then again, she really didn't think there was a way to get out of this bed or this apartment without things getting a bit awkward. With that in mind, she grabbed hold of his arm, opened her mouth to wake him up and gasped when she registered the feel of firm, warm lips pressing against the back of her neck.

"Go back to sleep, Tinkerbelle," Danny said sleepily, making her realize something very important.

Danny Bradford, who was still pressing the sweetest kisses against the back of her neck, knew who he was sharing a bed with. Which meant.....

Okay, she had absolutely no idea what that meant, because she couldn't exactly think straight with that battering-ram digging into her back and those warm lips pressing against her neck, sending delicious tremors up and down her spine. She'd never been in a situation like this one, where a man seemed more than happy to have her in his arms. Usually when a man pulled her in his arms and kissed her, his expression turned horrified when he realized that kissing her was like kissing his baby sister.

Not really a flattering comparison, but one that she was used to nonetheless.

“Ummm, what exactly happened last night?” she found herself asking, proud that she sounded unaffected by his touch, at least in her mind she did.

“My asshole brother gave you medicine,” he said, accompanying the words with another press of his lips.

“Oh,” she mumbled, remembering little details from the night before. With a frown she looked down at her arm and sagged with relief. The hives or whatever they were, were gone. Left in its place were pink streaks covering almost every inch of exposed skin, but she was surprisingly okay with that. A sudden thought had her trying to sit up, but the arm locked around her waist kept her in place. “I gotta get to my apartment and put the food away!” she explained, reaching down to grab his arm and push it away even as common sense kicked in and she realized that whatever had been left out was probably ruined by now.

Another kiss. “It’s all gone, Tinkerbelle.”

“That’s not my name,” she said absently with a frown, wondering how all that food could have disappeared in one night. “Did you throw it away?” she asked, hating the idea of wasting all that food.

“No,” Danny said with another kiss, making her wonder if he was even aware of what he was doing. “My brother and uncle consoled themselves with all that food after you kicked their asses,” he said, chuckling and she would swear to her dying day that she could actually feel him smiling against her skin.

“I kicked their asses?” she asked, sure that she’d misheard him about both counts, because there was no way humanly possible for two men to eat all that food she’d cooked in one night.

“Yes, you did,” he murmured, adjusting his hold on her as he shifted behind her to bring her body flush against his.

She opened her mouth, not exactly sure what to say to get her out of this situation when Danny cut her off with another one of those kisses that she was secretly starting to like and a murmured, “Go back to sleep, Tinkerbelle. You were up most of the night.”

It wasn’t until he’d said that that she realized just how tired she was. She hadn’t gotten a good night sleep in months, not since Jerry had knocked her world off its axis. Moving in across from *him* certainly hadn’t helped, she thought with a snort as her eyelids drooped heavily.

She should be climbing out of the bed and putting some space between her and those confusing kisses of his, but she just couldn’t seem to find the

energy or the willpower to ask him to let her go, not when it felt so good to be in his arms. She'd blame it on the medicine, she decided as she stopped fighting and gave in.

*_*_*_*_*

“You look like shit.”

“Thanks,” Danny said, plopping down on the bed next to his brother as he lazily rubbed his hair dry with a towel.

“Did you get any sleep after we left?” Aidan asked, reaching over and ran his fingers over the pink streak left behind on Danny's shoulder. “This should be gone within a few days.”

“You mean after you and that bastard ran off like the cowards that you are, but only after you ate everything within sight?” he asked, tossing the towel in his brother's face.

“Yes,” Aidan said with an unconcerned shrug as he stood and walked over to the closet. “Were you able to sleep?” he asked, throwing him an assessing glance before he turned his attention to Danny's limited wardrobe.

“Yeah,” he said, not mentioning that he couldn't remember ever sleeping so well before.

Before his career had been fucked up by a sniper, he'd managed to spend the night holding a woman a few times. Although he'd enjoyed the feeling of falling asleep with a warm soft feminine body pressed up against him, it had never felt as good as it had last night with Tinkerbelle lying in his arms.

Holding her had been.....

Unbelievable.

Waking up to find her gone had left him reeling. He'd never expected to feel that way, especially not about a woman he barely knew, but the moment that he'd woken up to find himself alone he'd felt.....

Lost.

He'd felt like a part of him was missing, which was fucking ridiculous. He didn't know this woman, had never spent any real time with her, not to mention the fact that he'd spent the last two months tormenting her in the usual Bradford fashion. So why he was feeling like a part of him was missing was beyond him. Maybe he should just agree to go out with one of the women that Aidan had stashed in the other room and was trying to spring on him, to clear his

head.

Maybe a night away from his apartment with a beautiful woman that wasn't expecting anything more than a good meal and a good time was just what he needed. He looked down at the pillow that he'd shared with Tinkerbelle and nodded. Maybe it was time to move on and let go of the past and he couldn't do that by hiding in his apartment, mooning over a woman that hated his guts.

*_*_*_*

"Who says thank you with meatloaf?" she mumbled with disgust as she looked down at the plate overflowing with meatloaf, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, corn, homemade honey butter and a thick slice of chocolate cake with fudge frosting on a smaller plate in her other hand.

"Someone too broke to buy a decent thank you gift, that's who," she answered her own question with a shake of her head.

Deciding to get this over with, she opened her door and walked out into the hall, wishing that she could be anywhere else, doing anything else, but she didn't have much of a choice in the matter. Danny had taken care of her not once, but twice and she had yet to thank him properly. As embarrassed as she was about the whole situation, and God was she embarrassed, she couldn't pretend that it never happened. Her parents hadn't raised her that way.

She shifted the smaller plate onto her other arm, raised her hand to knock and nearly dropped both plates when the door suddenly opened and a vaguely familiar, handsome man with a beautiful brunette by his side stepped out into the hallway.

"How are you feeling?" he asked with a warm smile and real concern in his expression as he quickly looked her over, his gaze pausing on the light pink streaks marking her arms and face.

"I'm fine," she answered, forcing a smile as she wracked her brain trying to figure out who this man was.

"Good," he said, nodding approvingly as he stepped out into the hall with the pretty woman and made room for-

"Tinkerbelle?" Danny said, stepping into the hall with a beautiful blonde by his side, somehow making this moment more painful than that moment she had to step in front of the church and announce to a group of strangers that they'd showed up for nothing.

"Umm, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. I just wanted to thank you

for everything and, so umm, I made you dinner, but I can see that you're going out so I'll just put this back in the fridge," she rambled on, somehow managing to stop herself at the end there before she made a complete ass out of herself. With a tight smile, she turned around to-

"You made me dinner?" Danny asked, sounding surprised.

Nodding, she turned around to answer him when she suddenly found her arms empty.

"What did she make?" the vaguely familiar man asked, stepping closer to Danny, seeming to forget the beautiful brunette by his side to peer down at the dishes in Danny's hands.

"It's nothing special," she said, watching as Danny tore back the aluminum foil. "It's just a meatloaf dinner."

"Oh-"

"-God," Vaguely familiar man said, finishing for Danny as both men stared down at the plate of food, licking their lips and looking as though they were in heaven.

She looked down at the plate and sighed. She'd forgot the biscuits. "Look, I didn't mean to interrupt your night. I just wanted to say thank you for everything that you did for me. Let me just run back into my apartment and get the biscuits and I'll leave you to enjoy your evening."

When nobody spoke, she took it as her cue to make her escape back into her apartment. She rushed into her kitchen, grabbed the basket of biscuits, turned around and nearly tripped over her own two feet when she spotted Danny sitting at her kitchen table, digging into his food and groaning in rapture.

"This is so good," he said, around a large bite of meatloaf.

A little more than stunned, she opened her mouth to ask him if he wanted a biscuit when the banging started.

"You selfish bastard!" vaguely familiar man yelled as the pounding on the door continued.

"Just ignore him," Danny said, reaching for a biscuit. "He'll eventually go away."

"Alright then," she said, because really, what else was there to say?

Chapter 10

“You’re pink,” Matthew said, studying her with a tilt of his head as he placed the lollipop back in his mouth.

“And you found my stash,” she said with a mock glare and a growl as she reached up and grabbed the large bag of lollipops by his side, pausing with the bag long enough for the boy to grab a few more lollipops before she carried it around her desk to put it back in the-

“Your checkbook is unbalanced,” Matthew announced with a bored sigh as he raised his legs and swirled around so that he was facing her with his feet on her desk. “I balanced it for you,” he said with a shrug as he focused back on his lollipop.

“You went through my purse?” she asked, although really, by this point nothing this kid said or did or any of the Bradford children did for that matter, should really surprise her. She narrowed her eyes on Trevor’s youngest son as she asked, “Did you break into my computer again?”

“Yup,” he said, letting the word pop around his lollipop. “And you still haven’t told me why you’re pink.”

“That’s because you never asked,” she muttered absently as she dropped her lunch bag on the desk and the bag of lollipops back in the bottom desk drawer. She picked up her checkbook only to bite back a groan.

“You’re off by sixty-two dollars. You might want to transfer some money into that account before it bounces,” Matthew said conversationally as he leaned forward and pointed at the column that he’d fixed.

“You do realize that you’re only six, right?” she pointed out instead of admitting that there wasn’t any money to transfer. This was it, which was pretty sad because it wasn’t a hell of a lot.

She was going to have to run across the street during her lunch break and see if Mary could cut her a check a few days early. She’d planned on working through her lunch break to get things settled for the renovation, but now it looked like she was going to be spending it standing in line at City Hall and then at the bank. It also meant that she was going to have to stay an hour extra tonight to make up for the loss.

“You gonna tell me why you’re covered with pink streaks?” Matthew asked, studying her curiously.

“I’m part alien,” she said with a sigh, trying not to think about the twenty-five dollar overdraft fee that she was going to have to pay now.

“I see,” Matthew murmured thoughtfully, studying her for a moment longer before he abruptly nodded and turned around on the counter and jumped off.

“Where are you going?” she asked, looking up in time to see the precocious little boy who was secretly one of her favorites, head for the children’s section, which instantly put her on alert.

“To play with the other kids,” Matthew said with another one of those careless shrugs that made her nervous and for good reason. “And to tell them that you’re an alien out to steal their brains.”

“Wait? What?” she asked, the sad state of her finances instantly forgotten as she rushed to go after the little boy before it was too late.

*_*_*_*

“What the hell happened to your hands?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, reaching over the passenger seat of his truck and grabbing his bag.

“Don’t worry about it?” Trevor repeated with a snort of disbelief as he gestured down at his hands. “It looks like you shoved your hands in acid!”

Danny couldn’t help but chuckle at the comparison. “Close enough.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Trevor asked, keeping pace with him as he made his way to the old library that he personally believed should have been torn down years ago.

“It means that you might want to find another place to dump your wife’s science experiments,” he said, glad that Zoe wasn’t around for this conversation.

She was a really sweet woman and it would kill her to know that her food had actually harmed someone. He’d rather die than hurt her. She’d been there for him during his recovery, sat with him and held his hand when the painkillers stopped working, read to him, and kept his family from aggravating the shit out of him with their constant worrying.

“Zoe’s lasagna did this?” Trevor asked, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him to a stop so that he could look over Danny’s damaged hands.

For a moment, Danny could only stare at his cousin in horror. “That

was lasagna?”

“Yeah,” Trevor said, sighing heavily as he continued to look his hand over. “Maybe we should get you to a doctor,” he said with a worried frown, the same one that everyone in his family got whenever he so much as sneezed.

“Aidan already took care of it,” he said, pulling his arm away. “It will clear up in a few days.”

“Did anyone else get hurt?” Trevor asked, once again keeping pace with him.

“Some of it got on Jodi,” he said, deciding that using his nickname for his little neighbor would only encourage more bullshit, bullshit that he wasn’t in the mood for, not after last night.

“Shit,” Trevor muttered, looking truly upset. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine, but if I were you, I would probably give her a month or two of free rent,” he said, wondering what *he* was going to do about Tinkerbelle.

The only thing he knew for sure was that he wanted her.

He wanted to be with her, to hold her, to bury himself to the hilt inside her and stay there while the rest of the world disappeared, but he wasn’t sure that he could be what she wanted. The only relationships that he’d ever been in were in high school and those had been with teenage girls who thought a romantic night consisted of a movie, pizza and sneaking him into their room later when their parents fell asleep. Although he’d slept with more than his fair share of women over the years, he’d never dated any of them.

At least not seriously.

He’d taken plenty of women out when he had downtime, but he’d never had to put much effort into getting them into his bed. He’d never had to and most importantly, he’d never wanted to put in the effort. If he came across a woman that wasn’t interested in wasting a little time between the sheets, he’d moved on without a second thought. He hadn’t had time for anything more when he was a Marine. Now....

Now he’d really like to see if there was anything behind this overwhelming attraction and obsession he was feeling for his little neighbor. He wished his attraction to her was simple, something that he could work through by taking her to bed, but he instinctively knew that things with Tink would never be that simple. To be honest, he didn’t want simple.

He wanted something more, something better, he wanted Tinkerbelle

and he would have had her too if it hadn't been for that bastard Aidan. He'd been working up his nerve to ask Tink out, fortifying himself on his second helping of that incredible meal when the shameless bastard started to pout and whine. He'd tried to tell Tink to just ignore him, but she apparently she had a soft spot for whiny bastards.

For the rest of the meal he'd sat there, glaring at the smug bastard. Several times he'd dropped hints for the bastard to leave, but Aidan just sat there as content as could be while Danny had tried to look for an opening to ask his little neighbor out. Even that awkward moment when Aidan realized that he'd left his date in the hall hadn't been enough to get him to leave. He'd simply shrugged, grabbed the bowl of mashed potatoes and finished them off while Danny had sat there, contemplating beating the shit out of his brother with the gravy boat.

When Danny offered to do the dishes to thank Tink for the incredible meal and to buy himself a little more time, he'd thought for sure that his brother would make a run for it. He'd never expected his brother to join him at the sink with a shit-eating grin. For the next thirty minutes he'd worked beside his brother, jaw tightly clenched until the last pan was placed on the counter to dry. Tink thanked them for doing the dishes and wished them a goodnight around a yawn.

Forced to put off his plans for another night, he'd headed for the door with Aidan trailing behind him whistling a jaunty tune. Once Tink's door was shut behind them, he'd wished his brother a good night by placing him in a headlock. He'd brought the bastard to the floor where he used Aidan's shirt to secure his hands behind his back and then dragged the whiny bastard down the hall and shoved him inside the maintenance closet. As he'd walked away he'd tried to figure out a game plan to get Tink to take a chance on him, but so far nothing.

"We're going to have to replace these doors," Trevor said when they reached the large, thick doors that made up the entrance to the old library.

Danny had a feeling the City Council wasn't going to agree to that, especially since the doors were probably the original doors, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he grabbed hold of one of the dull door handles and tried not to cringe when the door slowly swung open on rusty latches, emitting a high pitched noise that was barely noticeable over the sounds of children screaming.

"What the hell....." Trevor mumbled at his side as they tried to make

sense out of what they were seeing.

The large front room where he remembered Mrs. Pattinson, the old librarian who used to smell of butterscotch and dusty books used to reside, was filled with screaming children covered with what appeared to be glue and glitter. Frowning, he watched as the horde of screaming children clambered to get to the desk where-

“Oh, shit,” Trevor muttered just loud enough for him to hear when they both spotted Matthew, Trevor’s youngest son, sitting on the checkout desk with several large bottles of paste on one side and a pile of brown paper bags and baggies filled with cookies, brownies and cupcakes on the other.

While the rest of the kids were flipping out, fighting over small canisters of glitter, Matthew sat there, calmly eating what appeared to be a rather delicious looking sandwich. Danny’s attention shifted to a closed door where he could just barely make out the pounding and the sounds of women demanding that someone open the door. When Matthew spotted them standing there probably looking a little confused and horrified, he took another bite of his sandwich and gestured absently over his shoulder.

Almost too afraid to look, but unable to help himself, he looked past his cousin’s frightening child and nearly swallowed his tongue when he spotted that delectable ass that he’d been fantasizing about for the past two nights wiggling enticingly. This was definitely a pleasant surprise finding her here. He may have groaned. He definitely licked his lips as he watched Tink try to escape the clutches of two seven-year-old girls by climbing on top of a cabinet. Unfortunately for her, she was too short to pull it off and fortunately for him, he now had his game plan solidly in place.

Grinning hugely, and ignoring his cousin’s impending nervous breakdown, he sauntered over to the front desk to put his game plan into action.

Chapter 11

“Oh, damn,” Jodi muttered, trying to find purchase on the old metal cabinet, but there wasn’t any to be found.

“Alien!” one of the girls currently trying to pull her down so that they could douse her with more paste and glitter, screamed somewhat hysterically.

“Girls,” Jodi said, licking her lips nervously as she tried to pull herself up, but the small hands clasped around her ankles and the fact that she lacked any real upper body strength prevented her from doing that. “Matthew was only kidding,” she said, forcing a smile and trying to sound as nonthreatening as possible.

“We need more glitter!” she heard one of them yell as the little nails dug into her skin, trying to yank her back down so that they could dump more paste and glitter on her in an attempt to destroy her powers, the powers that Matthew claimed she had.

Man, when she got out of this she was going to-

Scream her head off as two large hands cupped her bottom and pushed her up, giving her no choice but to scramble into a sitting position on top of the metal cabinet. As soon as her butt hit the top of the cabinet she pulled her legs up, a tad bit concerned that the little monsters hell bent on destroying her would manage to grab hold of her legs and pull her back down. She pulled her knees up to her chest, scooted back until her back hit the wall and-

Frowned, as she looked down at the face of the obscenely handsome man, who up until two days ago she’d considered risking becoming Big Bertha’s bitch in order to wipe the smug smile that he was currently flashing her off his face, and wondered what he was doing here.

“So, here’s what I’m thinking,” Danny lazily began, that smug smile of his becoming increasingly sexier with every syllable that left his mouth and distracting her a bit from what he was saying, “I’ll pick you up at seven, we’ll grab a bite to eat and then catch a movie afterwards.”

She blinked, sure that she’d misheard him. He couldn’t have possibly just asked her out on a date.

“Umm, I’m sorry, what?” she asked, shifting so that she could glance down and immediately regretting it when she saw how high off the floor she was. She moved back until her back was once again touching the wall.

That killer smile of his became knowing as he said, "I'd like to take you out tonight."

"I see," she said, simply to say something while her mind processed what he'd said and when it did, she said, "Oh, um, no thanks," and moved to climb off the cabinet only to remember that she was afraid of heights and that there was currently an army of six and seven year olds waiting to attack her.

"Why not?" he asked, leaning back against her desk, looking unfazed by her rejection.

Instead of answering him, she asked, "Do you think you could help me down?"

"No," he said, his lips twitching with amusement as he studied her.

"No?" she repeated, swallowing back a curse when she risked another peek over the edge only to find a small group of angry looking six and seven year olds glaring up at her, armed with paste and bowls of glitter. "Umm, why not?" she asked, moving back a safe distance from the edge and those rather frightening children.

"Why won't you go out with me?" Danny returned calmly.

Because she wasn't looking for another friend, another guy to look at her like a kid sister, and she sure as hell didn't want to go through the motions of a date only to get rejected at the end with a barely-there kiss on the cheek and a few complimentary words about how sweet she was. She especially didn't want to go through that with *him*.

She knew that it was foolish, but after falling asleep in his arms the other night, she couldn't stomach the idea of him looking down at her like she was the sweet baby sister that he'd never had and he would. There was just something about her, she didn't know if it was her size, her looks, the way she smiled or spoke, but something about her made men view her as nothing more than a kid sister. She didn't want Danny to see her like that, not when it meant that he'd start viewing the other night with horror.

He'd held her all night, caressed her stomach, constantly kissed her and had refused to let her go. If she went out with him the illusion that a handsome man wanted her would be ruined. Within minutes of the date he'd start looking at her funny and start to feel uncomfortable, but he wouldn't know why until the end of the date when he walked her to the door and stared down into her eyes. Then the realization would hit him and that would end any fantasy that an

incredibly handsome man wanted her.

“I can see that I’m going to have to do this another way,” Danny murmured and before she could ask him what he was talking about, he was back in front of the cabinet and pulling her off.

“What are you doing? Let me go!” she said rather hysterically as he pulled her down into his arms, forcing her to wrap her arms around his neck in a desperate attempt to stay there when small hands made a grab for her.

“Anything you want, Tink,” he said as he walked over to the checkout desk and plopped her down on the high counter right next to Matthew who was-

“Is that my lunch?” she asked, frowning as Matthew popped what looked like the rest of her double fudge, buttercream frosting brownie in his mouth with a shrug.

Danny sighed, as he gently cupped her chin and forced her to look back at him. “I’m going to need you to focus here, Tink.”

“That’s not my name,” she murmured absently as she peered past him and what she saw had her swallowing nervously and trying to shift back on the counter, but Danny wasn’t having that.

“Have dinner with me tonight,” he said, loosely wrapping his arms around her hips as he stepped closer, forcing her to spread her legs to accommodate the move.

“I can’t,” she said, gasping in horror when tiny hands suddenly closed around her ankles and tried to drag her away. Danny’s large frame was the only thing that kept her from being dragged to the ground and smothered in paste and glitter. That triumphant look in his eye let her know that he knew it.

“No?” he said, cocking a brow as he moved to step back.

“Get her!” one of the normally docile children screamed excitedly as she found herself being pulled to the edge of the counter.

Refusing to be covered in white gunk for a second time that week, she wrapped her arms and legs around Danny’s retreating form and held on for dear life. He simply stood there, his arms down by his sides as he stepped away from the counter, allowing the little demons to grab hold of her. Tightening her hold around him, she snapped, “Danny!”

“Are you sure you can’t go out with me tonight?” he asked, sounding amused, the bastard!

“Yes!”

“Well, then,” he said, sighing heavily as he grabbed her hips and-

“Wait!” she screamed a bit desperately when she realized that he was truly going to hand her over to the demons still pawing at her.

“Yes?” he inquired politely as she tightened her hold around him, her face buried in his neck as she struggled to come up with a way to get out of this without needing to scour glitter off her body for the next two months. When it came to her, she quickly looked up and peered over Danny’s shoulder only to find Trevor standing next to Matthew, both males snacking on Matthew’s loot as they openly watched them.

“Can I get a little help here?” she asked her landlord, who seemed to be enjoying the show.

Taking a big bite out of a chocolate cupcake, he shook his head and gestured for her to get on with it.

Bastard!

Making a mental note to tattletale on the bastard later to his wife, she shifted her gaze to the playroom’s barricaded double doors where the pounding and threats of spankings were louder than ever, and sighed. It looked like she was on her own.

Resting her head against his chest, she tightened her grip around him and said, “I can’t.”

“I understand,” Danny said, taking her by surprise as he walked back to the checkout desk and carefully placed her on the edge of the counter. As he pulled away, he gave her a boyish smile that had her biting her lower lip, wondering if maybe-

“Aliens can only be defeated with Elmer’s glue, kids, not paste,” he explained with a wink as he stepped back and away and-

“Get her!”

“Wait! No, wait!” she yelled, rushing to pull her legs up so that she could jump over the desk and make a run for it. She’d barely managed to pull her right leg up when they grabbed her and with one surprisingly hard pull, yanked her off the counter. She squeezed her eyes shut, biting back a scream as she waited for her back and bottom to make contact with the old cracked marble floor beneath her only to release a startled gasp when a pair of strong arms caught her, saving her from a bruised bottom.

Gasping, she opened her eyes to find herself staring into a set of intense emerald green eyes. She opened her mouth to thank him, but never got the chance. Before she knew what was happening, he was leaning down and kissing her. Warm firm lips moved over hers, enticingly sweet and incredibly sexy, making her lose her mind and forget where she was, and that she was surrounded by a bevy of demonic children determined to destroy her. Lost in sensation, a soft moan escaped her as she parted her lips and-

Blinked her eyes open with a soft grunt as she suddenly found herself sitting on the marble floor, staring as Danny stood up, trying to make sense of what had just happened when Danny said, "She's all yours," and stepped back.

It took a few seconds for those three words to register in her mind and when they did, it was too late.

The children had found the Elmer's glue.

*_*_*_*

"Why did you feel it was necessary to sic those kids on her?" Trevor asked as they paused in front of a set of bookshelves built into the wall.

"I was bored," Matthew said with a shrug as he stepped back so that his father could measure the shelves while Danny inspected them.

More dry rot, he noted with a snort of disgust. The entire library was going to have to be gutted at this rate.

Trevor sighed heavily as he moved his fingers aside so that his son could read the measurements and write it down. "What did we talk about?" he asked Matthew, sounding patient for a man who not twenty minutes ago was forced to sweet talk two dozen angry mothers out of calling his wife.....and the National Guard.

"That there are more constructive ways to deal with boredom than terrifying others for my own enjoyment," Matthew spouted off, sounding completely bored and making Danny wonder just how many times Trevor had been forced to drill it into the kid's head. It was actually kind of frightening, and if he wasn't still thinking about those soft lips giving beneath his, he'd probably be a little concerned for his cousin.

"Then why did you do it?" he found himself asking the kid, deciding that now probably wasn't the best time to be fantasizing about Tinkerbelle.

Matthew shrugged as he wrote down the measurements. "She wouldn't tell me why she was pink."

“And?” he asked with a frown, positive that he’d missed something.

“And I took exception to that,” Matthew said with another shrug that had Danny look up just in time to catch Trevor shooting a look heavenward. “Plus, I was hungry.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” he asked, glancing back down at the little boy that would probably one day rule the world along with his siblings.

“Because he made the rest of the children give him their snacks in exchange for the glue and glitter,” Trevor said, sounding bored as he gestured for Danny to check the molding running along the floor.

“Rotted,” Danny said with a sigh.

“Do you think the frame can be salvaged?” Trevor asked with an expression that probably matched his own at the moment.

This was not a simple renovation like the City Council had led their uncle to believe. Everything from the outside walls and masonry work to the walls and shelves inside were rotted from age, too much moisture and termites. They’d be lucky if they didn’t have to demolish the entire building and start over.

“Let’s see,” he said, placing his hand against the wall and pushed.

The horsehair plaster crumbled beneath his touch, revealing an empty space, dried mold, long abandoned wasps nests and a surprisingly sturdy frame covered in water stains and holes.

“We can save it,” Trevor said, voicing his thoughts. “But it won’t be cheap.”

“No,” Danny said, pulling his hand away and wiping it clean on his pant leg, “it won’t.”

“Your future wife isn’t going to be happy about this,” Trevor pointed out with a taunting smile.

“I’m not going to marry her,” Danny said in a bored tone, surprised that his cousin had waited this long to start the bullshit back up.

Instead of arguing with him, Trevor simply chuckled, which wasn’t exactly comforting, especially not when Matthew chose that moment to look up at him with a knowing smile and shot him a wink.

Dear God, was he the only one that found Trevor’s kids terrifying?

Chapter 12

“The exciting life of a town librarian,” she muttered absently to herself as she pulled her damp hair back into a ponytail and took inventory of the folders covering the coffee table and half her couch with a sigh that bordered on a whimper.

It was going to be a long night.

Not that she had much of a choice, not since Bradford Construction made a call to the City Council and shared the good news that the library was not only rotting from the inside out, but that it also had a mold problem. That of course had triggered a series of events that ended with the Board of Health condemning the library during her lunch break. Thirty minutes later she'd found herself covered in a crusty mixture of paste, glue and glitter and sitting outside the City Council's offices, accepting the fact that she was going to have to update her résumé.

After all the objections, demands, and limitations they'd placed on her for the library renovations she'd expected them to condemn the building and cut their losses. What she hadn't expected was a group of giddy councilmen demanding that she help design a new state of the art library. Well, maybe demanded was too harsh of a word since what they'd really done was ask her if she'd be interested in creating another proposal. She wasn't and she would have had no problem with telling them that if she hadn't been so distracted to discover that she still had a job and other things.....

Other things being Danny Bradford and that incredibly sweet, sexy kiss that had left her stunned, confused and imagining a dozen more ways to get rid of the bastard by the time the second bottle of glue was poured over her head. Truly afraid that she would put one of those ideas into action, she'd stopped on the way home, bought a half dozen pints of Ben and Jerry's for fortification and after devouring one in the parking lot, decided that it was safe to go home.

When she didn't see his truck parked in its customary spot, she grabbed her bags, stormed into the apartment house, sent a murderous glare at his door and went into her apartment where she spent the next two hours scrubbing every inch of her body until she was sure that every last speck of glitter was gone. Once that was done she threw on her old favorite t-shirt, a pair of comfy sweatpants and decided to get the proposal out of the way and give herself the

distraction that she needed. Now, as she faced a long night of paperwork, all she wanted to do was to grab another pint of ice cream, pop a movie in the DVD player and curl up on the couch and pretend that this day never happened.

Except maybe for that kiss.....

“I’m an idiot,” she declared to absolutely no one as she dropped down on the couch and grabbed the folder closest to her with an overdramatic groan, deciding that after the day she’d had that it was completely warranted.

At least it was almost over, she reminded herself as she glanced down at the notes the Council had handed her and closed her eyes in defeat as someone knocked on the door, destroying all of her hopes for a peaceful night in a matter of seconds. She started to stand up when a thought occurred to her, one that had her sitting back down, picking up her notes and deciding to ignore whoever was at the door. Whoever it was knocked again, more insistent this time, but she wasn’t answering it.

She was done.

More than done actually. As far as she was concerned the rest of the world no longer existed. The only thing that existed tonight was her couch, her television, this proposal and the ice cream in the fridge. Everything and everyone else could go-

“Open up, Jodi. I know you’re there,” Greg announced, but she simply shook her head as she said, “Go away.”

“Jodi, come on, don’t be that way,” he said with a touch of exasperation that had her shaking her head more stubbornly.

“I’m busy,” she said, spreading the notes before her on the coffee table.

“Are you still mad about the other night?” he asked, laying on the boyish charm that he’d used to get her to go out with him in the first place and then used a week later when he’d decided that she was too sweet to date.

“Uh huh,” she said, set on ignoring him as she organized the notes into some semblance of order.

“It was a busy night at work. I didn’t have time to return your text.”

“Uh huh,” she muttered, not in the mood to point out that it had been his night off or that she knew the rest of the guys had avoided her texts and calls, terrified that she was under the influence of antihistamine.

They were all cowards and she’d eventually forgive them, but not

tonight. Tonight she just wanted to bury herself in her work.

A long sigh let her know that he'd given up. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Greg," she said, shaking her head in amusement at just how quickly he gave up.

"Goodnight, Jodi," he said, not sounding all that upset that she wouldn't answer.

"I guess it was never meant to be," she said on a long drawn out sigh before laughing softly and shaking her head in amusement.

That is until he started knocking again.

Sighing in disgust and knowing that he'd give up just as quickly as the last time, she focused on the files before her and ignored him. When a minute went by and he was still knocking, she looked up and frowned. He was being rather persistent all of a sudden.

"Go away, Greg!" she groaned, wondering why tonight of all nights he was being stubborn.

Another knock came, a more stubborn knock and one that had her eyes narrowing to slits. The next knock had her tossing her file aside and getting to her feet and by the time she made it to the door she was ready to kill her best friend with her bare hands. Hands clenching with the need to do just that, she flicked the lock open, grabbed the knob and yanked the door open to-

Stare at the empty hallway.

What...

She stepped out into the hallway and looked towards the front door, expecting to see Greg. When she didn't see him or anyone for that matter, she rolled her bottom lip between her teeth and looked over her shoulder to find the other end of the hallway empty as well. Shaking her head, she turned around and went back into her apartment. She closed the door and went back to the couch wondering if she had just imag-

Another knock.

This time she didn't say anything as she turned around, stalked to the door, yanked it open and-

"That'll be \$75.80," a man wearing the famous Black Jack pizza delivery shirt said with an expectant smile and his arms piled high with pizza and the small boxes that were normally used for appetizers.

“I’m sorry, but I think you have the wrong-”

“I’ve got it,” the familiar deep voice that normally conjured up fantasies of baseball bats and a good swift kick to the balls, said, causing a completely different and unexpected reaction as it came from behind her.

A shiver tore through her even as she jumped, startled to realize that Danny was in her freaking apartment! She probably would have tripped over her own two feet and fallen on her butt if Danny hadn’t placed his hands on her hips, catching her and gently moved her aside so that he could pay the delivery guy. Stunned, she could only stand there looking from Danny to the rest of her apartment and then back again, wondering how he’d been able to sneak inside without her noticing. That of course brought up one very important question.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, reaching up and rubbing her temples in an attempt to ward off the migraine that she knew was coming.

“Keep the change,” Danny said, shutting the door with his foot as he turned around and headed towards her couch, pausing only long enough to lean down and press a swift kiss against her lips, taking her by surprise as he said, “I’m here for our date.”

By the time his words sank in, he’d already placed the food on one of the end tables and disappeared in the kitchen. Giving her head a shake and almost positive that one of them had gone insane, she followed after him only to end up jumping out of the way when he suddenly returned, carrying a six pack of Pepsi that she didn’t remember buying, pausing once again to lean down and brush his lips against her as though he had every right.

“Stop doing that!” she snapped, ignoring the way her heart leapt every time he kissed her and focusing on the fact that he’d invaded her apartment and was clearly insane.

His answering shrug wasn’t really reassuring so she focused on the more pressing issue. “Why are you in my apartment?”

“For our date,” he simply said as he picked up a really thick slice of pizza covered in cheese, meatballs and mushrooms, her favorite, and put it on a plate.

“*This isn’t a date,*” she explained tightly before adding, “Get out.”

“Yes, it is,” he said with a shrug as he handed her the plate of that incredibly delicious pizza, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten since last night thanks to a foolish decision to skip breakfast and Matthew helping himself to her

lunch. That pint of ice cream that she'd devoured really hadn't filled her up either.

"It's really not," she said walking over to the couch and forcing herself to place the plate on a stack of folders so that she could gesture for him to get the hell out of her apartment.

"It really is," he said around a bite of pizza, ignoring her rather obvious gesture as he sat on the couch and got comfortable.

Struggling with an overwhelming urge to cry or throw something at him, she rubbed her hands down her face. "Look, I'm not in the mood to play whatever game you're playing. I've got a lot of work to do tonight thanks to your boss and the Council so we--"

"Have to have our date here," he finished for her with a putout sigh and a shake of his head.

She rubbed her hands down her face, having absolutely no idea how to deal with a man this stubborn. Normally when she said no to a man, he might make another half ass attempt to get her to change her mind before he shrugged and moved on. Then again, she'd already come to the conclusion that Danny wasn't normal.

"This isn't a date," she said a bit more slowly as she once again gestured towards the door and waited, rather patiently in her opinion, for him to get off his ass and leave before she was forced to do something that would require that defense attorney that she couldn't afford.

"Yes, it is," the stubborn bastard said around another bite of pizza.

"No, it's not!"

"It really is."

"It isn't!"

He paused to take a sip of soda before he said, "It really is."

"Oh my God!" she yelled. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He blinked up at her, looking adorably innocent and further pissing her off even as she had to resist the urge to roll her eyes at him. "Nothing. Why?"

"Because you think we're on a date!"

"We are," he said, gesturing for her to sit next to him.

"No, we're not! For Christ's sake, you don't even like me!" she pointed out, the tenuous hold she'd had on her patience quickly running out.

The smoldering look that he shot her sent a warm shiver tearing through her body. It also had her eyes narrowing on him and her hand twitching to grab the can of soda out of his hand and chuck it at his head.

“I like you just fine, Tinkerbelle,” he murmured, running an appreciative gaze over her.

“Well, I don’t like you!” she snapped, because honestly, she really just couldn’t take any more of his bullshit tonight.

He frowned, looking adorably confused, which of course made her wonder how a man who had more than a foot and a hundred pounds on her could possibly look adorable. He quickly dragged her out of her musings when he asked, “Then why did you agree to go out with me?”

Oh, that was it!

“I never agreed to go out with you!” she snapped, shutting the cover on the pizza box, picking up the stack of boxes and dropping them on his lap.

He sighed heavily as he stood up, placed the boxes back on the coffee table and reached for her. Before she knew what was happening he had her in his arms and his lips were hovering a few inches above hers. His expression was tender as he gazed down at her.

“No,” he said with a slight shake of his head as he leaned down, tilting his head to the side and pressing a kiss against her cheek, “but you will.”

Chapter 13

“I hear it skips a generation.”

“That would explain it,” Trevor said conversationally as the three of them walked around the library, trying to see if any of the structure could be saved and reused in the new building.

“It would definitely explain a few things,” Jason said as he placed an orange sticker on an ornate bookshelf by the wall, marking it as reusable.

Danny ignored them as he’d been doing since they’d arrived an hour ago and focused on the job he’d been hired to do and the little librarian that seemed to be going out of her way to avoid him. That was fine with him since the marine in him was more than up for a challenge, and she was definitely a challenge, he decided as he casually tracked her every move.

“Do you want some advice?” Jason asked as he knelt down to check the molding that ran along the edge of the wall.

“No,” he said, making a few notes on his iPad as he ignored his cousins.

Trevor sighed heavily from his right. “I’m afraid that you’re going to need our expertise on the matter if you want to win over your future wife.”

Without looking up from his notes, Danny pointed out, “Jason had to kidnap Haley to get her to marry him and even then she only did it out of pity and didn’t Zoe marry you because she lost a bet?”

He ignored their outraged gasps and watched the object of his desire as she bent over to put together another box and had to bite back a groan. God, she had a great ass. A week ago he would have been able to ignore her and focus on the job, but that damn shower.....

Over the years he’d seen his fair share of naked women, and while some had left him hard and panting, he’d never reacted this way to any of them. He couldn’t stop thinking about her or just how good it had felt to run his hands over her before pain had shot through them and they’d eventually gone numb. Even after he’d lost all feeling in his hands he’d still enjoyed the experience. There was just something about watching his hands run over her smooth, soft skin that had left him mesmerized. Even the pain that came and went in his hands hadn’t been able to take away his enjoyment in touching her. The pain had kept him from showing her just how much he liked seeing his hands on her, but it hadn’t been enough to keep him from imagining more.

“We need to get this building inventoried before tomorrow,” he said, forcing his thoughts away from Tinkerbelle and all the things he would love to do to make his little neighbor light up.

Jason nodded as he looked over his notes. “I’ll go check the basement and see if they’re ready to start moving everything out.”

“I’ll start taking down the doors and everything else the Council wants to reuse,” Trevor said, giving him a pointed look before he shifted his gaze to where Tink stood, glaring down at the clipboard in her hands as she tried to pretend that he wasn’t there.

Well, he couldn’t very well allow that, now could he?

*_*_*_*_*

That cocky, glitter encouraging, parking spot stealing, pizza teasing, kissing bastard was walking towards her, *again*. All afternoon and most of the morning, he’d been doing everything within his power to drive her out of her freaking mind! Everywhere she went, he followed. Every time she looked over her shoulder, he was there, watching her with a touch of that smug grin of his that normally made her hands twitch with the need to throttle him, but now.....

Now, she had absolutely no idea what she wanted.

He was driving her out of her mind and there was nothing that she could do about it. It seemed that Danny Bradford was in charge of rebuilding the library, something that she really wished she’d known before she’d agreed to work this summer. Okay, so she didn’t have much of a choice since she needed the money to pay off the debt the asshole had left her with, but still.....

A little warning that she was going to be stuck spending the summer with the bane of her existence would have been nice, especially since he seemed intent on driving her out of her damn mind. She didn’t know what kind of game he was playing, but he was definitely playing with her. It was the only explanation that she could come up with that would explain how he’d gone from tormenting her to acting like he wanted nothing more than to strip every last inch of clothing from her body and-

What the hell was wrong with her?

She didn’t have time for him or his games. She had a job to do, an insane amount of debt that wasn’t hers to pay off and absolutely no idea how to handle a man like Danny Bradford. She was definitely in over her head here. She

knew that much at least.

“What are you doing, Tink?” her tormenter asked as he stopped beside her, looking relaxed, cocky and incredibly handsome.

Yup, definitely in over her head.

“Looking for my keys,” she said, doubling her efforts to find them.

“Do you want some help?” he drawled lazily as he leaned back against the wall.

“No, thank you,” she said, wondering when she was going to catch a break.

Five minutes later, after she'd finished searching her desk and her bag for the third time, she'd decided that today definitely was not that day. That opinion was only confirmed a minute later when she grabbed her bag, gave Danny a muttered, “Have a good night,” and headed to the front doors only to discover that sometime during her mad search for her keys it had started to rain. Well, downpour really was a much more fitting description, she decided as she stepped back inside and pulled out her phone.

Ten phone calls and twenty texts later and she was cursing all of her friends to hell and back. They were all either at work or trying to get to work and couldn't swing by and pick her up. For a moment she stared down at her phone, wondering if she should call her father and then decided against it. With the way things were going right now it would probably only take one of her father's warm smiles to get her to breakdown and admit that she wasn't doing so well. She didn't want her father to have to shoulder her responsibilities for her. He'd been through enough over the past few years without having to add her problems into the mess.

“Need a ride?” the man that she really wished she could stop thinking about asked.

She glanced outside, looking for any sign that the rain would let up soon so that she could make the five-mile walk home without the risk of drowning, but it didn't look good. As she stood there, absently watching as a trash barrel was swept down the street with the rain, she realized that she had to make a decision. She could either stay here searching for her keys and waiting for the rain to stop, call a taxi and hope that he'd accept a smile and a thank you as payment enough since she was broke, call her father, or she could accept a ride from the man that was driving her crazy.

In the end it was the library suddenly losing power and her phone dying that had her closing her eyes, sighing in defeat and accepting his offer with a mumbled, “I could definitely use a ride,” that sealed her fate.

*_*_*_*_*

“Any luck?” he asked, biting back a smile as he watched Tinkerbelle try to pick the lock.

For a minute he considered mentioning the set of keys collecting dust on his bureau that Trevor had left with him just in case someone got locked out of their apartment, but decided against it when Tink started to mutter the cutest little threats of violence to her apartment door. The way her ass swayed enticingly as she tried to pick the lock might have influenced his decision to stand there and keep his mouth shut.

“Are you sure that you don’t know how to pick a lock?” she asked, squishing her face up in concentration as she wiggled the paperclip he’d given her in the lock.

“Yes,” he lied, watching as her round bottom swayed back and forth...back and forth....

“This isn’t working,” she grumbled sourly as she stood up and propped her hands on her hips, looking like a sexy little General.

“Do you want to try the phone again?” he asked, since he knew that it wouldn’t make a damn bit of difference.

For the night, Tinkerbelle was all his and he was going to use every minute of it to help convince her to take a chance on him, despite the fact that he was an asshole. First though, he was going to have to sit back and wait for Tinkerbelle to come to the conclusion that there was nothing and no one coming to save her from her fate.

She was *his*.

“No, I’ve already left everyone about a million messages. They’ll call soon,” she said, folding her arms over her chest as she sent the front door a considering look.

“I’m sure you’re right,” he drawled, doing his best to keep a straight face.

Her expression became determined as she turned to face him. “I’m going to go see if I can get in through one of the windows,” she said, nodding to herself as though the idea was solid as she turned right back around to do just

that.

“That sounds like a good plan,” he said, not bothering to point out that it was still down pouring or that his cousin had spared no expense to make sure that all the doors and windows in this building were made out of solid construction with theft deterrent locks that should be able to hold out one determined, sexy little librarian.

Turning his back on her and going inside his apartment felt wrong, but he forced himself to do it, knowing that it was the only way to get her undivided attention for the night. If she thought for even one second that there was a possibility that she’d overlooked some other way to escape her fate, she’d be preoccupied for the rest of the night and that just wouldn’t work for him. He wanted her undivided attention tonight as he did what no other Bradford had ever done before him, at least not on purpose.

He was going to woo a woman.

Chapter 14

“Son of a bitch!”

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, she thought as she dropped her raised fist by her side and took a hesitant step back away from Danny's door. Perhaps she'd overlooked something? she wondered, glancing back at the front door as she contemplated the pros and cons of going back outside.

After a minute she came to the conclusion that standing outside in the middle of a thunderstorm probably wasn't the best idea. That left her with two choices, sit in the hallway and catch a cold or ask Danny for help and a dry towel and risk losing what was left of her sanity.

“Oh, you son of a bitch!” came Danny's shout, making the decision for her.

It took a minute, but she managed to find a rather comfy spot on the floor by her door. She drew her knees up to her chest, wrapped her trembling arms around them as she ignored the squishy sounds her clothes made against the rough carpet and tried to get comfortable as she closed her eyes. It had been a long day, a very long day, and all she wanted to do was go inside her warm, dry apartment, soak in a hot bath, pull on her favorite tee shirt, watch a movie and get good and fat on a few pints of Ben and Jerry's, but it didn't look as though that was going to happen any time soon.

So instead, she resigned herself to sitting there in the hall, wondering how this day could possibly get any worse. Her answer came from an unexpected source, letting her know that yes, yes her day could get much worse than being stranded with an incredibly sexy man.

A lot worse.....

*_*_*_*

Danny glared down at the burnt mess simmering in the kitchen sink, wondering exactly where he'd gone wrong.

“So much for a romantic dinner,” he said, sighing in disgust as he returned to the refrigerator and grabbed a pound of butter and tossed it on the counter along with a loaf of bread. “Grilled cheese it is then.”

That was fine. He still had a few other cards up his sleeve. He walked into his living room and-

“Oh, shit!” he grabbed a throw pillow off the couch and proceeded to beat the flames licking at the curtains until he was left with a ruined curtain, pillow and enough damage to the wall to guarantee that he’d be spending the weekend and about five hundred bucks fixing the wall, the molding around the window and possibly the window itself.

“Fucking great,” he said, tossing the ruined pillow to the floor right beside the puddle of wax that marked the final resting place of his dreams for a romantic night.

This was a lot harder than he’d realized. Maybe he should just suck it up and take the easy way out with a nice restaurant and a-

“Please stop!” came a woman’s high-pitched scream.

Terror for Jodi had him jumping over the couch and across the room in seconds. He tore the door open, ready to tear apart whoever was attacking her only to stop abruptly when he spotted Tinkerbelle sitting across from him, unharmed and looking torn between amusement and horror as she watched as two of his cousins guaranteed their spot on another restaurant’s banned list.

“Help me!” the man wearing a Black Jack’s uniform screeched hysterically while his cousins stumbled over him while they tried to take each other down in a headlock.

Shaking his head in disgust, he walked down the hallway, grabbed the sobbing delivery man off the floor by the back of his shirt and shoved him towards the door while his cousins continued to fight over the stack of pizza boxes marked, The Monster. Their food obsession was pathetic, he thought with a disgusted sigh as he reached down and picked up the stack of pizzas. He walked back to his apartment, pausing only long enough to reach down and help his horrified neighbor to her feet and give her a gentle push towards his apartment. Once they were inside, he shut the door behind him, dropped the pizza boxes on the coffee table and announced, “Dinner is served,” with a satisfied sigh.

*_*_*_*

“You can’t ban all of us!”

“This is bullshit!”

“I wasn’t even home!”

“You made a grown man cry!” someone, probably the cop, yelled.

“When will this night end?” Jodi asked no one in particular as she

rubbed her temples.

“Probably not for a while,” Danny admitted, sounding oddly defeated as he sat there, staring at the destruction that had once been his living room.

“Probably not,” she murmured in agreement as she looked around the living room and took in the damage.

She toed the remains of his coffee table, still amazed over the amount of damage that three men fighting over pizza could do in less than a minute. And yes, she was definitely sure that the damage to Danny’s apartment had only taken a minute, because when the door burst opened she’d been looking down at Danny’s cell phone. By the time she’d looked up, the door was falling off its hinges, the coffee table was in pieces, the television was smashed, the large leather chair that had actually looked pretty comfortable was in three pieces, a window had been smashed and there were five very large, and very noticeable, holes marring Danny’s living room walls and only one minute had passed.

“I’m gonna need a rain check,” Danny said, drawing her attention away from the electrical socket hanging by its wires from the wall.

“A rain check for what?”

He sighed heavily as he stood up and held his hand out to her. “For our date.”

“Our.....*date*?” she asked slowly, wondering if he’d hit his head when his cousins tackled him.

He nodded as he reached down and took the decision out of her hand. “I’m afraid that I’m going to have to regroup,” he said, taking her hand and gently pulling her to her feet.

“Regroup.....”

“Mmmhmmm,” he murmured, entwining his fingers with hers as he raised their hands and pressed a kiss against the back of her hand. “Just a day or two to fix this.”

“A day or two,” she repeated numbly as she allowed her gaze to run over the destruction.

“Are you going to repeat everything that I say?” he asked teasingly with a sexy little smile that had her revisiting that whole brain injury idea.

“Yes,” she said, nodding as she allowed him to lead her to his apartment door. He was forced to release her hand so that he could grab the door and move

it aside so they could go into the hallway where his cousins were still arguing with the cops and the manager from Black Jack's, "And this wasn't a date."

"Yes, it was," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out-

"You stole my keys?" she demanded when he proceeded to unlock her door and open it wide for her.

"Of course I did," he said, smiling down at her.

"Wow.....," she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "And why exactly did you do that?"

"It seemed necessary at the time," he said sheepishly.

"Uh huh," she said, staring up at him as she tried to make sense of this man. After a minute she decided that it was simply impossible and gave up.

"I'm going to bed. Have a good night," she said, suddenly feeling exhausted.

"Good night, Tinkerbelle," came the response that had her shaking her head and resisting the urge to remind him that her name wasn't Tinkerbelle, but she was too tired to argue with him right now.

She walked into her room, grabbed her favorite pair of sweatpants, a tee shirt and headed to her bathroom. She tore her clothes off along the way, tossing them aside as she headed for her sanctuary. Five minutes later she was soaking in a hot bath, savoring the moist warmth seeping into her bones and the scent of lavender surrounding her as she closed her eyes, and fantasized that she lived in a world where men didn't ditch their fiancés the day before their wedding, destroy their credit, steal their life savings, humiliate them, leave them destitute and jobless and with no other choice but to move in across the hall from incredibly sexy ex-marines who went from getting a kick out of screwing with her head one day to undressing her with his eyes the next.

In this fantasy she still had her job at the museum. The promotion that Jerry had stolen behind her back was hers. Her credit was still perfect, her bank account healthy and her biggest problem was deciding between sleeping in on the weekend or spending the day reading, curled up on the couch. She'd never accepted Jerry's invitation for coffee, had seen the prick for the jerk that he really was. Things were the way that they were meant to be, should be.

But all too soon, she was forced to come back to reality. Her bath water had long since gone cold, she was exhausted and all she wanted to do was to crawl in bed and pretend that getting up at six in the morning was her choice.

Yawning, she reached over and pulled the drain as a slight shiver shook her. Freezing, she stood up and grabbed a towel, quickly drying off, eager to crawl into her warm bed.

Biting back another yawn, she got dressed and opened the bathroom door. She couldn't wait to-

“Romantic comedy or a horror flick?” the bastard lounging on her bed next to a monster size bowl of popcorn asked as she stood there, staring dumbly at him while she tried to make sense of what she was seeing.

This couldn't be happening.

It just.....couldn't.....

She closed her eyes, counted to ten and opened them only to close them again, counted to a hundred, praying that he would just take pity on her and take a hint and get out of her apartment before she opened her eyes again. Nope, still there, she realized as she opened her eyes to find him holding up two DVDs and sending her an incredibly sexy smile that had her shaking her head.

“You need to leave,” she said, ignoring his smile as she gestured for him to get his ass off her bed and get the hell out of her apartment.

He sighed heavily as he tossed the DVDs aside. “You're canceling another date.”

“Another date?” she repeated back, realizing that she was starting to sound like a parrot thanks to him.

He nodded, looking boyish as he explained, “Our third date.”

“Our third date.....,” she repeated, wondering how'd she missed the first and second date, but she didn't have to wonder for very long.

“Our first date last night when you kicked me out for work and earlier tonight when we had to call it an early night because of the.....incident,” he said with a shrug as though that horrifying experience that she'd somehow survived was no big deal.

“Those weren't dates,” she pointed out between clenched teeth. “And neither is this.”

“Wow,” he said, shaking his head as though he just couldn't believe what he was hearing, “I can't believe that you keep leading me on like this.”

“I never led you on!”

“It's really not nice leading guys on, Tinkerbelle,” he said in a chiding

tone as he climbed off the bed.

“Oh my God! Are you insane?”

“Probably,” came the unconcerned answer as he walked up to her and cupped her face in his large, warm hand and caressed her cheek with the pad of his thumb. “Now, why don’t you tell me why you’re scared of me?”

Chapter 15

“I-I’m not afraid of you,” Jodi argued, stepping away from him.

He tilted his head to the side as he considered her. “No, you’re not,” he murmured softly. “But you are afraid of what’s going on between us.”

She snorted. “There’s nothing going on between us.”

“Really?” he asked, moving closer.

“Really,” she said firmly and he would have believed her except he didn’t want to. He refused to believe this insane attraction that he was feeling was one sided.

“Then prove it,” he said, moving closer until there were only a few inches separating them.

“I don’t need to prove anything,” she said on a tired sigh as she pushed past him and went to the bed.

“Then why are you running away?” he asked, watching as she picked up the large bowl of popcorn and set it on the nightstand.

“I’m not running away,” she said, sighing heavily as she pulled back the covers and climbed in.

“Then what are you doing?”

“I’m going to bed,” she said, and with that she turned over and curled up.

“You’re afraid of men,” he said, sitting on the bed by her side.

“No,” she said, shifting away from him, “I’m not.”

“Uh huh,” he said, not believing her as he reached over and gently swept her long hair back onto her pillow.

“Yeah, that would explain why most of my friends are guys,” she drawled, reaching back to slap his hand away.

“I see,” he said, because he did. It all made sense now, the comments that she’d made while drugged out on Benadryl, her reaction to him and her choice in friends. “You’re afraid of sex,” he blurted out before common sense could take over and help him keep his mouth shut.

“I’m not afraid of sex!” she snapped, sitting up to glare at him.

“Look, I’m sor-”

“I’m just not into sex, okay? Are you happy now?” she demanded angrily and it was at that point that he decided that he’d already fucked up past the point of redemption so what was one more fuck up?

“You have absolutely no idea what you’re into, because you were with a man who had absolutely no idea how to please a woman in bed,” he snapped right back.

Her mouth moved, but no sound came out as she registered his words and he realized something rather important. She didn’t remember what she’d said to him the other night. Well, if she wasn’t pissed at him before, she definitely was now. So, there really was no point in apologizing at this point, not when he’d ruined any chance he’d had with her. Not that he’d ever really had a chance with her, he realized.

“Look, men just aren’t attracted to me. They go out on one date with me and by the time the appetizers arrive they start looking at me like I’m the sweet little sister that they never had, but suddenly realize that they want. There’s never going to be anything between us, because sooner or later you’re going to realize just like every other guy before you that I’m just not the kind of girl that drives a man crazy.”

He blinked down at her.....just blinked, because really what was there to say?

Except maybe.....

“You’re an idiot.”

*_*_*_*

“What the hell?” Danny demanded just as she nailed him in face with the pillow.

“I’m an idiot?” she demanded, pulling the pillow back and with another swing, nailed him in the face again before he managed to grab the pillow from her.

“I’m the idiot?” he asked, tossing the pillow aside.

“Yes!” she hissed, grabbing another pillow and-

“Really?” he calmly asked as he picked her up and placed her on his lap, adjusting her until she was sitting sideways with her legs hanging over the side of his legs. He wrapped his arms loosely around her, but it was clear that he wasn’t going to allow her to move.

“Really!” she said, trying to shove his arms away, but he simply ignored her and kept his arms where they were.

“You’ve been standing me up all this time, because you think that I’m not really attracted to you,” he mused with a rueful shake of his head and a chuckle that she really didn’t appreciate.

“All this time……,” she repeated back slowly, shaking her head in disbelief. “You only started to bring up this asinine idea of going out a few days ago!”

“True,” he murmured, leaning down so that he could brush his lips along her jaw, startling her. “But, I most definitely don’t see you as a little sister,” he said with a chuckle as he tightened his arms around her and pulled her closer so that she could feel-

“*Oh my God,*” she whispered around a choked gasp.

“Definitely. Not. A. Sister,” he said, stressing each word as he turned his head and pressed a kiss against her neck, robbing her of the ability to speak or think.

“So,” he continued pressing kisses along her neck and jaw, “why don’t we finish our date and at the end of the night you let me show you just how enjoyable a goodnight kiss can be.”

*_*_*_*

“What the fuck just happened?” he asked as he stood there, staring at the door and wondering where he’d gone wrong.

He’d had Tinkerbelle in his arms, holding her, brushing his lips against her soft skin, and was saying all the right things one minute and the next……

He’d been unceremoniously kicked out, the bowl of popcorn shoved in his hands and the door slammed shut in his face. She’d even ignored him when he’d inquired about a goodnight kiss. He stood there for another minute until he accepted the fact that she wasn’t coming back and he realized that he was starting to look like an idiot standing there.

“Shit,” he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck as he reluctantly turned around and headed back to his apartment.

He paused in front of his broken door long enough to pick it up and lean it against the doorway, making a mental note to fix it tomorrow along with his wall and furniture. Greedy bastards, he thought, shaking his head in disgust as he kicked a piece of what was left of his entertainment center out of his way and

headed towards his bathroom.

What the hell was wrong with him? he couldn't help but wonder as he forced himself to stand beneath ice cold water ten minutes later. The first woman that he'd been attracted to since he woke up from the coma wasn't interested in him. She didn't want him, didn't like him and he was a fucking moron for not seeing it sooner. He should probably move on, but.....

He wasn't going to give up, but he was going to back off for a few days and start all over again, he decided as he shut the water off and stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. He'd force himself to keep his hands to himself, he'd take his time getting to know her, but more importantly he'd give her the chance to get to know him. He'd fucked up, made a horrible first impression and had startled Tinkerbelle.

It was going to kill him to take this slowly, but he was going to do it, he decided, resigning himself to more ice cold showers in the future. He crawled in bed and pulled the sheet up over his lap, ignoring the way that the cool cotton sheet brushed over his straining erection. He folded his arms behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. It was going to kill him to keep his hands to himself, but he would do it because he had a new game plan.

He was still planning on wooing her, but now he was going to have to be sneaky about it. He'd give her a few days to cool off and when she stopped giving him looks that caused his balls to tighten up in fear, he would approach her, start with small talk, grab coffee, drinks after work and when she finally let her guard down, he'd go in for the kill.

For now, he'd just bide his time.

He would-

"Tinkerbelle?" he asked, sitting up as he watched her walk the rest of the way into his bedroom. "Is everything okay?"

"I need to know something," she said as she toyed with the ends of the belt holding her terry cotton robe closed, shifting nervously as she looked anywhere but at him.

"What's that, sweetheart?" he asked, leaning back against the headboard even though everything in him was demanding that he get his ass off the bed and pull her into his arms to make sure that she was okay.

"I need to know if you're toying with me?"

At his blank look she sighed. "I just want to know if this is a game for

you,” she clarified.

“No,” he said, shaking his head, “I’m not playing with you.”

“So, you’re suddenly interested in me?” she asked, looking up and meeting his gaze head-on.

“Very.”

“Why?”

“Why what?” he asked, not sure what she was trying to get at.

She rolled her eyes with an exasperated sigh as though it should be obvious. “Why are you suddenly interested in me?”

“Would you like the polite answer or the truth?”

Frowning, she slowly said, “The truth?”

The polite answer probably would have been a better choice, but.....

What the hell?

“Are you sure?”

She nodded once, firmly.

Shrugging, he admitted, “Because I can’t stop fantasizing about you. I can’t walk into a room without thinking of at least a hundred ways to fuck you in it. I can’t stop fantasizing about how your body would feel against mine, how hard your nipples would get in mouth, how good your skin would taste on my tongue, how it would feel to run my hands all over you, how good it would feel to slide inside you, how wet you would be when I-”

“I get the picture,” she said, cutting him off with a blush and....was that a pleased little smile that she was trying to hide? “Why don’t we try the polite answer?”

“Fine,” he said with a shrug, “I like you, Tinkerbelle. I’m attracted to you and I want to get to know you better.”

She nodded absently. “Is this just about sex?”

“No,” he said softly, watching her reaction.

“So.....then what do you want?” she asked, cocking a brow in question.

He thought that over for a moment. He wanted to hold her, to kiss her, to make love to her, to piss her off so that he could see that cute little murderous glare of hers, he just wanted.....

“A chance,” he answered. “Just a chance.”

Chapter 16

“I can’t do this. I’m sorry,” Jodi said, swallowing nervously as she stepped away from him.

“It won’t hurt,” Danny said, reaching out to stop her from running away, and she desperately wanted to run away, by taking her hand into his and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“You lying bastard!” she bit out, yanking her arm back so that she could point to the 6’2” hulk of a man who was currently curled up on the ground, cupping himself and whimpering pathetically for his mommy. “He sure as hell looks hurt to me!”

Giving her an incredibly sexy grin that had her narrowing her eyes on him, he said, “He’s fine, Tinkerbelle.”

She shifted her glare back to the man who was now openly crying and then back to Danny, who stood there wearing military gear stained with old paint, a paint gun thrown over his shoulder, several paintball cartridges strapped at his side and over his shoulders and that damn sexy smile that he’d used on her this morning when he’d shown up at her door dressed as Rambo.

“Tell me it’s not going to hurt,” she said, daring the bastard to lie to her.

“Just a little pinch,” Danny said, picking up the second paintball gun and handing it to her.

“Can’t we do something else?” she asked, sounding like a wimp and not really caring.

“No,” he simply said, taking her by the shoulders. He turned her and gave her a gentle push towards the outside obstacle course where grown men were running around shooting each other with balls of paint, “you said that I could choose our first date.”

“But-”

“But it will be fun, I promise,” he said, giving her another little push when she dug her heels in.

“But-”

“I’ll let you choose the restaurant if it will make you feel better,” he said, continuing to push her towards her doom.

“No, it really wouldn’t. What would make me feel better is if we could

maybe go and do something else? A movie? Zoo? Museum? Back to my place for an afternoon of nonstop sex?” she suggested, only half-kidding about the last one as she reached up and pushed her safety helmet back in place.

Okay, so maybe she was completely honest about the last one, but the giant bastard shoving her towards her doom was determined to take it slowly. Last night when he’d climbed out of his bed, completely naked and aroused, very aroused, she’d expected him to take her to bed and show her how sex was supposed to be. Instead, he’d kissed her softly, pulled on a pair of sweatpants, taken her hand in his and walked her back to her apartment where he’d given her another kiss goodnight and promised that he was going to call her in the morning.

He’d lied.

He hadn’t called her, but showed up at the crack of dawn with coffee and donuts and that damn sexy smile. Surprised, and secretly pleased, she’d quickly changed into a pair of jeans and a tee shirt. The entire way here he’d held her hand, caressing the back of her hand with his thumb while making small talk, probably trying to make her comfortable. It had worked. That is until he’d pulled into the makeshift parking lot for the outdoor paintball arena. That’s when she’d started suggesting other alternatives to being chased by a bunch of psychotic men shooting each other with little round balls.

He’d laughed.

The bastard!

Danny sighed, giving up on gently prodding her and took her hand and pulled her towards a large gate marked “Entrance.” Her eyes shifted away from the entrance sign and took in the very large, very detailed sign that was taller than her and attached to the chain-link fence. She started reading the warnings and immediately wished that she hadn’t.

“If this isn’t dangerous then why are there over fifty warnings about death and accidental mutilation?” she demanded, hugging her gun tightly against her chest with one arm as he ignored her concerns and continued to pull her towards a makeshift barrier.

“Take a knee, Tinkerbelle,” Danny said when they’d reached the barrier.

Trembling, she did as he asked, just in time too it would seem since a volley of paintball pellets suddenly came flying at them, slamming into the

barrier with several loud *whacks*. Resisting the natural urge to run back to the entrance and to the safety of the women's room where she fully planned on hiding for the next two hours, she stayed there while Danny methodically explained how to fire her gun, how to use their surroundings to her advantage and what to do if she got hit.

Unfortunately for her, she was too busy listening to the sounds of paintballs going splat around her and the sounds of grown men running and shouting orders, but it wasn't enough to hide the sounds of people getting hit and crying out. Yeah, this really wasn't for her.

"Danny," she said, licking her lips nervously, "I-"

"Stay here and count to ten, then follow me," he said, cutting her off before she could give him an excuse to leave. "Stay down and shoot anyone wearing a blue helmet or arm band."

"But-"

"You'll be fine," he said, cutting her off once again, but this time adding a swift kiss that left her stunned. "Remember to stay low."

And with that, he was gone and she was left kneeling on the ground behind a wooden barrier, in the middle of the woods about to be chased down by a bunch of psychotic men sporting blue armbands.

Nibbling on her bottom lip, she looked wistfully over her shoulder at the entrance. She could wait for him by the gates, she decided, already getting to her feet when someone yelled, "Incoming," and her world turned red and blue.

*_*_*_*_*

"You're banned!" the manager yelled, taking him by surprise, not because he'd never heard those words screamed before, he was a Bradford after all, but because of who the manager of the paintball facility was screaming at.

"Are you kidding me?" his little Tinkerbelle demanded, wiggling wildly over his shoulder to get free. "You're seriously going to ban me because a few wimps complained?"

"You made over twenty men cry!" the manager shouted, gesturing wildly towards the group of men standing by the first aid station, bitching and whining about their injuries and the fact that his little Tinkerbelle had ignored their surrender and kept shooting.

Damn, he was proud.

“If they couldn’t handle it then they shouldn’t have walked through those gates!” his little warrior shouted, making him smile and the manager’s jaw drop in astonishment.

“Get out!” the manager yelled once he’d managed to get over his shock.

Danny considered arguing with the manager, but he knew that look well enough to know that the man was less than thirty seconds from running for his life and calling the cops. Since he didn’t feel like wasting part of his date dealing with the authorities, he tightened his arms around Tinkerbelle’s legs and walked away, grinning hugely when his little warrior started insulting all the men jumping out of their way.

*_*_*_*

“Are you actually pouting?”

“No!” she mumbled, folding her arms over her chest as she glared ahead. She wasn’t pouting. She was justifiably pissed.

“The ban isn’t going on your permanent record so I wouldn’t worry about it,” Danny explained as he took a turn on Parker Street.

“I’m not worried about it,” she mumbled, glaring straight ahead.

“Then why are you upset?” Danny asked, sounding amused.

“Because I should have won,” she grumbled, contemplating going back there to prove it.

“You did,” he said smoothly, obviously trying to appease her bloodthirsty needs.

“Then why did they end the hunt?” she demanded, looking over to find him grinning hugely. “This isn’t funny!”

“No, no, of course it’s not,” he said, biting back his smile, but she didn’t miss how his damn lips twitched with amusement.

“Where are we going?” she asked, changing the subject before she did something stupid like pout, for real this time.

“I thought we’d grab lunch before the movie,” he said, pulling into the parking lot of a fifties era diner.

“We’re seeing a movie?” she asked, suddenly perking up, not only because it had been a while since she’d been to the movies, or could afford to, but because she’d thought after her.....ummm, little meltdown, that he’d want to end things early. Most guys that she’d gone out with would have ditched her

by now. Even Greg would have dropped her off at her house, shaken his head in disbelief and walked off.

“Your choice,” Danny said, shooting her that grin that did funny things to her and a wink.

“That sounds nice,” she said, trying to bite back a smile, failing and not really caring all that much for one simple reason.

She was on a date, a real date. Not that she’d never gone out with a man before, obviously she had, but she’d never been treated like a real date before. Danny wasn’t treating her with indifference, constantly checking the time, or even checking out the really beautiful woman walking in front of the truck. Instead, all of his attention was on her and it was nice.

Before she could open her door he was there, opening it for her and helping her out of the truck. He took her hand into his and together they walked towards the diner that was giving off the most delicious aroma. She hadn’t realized just how hungry she was until that moment, which of course made sense since she’d spent the last three hours building an appetite by hunting down a bunch of big babies in the woods.

“Welcome to Henry’s. How can I.....,” the hostess started to say with a big smile as they walked through the door only to let her words trail off with a frown when her gaze landed on Danny.

“We’d like a table for two,” Danny said, seemingly oblivious of the waitress’s weird greeting.

“Umm,” the waitress mumbled, licking her lips nervously as she stepped away from her station, “I-I’ll go see if we have any tables available.”

“It smells good in here,” Danny said, drawing her attention back up to him.

“It really does,” she murmured with a frown as she watched the hostess run across the diner, around tables and finally slam through the kitchen’s swinging double doors.

“Is something going on?” she asked, returning her attention to Danny to find him gazing around the diner, looking innocent.....a little too innocent.

“He’s one of them!” somebody suddenly shouted.

“I’m not going out there!”

“Neither am I!”

“Oh my God!” another scream came from the vicinity of the kitchen. “You promised us that they were never coming back!”

“He’s a Bradford!”

“Oh...shit,” the softly muttered oath drew her attention back to Danny to find him shaking his head in disgust as he pulled out his phone.

“What is going on?” she asked, ending on a gasp when Danny suddenly yanked her back and out of the way as several women wearing matching uniforms suddenly came charging towards them. The panicked staff kept as far away from them as possible as they shoved each other out of the way in attempt to get through the door first.

“I’m not serving him!” a short elderly woman with curly gray hair yelled, grabbing a redhead by her ponytail and yanking her out of the way.

“Why don’t we go somewhere else? This place looks busy,” Danny said as she watched several more women and two men join the group desperately trying to escape the otherwise peaceful diner.

“How about the burger joint across the street,” she suggested absently, unable to look away as the little old lady reached up and grabbed another woman by the back of shirt and yanked her out of the way.

Danny cleared his throat. “That might not be a good idea.”

“What might be a bad idea?” she asked, wincing in sympathy when the old lady kicked out one of the waitress’s legs.

“Going to the burger joint across the street.”

“Why’s that?” she asked, watching as the little old lady managed to slam an elbow into the cook’s stomach and shoved her way to freedom.

Sighing heavily, he said, “Because I’m banned.”

Chapter 17

“You don’t need to do this,” Danny said, handing her the pot she’d asked for.

“It’s fine,” she said as she took the pot from him with a smile.

No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t even close to being fine, but thanks to his asshole cousins and uncles, he’d discovered the extent of the damage those bastards had done over the years. Every restaurant they’d tried to go to had either turned them away, run screaming for the fire exits or had a mental breakdown when he came walking through the door. When he’d tried to avoid a potentially embarrassing situation by calling ahead, it had ended with some hysterical manager sobbing as they threw around the words police, restraining order and “Please, God, no!”

After coming to the conclusion that his asshole relatives had gotten the family banned from every restaurant within a ten-mile radius of the movie theatre, he’d given up and headed to the movies. He’d planned on ordering a few ten-dollar hot dogs, and fifteen-dollar bags of popcorn from the concession stand to hold them over until later, but his little Tinkerbelle had taken one look at the prices and professed up and down that she wasn’t hungry.

When he’d told her not to worry about it, she’d offered to make him dinner instead. He’d tried talking her out of it, but the stubborn woman had simply shook her head, grabbed his hand and yanked him towards the exit, leaving him with no choice but to accept the fact that he’d failed in his first attempt to woo her.

Now, as he stood in her kitchen watching her throw together a quick dinner, he decided that he was going to have to reevaluate his game plan. Originally he’d planned on wooing her with casual dates, a romantic meal here and there and his natural charm, but so far, none of that was working for him.

Well, at least the romantic meal portion of his plan wasn’t working. The next time he took her out, and there would be a next time, he was going to have to do a little research in advance. He’d show up at her door with roses, chocolates and take her out to the most romantic restaurant that he could find. For now, he’d have to work with what he had, which admittedly wasn’t a hell of a lot, but he’d make it work.

“Do you need any help?” he asked, running several possibilities through

his head.

“No,” Tinkerbelle said with a shy little smile that had him rethinking his plans to take this slowly.

But, he had a plan and he was going to stick with it even if it killed him.

“How long before it’s done?” he asked offhandedly.

“About an hour,” she said, shooting him another small smile over her shoulder as she filled a large pot with water.

Perfect.

“I’ll be back in time,” he promised with a satisfied sigh as he walked out of her apartment, quickly making plans to salvage this date.

*_*_*_*

“I’m an idiot,” she muttered, watching the steam rise off the homemade macaroni and cheese casserole that she’d cooked for Danny, who had apparently ditched her at the first opportunity.

She’d been ditched before, but wow, did this hurt.

It was foolish, but she’d actually been enjoying herself. This was the first date that she’d ever had where she could honestly have said that she’d had fun. Her usual first dates consisted of drinks, coffee, food and maybe a movie. Even dating Jerry had been incredibly dull and boring. They’d dated for almost two years, two very boring years with boring unimaginative dates that ended with really boring, uncomfortable, unsatisfying sex.

Well, sometimes. Most of the time Jerry wasn’t in the mood, which had been okay with her, mostly. She’d been a virgin before she’d met him, a very frustrated virgin and once she’d given herself to him.....

She’d become even more frustrated.

The first time he’d taken her to bed she’d been excited and eager to take that step, but barely a minute after he’d started, he’d rolled off her, covered in sweat, panting heavily and she’d laid there, disappointed and trying not to cry. She’d barely felt anything besides a tiny pinch of pain, some jostling and his large stomach crushing her. It had been one of the most depressing moments of her life and unfortunately, it only got worse after that.

When he’d broken things off she should have been relieved, but instead it had depressed her that someone like Jerry didn’t want her. It also scared her. She couldn’t hold out much hope that a nice guy would want her when she

couldn't even manage to keep the interest of a man like Jerry. It had also confirmed her previous belief that men were incapable of seeing her as anything more than a little sister. Apparently Danny had come to his senses an hour and a half ago and had cut his losses.

She should have expected it, had expected it, but she'd hoped that things could be different. It had been foolish to let herself hope for anything more with Danny, but she hadn't been able to help herself. She liked the way that he looked at her, the way he touched her and even though he still annoyed the crap out of her, he had the ability to make her smile.

Unfortunately for her, this date, like many dates before, had ended poorly. It also had the added bonus of making things even more awkward, because she'd stupidly agreed to go out on a date with her *neighbor*. She closed her eyes and dropped her head in defeat. This had been a mistake, one that she should have known better than to repeat after Jerry, but here she was in her kitchen, alone with an extra large pan filled to the brim with mac and cheese.

"Well, this is going to make things easier," Danny said softly, sounding amused just as she registered the feel of silk touching her face. "No, just leave it, Tinkerbelle," he said when she reached up to push the blindfold off.

"What are you doing?" she asked when she felt Danny's large hand wrap around hers.

"Moving on to the second portion of the date," he explained as he gently pulled her to her feet.

"Where did you go?"

He sighed heavily seconds before she felt his lips brush against hers, which pleased her bruised ego. "I'm sorry that I'm late. It took longer to pull this together than I'd thought."

"Pull what together?"

"You'll see," he said, sounding a bit excited, which actually made her understandably nervous considering who she was dealing with here.

"Is it going to leave a permanent scar?" she half teased.

He sighed heavily. "It might."

"Should I send up a silent prayer for help?" she asked, smiling as she allowed him to lead her through her living room.

"I'd send up two."

“Maybe I should put up a struggle?”

“It wouldn’t help.”

“Should I leave a trail of breadcrumbs behind so that I can find my way back later after I escape?” she asked as she heard him open her front door.

“It would be gone in less than ten minutes.”

“Birds?”

“My cousins,” he answered with a soft shiver-inducing chuckle.

“I see,” she murmured, loving their playful banter. “Then perhaps I should put up some sort of resistance?”

“You could, but then you wouldn’t get your surprise,” he teased as he guided her to sit down.

“Will the surprise be worth a kidnapping charge?”

He chuckled as he double-checked her blindfold. “Absolutely.”

“Then I suppose I could wait a few minutes before I start screaming for help.”

“I would appreciate that,” he said, pressing his lips against her forehead. “Stay still and try to behave while I’m gone.”

With that, he was gone and she was left sitting in what she assumed was his living room. She strained her ears, but she couldn’t hear anything that gave away Danny’s plans. She did however smell flowers and a light floral scent mixed with smoke. Candles? She was tempted to peek, but she didn’t want to ruin the surprise. She didn’t care what it was. The only thing that she cared about was that Danny had done something special for her. She wanted to savor the moment, but all too soon Danny returned, and with her casserole by the smell of it.

“I wanted to take you to a nice restaurant, but.....,” he let his words trail off with a sigh that had her biting back a smile.

“Are you ever going to tell me what that was about?” she asked, not bothering to hide her amusement.

“It’s just a little misunderstanding,” he muttered as she listened to him move around the room.

“I see,” she said, still wondering how an entire family could be banned from what amounted to twenty-nine restaurants. Then again, she had a hunch that the number was actually higher.

“Don’t worry. I’ll plan better next time,” he said, making her bite back a smile.

“Who said there would be a next time?”

“You did.”

“Me?”

“Mmmhmm,” he said, moving around her.

“And when exactly did I agree to a next time?”

“This morning.”

“I don’t remember that,” she said, almost positive that she would have remembered agreeing to going out with him again. Then again, she had been a bit distracted this morning.

“Remember when you had that big guy with glasses curled up in the fetal position crying?” he asked conversationally as she winced at the memory of making the man beg for mercy.

“Yes?” she answered slowly, wracking her brain and trying to remember exactly what she’d said, other than calling the man a big baby and a few other things that were probably better left forgotten.

“That’s when you agreed to go out with me again.”

“Wasn’t that about the time when you threw me over your shoulder?” she pointed out.

“Yes.”

“I don’t remember having a conversation with you.”

“You did and it was life altering.”

“I see.”

“I’m glad that you do, Tink,” he said, suddenly in front of her.

“Welcome to Bradford Cinemas, Tinkerbelle.”

Chapter 18

He'd definitely outdone himself tonight, he thought with satisfaction as he pressed a kiss against the top of Jodi's head where it laid against his shoulder. He would have rather taken her to a nice restaurant followed by a movie and then on a romantic drive later, but his plans had fallen apart. Thankfully, he'd been able to come up with a contingency plan.

It had taken him a little longer than he'd planned, but he'd managed to replace the furniture his cousins had destroyed the day before, hit the florist, bakery, and the store where he'd picked up a few movies, popcorn and candy in time to salvage their date. Judging by the expression on her face when he'd removed the blindfold, she'd been pleased with his efforts.

They'd watched movies well into the night, eating that unbelievably delicious macaroni and cheese and snacking on candy and popcorn until about a half hour ago when she'd snuggled up against him and fallen fast asleep. He'd thought about waking her up so that he could walk her to her door and get that goodnight kiss that he'd been dreaming about for the past two days, but he wasn't ready to let her go yet.

He closed his eyes and settled back, savoring the feel of her in his arms. He felt his body begin to relax and tried to fight it, but it just felt too good to fight. It had been years since he'd been able to let his guard down. Just a few minutes and he'd wake Tinkerbelle up and walk her home.

Just a few minutes.....

*_*_*_*_*

"Ow!" she muttered just as Danny groaned, "Shit!"

For a minute she could only lay there as she struggled to catch her breath, but it was kind of difficult with a man who had to weigh at least two hundred and fifty pounds lying on top of her. She wasn't exactly sure how this happened. One minute she'd been dreaming of Danny doing....umm, what he was doing in her dream wasn't important, and the next minute she was falling off the couch and hitting the floor with Danny landing on top of her.

"Are you okay?" Danny asked, shifting some of his weight off her and onto his elbows.

"I t-think so," she said in a daze.

“I must have dozed off. I’m sorry, Tinkerbelle,” Danny said, sighing softly as he reached over and pushed her hair out of her face.

“Uh huh,” she mumbled absently, not really hearing him as all of her attention zeroed in on the fact that Danny’s body had settled between her legs.

Now, when Jerry had been in this same position she’d barely felt anything except for discomfort and well, that was it. With Danny, she felt comforted by his weight, but that wasn’t all. Right now there was a very large and very hard part of his body that was pressing insistently against her. She had to resist the urge to shift beneath him, curious to see just how big he was, but once again that seemed kind of rude so she forced herself to lay still.

“God, you’re beautiful,” Danny whispered hoarsely.

She looked up and met his intense gaze and felt herself melt. He was so handsome, sweet, funny and kind. She could quickly see herself falling for him and that scared her, but not enough to fight this. It seemed as though every time she saw him or thought about him, this attraction grew stronger. She’d never wanted a man the way that she wanted Danny and for once in her life, she was going to take what she wanted.

She reached up with a trembling hand and cupped the back of his neck. Licking her lips, she leaned up and pressed her lips against his. With a soft groan, he moved his lips against hers, slowly, tenderly as though he was savoring her lips. She’d never enjoyed kissing, never thought a kiss could feel so good, and God, did this feel good.

She moved back until she felt her head touch the plush carpet, pleased when Danny followed. Praying that this wouldn’t end up being like one of Jerry’s kisses, she parted her lips. Danny instantly moved to deepen the kiss. His tongue invaded and she felt herself stiffen, prepared for the revulsion that used to hit her when Jerry did that, but it never came.

Instead she found herself moaning into his mouth as his tongue slid sensuously against hers, teasing and tempting her into giving him more. With a sigh, she did just that. She moved her tongue against his, loving the little groan that he made so she did it again. Jerry hadn’t been big on kissing, something that she’d always been thankful for, because even with her limited experience she’d been able to tell that he had absolutely no idea what he was doing. He’d never kissed her like he’d enjoyed it, enjoyed being with her, touching her or wanted her. Jerry had never really wanted her, but at the time she’d hadn’t cared.

Right now, she cared.

She didn't want Danny kissing her the way that Jerry used to. She didn't want him to kiss her be kissed like he couldn't stomach touching her. She wanted him to kiss her like he couldn't get enough of her, the way that he was kissing her now.

Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she lost herself in the kiss. She moved her tongue around his, loving the way kissing him made her feel, the way it made her body come alive. When he gently suckled on her tongue she whimpered, her back arched, pressing her breasts against his chest as the move caused him to settle more deeply between her legs. He felt so good, so damn good and she wanted to-

Kill him when he suddenly moved away.

"I'm sorry," he said, panting slightly as he sat on the edge of the couch and held his hand out to her.

Biting back a groan that would either make her look pathetic or like a slut, she took his hand and allowed him to help her up. She sat on the couch next to him, trying to catch her breath even as she contemplated tackling him to the floor and picking up where they'd left off.

"I promised you that we'd take things slowly. I want to do this right," he said, shooting her a tight smile as he took her hand in his. He raised their hands and pressed a kiss against the back of her hand. "Let me walk you home."

For a goodnight kiss? she thought hopefully, perking up at the idea even as she continued struggling to catch her breath. She stood up, hoping that she didn't look too eager. As he walked her to his door and then across the hall, she couldn't help but wonder how long she could stretch out this kiss.

Not very long it would seem.

He walked her to her door, leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. Before she could respond or throw herself at him, he was wishing her a goodnight and walking away, leaving her standing there, frustrated beyond belief and contemplating killing the bastard for leaving her this way.

*_*_*_*

"Shit!" he hissed as he lowered himself into the ice-cold tub.

He was a fucking moron. That was the only explanation that he could come up with that would explain why he was freezing his balls off instead of across the hall burying himself between his neighbor's beautiful short legs.

She'd felt so good beneath him and pressing up against him as he'd explored her surprisingly talented mouth. He'd almost lost himself in that kiss and given in to every fantasy that he'd had about her, but somehow he'd found the willpower to slow down and pull back. He had a game plan and he was going to stick to it. He wanted to do this right. He wanted to make sure that she forgot what an asshole he was. He wanted.....

He wanted what his cousins had, he realized with a groan. He wanted Jodi to look at him the way that his cousins' wives looked at them. He wanted someone waiting for him when he came home at the end of the day, someone to hold in his arms at night to fight off memories that were better left forgotten, and he wanted that someone to be his Tinkerbelle.

As tempted as he was to go back across the hall and finish what they'd started, he knew better. This wasn't just sex for him. He was sick and tired of watching his cousins and his old friends from high school getting married, raising families and finding some semblance of peace in their lives. He wanted that more than anything, needed it more than his next breath and would do anything to get it.

"Fuck it!" he snapped when the cold water only heightened his need for her.

He hit the drain as he stood up and stepped out of the bath. As soon as his foot touched the bathmat his hand was wrapped around his aching cock. He closed his eyes, picturing his hands running over Jodi's curves. God, she was so fucking beautiful. He imagined how good it would feel to have her sitting on top of him, impaling herself on his cock. He licked his lips just thinking about how wet her pussy would be when he finally slid inside her.

He'd run his hands over her thighs and up to her breasts, cupping them and molding them to his hands. Her large nipples would tighten, becoming hard points that he could tease between his fingers. He would trace her hard nipples with his fingertips as he watched her slowly ride him.

As his hand moved over his cock, pausing at the tip to squeeze it, he wondered if she would blush as she enjoyed his cock, if she would lick her lips, moan or slide her fingers between her legs and tease her clit with her fingertips while he watched. Just thinking about her riding his cock while she fingered herself had him licking his lips and his fist moving over his cock faster.

He wanted to fuck her so badly that his balls actually hurt. He pictured

her pulling herself off his cock and climbing up his body until her wet pussy was right above his-

“*Jodi*,” he groaned long and loud as his balls pulled up tight and his cock stiffened past the point of pain. His cock continued to swell until finally his release took over. He licked his lips, wishing that it was her wet slit as he came. The pleasure was immense, better than he could ever remember, but as he gasped for air and his hand slowed on his cock he realized that it wasn’t enough.

His hand was a poor substitution for the real thing, but for now it would have to do. He wasn’t going to fuck this up by letting his cock call the shots. He was going to take things slowly with *Jodi*, making sure that she couldn’t imagine her life without him. Only then would he give in and take her, but for now, he was going to stick with his game plan.

Chapter 19

“Wake up,” a deep, sexy voice that she vaguely recognized said, drawing her away from her dream just as things were getting good, adding to her frustration.

She cracked one eye open to see who it was only to promptly close it and say, “Get out.”

“Sorry, sweetheart, but we’re not leaving until we have a talk,” Trevor’s cousin, Jason said.

“Out,” she grumbled, hugging the throw pillow as she turned over and snuggled beneath her blanket, determined to return to the dream where Danny was making all her fantasies come true.

“Let’s go, Jodi. Rise and shine,” Trevor said as her comfy blanket was suddenly yanked away from her.

She blindly reached for it, managing to grab it only to end up getting dragged off the couch. She landed on the floor with an *ooof*. She opened her eyes to find Trevor and Jason standing over her, casually sipping their coffee as they regarded her with twin expressions of amusement.

“Now that you’re up, we can have ourselves a little chat,” Trevor said, sitting on the couch that she’d been happily sleeping on less than a minute ago.

Sighing, she stood up and brushed off her clothes and said, “Get out.”

With that, she headed to the bathroom. Ten minutes later her teeth and hair were brushed, her face was washed, she’d relieved herself and she was positive that her unwanted guests had shown themselves to the door.

“Ready for that talk now, princess?” Trevor asked as she opened her bathroom door.

“No, so get out,” she said around a yawn as she headed to her kitchen. She didn’t have to look back to know that she was being followed by two very large annoying men.

While she pointedly ignored them and started making coffee for herself, the only thing that would save them from a brutal death, they sat at the table and sipped their coffee. Accepting the fact that they weren’t leaving anytime soon and used to dealing with men hanging out in her apartment, she pulled out all the ingredients to make pancakes and set to work.

“We want to know what your intentions towards our cousin are,” Jason announced, taking a sip of coffee as he watched her work.

She stopped mid-whisk and looked up to find both men staring at her intently. “You can’t be serious.”

“Very,” Trevor said evenly.

Jason nodded firmly in agreement.

“You do realize that I’ve only been on one date with him, don’t you?” she asked as she turned on her electric griddle and dropped a spoonful of butter on the surface.

“Four dates,” Trevor said distractedly as he watched her work.

“What are you doing?” Jason asked, licking his lips hungrily as the butter began to melt.

“Making pancakes,” she answered, wondering why they felt the need to have the “talk” with her.

“For us?” Trevor asked, sitting up straighter in his chair as he watched her spoon batter onto the hot surface.

“Well, that depends,” she said, watching them closely as she leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms over her chest.

“On what?” Jason asked, barely able to take his eyes off the griddle as the pancake batter rose.

“On whether or not Zoe knows that you’re here,” she said, watching their reaction closely. When Trevor winced, she had her answer.

“I see,” she murmured thoughtfully as she walked over to the kitchen island and picked up her cell phone.

“What are you doing?” Trevor asked nervously.

“Nothing much,” she murmured, searching through her contacts until she found Zoe’s phone number. After she sent Zoe a quick text she realized that she didn’t have Danny’s phone number, but that wasn’t a problem.

She flipped the pancakes, waited until they were done and then split them between two plates. After she added more butter and batter to the griddle she walked out of the kitchen. She wasn’t surprised when the men didn’t follow this time since Jason was busy devouring both plates of pancakes while Trevor did a half-assed job of explaining to his wife why he’d dragged another woman out of bed. She walked out her front door and across the hallway where she

knocked on Danny's door.

A minute later he was standing in his doorway wearing a pair of unbuttoned jeans, a sleepy smile and looking incredibly sexy first thing in the morning.

"I just thought you should know that two of your cousins are in my apartment eating the pancakes that I'd planned on surprising you with," she said with a shrug before he had a chance to say anything.

His sleepy smile quickly faded only to be replaced with a grim frown a second later as he walked past her and headed straight for her apartment. She took her time following him, deciding that it was probably for the best if she wasn't within throwing distance of them since she'd seen firsthand how badly things could end when the men in this family had a disagreement over food.

"Those are my pancakes, you bastard!"

"Ow!"

"Stop!"

"No, don't do-"

Seconds later everything went quiet. Afraid that things had gone too far, she walked into the kitchen in time to see Danny yank his cousins off the floor and in a move that had her brows shooting up in astonishment, twisted their arms behind their backs and used his hold on them to force them to walk.

"You'll regret this, you son of a bitch!" Trevor snapped as Danny calmly escorted him and a pouting Jason past her. He paused briefly next to her so that he could lean down and plant a quick kiss on her stunned lips. "I'll be back in a minute."

"O-okay," she mumbled, not exactly sure what the correct response was and after a slight pause she shrugged it off, decided that she really didn't care as long as he got rid of her interrogators.

She walked back into the kitchen in time to flip the pancakes and add a little more batter to the griddle. While she waited for them to cook she cleaned up the small mess the men had left behind, grabbed another clean plate, another bottle of maple syrup and more butter. She'd just shut off the griddle and started removing the pancakes when two large arms wrapped around her and pulled her back against a rather large warm body.

"I'm sorry," Danny said, pressing a very distracting kiss against her neck.

“It’s fine,” she said, wondering if he’d noticed the way that she couldn’t stop trembling every time he touched her.

“They won’t be bothering you again,” he said, pressing another kiss against her neck. Since she had a feeling that his cousins weren’t done interrogating her, she didn’t say anything.

“What are your plans for lunch?” he asked, pressing another kiss against her neck.

“I’ll be spending this lovely Sunday afternoon boxing up whatever’s left at the library,” she said, adding the last pancake to the stack and stepped out of his arms, gesturing to the plate of pancakes.

“What about you?” he asked, frowning down at the plate stacked high with pancakes.

“Coffee,” she said, picking up her mug in answer.

“Have dinner with me tonight?” he asked, picking up the bottle of maple syrup.

“Can’t,” she said, heading towards the doorway. “I’m meeting the guys at Joe’s Tavern after work for a drink.”

“The guys, huh?” he murmured thoughtfully, absently adding more butter to his pancakes.

“Mmmhmmm, and if you behave, you can tag along,” she said, watching as the corner of his lips kicked up into a pleased smile.

“I’m sure that I can manage.”

“Pick me up at seven!” she threw over her shoulder as she left the room to get ready for a fun filled day of sifting through rotted boxes, dust and the moldy basement that she normally avoided at all costs. She wanted to try to salvage whatever she could before tomorrow when the old library was demolished along with all its old treasures that had been long ago forgotten.

*_*_*_*

“Where are you?”

“Ummm, nowhere special,” she muttered, worrying her bottom lip as she watched the man lying on the gurney next to hers vomit all over himself, again.

“Nurse!” his nervous wife yelled, making Jodi cringe, because she knew without a doubt that Greg had also heard it.

There was a long-suffering sigh on the other end of the phone before Greg said, “*You’re at the hospital, aren’t you?*”

“Maybe,” she mumbled, looking down at her arm where a large ice pack sat, concealing the reason why Mr. Tate had felt it was necessary to browbeat her into going to the hospital.

It wasn’t a big deal, but he’d refused to listen. Instead, he’d mumbled something about liability, lawsuits and unnecessary paperwork that would pull him away from his bridge game as he’d dragged her to his car, shoved her inside and drove her to the hospital where he’d made sure the doctor knew the extent of her injuries before he’d wished her luck and ditched her ass to the tender mercies of the emergency room staff.

“*Do you need a ride?*” Greg asked, not sounding all that happy about it. Not that she could blame him.

“No,” she lied, hating the idea of putting any of her friends in the position of having to handle her when she had medicine in her system.

“*Are you sure?*” he asked, sounding really relieved that he wouldn’t have to take care of her, but she knew that if she told him that she needed a ride he would be here in a heartbeat to look after her. He wouldn’t be happy about it, but he would do it.

“Yeah, I’m-” she started to say only to have her phone suddenly taken from her.

“She’ll be fine,” Danny answered for her, ending the call and tossing the phone on the bed next to her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, shifting self-consciously as she took in his freshly combed hair, handsome face and the dark navy shirt that molded to his muscles and then glanced down at her ripped, dust covered, coal stained shirt and pants and grubby arms and hands.

“They told me what happened down at the library,” he said, gingerly raising the ice pack off her arm so he could get a look at her injury.

“Why were you at the library?” she asked, deciding that it was for the best to pretend that her hair wasn’t a tangled grubby mess.

He gently gripped her arm and turned it over. “I came to bring you coffee and to see if you needed a hand,” he murmured thoughtfully as he studied her wound.

“It’s not broken,” she said, forcing a small smile as she picked up the

ice pack and placed it back on her arm.

“No, it’s not,” he said, sighing heavily as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him, wondering where the doctor was. “It’s just a few nasty scrapes and a bruised bone.”

He nodded, but said nothing.

“It’s no big deal.”

Silence.

“Mr. Tate got nervous and made me come here. I just need to clean the scrapes and as long as I keep ice on my arm, I’ll be fine,” she promised him when the silence became awkward.

Rubbing his hands roughly down his face, he sighed, “It’s going to be a long night.”

Chapter 20

“Your lap is so comfy,” his drugged out passenger said dreamily as she snuggled closer.

“So you keep saying,” he said absently as he parked the truck.

This was going to be a very long night, he mused *again* as he opened his door and turned around to help Tinkerbelle out of the truck only to pause when he spotted the woman, who hadn’t stopped talking since the doctor had shot her beautiful ass full of medicine, fast asleep. Deciding that someone up there must love him, he picked Jodi up, careful of her head and carried her in the house, pausing only long enough to kick his truck door shut.

“You coming upstairs to watch the game?” his cousin Devin asked, shifting cases of beer in his arms so that he could hold the front door open for Danny.

“Not tonight,” Danny said quietly as he stepped past his cousin and headed for his door.

“What happened to her?” Devin asked, placing the beer on the floor. He took the keys out of Danny’s hand and opened the door for him.

“An old crate fell on her arm,” he said, carrying Jodi inside.

“Is it broken?”

He shook his head as he carefully placed Jodi on his bed. He pulled her shoes off and double-checked her bandage before he pulled the quilt his great grandmother had made him over her.

“So, this is her, huh?” Devin asked, reaching over to push a strand of Jodi’s dust coated hair out of her face only to draw his hand back with a darkly muttered oath when Danny slapped his hand away.

“Don’t touch her,” he simply said as he reached down and moved the strand of her beautiful hair aside.

“I thought she hated you,” Devin said with a frown, tilting his head to the side as he studied Jodi.

“That’s the only way she knows how to express her overwhelming desire for me,” he said, moving to stand up, but he thought better of it when he caught the appreciative look in his cousin’s eyes as he looked Jodi over. He leaned back down and kissed Jodi’s soft, unresponsive lips to make sure that his

cousin got the message.

She was *his*.

“It’s nice to see you taking an interest in life again,” Devin said with an approving smile. “You were beginning to worry us.”

“Nothing to worry about,” he said, grabbing a pair of clean boxers from his bureau, hoping that his cousin took the hint and got the hell out of his apartment without telling him just how worried everyone was about him.

“Are you sure?”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he said evenly, gesturing towards the door with his boxers.

“No,” Devin murmured, frowning down at Jodi, “I suppose there isn’t.”

“Try to keep the noise down,” Danny threw over his shoulder as he headed for the bathroom.

“I’ll do my best,” Devin said as he sauntered out of the room.

Danny threw one last look over his shoulder, making sure that his houseguest was still sound asleep in his bed. When she didn’t stir, he decided that it was safe to leave the room, but only after he locked his bedroom door to keep her from making an escape. Once he was positive that she wouldn’t be able to unlock the door in her drugged out state, he walked into the bathroom, stripped out of his clothes and stepped into the tub, turning the shower on full blast.

He pressed his hands against the tiled wall and dropped his head forward, letting the water stream down his back, wondering what level of hell his little Tinkerbelle was going to put him through tonight.

An irritated sigh came behind him, making him chuckle just as a pair of small hands grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back. Well, she tried to pull him back, but she was a tiny little thing. Still chuckling, he stepped out of the way so she could stand in front of the hot water.

“What are you going to put me through tonight, Tinkerbelle, hmmm?” he murmured as he watched Tinkerbelle tilt her head back and enjoy the hot water as it washed away the soot and dust covering her from head to toe.

He picked up the bar of soap and lathered his hands as he mentally prepared himself for the night of hell to come.

*_*_*_*

Ten minutes later.....

“I don’t think I’d be able to fit that thing in my mouth,” she said conversationally, pursing her lips up thoughtfully as she stared between his legs.

“Tinkerbelle,” he said, sighing heavily as he rubbed his hands roughly down his face, wondering why he hadn’t begged the doctor to sedate her.

“Wow, it’s getting bigger.....”

“Of course it is,” he muttered in disgust as he dropped his hands by his sides and looked down at the woman who was driving him out of his mind, and the funny thing was.....

He was surprisingly okay with it.

That didn’t mean that he was going to willingly put himself through this kind of hell. Sighing, he reached up and cupped her beautiful face and leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. “We’re going to get dressed now, crawl in bed and watch a movie,” he whispered against her lips.

“But, I’m not tired,” she mumbled pathetically, making him smile.

“I know, but I am,” he lied, hoping that she’d just take pity on him.

She sighed heavily as she stepped away from him. “Fine,” she grumbled as she turned around and stormed off, leaving him to follow after her. Knowing just how quickly medicated Tinkerbelle could find trouble, he moved his ass.

*_*_*_*

Two hours later.....

“Just one more beer!”

“No!” Devin snapped as he stumbled to the side, his hands cupping his damaged manhood as Danny stood there, holding Tinkerbelle in his arms. He struggled not to laugh as his cousins and their friends fell all over themselves trying to scoop up all the alcohol and get it as far away from Jodi as possible.

“But I can’t watch the game without beer!” Jodi pointed out, desperately trying to get out of his arms and return to the couch and the bottle of beer she’d been sipping when he’d finally managed to track her down.

“Why don’t we go downstairs and watch the game?” he suggested, kissing the tip of her nose.

“Can I have a beer?” she asked shyly.

“No,” he said, leaning down to kiss her before she could start arguing

again, “but you can have all the soda you want.”

“Fine,” she grumbled, gesturing absently for him to carry her away, “but it better not be diet.”

He chuckled as he pressed another kiss against the tip of her nose. “It’s definitely not diet.”

*_*_*_*_*

One hour later.....

Why couldn’t he drink diet soda? he wondered as he leaned forward, careful not to crush Tinkerbelle, and picked up his drink. Medication, beer and sugar was not a good combination for his little Tinkerbelle.

“Let’s go swimming!” Tinkerbelle said excitedly as she wiggled and shifted, trying to crawl off his lap.

He took a sip of his soda. “No,” he said, using his hold on her to keep her lying across his lap.

“But I’m hot!” she whined, renewing her efforts to escape.

“That would explain why you’re naked,” he said, taking another sip of his soda before he placed it back on the coffee table and leaned back, keeping his arm locked around her waist.

“It’s hot in here!”

“Uh huh, that’s nice,” he said, shifting his arm until it was lying across her beautiful naked ass.

“Please!”

“Not happening.”

“I hate you!” she snapped with a pout, folding her arms on the throw pillow and plopping her head down on her folded arms in a fit of annoyance.

“No, you don’t,” he said, gently rubbing her back.

“I really do.”

“Then why are you naked on my lap?” he asked, continuing to rub her back and moving down to her bottom.

God, she had a great ass. It was so firm, yet soft, he mused as he ran his hand up towards her back, deciding that it would be for the best if he didn’t torture himself.

“Because you won’t let me leave!” she snapped, but he’d noticed the

way she'd settled down, seeming to relax beneath his touch.

"And the naked part?" he murmured, watching his hand glide over her back and bottom.

"It's hot in here," she muttered.

"The air conditioner is on," he pointed out, smiling when she let out a long-suffering sigh.

"It doesn't feel like it."

"Are you tired?" he asked casually, hoping that she would finally agree to go to bed so that he could slip back into the bathroom and take himself in hand before he exploded.

"No, I want to go swimming," she said with a pout.

"We're not going swimming."

"I hate you."

"Are we back to that?"

"We never left!"

*_*_*_*

7 A.M.

"Ummm, why are you lying on top of me?"

He didn't bother opening his eyes or even lifting his head from where it had been resting for the last four hours as he asked, "Are you still out of it?"

"I don't think so," she said hesitantly as she sat up, causing her stomach muscles to tighten beneath his head.

"Thank God," he murmured, turning his head and pressing a kiss against her stomach, forcing himself to ignore the one place that his mouth had been watering to go all night.

Jaw clenched tightly, he averted his eyes as he climbed off Jodi and headed for the bathroom. He was trembling, he realized as he hurried across the room and closed the door behind him. He wanted her so much.

He wanted to crawl back into that bed, pull her into his arms, kiss her, run his hands all over her, kiss every inch of her body, slide his fingers deep inside her, suck and lick her beautiful bubblegum colored nipples before he moved his mouth down between her legs and licked her out until she was begging for his cock, until they both thought they would die if he didn't fuck

her.

God, he didn't know how much longer he could do this. How much longer he could keep himself from touching her, from pulling her beneath him and sliding deep inside her as he lost himself to her.

But, he wasn't going to let his cock fuck up his game plan. Not if it meant losing her.

Chapter 21

Two months later.....

“We have to stop,” Jodi groaned softly against his lips, but she didn’t loosen her death grip on his shoulders or stop grinding down on him. No, instead she widened her legs, desperate to get closer.

“*We’re taking it slow,*” Danny ground out, one hand beneath her shirt, caressing her bare breast while his other hand shoved its way down the back of her pants, snaked beneath her panties and cupped her ass.

“We are taking it slow,” she reminded him, grinding as hard as she could against the large bulge in his pants that had been driving her out of her mind for the past month.

They were taking things very slowly, indeed. For the first month they’d kept it to short kisses stolen during their dates and even longer kisses goodnight. At some point in the last four weeks she’d found herself climbing onto his lap, grinding down on him and....enjoying it.

It had surprised her just how much she’d enjoyed it. She liked everything about him, from the way that his hand felt wrapped around hers, the way his lips felt against her skin, the way his hands moved over her, the way he held her, the way he made her heart race and made her gasp. Over the past two months he’d surprised and amazed her. He treated her like she was the most precious thing in the world to him.

He took her out on romantic dates, which usually ended in disaster, but left her smiling each and every time. He’d taken her on a romantic dinner cruise, taught her how to play laser tag, took her to play paintball in the woods, taught her to play basketball, taken her to a concert, picnics, cooked her dinner, surprised her at her temporary office at City Hall most days with lunch, and just made her smile. It didn’t matter if he was burning dinner or accidentally setting his apartment on fire when he tried to surprise her with a candlelit dinner, he just had a way about him that made her smile.

Danny still irritated her from time to time, but now he apologized before she got a chance to come up with another way to get rid of the body. When he pissed her off, and he still did that frequently, he brought her flowers, chocolate and a pint of Ben and Jerry’s to make up for it along with a sincere apology and a promise to try to stop being an asshole.

“Jodi,” he groaned loudly, making her smile because he only called her by her first name when he was nearing the point of no return. The point where he came close to saying the hell with it and forgetting his plans to take this slowly.

“We should stop,” she said, panting as she pulled back only to moan as he followed the move with his mouth and began licking and suckling her neck. She laid back against the steering wheel, pulled her legs up until they were bent and she’d shifted until her bottom was rubbing against the hard bulge in Danny’s pants. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and groaned as he moved his hands to her hips.

“You feel so fucking good,” he groaned against her neck as he tightened his grip on her hip and moved her, shifting her back and forth across his lap.

She moaned loudly as she closed her eyes and allowed her head to drop back against the windshield as she lost herself in his touch.

“Are you wet for me?” he asked, moving her harder against him.

The only response she could manage was a moan, but it seemed to be the answer that he was looking for because he rewarded her with a hard rub.

“I bet you’re soaking wet, Jodi. I’d also be willing to bet that you’d be tight for me,” he growled against her skin, his hands moving her in a rhythm that had her gasping for air and grinding down on him harder. “I bet sliding inside you would feel better than-”

A hard knock at the driver’s side window interrupted whatever he was going to say and had her groaning pathetically and whimpering a bit as she buried her face against his chest, struggling to catch her breath and for the second time in her life, contemplating throttling someone with her bare hands.

Before she could move off Danny’s lap, not that she was really capable of doing that at the moment, the driver’s side door was thrown open and Greg, looking seriously pissed, was standing there, glaring at them.

“You said you were coming right back,” Greg bit out evenly.

“Oh, umm, sorry, I just got distracted for a minute,” she said, blinking.

“A *minute*?” Greg repeated back in disbelief. “You’ve been out here for over an hour!”

“Oh, ummm, well,” she muttered, glancing at the clock on the dashboard and trying not to wince. “I was just on my way back inside,” she lied, shooting him a smile and not quite able to meet his eyes as she hastily climbed off Danny’s lap and-

Was pulled right back onto his lap and thoroughly kissed. “Come over after your friends call it a night?” he asked, teasingly brushing his lips against hers. “We’ll watch really bad 80’s horror flicks, devour a pint of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream and finish what we started?”

She rolled her eyes as she climbed off his lap, already knowing that they wouldn’t finish what they’d started and she wasn’t going to get more than a spoonful of ice cream before he devoured the entire pint of ice cream. “I’m only coming over if I get my own pint of ice cream,” she said, pretending that she just had a craving for ice cream and wasn’t planning on devouring an entire pint of ice cream with the hopes that all that sugar and yumminess would make her forget how badly she wanted to jump him.

*_*_*_*

“I’ll see you later, Tinkerbelle,” he whispered softly against her lips.

“Have fun at dinner,” she whispered right back, stepping away from him as she gave him one of those sweetly shy smiles that he loved before she turned around and headed towards the front door, leaving him with Greg.

The bastard that was staring at Tinkerbelle’s ass like it was a delicious morsel that he couldn’t wait to take a bite out of. It was the same way that all her guy friends now looked at her.

“Not going to happen,” he said, leaning back against his seat as he regarded the man that up until a few months ago had never looked at Tinkerbelle as anything more than a cute kid sister.

“You never know,” Greg murmured, his eyes still locked on Tinkerbelle’s retreating ass as it swayed slightly from side to side.

“I know,” he said, chuckling darkly as he sat back and clipped his seatbelt. He shut his door, turned the engine on and wasn’t surprised when the knock came at his window a minute later.

“I’ve known her longer,” Greg said before the window was all the way down.

Danny looked straight ahead, nodding thoughtfully. “That’s true, but that also means that your chance has come and gone.”

“Maybe,” Greg murmured, “maybe not.”

“You planning on finding out?” he asked, his humor quickly fading even as his respect for the man rose.

“Maybe,” Greg said, turning to shoot him a grin, “maybe not.”
Danny nodded slowly, reaching for his door handle. “You on duty?”
Greg’s grin grew bigger. “Nope.”
“Good to know.”

*_*_*_*

“But-”

“Not a word!” she yelled, slapping an ice pack against Greg’s face.

“Ow!”

“And stop being a baby!” she snapped, grabbing the bloody paper towel and band aid wrappers as she stormed across the kitchen, slammed her foot down on the trashcan pedestal a little harder than was probably necessary and threw the trash away. Shaking her head in disgust, she walked over to the sink and turned the hot water on.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Greg said, standing up from where she’d told him to sit down and shut the hell up a half an hour ago when she’d found him on the ground trying to fend off blows from the other man that she was no longer talking to.

“Jodi,” Greg said, sighing heavily as he walked up behind her and placed his bloodied hands on either side of her on the kitchen sink, boxing her in, “can we just talk about this?”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she said, sighing heavily as she scrubbed her hands clean.

“There could be,” he said just as she felt his lips brush the top of her ear.

“Oh my God!” she gasped, quickly turning in his arms. She looked up at him, scanning all the cuts, bandages and quickly darkening bruises, worry twisting her stomach as he stared deeply into her eyes.

He leaned in, tilting his head to the side as he came closer. “Jodi,” he whispered, ducking his head and-

“Ow! What the hell?” he demanded, but she ignored him as she twisted and turned his head, looking for a head injury that would explain why he’d suddenly lost his damn mind.

“We should get you to the hospital,” she said, trying not to panic and wondering where she’d put her car keys. Maybe she should call an ambulance?

Head injuries weren't something to play around with.

"Wait," he said, shaking his head as he stepped back out of her reach, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Getting you to the hospital!" she snapped, wondering what the hell was wrong with him.

Time was of the essence here!

"Because I'm trying to kiss you?" he asked, frowning.

"Yes!" she snapped, shoving past him to find her keys, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her to a stop.

"I'm fine, Jodi," he said, sighing heavily as he used his hold on her to turn her around.

Worrying her bottom lip, she let him turn her around. "Then what's going on?"

He entwined their hands together, caressing his thumb over the back of her hand. "I'm trying to kiss you, Jodi," he said softly as he pulled her closer.

"Trying...to...kiss...me," she mumbled back, trying to make sense of what he'd just said when he leaned down to-

"Whoa!" she yelled, slapping her hand across his lips.

"Ow!" he winced, stepping back and pressing his fingertips against his split lip.

"*Why are you trying to kiss me?*" she demanded, not giving a damn that she sounded a bit hysterical, because this was her best friend and best friends didn't kiss each other!

"Because I want to," he said, reaching for her again, but this time she saw him coming and jumped back.

"Now? Seriously?" she couldn't help but shake her head in disgust. "Five years ago when you took me out the idea of kissing me turned your stomach and now suddenly you can't seem to keep your lips to yourself?"

"It didn't turn my stomach!"

"Really? Because you could have fooled me," she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You didn't want me to kiss you!" he snapped.

"No, *you* didn't want to kiss me!" she snapped back.

“The hell I didn’t!” he shouted, getting in her face.

“I-”

But he wouldn’t allow her to get a word in. “I asked you out, because I was attracted to you, but by the end of the date.....,” he let his words trail off with a shake of his head, “you started acting like I was your brother, not a date.”

“You started to treat me like a kid sister!” she snapped, pissed that he was playing this game with her.

“Because that’s how you acted! Like my kid sister! We’d barely got through our first drink when you started treating me like a brother and by the time I walked you to the door you’d placed me firmly in the friend zone.”

“No, I didn’t!”

He sighed heavily as he headed towards the front door. “Yeah, you did. You do it with every guy,” he said, only to pause with a lazy gesture towards the front door before he added, “except for the asshole living across the hall. You treat every guy you meet like he’s your long lost brother, even that asshole that you were going to marry.”

Chapter 22

“I’m not going to keep apologizing,” Danny said, pulling to a stop in front of a large colonial house.

“I don’t want you to,” she said, distractedly as she continued to stare out the window, not really seeing anything as she kept running the conversation she’d had with Greg through her head.

He was wrong. At least, she wanted to believe that he was wrong, but maybe...

“If you don’t want me to keep apologizing then what’s wrong?” Danny asked, reaching over and taking her hand into his. “What’s wrong, Tinkerbelle?”

“Besides the fact that you beat the shit out of my best friend?” she asked with a small sigh as she shifted her attention down to their hands.

“Besides that,” he said, waving it off like it was no big deal and making her lips twitch.

“Do you think...,” she started to ask, only to shake her head and look back out the window. “Forget it.”

“No,” he said softly as he gently gripped her chin and turned her head so that she was looking at him, “I’m not going to forget about it when there’s something bothering you, sweetheart.”

She looked up into his beautiful green eyes and sighed. “Do you think that I have a habit of treating guys like they’re my brothers?”

“Yes,” he said with absolutely no hesitation as he gave her a reassuring smile and her hand a small reassuring squeeze.

“I don’t do it on purpose,” she mumbled, wondering why she’d never realized this before.

“I know that, sweetheart,” he said soothingly.

She shook her head. “I can’t believe I never saw it before. I always thought.....”

“That it was the other way around,” Danny said in understanding as he gave her hand a light squeeze as he gently tugged her up on her knees so that he could pull her onto his lap.

“Yeah,” she mumbled as she laid her head against his chest and sighed

pathetically.

“You give off a sisterly vibe,” he said, nodding slightly, “that much is true, but you play off it. You use it to push away men, but I don’t think you’re doing it on purpose.”

“Then why am I doing it?” she found herself asking as she took his hand into hers and began tracing circles on his palm.

“Because you have absolutely no idea how to tell a guy that you’re not interested in him. So instead, you friend-zone him by acting like you’re his kid sister,” he said, pressing a kiss against her forehead.

She shook her head. “There were a lot of guys that I really liked, a lot of them that I could have really fallen for and-”

“And they’re your best friends now, aren’t they?” he asked, guessing correctly.

“Yes.”

“They weren’t for you, Tinkerbelle, and on some level you knew it.”

“What about Jerry?” she asked softly.

“What about that prick?” he asked coldly.

“Greg said that I treated him like a brother, an unwanted brother, but I still encouraged him. He was a jerk, selfish and I...I didn’t love him, but I was still prepared to spend the rest of my life with him,” she said, feeling her cheeks burn with mortification at the realization that she’d been willing to marry someone that she didn’t like, never mind love.

She was pathetic.

“You were settling, sweetheart. That’s all. Don’t try to make more out of it than that. You met some nice guys, but you couldn’t force yourself to want more from them and then you found an asshole who didn’t care how you saw him. You’d been driving men away for so long that you were willing to settle even for an asshole.”

“W-what about you? Have I ever treated you like that?” she had to ask.

He chuckled as he pressed another kiss against her forehead. “I pissed you off too much for you to waste the energy trying to push me away. Besides,” he said, pressing another kiss against her forehead, “it wouldn’t have worked on me.”

“No?” she asked, smiling despite the fact that she felt like crying.

“No,” he said, pulling his hand away so that he could trace her jaw with the tips of his fingers, “because there is nothing that you could do that would ever make me stop wanting you.”

“You want me?” she asked with a watery smile.

“More than my next breath,” he swore as he gripped her chin gently between his fingers and tilted her head up as he leaned in to-

“Hey! You’re holding up dinner, asshole!” someone yelled with a bang on the driver’s side window.

Sighing, Danny pressed a kiss against her forehead and said, “Let’s get this over with.”

*_*_*_*

“Ever hear of a phone, asshole?” Darrin asked, even as he pulled him into a hug. “Mom was about to send us to go find you,” he whispered low enough so that Jodi, who was standing nervously nearby, couldn’t hear.

“I’m fine,” he said, squeezing his arms around his little brother one last time before he pulled back and took Jodi’s hand back in his. “Just got a little delayed.”

“I can see that,” Darrin murmured, looking Jodi over. With a smile, he nodded towards the house. “Why don’t we head inside?”

“I should have called,” he said, shooting Jodi a glance, noting the way that she was worrying her bottom lip.

“And warned Mom that you were bringing a woman to meet the family for the first time ever?” Darrin asked brightly, chuckling when Danny shot him a homicidal glare. “Now, why would you want to do that?”

“Umm, maybe I should wait in the car? Or walk home?” Jodi asked, slowing down a bit. “I can walk home. It’s really not that far.”

“It will be fine. I promise,” he said, raising their hands so that he could kiss the back of hers.

“Yeah, but I wasn’t supposed to be here tonight. I don’t want to interfere,” she said, looking like she’d rather be anywhere but here.

“It’ll be fine,” he promised her, resisting the urge to laugh at the expression on her face. “Besides, I want you here.”

“*Fine*,” she said on a drawn out sigh with a miserable little pout that had him stopping so that he could lean down and kiss her. “No worries, Tinkerbelle.

Everything will be fine.”

*_*_*_*

Oh, he was a lying bastard, she decided five minutes later as she pressed back against the wall and out of trampling distance of all the large men yanking Danny into bear hugs. Even Jason and Trevor pulled Danny into a hug, seeming very pleased to see him and acting like they hadn't just spent all day with him at work. It was really sweet, she thought with a smile that disappeared when all the large men in the room suddenly stopped talking and as one, turned around to look at her.

“Ummm,” she murmured, awkwardly clearing her throat. “Hi,” she said a little nervously, adding a little wave to try and make the moment a little less awkward.

“Who's this?” Darrin asked, making her frown, because she'd just been introduced to him ten minutes ago.

“This is my girlfriend,” Danny said, pushing the men surrounding him out of the way so that he could come to her side and for the first time since they'd arrived, she realized that he wasn't happy about being here.

He came to her side and reached for her, but before he could save her, someone grabbed her other hand and pulled her away from the safety of her wall. “This is Jodi,” Aidan said, smiling hugely as he released her hand and threw his arm around her shoulders, yanking her closer. “Also known as Tinkerbelle to our little Danny.”

Instead of looking happy to meet her, every man, except for Trevor and Jason that is, stopped smiling to glare down at her. Aidan gestured towards Darrin, “This is Reese, Darrin's twin brother,” he said, solving that mystery for her before he gestured to the next man glaring down at her. “This is our brother Duncan,” he said, pointing to a rather large, and rather angry looking man glaring down at her before he moved on to the next three angry men. “This is Garrett, Arik, and Lucifer,” he said, ending with the angriest man that she'd ever seen. “And I believe you already know our cousins, Jason and Trevor.”

“It's nice to meet you all,” she said, trying to force a smile, but she couldn't quite pull it off, not with all of them glaring down at her.

“Where's Mom and Kenzie?” Danny asked, sounding tired as he reached down and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze that really didn't help all that much.

“In the kitchen,” Darrin said, walking back into the room. The cordial smile he’d worn when he’d first met her only minutes ago was completely gone and replaced by a scowl that matched his brothers’.

“Is Marybeth here?” Danny asked, releasing her hand.

“That bitch is dead to me,” Darrin said, his glare intensifying on her with each word.

“Uh huh, that’s nice,” Danny mumbled absently as he released her hand. “I’ll be right back,” he said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head and heading off towards the small hallway to the left of the stairs before she could come up with a reason to go with him and she desperately wanted to come up with a reason to go with him.

“O-okay,” she said, swallowing nervously as the men’s eyes narrowed dangerously on her.

She looked over at Jason and Trevor for help only to find their smiles gone and their eyes just as narrowed as their cousins’. Aidan released her to join his cousins and brothers in their glaring party, leaving her to step back until her back hit the wall and she realized that she had no where else to go.

“So, umm, big family, huh?” she mumbled, shooting a glance towards the door, towards freedom. Maybe if she moved really fast she could-

“What are your intentions towards our brother?”

Chapter 23

“You’re late,” Kenzie said, smiling hugely as she reached up and threw her arms around his neck, yanking him down to give him a bear hug that would put his brothers’ sad attempts to shame. “I missed you.”

Closing his eyes, he returned his sister’s hug and chuckled. “You saw me last week.”

“It was a short visit,” she pointed out as she released her hold on him and headed back towards the kitchen.

“I had somewhere to be,” he lied, rubbing the back of his neck as he followed his sister.

“Sure you did,” she said, sending him a mischievous smile over her shoulder as she pushed the swinging door open.

He walked in, expecting to find his mother arranging large bowls and platters of food only to find his father standing in the middle of the kitchen with a large bowl of mashed potatoes in his arms. When his father’s gaze locked on Kenzie, he shot her that warm, sappy smile that belonged to his only baby girl. That smile quickly disappeared when he looked up and saw Danny standing in the kitchen. Jaw clenched firmly, he walked past Danny, pointedly looking straight ahead.

“I do so love these family dinners,” he muttered, rubbing his hands down his face.

“Why don’t you just tell Dad that you-”

“Don’t,” he said, dropping his hands by his sides, “Just don’t.”

“Sorry,” Kenzie said, giving him a small smile as she grabbed a large platter of fried chicken.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, sighing heavily as he looked around the large kitchen. “Where’s Mom?”

“She spilled gravy on herself and had to go change,” she said with a shrug.

He gestured absently behind him. “I wanted her to meet Jodi.”

The smile on Kenzie’s face slowly turned to horror as his words registered. “You brought your girlfriend here?”

“Yes.”

“Where is she?” she demanded, shoving the platter of chicken in his hands.

“In the front hall with everyone,” he said, wondering what her problem was.

“You left her with our brothers? Are you out of your damn mind?” she demanded, shoving past him and making him realize what he’d just done.

He’d left Tinkerbelle alone....

With his cousins....

And his brothers....

Who all thought it was their job to look after him.

Shit.

He dropped the platter on the kitchen counter by the door and shoved past his sister at a dead run. He was halfway down the hallway when he realized the large foyer where he’d left Jodi with his brothers and asshole cousins was empty. By the time he’d reached the stairs the cries to stop had started.

“Please stop!” Tinkerbelle cried, sounding out of breath.

He was going to fucking kill them, he swore as he followed the sounds of her pleas. He couldn’t believe how stupid he’d been to leave her like that. He’d known better than to leave her with them, but he hadn’t been thinking. He hated coming here, hated seeing his father, hated the reminder that his father hadn’t spoken a word to him since the night before he’d run off to enlist, but most of all he hated the fact that his father looked at him as though he was a stranger.

“No, I can’t take anymore! Please stop!” Tinkerbelle cried, sobbing hysterically as he rounded the corner and ran down the hallway where he used to race his matchbox cars with his brothers late at night when their parents had gone to bed.

He ran down the hall, shoved the double doors to the family room open and decided then and there that he was definitely going to kill his brothers.

*_*_*_*

“Please, stop!” she cried, gasping for air as she tried to stop laughing, but she just couldn’t, not with all seven of Danny’s brothers shoving the most embarrassing pictures they could find of Danny in her face.

“Wait! I found the home videos!” Arik announced triumphantly as he held up a large stack of DVDs.

“You.....*Bastards!*” Danny snarled as the photo album on her lap was suddenly yanked away.

“Oh, come on!” his brothers whined as Danny snatched the rest of the photo albums away from them.

“Betraying bastards,” he grumbled with a murderous glare aimed at his brothers as he slammed the photo albums down on the coffee table.

“Stop being an asshole,” Duncan said with a roll of his eyes as he reached down to-

“Ow!” he yelped as Danny grabbed his hand and with a simple twist of his wrist, dropped his brother to his knees.

“The next person that shows my girlfriend a picture of me wearing one of Mom’s bras is a dead man!” he snarled, using his hold on his brother’s hand to make his point.

“Let go, you bastard!” Duncan yelled, gasping in pain as Danny added a little more pressure to drive his point home.

She should be concerned about his brother, but.....

“There’s a picture of you wearing a bra?” she asked, shooting a hopeful glance towards the pile of photo albums and wondering if it would be possible to get a copy blown up for her wall.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said, throwing her a menacing look that once upon a time would have cowed her, but now it just made her mumble under her breath and shake her head as she got to her feet and walked around him to find that picture for herself.

She heard a muttered curse and then she found herself pulled into Danny’s arms and his lips pressed against hers. “Be nice, Tinkerbelle, or I won’t show you my old tree house.”

“You had a tree house?” she asked, smiling against his lips as she imagined a mini-Danny holing up in his tree house, warding off his territory from his younger siblings.

“Yes, he did and I could only get him to come out for dinner,” a small woman with graying black hair and a huge smile said as Danny stepped back.

“Sweetheart, this is my mother,” Danny said, leaning down to kiss his

mother on the cheek.

“Mom, this is my girlfriend-Mom?”

“Mrs. Bradford?” Jodi asked, panic taking over as she reached for the older woman just as her eyes rolled in the back of her head and she-

*_*_*_*

“I’m fine,” Mary, Danny’s mother, said, waving off everyone’s concerns and gesturing for everyone to eat.

“Honey, maybe we should go to the hos-” Dr. Bradford began to say only to stop mid-word when Mary turned a furious glare on him.

“My oldest son brought home his girlfriend to have dinner with me and I’m damn well going to have dinner with her!” Mary snapped at her husband, startling everyone at the table.

“Ummm,” Dr. Bradford began to say, swallowing nervously as he slowly, ever so slowly, handed his wife the ice pack he’d been holding against the back of her head where she’d hit the edge of the couch when she’d passed out, and sat back in his chair. “Just let me know if it starts hurting.”

“Uh huh,” Mary said, shifting her attention back on her. “Would you like any more chicken, Jodi?” she asked pleasantly, startling her even more.

“N-no, thank you, I’m fine,” she said, glancing down at the plate overflowing with food and wondering how she was going to eat all of this without getting sick.

“Are you thirsty?” Mary asked, sounding eager as she gestured towards one of the many pitchers lining the long dining room table.

“I’m fine, thank you,” she said with a smile.

“Are you sure?” Mary asked, gesturing for one of her sons to pour her a glass of lemonade.

“She’s fine, Mom,” Danny said, waving his brother off.

“Yes, yes of course,” Mary murmured, looking thoughtful as she absently pushed her mashed potatoes around on her plate.

“This is really good, Mrs. Bra-umm, Mary,” Jodi said with a smile as she took a bite of mashed potatoes.

“So, tell me about yourself,” Mary said with a huge smile as soon as Jodi had food in her mouth.

“You already know all about her,” Danny said, surprising her.

Mary’s eyes narrowed on Danny. “I have waited years for one of my inconsiderate sons to bring a nice young woman home to meet me! You will not deny me this moment!”

Jodi watched in astonishment as every single one of Danny’s brothers suddenly dropped their heads and become completely focused on their food while Jason, Trevor and Kenzie sat there, clearly enjoying themselves. Danny just sat there, pushing his food around on his plate as he stared down at the table. Frowning, she looked from Danny to the end of the table where his father was also staring down at his plate, pushing his food around.

“Jodi?”

“Hmm?” she murmured, tearing her gaze away from Mr. Bradford to focus on his wife, his really happy wife.

“Tell me about yourself, Jodi.”

“There’s really not that much to tell,” she said, feeling self-conscious as every pair of green eyes at the table looked up to watch her as she answered.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Mary said, smiling. “Danny said you went to college?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said, clearing her throat as she shifted in her chair, subtly looking around, hoping that someone, anyone, was going to come to her rescue, but no one said anything. “I have a Master’s in History with a concentration in Antiquities.”

“Very nice, very nice,” Mary said, nodding approvingly. “And your family? Danny said that you’re very close to your father?”

“Yes,” she said, smiling weakly, because they were close, but over the last couple of months she’d been avoiding her father. She didn’t want him to see how far she’d fallen, because it would only take one hug from her father to make her lose it and break down, telling him everything.

She really missed him.

“Why are you here?” Danny suddenly asked, distracting her. She looked over at him to find him still sitting there, still pushing his food around on his plate.

“There was a party,” Jason said, taking a large sip of his ice tea.

“And we weren’t invited,” Trevor finished for him with a careless

shrug.

Okay, then.....

“And Haley and Zoe?” Danny asked, still pushing around his food.

“Were,” Jason answered, taking a bite of mashed potato.

“And the kids?” she asked, too curious to keep her mouth shut.

“Also invited,” Trevor said, taking a bite of chicken.

“Then why weren’t you-” she started to ask, only to get cut off when a small, pretty woman with jet black hair pulled up into a ponytail, wearing a tight black Bradford Construction tee shirt and hip hugging jeans came walking into the room, smiling hugely as she said, “I’m sorry I’m late. Uncle Jared needed a hand with some blueprints.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Darrin demanded, looking seriously pissed off.

“Darrin Bradford!” Mary gasped. “What is wrong with you?”

“Many things,” Reese muttered under his breath, taking a bite of food as he shook his head in disgust at his twin.

“I’m glad you’re here, Marybeth,” Mary said, smiling warmly at the small woman that looked nothing like the rest of the Bradfords. Actually, now that she thought about it, she thought that Marybeth looked like she had a little Native American blood in her. She had a flawless tan, warm dark eyes and a mischievous smile that far surpassed Danny’s. “I wanted to see if you’re still planning on flying down with us for the trip.”

“She’s not going,” Darrin said evenly, grabbing two biscuits off the large platter in front of him.

“Yes, I am,” Marybeth said, sitting down in the empty chair next to Darrin.

“No, you’re not,” Darrin said, even as he scooped some mashed potatoes on her plate and started to load it up with food.

“Yeah, I really am,” she said, taking a sip of his lemonade.

“No, you’re really not,” he said, throwing his arm over the back of her chair as he took the glass of lemonade from her and finished it off.

“You really need to get over it,” Marybeth said and as much as Jodi knew that she should look away, she couldn’t. There was just something about the couple that made it difficult to look away.

“You really think I’m going to be able to get over this kind of betrayal?” he demanded, reaching up to play with a lock of her hair.

“I had lunch at a buffet with Zoe without telling you. It wasn’t the first time and it won’t be the last time so get over it,” she said, stealing one of his rolls off his plate just as a loud gasp drew everyone’s attention to the other end of the table where Trevor stood, looking absolutely furious.

“She told me that she was running errands!”

Chapter 24

“Have you given any thought to joining us in Florida?” his mother asked.

“I can’t go, Mom,” he said, continuing to push his food around on his plate.

“We already bought your ticket, Danny. I was talking to Jodi,” his mother said, making him drop his fork on his plate with a *clang* as he sat back in his chair.

“Me?” Jodi asked, shooting him a questioning look.

“Of course,” his mother said, smiling warmly. “We’re taking our family trip in October and we’d love for you to join us.”

“We can’t go, Mom. I’m sorry,” he said, wondering when his mother was going to start listening to him.

He didn’t want to go on a trip where he was forced to pretend that the fact that his father couldn’t stand looking at him didn’t make him want to shove his fist through a wall. He’d already made that mistake once and that had been enough. Two weeks after the last surgery on his leg he’d foolishly allowed his mother to convince him that a trip to Cape Cod was a good idea.

For whatever reason, she’d thought that being cooped up all day in a cottage by the water was a good way for him to overcome his differences with his father. What she hadn’t counted on was his father renting him his own cottage down the beach and avoiding it like the plague. He’d spent the entire trip sitting on the cottage’s small stone patio with his leg propped up, staring at the ocean. Since then he’d refused to join his family on their annual trips and his mother refused to listen to him.

Every year she bought him a ticket, reserved a room for him and pretended that she didn’t hear him when he told her that he didn’t want to go. He never went and she always seemed to forget that he never showed up the next year when she started to plan their trip.

“Your Uncle Jared already said that he’d approved your time off so you can go,” his mother said with a pleased smile.

He nodded, never taking his eyes off his mother, because he’d learned long ago never to show weakness to this woman when she was busy meddling

with his life. “I took the time off, but I’m not going on the trip.”

“Of course you are,” his mother said, quickly dismissing him as she refocused all of her attention back on Jodi, who was sitting there, clearly trying to resist the urge to get up and flee from the table. “Now, how about you, dear? Do you think you’ll be able to get the time off from work?”

“Ummm,” she licked her lips nervously as she shifted in her chair, throwing him a pleading look that he was helpless to ignore, but he knew that there was nothing that he could say that would save Jodi from this line of interrogation.

“Mom, we can’t go,” he said, but not surprisingly, she ignored him and continued.

“Since the ban has been removed,” she said, pausing to shoot Jason and Trevor a pointed look, “at least for some of us, we’ve decided to take a trip to Disneyworld.”

“Ban?” Jodi asked, squishing her face up adorably as everyone at the table suddenly became occupied with their food again.

His mother waved it off. “The point is that we’re heading down there in a month and we’d love it if you could join us.”

“Thank you very much for the invitation, but I haven’t been working at the library long enough to get vacation time,” his little Tinkerbelle explained with a blush and a smile.

“But, if you were able to get time off?” his mother asked with a familiar gleam in her eyes that he knew all too well.

“Then I would still have to decline, because a trip to Florida is out of my budget at the moment,” she said with that same smile, but that blush.....

It deepened.

“Oh, sweetie, we wouldn’t expect you to buy your own ticket,” his mother said with a reassuring smile.

“I’m sorry, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable with that,” Jodi said softly, shifting her attention down to her plate in an attempt to hide her embarrassment, but he saw it.

He saw everything.

He knew that she made good money, was frugal, never so much as bought a candy bar without planning it into her budget, but he also knew that she

was broke. She was barely getting by and was living paycheck to paycheck. She made every cent count, but she was still struggling and he didn't know why.

"Neither would I," he said, picking his fork back up to push a corn kernel around his plate. "I'm more than capable of taking care of our tickets."

"So, you'll go?" his mother asked, perking up.

"No, I'm sorry."

"Then why are you taking the time off?" Aidan, the bastard, asked.

Because he'd been looking forward to two weeks without his family, without anyone fussing over him, calling him a thousand times a day to make sure that he was okay, that he was eating enough, that he was taking his medication and getting enough sleep. As soon as his mother had announced their annual family trip, he'd gone to Uncle Jared and requested the time off with plans on staying in his apartment with his books and beautiful silence. But now....

Now he wanted to spend those two weeks in bed with Tinkerbelle, but that wasn't going to happen. They were taking things slow....very slow..... No matter how much it was killing him or how badly he needed to tear her clothes off and slide inside her, he was going to take this slow and do this right. Just thinking about all the things that he wasn't allowing himself to do to her had him shifting discreetly in his chair.

"I made plans," he said, looking up to give his mother an apologetic smile and wishing that he hadn't seen the hurt expression on his mother's face.

"Oh," his mother said, giving him a trembling smile as she looked away, but not before the expression on her face made him feel like the biggest asshole to ever walk the face of the planet.

He ignored the way that his brothers, sister and cousins were looking at him and focused on the woman that had cried over him, held his hand, wiped his face and arms down with a cold cloth when his fever got too high and the medication stopped working. This was his mother and he was breaking her heart.

He sighed heavily, already regretting what he was about to say before the words left his mouth.

"We'd be more than happy to go, Mom."

*_*_*_*

"Danny, I-"

“I have to go, Tinkerbelle,” he sighed, throwing the truck into park.

“Yes, but I don’t,” she said, opening her door and jumped out.

She still couldn’t believe that he’d done this to her, putting her on the spot like that in front of his family. What was she supposed to say when his mother suddenly burst into tears? Say no? Seriously? The woman had practically tackled her and strangled the life out of her when she’d reluctantly agreed to go.

She also couldn’t afford this trip or to take any time off.

God, what the hell was she supposed to do? She’d told Danny’s mother that she would go, but she had no money, no time off and a large credit card payment to make at the end of the month. She wasn’t going to be able to go, which meant that she’d lied to her boyfriend’s mother the first night that she’d met her. This did not bode well for their relationship.

“You promised my mother that you’d go,” he said, joining her in front of the truck.

“No, *you* promised your mother that I would go,” she felt obligated to point out as they walked up to the front door.

“I distinctly remember you telling my mother that you would go,” he said, reaching past her to open the door for her.

“You mean when she was crying hysterically as she clung to me, thanking God for sending me to her?” she snapped back, rolling her eyes in disgust.

“It still counts,” he said, shooting her a grin as he reached down and took her hand into his.

“No,” she said, sighing heavily as she pulled her hand free and pulled her keys out of her purse, “It doesn’t.”

“It really does,” he said, taking the keys out of her hand and unlocking the door for her.

“Think again,” she said, taking her keys back from him and tossed them on the table by the door. “I’m not going.”

“You really are.”

“Nope,” she said, walking towards the back hall. She gestured towards the kitchen as she walked past the open door. “There’s leftover spaghetti if you’re hungry,” she said, guessing that he was starving since he hadn’t eaten a single bite of the delicious meal that his mother had made.

Then again, neither had his father.....

“I’ll heat some up in a bit,” he said, following her into her bedroom. “First, we’re going to discuss our plans for the trip.”

She sighed as she kicked off her shoes and undid her pants. “We’re not going on a trip,” she reminded him as she pulled off her shirt.

“Yes,” he said, reaching back and grabbing a handful of his shirt, “we are.”

She shook her head as she reached back and unsnapped her bra. “Danny,” she said, sighing his name as she dropped her bra on the floor and walked into the bathroom, “I can’t go so please just let it go.”

“Why not?” he asked, following her into the bathroom as he shoved his pants down.

She hooked her thumbs in her panties and opened her mouth to tell him exactly why she couldn’t go when something occurred to her. “Umm, what are you doing?” she asked, pointedly looking at his hands, which were currently pulling down his boxers.

He blinked innocently at her breasts as he said, “Continuing our conversation?”

Shaking her head, she turned around and pulled the curtain open. “You don’t need to be naked to continue this conversation.”

“No,” he murmured thoughtfully, “but it helps.”

Too tired to argue with him, she pushed her panties off and climbed in the shower, uncaring if he followed her inside. They hadn’t seen each other naked since that morning when she’d woken up to find him lying on top of her, apparently pinning her to the bed so that she couldn’t do anything questionable during her drugged out state.

“It will be fun,” he said as he stepped inside the shower behind her, pausing by her side long enough to press a kiss against her shoulder.

“I’m sure you’ll have a great time with your family, Danny,” she said, licking her lips and trying to pretend that the feel of his lips on her bare skin didn’t make her breath catch.

“Not unless you’re there, Tinkerbelle,” he said, moving his lips along her shoulder. “Please come with me, sweetheart,” he asked softly as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him.

She opened her mouth to argue with him, but that “please” undid her so the only thing that came out of her mouth was, “I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Why not, Tinkerbelle?” he asked, turning his head so that he could press another kiss against her neck. “I can’t do this without you, Jodi. Please don’t make me do this without you.”

She opened her mouth to tell him no, but somehow she found herself saying, “I’ll ask, but I can’t make any promises.”

“Thank you,” Danny whispered, pressing another one of those kisses to her shoulder that she was really starting to love.

She closed her eyes and leaned back into his touch and felt herself relax for the first time all day. She’d ask and her boss would say no, but at least she could say that she’d tried. Then Danny would go on his trip, she would stay here and miss him, those two weeks would be difficult, but she’d get through it. Then when he came back she would-

“Pass the soap?”

Chapter 25

“What the hell?” he asked, stumbling across the small bathroom floor after the little bully shoved him out of the shower.

Tinkerbelle’s beautifully smug face peeked out from behind the curtain. “I believe that you wanted to take this slow,” she said, clearly biting back a smile as she reached out and grabbed a clean hand towel off the rack and threw it at him.

He didn’t bother trying to catch it. Instead he focused all of his energy on glaring at the woman that was driving him out of his fucking mind. “We were having a conversation.”

She shrugged as she stepped back and disappeared behind the semi-clear curtain, leaving him with a tantalizing view that left him fighting the urge to rip the curtain off the rod and get right back in there with her. God, she was sexy, he thought, licking his lips hungrily as he followed the outline of her curvy little body with his eyes.

“Which we finished,” she said, loud enough to be heard over the shower.

“But I had many more valid points to make,” he said absently with a groan as he watched her pick up a loofah sponge and run it over her breasts and over her stomach.

She chuckled as she ran the sponge back up over her breasts and over her shoulder. “I already agreed to ask if I can have some time off. What else did we need to discuss?”

“Umm, many things.....many, many things,” he murmured, shifting anxiously as he watched her bend over and run the sponge up and down her curvy little legs.

“Well?” she said, switching to the other leg.

“Well, what?”

She chuckled, shaking her head ruefully. “What else did you want to talk about?”

“Things?” he struggled to say as he watched her place the loofah sponge down and pick up a bottle of body wash and pour some into her hand. When she slowly reached down between her legs he was forced to slap his hand on the sink

counter when his legs threatened to give out and drop him on his ass.

“Like?”

He opened his mouth only to release a loud, pained groan as he watched her hand move up and down as she washed between her legs.

“So, you understand?” she said, breaking through his rather inappropriate thoughts and making him realize that she’d been talking the entire time he’d been watching.

“Yes?” he asked, having absolutely no idea what she’d just said.

“So you won’t be mad?”

“Ummm...,” his thoughts dissolved as she turned around and began running her hands over her back and ass.

“They’re probably going to say no.”

“Who will?”

“My boss.”

“Say no about what?” he asked, watching as her hands moved back to her breasts as she used her hands to help wash away the soap.

“The time off,” she replied, tilting her head back to get her hair wet.

“What about it?”

“They’re probably going to say no,” she explained, reaching up to push her hair back, causing her back to arch and her breasts to-

“Huh?”

“I haven’t been there that long, Danny. They’re probably going to say no.”

“Doesn’t hurt to try,” he mumbled, licking his lips as he reached out and grabbed a fistful of curtain.

“It doesn’t, but they’re probably going to say no.”

She was going, he’d already decided that.

She’d been working as a librarian for less than a year, and although there were great benefits to working for the city, they usually didn’t kick in until after a year. She’d ask, they’d say no and then he’d have to step in. He didn’t want to disappoint his mother, but he didn’t think he could handle a trip to the happiest place on earth without his Tinkerbelle.

Then again, he didn’t think that he could handle two weeks with his

father with or without Tinkerbelle by his side. He loved his mother, adored her really, but he didn't think that he could handle this trip alone, even for her. He'd make sure that Jodi got the time off and then he'd use it to his advantage for his game plan.

"They might surprise you," he said off-handedly, pushing the curtain out of the way and stepping back inside the shower where he was going to test his control for the next twenty minutes.

*_*_*_*

"Didn't I just kick you out?" she asked, biting back a smile when she felt his arms wrap around her.

"Yes, but I came back," he said softly as he kissed her neck.

"Yes, I can see that," she said, smiling as she reached over and shut the water off.

"Don't you want to finish your shower?" he murmured, pressing another kiss against her neck.

"Already finished," she said with a careless shrug as she pulled the curtain aside and stepped out, not at all surprised when he followed her.

"I'd be more than willing to make sure that you didn't miss any spots," Danny offered, tracing his fingers down her arm, making her shiver.

"That's very considerate of you," she murmured, shooting him a glance over her shoulder only to have to turn her head right back around and bite her lip to stop herself from smiling, laughing or groaning, she wasn't sure which one at the moment.

She knew two things at the moment; the hand towel that she'd tossed him a few minutes ago hadn't hit the floor and Danny was clearly enjoying this just as much as she was. She'd never been playful, never teased a man like this and she was enjoying it almost as much as she was enjoying his reaction to her. It was an incredible feeling having a man like this panting after her.

"I'm a considerate kind of guy," he said, rubbing a towel down her back.

"Yes," she said, closing her eyes as she enjoyed his touch, "you are."

"Mmmhmmm," he said, moving closer until the towel rack that he was sporting between his legs was pressed against her back, the soft material of the "hand towel" caressing her back and making it difficult to focus on anything

else.

“I thought you wanted to take things slow,” she said, licking her lips not realizing until this moment just how nervous she really was.

“We can still take this slowly, sweetheart,” he promised, reaching around her with the towel.

She trembled as he ran the towel between her breasts. “How slowly?” she found herself asking, licking her lips anxiously as he gently ran the towel over her stomach and back up between her breasts.

“Slow enough to help take the edge off, but not enough to take away from the moment when you and I make love for the first time, Jodi,” he said, emphasizing his words with a kiss and her name, making her melt. “We’ll wait to take this all the way, sweetheart, but if I don’t hear you moan my name soon I’m going to lose my goddamn mind.”

*_*_*_*

Shit, he’d pushed her too far, too fast, he realized as the last words slipped from his lips and his little Tinkerbelle turned around and took the towel away from him. He opened his mouth to backtrack, apologize, grovel, anything that would stop her from leaving him.

“I- *oh, God!*” the vicious growl ripped from his throat as his little Tinkerbelle took him by surprise.

“What if I want to hear you moan my name?” she asked in a surprisingly sultry voice that had his cock jumping in her hand.

He opened his mouth, but the only thing that came out was a choked groan as she squeezed the towel hanging off him around his cock. Licking his lips, he looked down and watched the small tan hand holding the white towel wrapped around his cock move. It had been so long since a woman touched him this way and it had never felt this good before.

He should stop her, take back control and show her how good it could feel when a man touched her. He wanted to erase every bad memory that piece of shit before him had made. He wanted to show her how pleasurable a man’s touch could be, *should* be. He wanted to lay her down on the bed and kiss every inch of her body, but at the moment he could barely stand as he watched that small hand move the towel over him.

With every stroke of her hand, the towel shifted until the head of his cock would disappear and reappear with every stroke. The sight mesmerized

him. Without thought, he shifted his legs apart and arched to give her better access.

“Is this okay?” she whispered almost shyly, shooting him a questioning look as she continued to stroke him with the towel.

“Better than okay,” he growled, leaning down to kiss her. “Don’t stop, Jodi. *Don’t stop.*”

*_*_*_*

“Please don’t stop.”

“I won’t,” she whispered against his mouth as she tightened her grip around his erection experimentally, not sure if she was doing this right, but that loud groan that he released against her mouth had her smiling.

Whenever she’d done this with Jerry he’d complained, made sounds of annoyance and glared at her because he couldn’t maintain an erection or even seem to enjoy it. At first she’d enjoyed experimenting with him, trying to figure out what he liked until one day the thought of touching him left her feeling sick and nervous. It hadn’t exactly helped that she hadn’t liked the way that he’d touched her.

He’d always left her feeling cold and worthless. When she didn’t come, and she never did when he touched her, he put her down, made her think that there was something wrong with her. He’d never hesitated in telling her that she didn’t know what she was doing in the most assholeish way possible.

He’d made her feel worthless.

Danny.....

He made her feel beautiful, sexy and desirable. He never complained about the way that she touched him or kissed him. He welcomed her touch, seemed to crave it. He made her feel whole. He never complained, never bitched, gave her a dirty look or made her feel like garbage. No, not Danny. He murmured words of encouragement, kissed her, caressed her and had absolutely no problem with letting her know how much he enjoyed being with her.

“Wait,” he said, startling her. He placed his hand over hers, stopping her.

“Sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m sor-”

“Shhh, sweetheart,” he said soothingly, reaching down between them and yanking the hand towel away. “I just want to feel your hand wrapped around

me.”

Hand over hers, he wrapped her hand back around his erection and kissed her. “Don’t stop, Jodi. *Don’t stop.*”

Chapter 26

She had him begging for a hand job.

If he wasn't so damn close to coming harder than he'd ever come in his life he'd probably laugh, but goddamn, this felt good. He wanted to push her hand away, turn her around and shove his cock inside that sweet little pussy he'd been fantasizing about for months.

He reached up and cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. He invaded her mouth, teased her tongue into playing with his and groaned when she gently suckled his tongue in time with her strokes. He was so damn close to coming, to screaming her name, but he wanted to prolong it, to make this feeling last.

"You feel so good," Jodi moaned in his mouth, destroying his control.

One second he was struggling not to flex his hips and ride her hands and the next he was blindly reaching out, slapping his hand against the wall and yelling her name until his legs buckled, almost dropping him on his ass. Exquisite pleasure shot down his spine and tore through his cock, robbing him of the ability to breathe, to think, to do anything but hold onto the wall.

He opened his eyes, panting hard and stared down at Tinkerbelle. Her cheeks were flushed, her breaths were coming faster and faster and she was watching him with an expression mixed of hunger and amazement. She was absolutely beautiful and she was most definitely *his*.

"On the bed.....*now*," he bit out, needing to hear her lose control. He wanted to hear her scream his name, to feel her tremble beneath him, to hear her moan and gasp as he pleased her.

When she didn't move fast enough, at least not for his sanity, he grabbed her. He wrapped his arms around her and picked her up. She wrapped her arms and legs around him as he swooped in and picked up where they'd left off. He devoured her mouth, groaning loudly when he felt just how wet she'd become from touching him.

He carried her into the bedroom and laid her down on the edge of the bed. He slid his tongue across hers one last time before he pulled away, but he didn't go far. He brushed his lips against hers as he pulled his arms away.

"Don't move, Tinkerbelle," he said hoarsely as he pressed a kiss against her stubborn little chin.

“Why?” she groaned with a little whimper that had him smiling as he pressed a kiss to her chest.

“Because it’s my turn,” he said, kissing his way down between her breasts.

“Your turn for what?” she asked, sounding a little dazed as he cupped her breasts and gave them a light squeeze.

He kissed his way to her right breast, gently suckling the side of her breast as he went. His hand tightened around her large breast as he reached the firm nipple begging for his attention. He licked around it, kissed the tip, flicked it with his tongue, pulled it into his mouth and suckled on the hard tip as he ran his palm over the other nipple, teasing it into a firm point.

“*Danny,*” she moaned his name, shifting restlessly beneath him.

“Does this feel good, sweetheart?” he asked as he allowed her nipple to slip free from his mouth.

“Yes,” she moaned, swallowing audibly before she added, “do it again.”

Chuckling, he worked his way to her other breast, kissing and licking as he went, savoring every moan that escaped her beautiful mouth. He gently squeezed her breast, holding it as he ran his tongue around the nipple before he pulled it into his mouth and gently tugged it between his teeth. He worked her other nipple between the fingers of his free hand as he squeezed her breast.

God, she felt so fucking good.

But, he knew that she would feel better in a minute. He gave her breast one last squeeze before he trailed his hand down the soft swell of her stomach, over her hip and down her leg until he came to her knee. He moved his hand behind her knee and pulled her leg aside. He trailed his fingers back up her thigh until he came to the soft thatch of hair between her legs.

“*Please make this good, please make this good, please make this good,*” he heard her whispering softly, pleading, and he couldn’t say that he blamed her, not after what she’d been through with that prick.

“I’ll make this good,” he promised her as he moved his hand and cupped her. God, she was so soft, so warm and wet in his hand.

He suckled the firm nipple in his mouth as he moved his palm over her, loving the way she felt, the way her lips parted each time his hand moved over her, exposing her slit and making it easier for him to slide his middle finger

inside her.

“Oh, God!”

He pressed down harder, making sure to rub the greedy little clit brushing up against his palm as he thrust his finger inside her. She was fucking wet and tight, greedily squeezing his finger. Moaning, he abandoned her breast and kissed his way down her stomach. He dropped to his knees in front of the bed as he removed his hand.

“Danny, please don’t stop!” Jodi sobbed, shifting restlessly on the edge of the bed.

“Shhh, I’m not done,” he said soothingly as he leaned down and kissed one thigh and then the other.

A strangled gasp escaped her as he leaned forward and pressed his lips against her slit so he kissed her again, using his tongue to separate her folds. He ran his tongue over her core and the swollen clit begging for his attention. He lapped at it, loving the way she rolled her hips against his mouth.

“*Danny, please.....*,” she moaned, threading her fingers through his hair, holding his mouth against her.

He turned his head and shifted his attention to her core. He licked around her opening, making her moan as he slid his tongue inside her, damn near coming when her sheath tightened around his tongue and squeezed. He could only imagine how good she was going to feel wrapped around his cock when he fucked her.

His hand actually shook as he reached between his legs and palmed his erection. He wanted her. God, he fucking wanted her. He gripped his cock and stroked himself, trying to take the edge off his need for her, but it didn’t work. With every moan and shift of her hips, she had him struggling to stay in control. He wanted to fuck her.....needed to be inside her, but he fought it with everything that he had.

This was too important to fuck up. He wanted her, not just for the night, but for the rest of his life. This was the woman that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with and he wasn’t about to fuck it up because he wanted to-

“*Fuck me,*” Jodi moaned, causing his hand to tighten around his cock. “Please, Danny!”

“*No,*” he practically snarled against her slit as he hungrily licked her out.

“Please!”

“We’re going slow!”

“I don’t want to go slow!”

“We’re going slow!” he snapped against her slit as he was forced to tighten his fist around his cock to stop himself from coming too soon. He might not allow himself to come inside her, but he would damn well be coming with her.

“No!”

“Yes!”

“No!”

“Danny, please!” she sobbed around a moan as she shifted wildly beneath his mouth.

He groaned against her as he shifted his attention back to her core and slid his tongue back inside. He licked her out, sliding his tongue inside her, ignoring the tight grip she had on his hair and the urge to come.

This was for *her*.

He didn’t care how much pain he was in, or how badly he needed to come. He needed to do this for her. He needed to give this to her.

“That feels so good!”

He doubled his efforts, his hand tightened around his cock as he licked and suckled her clit, loving every moan and gasp that filled the small bedroom. He felt her sheath tighten around his tongue, heard her gasp and moan his name, and when he felt her clamp down around his tongue and heard her scream his name, he groaned in relief as he released his hold and let go.

As the tremors of his orgasm tore through him he realized something very important, taking it slow was going to kill him.

Chapter 27

As she carefully closed the door behind her, she realized that yes, yes she was in fact sneaking out of her own apartment. She winced when the door made a slight clicking noise as she locked it behind her.

For about thirty seconds she stood there, frozen on the spot as she waited for a sign that Danny had heard that. When she didn't hear anything, she waited an extra fifteen seconds just to make sure that she was in the clear. Relief surged through her as she stepped away from her door and quickly, yet quietly, made her way towards the front door where freedom awaited her.

God, she couldn't believe that she was doing this.

Okay, so that wasn't exactly true. She could completely believe that she was sneaking out of her own apartment the morning after fooling around with one of the hottest men that she'd ever seen. Last night had been.....

Amazing.

There was no other way to describe it. She'd never been more nervous or more excited in her life than last night. She'd been terrified that she would do or say something wrong, to wreck the moment and bring reality crashing down on her. Instead, she'd had an incredibly sexy man panting and begging her to keep touching him.

She couldn't help but grin smugly as she reached for the doorknob and-
Frowned when the door wouldn't open.

She tried to turn the knob again, but it wouldn't budge. She even checked the lock, but it wouldn't open. Making a mental note to call Zoe later, she turned around and quietly walked back down the hall, making sure to be extra quiet as she walked past her apartment door. She threw a cautious glance over her shoulder and-

Groaned pathetically when she realized that she was trying to make her escape without her purse and lunch bag. She stopped walking as she considered her options. She could walk to work, skip lunch and fill up on water from the bubbler all day and call one of the guys for a ride home later or.....

Go back into her apartment and risk running into the man that she was trying to avoid. She stood there for another minute contemplating her choices until finally with a shrug, she turned around and started walking towards the

backdoor again, deciding that a vigorous five mile walk in ninety degree weather in high heels was the better option.

She opened the backdoor and walked outside, carefully closing the door behind her. Ignoring the oppressive heat, she walked around the house and headed for the driveway where Danny Bradford, the sneakiest bastard to ever walk the face of the planet, was leaning back against his truck, holding her purse and lunch bag.

“Forget something?” he asked with a lopsided smile as he pushed away from his truck.

“I, umm....,” she mumbled pathetically, trying to come up with an excuse for why she was trying to sneak off without a word, but sadly, she couldn’t come up with a single one.

“Jump in. We’ll grab breakfast on the way,” he said, walking around his truck and opened the passenger door for her.

Accepting the fact that she wasn’t going to be able to come up with an excuse for why she’d rather walk the five miles to work than face him, she forced a small smile, murmured, “Thank you,” and accepted his help and climbed in.

Needing something to do, she took her time buckling in as Danny quickly made his way around the truck and climbed in. “Donuts or an egg sandwich?”

“Donuts sound great,” she said, trying not to squirm in her seat as she thought about *everything* that they’d done last night.

“Donuts it is then,” he said with a nod, looking amused as he started the truck and pulled out of the driveway.

As he drove towards the center of town, she sat there praying that he wouldn’t bring up last night or her escape attempt this morning. Ten minutes later as they were pulling into the old library’s parking lot that resembled a war zone these days, she decided that someone upstairs really liked her, because he hadn’t said a single word to her.

She was so relieved that she didn’t notice that he’d chosen a parking spot in the back of the lot, behind the dumpsters piled high with concrete and debris until it was too late.

“Why are we parked back here?” she asked with a frown.

Danny sighed as he reached between them and picked up the box of donuts. He placed the box on the dashboard. “I wanted to eat in peace,” he

explained as he opened the box and picked up a jelly donut.

She didn't have to look to know that it was a jelly donut since he'd ordered a dozen of them this morning. She hadn't said anything at the time, because she was too busy trying avoid talking and figured that he just had a craving, but now-

"Sorry," he said, as a glob of jelly escaped and landed on her bare knee.

"It's fine," she said, giving her head a little shake, thankful that it hadn't landed on her skirt.

"Here, let me clean that," he said, just as she reached for the pile of napkins when she felt it.

His mouth on her knee.

He gently sucked the jelly off her leg and followed it up with his tongue. Taking his time licking her knee clean as she sat there, a bit stunned and not really sure what to do.

"What are you doing?" she finally managed to ask.

"Cleaning up my mess," he said with one last lick before he leaned back and-

Squeezed more jelly on her knee.

"You may want to pull your skirt up," he warned as he leaned back down to swipe his tongue through his newest mess as he reached down and pulled her shoes off.

It took her a minute to register his words and when it finally hit her, she couldn't grab the hem of her skirt fast enough. She yanked it up, deciding that she'd rather deal with wrinkles than jelly stains, but apparently she hadn't moved it up high enough.

"Higher," Danny said softly as he made more jelly hit her leg, this time on her thigh.

He dragged his tongue up her leg, sucking the jelly off her leg as he reached up with his free hand and pushed her skirt up higher until she took the hint and pulled her skirt up until it was shoved up around her waist and she was reclining back against the passenger door. She wasn't exactly sure how she'd ended up in this position, but Danny seemed happy with the results as he continued to make a path of jelly up her leg.

"What exactly are you doing?" she asked, swallowing nervously as she

glanced around the parking lot, relieved to discover that they were still alone.

“Open your shirt,” he said, instead of answering her.

“What?” she asked, a little breathless while she watched as he continued licking his way higher up her leg.

“I’d do it, but I don’t think that you’d want to have to explain why your shirt is covered in jelly,” he explained calmly as he traced a circle on her inner thigh with his tongue.

Her hands trembled as she reached up and quickly worked at the buttons on her blouse, telling herself that she was doing this to protect her white blouse.

“Spread your legs for me, Tinkerbelle,” he said, between flicks of his tongue across her thigh.

Licking her lips, and stretching up one more time to make sure that the coast was clear, she did just that. When he reached up with his clean hand and flicked open the front clasp of her bra and moved the cups aside to expose her breasts, she moaned in anticipation. She’d never done anything like this, never dreamed that she’d be doing this one day and couldn’t believe that she was doing this now.

“You taste so sweet, Tinkerbelle,” he growled against her skin as he ran his hand over her left breast and gently squeezed. “But, I bet I can find something sweeter to lick.”

*_*_*_*

“Oh, God.....,” he heard her moan as he squeezed the last drop of jelly out of the donut and licked it off the soft skin bordering her panties.

Once he licked the last drop of jelly off her skin, he tossed the donut aside and cupped her other breast with his hand, spreading the jelly over her hard nipple and breast. He gave her thigh one last lick before he pushed up and shifted so that he could take her nipple between his lips and lick it clean.

“Danny! Oh, God, Danny!” she cried as she wrapped her arms around him and shifted desperately beneath him.

As he moved his attention to her breast and worked on licking every last drop of jelly off her breast, he reached down and hooked his fingers in her panties and pulled them off. He moved to the side and sat back on the bench as he pulled them free and tossed them aside. Groaning, he took her nipple back in his mouth as he reached down and undid his fly.

“Come here and show me just how wet you are,” he said as he released her nipple and sat back against the bench as he pulled his cock out with one hand and with the other, gave her hand a gentle tug that had her moving.

She grabbed onto his shoulders and leaned in, taking his mouth in a hungry kiss as she followed him until she was settled on his lap and her pussy was pressed down on him, thoroughly soaking him.

“No sex?” she doubled-checked as she pressed down harder until the underside of his hard length pushed past her lips and was pressing against her core.

“No sex,” he forced himself to say when all he wanted to do was to shift her so that he could ram his cock inside her and fuck her until she squeezed him dry.

“Okay,” she agreed with a loud moan against his mouth as she shifted her hips experimentally, but abruptly stopped before he could register the move.

“Jodi?” he asked, forcing himself to be patient.

She pulled back, looking scared, really scared as she admitted, “I’ve never done this before.”

He chuckled weakly as he reached up and cupped her face. “And you’re afraid of doing something wrong?”

She worried her bottom lip as she reluctantly nodded.

“Do whatever feels good and I guarantee you that I’ll love it,” he said, leaning in and kissed her. He teased her lips with his own as he slowly dragged his fingertips down her neck, over her chest until he came to her breasts and cupped them.

“Are you sure?” she asked, against his lips, releasing a gasp as he gently squeezed her breasts.

“Extremely,” he groaned against her lips as he deepened the kiss and teased her breasts, hoping that it would be enough to relax her.

A few seconds later she started moving.....and nothing had ever felt better.

Needing to feel her as she moved against him, he dropped one of his hands away from her breasts and placed it on her bare bottom. He cupped her cheek, loving the way it moved against his hand as she ground herself down against him. Desperate to see her lose control, he brushed his lips against hers

one last time before he sat back and watched as she turned his life upside down.

He gave her breast one last squeeze before he released it and reached down and shoved her skirt up higher until it was wrapped around her waist and he had an unobstructed view. He licked his lips as he watched her rub herself over the underside of his cock, coating him in her arousal. She was so fucking wet. Mesmerized, he watched as she moved on him while he licked his lips, wishing that it was the soft pink lips rubbing over his cock.

“Does this feel okay?” she asked, breathlessly as she rubbed harder against him.

“Keep that up and you’ll find out,” he promised her as he forced himself to look away so that he could lean in and capture her lips in a hungry kiss that had her moaning as she wrapped her arms around him.

She shifted on his lap and pressed down, wrenching a loud groan from his lips as she started to lose control. Her movements became less coordinated, harder and wilder until he was forced to cup her ass and encourage her to keep going.

She felt so fucking good....

His hands gripped her ass tightly as he struggled against the need to shift her so that he could fuck her. God, he wanted to be inside her, had to be inside her, but he couldn’t.

She wasn’t just some one-night stand that he’d picked up to kill some time during leave. This was the woman that he wanted for his own. He wanted to do this right, wanted to take things slow and make sure that when he finally made love to her that it was perfect. He wanted to erase every memory of the fucking asshole from her mind. He wanted to be the only man that she ever wanted.

“Oh, God,” she moaned loudly as he pushed up against her, making sure to rub against her clit as she rode him.

When she pushed down on him and stilled, he swallowed her cries of pleasure and waited it out, waited until the last scream was torn from her lips before he let go and when he did, he dropped back against the bench and roared with pleasure as she wrung him dry.

As she dropped against his chest and struggled to catch her breath, he couldn’t help but wonder if there was an accelerated way to win a woman’s heart, because he wasn’t sure that he was going to survive this game plan.

Chapter 28
Orlando, Florida
1 Month Later.....

“Are you still ignoring me?”

“Yes,” she said, taking his bottle of water from him and finishing it off before handing the empty bottle back to him with a mutinous glare.

“It’s not my fault that your boss said yes,” Danny pointed out as he glanced around the hotel lobby, looking bored.

“*Wasn’t your fault?*” she repeated back in disbelief, absolutely stunned. “You *accidentally,*” she stressed, throwing up her hands to make finger quotes, “locked him in the storage closet when you gave him the tour of the new library, for seven hours until he agreed to give me time off with pay!”

He blinked down at her. “The lock was faulty.”

“The lock was faulty?” she repeated back with a slight shake of her head, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

“Mmmhmm,” he muttered as they moved up in line.

“How does the lock being faulty explain the chair and cooler full of snacks you set up in front of the storage room?” she demanded, shifting her bag over her shoulder.

“I had to keep my strength up while I waited for help,” he said with a sniff, forcing her to look away so that he didn’t see her lips twitch.

“And by help I assume you mean pulling the key out of your pocket and unlocking the door,” she said, frowning as a thought occurred to her. “Ummm, where’s the rest of your family?”

“Probably at their hotel,” he said with a shrug. “Why?”

“They’re not staying at this hotel?” she asked, moving up in line with him.

He chuckled as he pulled out his wallet. “No.”

“Why not?”

He sighed as he reached down and took her hand in his and raised their hands so that he could press a kiss against the back of her hand. “Because we never would have gotten a moment of peace otherwise.”

“But it’s a family trip,” she said, nearly sighing with relief, because no matter how cute she thought his family’s overprotectiveness was, and it really was, it was also a bit much to deal with.

Like last Sunday when his brothers and cousins came over to watch the game. She hadn’t planned on joining them, but Danny had used puppy dog eyes and the promise of a backrub to convince her that spending some time with his brothers was a good idea. It hadn’t been. At least not for her.

Danny on the other hand had seemed completely oblivious to the looks that his brothers kept sending her. Whenever Danny kissed her, held her hand, touched her or pulled her onto his lap, they stared. They’d stop eating, talking and putting each other in headlocks just to stare.....

It was a little unnerving.

If that wasn’t bad enough, every time Danny left the room the questions would start. They wanted to know her dating history, about her family, her plans for the future and of course, how she felt about Danny. She tried her best to answer their questions. Well, most of them. But apparently her answers had not been what they were looking for, because about two hours into the game they’d decided to hand over their interrogation to the twins, who both just happened to be cops.

The trip here had been just as bad. During the entire ride to the airport his brothers had taken turns watching her every move. They kept it up at the airport until she’d finally had enough and made her escape to the bathroom, which in retrospect had been a mistake. His mother and sister had taken her escape as an opportunity to get to know her better.....

After deciding to block those fifty-two minutes from her memory, she gave up and returned to Danny’s side only to discover that there was a two-hour delay. For the next hour and a half she’d contemplated returning to the bathroom, but the incident that she’d blocked from her memory had kept her butt firmly planted in the hard plastic chair where she’d tried to ignore the stares and glares.

The only one who hadn’t seemed interested in her was Dr. Bradford. He’d sat off to the side, reading or watching the planes take off and land. His children and wife left him alone for the most part. The only time he’d acknowledged any of them was when his wife or one of his children spoke directly to him. He’d smile at his wife or chuckle at something that one of his children said, except if Danny spoke that is. Dr. Bradford seemed completely

oblivious to his oldest son.

“We’ll see them at dinner and at the parks,” he explained as he leaned down and brushed his lips softly against hers. “Besides,” he whispered softly against her lips, “if my mother was here we wouldn’t be able to get away with sharing a room.”

“And your mother was fine with us staying at a different hotel?” she asked, deciding that pretending that his mother wasn’t aware of all the naughty things they did was for the best.

“No,” he said, shooting her a wink as he stepped up to the front desk and handed over his ID and credit card.

“That would explain why she hasn’t stopped calling since we got in the taxi.”

“Or texting me,” he said, looking down at his phone with a rueful shake of his head.

“She’s going to make you pay for this later. You do realize that, don’t you?” she said, knowing his mother well enough by now to guess that the older woman wasn’t going to take this lying down.

*_*_*_*_*

“Are you tired?” he asked, running his fingers down her spine.

“No,” she mumbled with a sleepy little sigh that had him smiling.

“Liar,” he whispered, pressing a kiss against her bare shoulder.

“Just give me five minutes and we can go,” she muttered into her pillow.

“How about this?” he suggested, pressing another kiss against her bare shoulder, savoring the fresh scent of her skin from her recent shower. “Why don’t we take a nap, then grab a late dinner and end the night with a midnight swim in the pool?”

“Sounds heavenly,” she mumbled with a sleepy little smile, “but what about your family? Aren’t we supposed to meet them for dinner?”

“Already taken care of,” he said, pressing another kiss against her bare shoulder as he moved to stand up. “I sent Aidan a text and told him that we weren’t going to make it tonight.”

“You should go,” she said, curling up on her side. “I’ll be okay.”

He let his gaze run over her naked form, taking in her beautiful back,

the curve of her hip and bottom and her shapely legs and tugged his shirt off. “I’m staying,” he said, toeing off his shoes as he worked the fly of his pants.

“Your mother will be mad,” she mumbled, sounding seconds from falling asleep.

“Probably,” he said with a soft chuckle as he shoved his pants and boxers down. “But she’ll get over it. Besides,” he said, crawling on the bed behind her, “she’s going to have her hands full tonight with my brothers and father.”

“Probably,” she agreed with a soft chuckle that ended on a sigh as he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer. “Don’t let me oversleep.”

“I’ll wake you up in a couple of hours.”

“You promise?”

“I promise,” he said, pressing a kiss against her bare shoulder as he closed his eyes, imagining all the ways that he could wake her up and settling on his favorite as he drifted off.

*_*_*_*

“Oh, God!”

“It’s time to wake up, sweetheart,” Danny murmured as he slowly ran the tip of his tongue over her slit.

No matter how many times he woke her up like this, and he did this a lot, she didn’t think she’d ever get used to it. For the past month he’d shown her just how good a man’s touch could be. She hadn’t thought it was possible, but he’d managed to destroy every insecurity that Jerry had helped create. He made her feel beautiful, sexy and desirable. She loved the way he looked at her, the way he touched her and made her body feel.

“You ready to fly, Tinkerbelle?” he asked in that low deep voice that made her toes curl as he gently parted her lips with his fingertips.

“Getting close,” she moaned softly as she ran her fingers through his short hair, encouraging him to continue.

She gasped as she felt his tongue tease her core. “You are so damn sweet,” he growled as he slowly licked her. “I could lick you for hours.”

He wasn’t lying. She’d learned that very quickly weeks ago. She never knew a man could enjoy the act so much before, but Danny did. He seemed to love nothing more than pulling down her panties and burying his face between

her legs. It didn't matter if they were in her new office at the library, in the laundry room, in his truck, kitchen, living room, or shower, if there was no one around, he took advantage.

She loved it, more than she ever thought possible, but sometimes like now she wanted more, *needed* more. As much as she wanted to ask him to stop teasing her and finally make love to her, she knew better. It didn't matter what she said or how much she begged him, he wouldn't make love to her. He was determined to take this slowly even if it killed them, and at times like this she was pretty sure that she was capable of killing the bastard.

"*Danny,*" she moaned as he slid his tongue inside her. "Please!"

"Please what?" he asked, teasingly as he pulled his tongue out so that he could tease her clit.

"You know what I want," she moaned, needing to touch him in return, to hear him moan as she teased him and drove him out of his mind.

"Yes," he said, running his tongue from core to clit and back again before he pressed a kiss against her lips and sat up.

He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers as he shifted and laid back on the bed. Smiling, she bent down and pressed a kiss against his chest, loving the way he groaned. She continued to press kisses against his chest, down his stomach, paying special attention to the scar that cut down his abs.

When she came to the head of his erection she lapped at the tip, teasing the slit the way that he liked before she took it in her mouth. The first time that she'd done this for him she'd been nervous, terrified that she was going to hate it the way that she used to hate doing it for Jerry, but within seconds she'd realized something very interesting.

She loved doing this for him. She loved the way he felt in her mouth, the way he moaned as she challenged herself to take him deeper than the last time.

"You going to keep teasing me?" he asked in a strained voice as he gripped her hips and shifted her to the side, patiently waiting for her to move her leg over him.

"Mmmhmm," she said around the large tip in her mouth.

He chuckled as he cupped her bottom and-

"Oh God....," she moaned, shifting back to force that tongue teasing her to slide back inside her.

“Put me out of my misery, Tinkerbelle,” he said, rolling his hips and causing the head of his cock to push against her lips.

She opened her mouth and moaned as he pushed inside her mouth. She closed her lips around him and moved forward, taking him as far as she could before she pulled back until the tip was sliding over her tongue. Moaning, she spread her legs further and shifted back gently so that she could ride his tongue. He groaned his approval as she shifted her weight onto one hand and wrapped her other hand around the large erection sliding in and out of her mouth.

“That’s it, baby,” he rasped, against her slit as he slowly shifted his hips, sliding in and out of her mouth and hand.

Gasping, she tightened her grip around him and-

“Hey, roomie, I-*Oh, shit!*” the startled shout echoed throughout the small room just as a startled squeak tore from her lips and she found herself being rolled off the bed and hitting the carpeted floor with a grunt and a groan.

Reaching up blindly, she grabbed hold of the blanket, yanked it down and buried herself beneath it, praying that the men shouting at each other forgot that she was here as she lay there, dying of mortification.

Chapter 29

“Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Probably,” Darrin admitted easily, keeping his back to the room as Danny grabbed the sheet off the bed and wrapped it around his waist.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked, even though he had a sneaking suspicion that his mother was somehow involved.

“The hotel that we were supposed to stay at was overbooked so we came here,” his brother explained with a sigh before he added, “I didn’t mean to, umm,” he cleared his throat, “interrupt.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” he asked, glancing around the bed to find his little Tinkerbelle curled up in the fetal position, cowering beneath a blanket. He considered telling her that it was okay to get up, but reconsidered it and decided to leave her there for the time being.

“Marybeth and me,” Darrin said, raking his hands through his hair.

“Then why are you in my room?” he snapped, praying for his brother’s sake that he had a damn good reason for barging in on them.

His brother shook his head. “I fucked up and she isn’t talking to me right now.”

“I see,” he murmured, glancing back at the bed where Tinkerbelle had been seconds away from screaming his name.

“Anyway, I was hoping that you wouldn’t mind switching with me. I figured the girls could share a room and I could bunk here with you,” Darrin said, sounding hopeful.

“She’s been pissed at you before,” Danny pointed out.

Darrin chuckled without humor as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Never like this.”

“I see,” he murmured thoughtfully as he looked from his brother to the woman curled up on the floor, trying to hide.

Sharing a bed with his brother or with the woman that he planned on doing a hundred different naughty things to during this trip.....

“Yeah, that’s just not going to happen,” he said with a shake of his head as he reached out and grabbed his brother by the back of the neck.

“Wait!” Darrin said, trying to reach back and slap his hand away, but Danny just ignored him as he steered his brother towards the door. “I’m your brother, you asshole!”

“Uh huh, that’s nice,” he said, reaching over and opening the door. He swung the door open and shoved his brother out of the room.

“Where the hell am I supposed to go?” Darrin demanded with a murderous glare.

“Go beg for forgiveness,” Danny suggested with a shrug, not really caring enough to get involved in his brother’s weird ass relationship.

“I already did!” Darrin snapped. “The stubborn woman won’t listen to reason and-”

“Yeah, you have fun with that,” he said, cutting his brother off. “I’m going to go spend the night with my incredibly hot girlfriend.”

“But-”

He closed the door on his brother’s face and threw the lock with a satisfied sigh that ended on a groan when he turned around to find Tinkerbelle stumbling around the room, yanking on her clothes.

“What are you doing?” he asked after a minute of watching her wrestle with her pants.

“Getting dressed,” she said with a grunt as she yanked her socks on.

“I can see that,” he murmured. “Why exactly are you getting dressed?”

“Because I’m going home,” she said, roughly pulling on her shirt.

“I see…….”

“I’m sorry to have to do this, but we’re gonna have to break up,” she said, sighing heavily as she grabbed her bag and with a groan, picked it up and placed it on the edge of the bed.

“Why exactly are we breaking up?” he asked with a frown as he folded his arms over his chest and leaned back to watch as Jodi continued to stumble around the room, grabbing her stuff and shoving it in her bag.

The glare she sent him was just so damn cute, he decided, biting back a smile that would probably get his balls kicked in. “Because he saw us!”

“Darrin?”

“Yes!” she hissed, dropping to her knees to crawl on the floor,

frantically looking under the bed and coffee table.

“He didn’t see much,” he said with a shrug.

She stopped mid-search to shoot him a homicidal glare. “He saw plenty!”

“He won’t say anything,” he said, knowing his brother well enough to know that he would have absolutely no problem keeping his mouth shut. The men in his family might be assholes, but they were assholes that didn’t believe in humiliating women.

“It doesn’t matter!” she snarled, returning to her search.

“Why is that?” he asked, tilting his head to the side to get a better view of that beautiful ass that he loved so much as it swayed back and forth with her efforts to reach something beneath the bed.

“Because it doesn’t!”

“I see.....,” he mumbled absently as he reached down and dropped the sheet to the floor and grabbed his boxers. “Would it make you feel better if I beat the shit out of him?”

She stopped mid-search and her shoulders slumped with relief as she said, “Yes, yes it would.”

*_*_*_*_*

“You do realize that there was a buffet right next to the hotel, right?” she asked as he pulled open the door to the restaurant for her.

“We’ll hit that the day before we leave,” he said, holding the door for her as she walked inside.

“Why exactly are we doing that?” she asked, waiting for him by the door.

“Because I have a strategy,” he announced as he took her hand into his and walked with her down the corridor.

“You have a strategy for buffets?” she asked, sure, hell, hoping, that she’d misheard him.

“Yes.”

“I see,” she murmured, suddenly having a bad feeling about this. “Maybe we should-”

“That bastard!” Danny bit out as they turned down the small hallway

and spotted Darrin standing in line.

“I think I saw a pizza place down the street,” she said, tugging on his hand almost desperately to get him to stop.

She really didn’t feel like facing his brother after he’d caught her with her mouth on-

“I was here first,” Darrin said with a glare that was thankfully aimed at his brother, because at the moment she really wasn’t sure that she could make eye contact with him or handle him acknowledging her in any way.

“Too bad,” Danny said, ignoring her attempts to escape and pulling her in line right behind Darrin.

“You know the rules.”

“Yes, I do, but since you haven’t even paid yet this buffet is still up for grabs,” Danny said, getting in his brother’s face.

“There are plenty of buffets in this city,” Darrin said, standing his ground, “why don’t you go to one of them?”

“We’re not going anywhere.”

“Umm, I don’t mind grabbing pizza,” she offered, not at all surprised when the men ignored her.

“When you fuck this up, and you will, you better not take me down with you,” Darrin bit out, staring his brother down.

“I’m not the one who’s going to fuck this up,” Danny said, almost nose to nose with his brother now.

Sighing, she glanced over her shoulder, calculating the cost of a taxi ride back to the hotel when a throat cleared. “How many?”

She looked back to find the cashier eying the two large brothers nervously.

“One,” Darrin said tightly just as Danny bit out, “*Two.*”

Sighing, she rubbed her temples and accepted the fact that it was going to be a very long night.

*_*_*_*_*

“Tinkerbelle?”

No response.

“Sweetheart?”

She shook her head, but at least it was a sign of life. “Sweetheart, we have to leave. They’re closing up now.”

Squeezing her eyes shut tighter, she shook her head. He sighed as he knelt down in front of the booth and reached for her only to have her cringe away from him. He sighed heavily as he dropped his hand.

“Look, I’m really sorry,” he said, having absolutely no idea what to say to make this right for her.

“J-just give me a minute,” she said, licking her lips as she hugged her knees tightly against her chest.

“Sir? We’re closing up,” the waitress, one of the few waitresses who hadn’t run screaming when the shit hit the fan, said, shifting nervously next to him.

“We’re leaving,” he promised her with a smile that he hoped would reassure her that he wasn’t about to lose it like his brother and-

“Please leave now,” the waitress whispered, shifting back away from him.

Sighing, because there was nothing that he could say or do to fix this, he nodded as he reached for Jodi, who thankfully didn’t put up a fight when he scooped her up in his arms and carried her towards the door. She grabbed onto his shirt and held on for dear life as she buried her face against his chest and released a shaky breath.

“Promise me something, Danny,” she whispered against his chest as her grip on his shirt tightened.

“What’s that, Tinkerbelle?” he asked, kissing the top of her head as he walked down the sidewalk towards a line of waiting taxis.

“Promise me that it was all just a bad dream.”

“Of course it was, Tinkerbelle,” he said against the top of her head, wondering if a few shots of tequila would help her suppress the memory of what happened here tonight.

Chapter 30

“Morning!”

“Kill. Me,” Danny groaned as he turned over onto his stomach and released a muffled groan against the carpet as he tried to push himself up and promptly failed.

“Rough night?” she asked, biting back a smile when Danny turned to glare at her through bloodshot eyes.

“*You* did this to me!” he snarled accusingly as he blindly reached up and grabbed a pillow off the bed.

“Me?” she asked, frowning in confusion as she looked around the room, taking in the empty liquor bottles, beer cans and-

“I hate you both,” Darrin groaned from where he lay beneath the coffee table, making her wonder how she’d missed him.

“Exactly how much did the two of you drink last night?” she asked, a little startled when both men shot her accusing glares.

“How much did *we* drink last night?” Darrin repeated in disgust.

“Not half as much as you did!” Danny snapped, blindly reaching up and grabbing the blanket off the bed.

“I didn’t drink last night,” she muttered thoughtfully, although now that they mentioned it, she really couldn’t remember all that much about last night.

“I really hate you,” Darrin mumbled with a pained groan as he managed to crawl out from under the coffee table and get to his feet.

“Where are you going?” Danny asked as he pulled the blanket over his head.

“To my room where I can die in peace,” he said, stumbling his way to the door.

She turned her attention back to Danny to find him curled up in the fetal position. “Kill. Me,” he muttered pathetically, again, leaving her standing there wondering if now was a good time to mention that she had a craving for scrambled eggs.

*_*_*_*

“So, explain something to me,” Jodi said as she folded her arms on the

edge of the tube he was floating on.

“What?” he asked, wincing at the sound of his own voice and wondering when the aspirin was going to kick in.

“How exactly is this a family trip when you haven’t spent any time with your family?”

“I’m with them in spirit,” he told her, tempted to pull her up on his lap, but decided against it a minute later since this was a family hotel and they’d probably take exception to him removing that small black top and suckling on her nipples to help him forget about his hangover.

“Uh huh, is that why your mother keeps calling?”

“She doesn’t really expect me to spend every minute of this trip with them. Trust me,” he said, closing his eyes behind his shades, deciding that a post-lunch nap was in order.

“So, you’re planning on seeing your family?”

“Sure.”

“And when is that exactly?” she asked as he registered the feel of her small wet fingers tracing his jaw.

“Soon.”

“Tonight?”

“No.”

“Tomorrow?”

“I’ll still be recovering from this hangover,” he said, opening one eye to glare at her.

“Lightweight,” she said on a drawn out sigh and a shake of her head.

He was just about to remind her that he hadn’t been the one running up and down the hallway last night demanding to know who’d stolen her fairy dust when he saw her lips twitch and heard the telltale sound of a muffled snort of amusement. Opening his other eye, he glared at her as he quickly took in their surroundings. They were alone, probably because everyone else was still at the parks. Whatever the reason, it worked in his favor.

“I never did thank you for the scrambled eggs this morning, did I?” he asked thoughtfully as he slid off the tube and reached for her.

Her eyes widened with a muttered, “Uh oh.”

*_*_*_*

“*Open the door, you son of a bitch!*” she hissed as she cowered in front of their hotel door, holding onto the edges of the small pool towel with everything that she had.

She might be small, but the towels were even smaller and barely covered her. She’d discovered just how small they were when the bastard snatched her bikini off and ditched her naked ass in the pool as he’d sauntered away, smiling that smile that made her contemplate murder. It had taken her over thirty minutes to find the courage to jump out of that pool, race across the patio and grab a handful of the thinnest towels known to man and hide behind the dirty towel bin where she’d struggled to cover herself with the towels and failed.

She either ended up flashing her boobs or her ass, neither of which was appropriate for a stroll through the hotel lobby. It had taken her some time and a lot of luck, but she’d finally managed to cover her back and ass with one towel and drape another one in front of her by using her teeth and a lot of prayers and the promise of kicking Danny’s ass. Twenty minutes later and a humiliating wait in the lobby, she finally managed to make it to the sixth floor.

“Tinkerbelle,” Danny said with that goddamn charming smile as he opened the door and gestured for her to come in.

She stormed inside, only pausing long enough to slam her foot down on his instep.

“Ow! What the hell was that for?” he demanded, so she did it again before she went into the bathroom, grabbed the door and slammed it in his face.

Truly afraid that she was going to end up killing him with her bare hands, she dropped the towels, stepped inside the shower, yanked the curtain closed and turned the shower on full blast. As she stood there, trembling while she waited for the water to heat up, she decided that it might be a good idea if she bunked with Marybeth for the rest of the trip to save herself the headache of trying to come up with that defense attorney fund.

“You still mad at me?” the bastard asked as he stepped in the shower and wrapped his arms around her.

“Yes.”

He chuckled as he kissed her shoulder. “Would it make you feel better if I told you that I stayed down there to keep an eye on you?”

“No.”

“What if I told you that I kept a middle-aged couple with three really annoying children from going in the pool?” he asked with another kiss.

“It might help,” she said with a sniff as she pointedly looked away.

“How about if I said that I was sorry?” he asked, pressing another kiss against her shoulder, this one lingering.

“You’d be lying,” she said, licking her lips as she felt him tease the curve of her neck with the tip of his tongue.

He chuckled, but the sound was strained as he ran his hands over her stomach. “Do you want to finish what we started last night?” he asked, cupping her breasts with a soft groan as he gently sucked the spot just below her ear.

More than anything, but she didn’t want to stop this time. She didn’t want to settle for his mouth or his fingers. Even the idea of sitting on top of him and riding the underside of his cock left her unsatisfied. She wanted him. All of him this time. She was sick of taking things slowly, of testing every type of foreplay known to man only to end up lying in his arms, gasping and trembling and feeling oddly unsatisfied no matter how many times he’d made her scream his name.

“I don’t want to stop this time,” she said, licking her lips as she waited for him to explain that it was important for them to wait.

It was a discussion that she was sick and tired of hearing. In the beginning she’d understood and even appreciated his desire to take things slowly, but now she thought she’d scream if she didn’t feel him sliding inside her. She waited to tell him that, but he didn’t say anything. He just stood there, his lips pressed against her neck, his hands cupping her breasts and the part of him that she craved pressed against her back.

“Are you sure?” he asked softly after what felt like an eternity.

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes.”

“You’re positive?” he asked after a slight pause.

“Yes!” she groaned, not sure how much more she was expected to take before she lost it.

“I see,” he murmured thoughtfully, pressing a kiss against the curve of her neck as his hands reflexively squeezed her breasts.

One minute he was squeezing her breasts, standing right behind her and

the next.....

“Where are you going?” she asked, forced to slap her hand against the wall to stop herself from falling on her ass when he suddenly disappeared, taking his support with him.

“Shit!....Shit!...*Shit!*” the frantic cursing caught her attention.

Curious, she grabbed hold of the shower curtain and pulled it open. She felt her brows arch in disbelief as she watched Danny stumble and trip around the small bathroom as he struggled to pull his jeans up on his wet legs.

“Shit!” he snapped as he tripped over his feet and fell face first in the small carpeted hallway where he continued struggling to pull his pants up.

“Umm,” she said, rubbing her nose to hide her smile, because she was pretty sure that he wouldn’t appreciate it at the moment, “what exactly are you doing?”

“Condoms,” he said in answer, panting as he continued to wrestle with his pants.

“What about them?”

“Need them!”

“You didn’t bring any with you?” she asked, realizing that he hadn’t planned on taking this to the next level with her and not sure how she felt about that.

“No,” he said, pausing in mid-wrestle with his shirt to shoot her a hopeful look, “did you?”

Biting her lip, she shook her head, because like him, she hadn’t planned on taking this to the next level, mostly because she’d expected to end up staying in the room next to his parents. “No.”

“Shit!” he snarled, returning his attention back to the wrestling match.

“Ummm, do you want some help?” she offered, stepping out of the shower as she grabbed a towel and wrapped it around herself.

Getting to his feet, he pointed a finger at her and said, “Stay here.”

“But-”

“Stay here and don’t get dressed,” he said firmly as he grabbed his tee shirt and backed up towards the door. “Stay naked.”

“Umm, okay?” she said, watching as he reached back, opened the door

and stepped out into the hallway.

“Naked!”

Sighing, she walked over to the bed, picked up the remote and dropped down onto the soft mattress with a groan, wondering how long it would take before Danny realized the he'd left his wallet and shoes behind.

Chapter 31

“That will be twelve dollars, sir,” the front desk clerk said with a warm friendly smile as she placed two packs of condoms on the short counter.

“*Shit*,” he growled, startling the clerk as he frantically searched his pockets for his wallet. “I forgot my wallet in my room.”

“If you have your ID or your room key, I can charge the purchase to your room,” she offered, smile back in place.

“I don’t have any of it,” he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

“If you’d like to go back upstairs and get your wallet I can set these items aside for you,” she suggested, already picking up the small boxes and placing them on the counter behind her.

He stood there, staring intently at the condoms, already knowing that if he went upstairs to get his wallet that he wasn’t coming back down. Jodi had given him the go-ahead and he was too tired to fight it anymore. He wanted her so fucking badly and he couldn’t wait any longer, but he couldn’t give in without a condom.

Unless.....

Maybe she was on birth control, he wondered hopefully, but just as quickly dismissed the possibility. She’d only been with one man before him, a fucking loser, but it had been a while since she’d had sex and hadn’t had much of a reason to use birth control. He also didn’t think that he had enough self-control to walk away if she wasn’t.

“Hey, asshole!”

He sighed with relief as he turned around and found Aidan coming his way. “Thank fucking God,” he said, moving to meet his brother halfway.

“Everyone’s been calling you since yesterday. You were supposed to meet us at the park-*Hey! What the hell are you doing?*” Aidan demanded as Danny grabbed him by the arm, turned him around and snagged his wallet.

“Thanks,” he said, pulling out two twenties before he tossed the wallet back to his brother.

“Danny!”

He ignored his brother and returned to the small hotel store and grabbed a couple bottles of water, a few protein bars and a couple of cereal bars for Jodi

and headed back to the small counter. He placed the items on the counter and stood there, waiting impatiently for the clerk to finish with the couple that she was checking in so that he could pay and get upstairs to Jodi.

“What the hell are you doing?” Aidan asked, coming over to stand next to him while he glared at the bastard asking the clerk about the shuttle service to the parks.

“Getting supplies,” he said, glancing back at the small store, wondering if he should buy Jodi that overpriced stuffed teddy bear and box of chocolates. After a minute he decided that it couldn’t hurt. He grabbed the bear and chocolate, ignoring his brother’s questioning look and placed them on the counter, and returned to glaring at the annoying bastard holding the clerk up.

“Supplies?” his brother murmured with a cocked brow as he picked up the teddy bear.

With an annoyed sigh, he grabbed the teddy bear away from his brother and placed it back on the counter. “Supplies,” he said tightly, glaring at the bastard now asking the hotel clerk about brochures.

“We’re supposed to be on a family trip,” Aidan said quietly as he leaned against the counter.

“Don’t start,” he said, drumming his fingers against the marble countertop as he waited for the bastard to hurry up.

“Mom’s upset.”

“No, she’s not,” he said, knowing his mother well enough to know that if she was upset she would have come here to tell him instead of sending Aidan to do her dirty work. His mother didn’t work like that. She didn’t use messengers or guilt. If she had something to say, she said it.

“Fine. We’re all worried about you,” Aidan said, toying with the teddy bear’s foot.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he said, wondering just how many fucking questions one man could have about brochures.

“Really? Then explain why you’ve been skipping family dinners lately, why you don’t return phone calls and why none of us have been able to get a hold of you in the past two days.”

“Because I have a girlfriend now, asshole. I haven’t been going to dinner every other night because I spend most nights with her now. I don’t return all of your phone calls, because I don’t have that kind of time. You assholes call

me at all hours of the day with whatever bullshit excuse you can come up with to check up on me. I'm fine, more than fine and as soon as you assholes realize that things will be even better."

Aidan sighed, "We're just worried about you."

"There's nothing to worry about. I'm fine."

"Yeah, I can see that," Aidan said with a chuckle when the hotel clerk picked up the boxes of condoms with a smile and placed them on the counter.

"Would you like these items as well?" she asked, gesturing to the items on the counter.

He nodded, struggling not to think about what was waiting for him upstairs. With a smile and a slight nod, she began scanning all the items as he stood there, shifting anxiously.

"That will be \$52.37," she said, looking up at him expectantly.

With a nod, he grabbed the bags and gestured to his brother. "He's got it."

He ignored his brother's muttered, "Greedy bastard," and headed towards the elevator doors. Five minutes later he was standing outside their hotel room, searching for a card that he didn't have and constantly adjusting his pants trying to make his erection behave. Finally after a minute, he gave up and knocked on the door, rather urgently.

He damn near sighed with relief when the door finally opened and his little Tinkerbelle stood there, wearing nothing but a towel and-

*_*_*_*_*

Gasped as Danny practically tackled her and took her to the floor, dropping the bag he'd been holding in the process. He took her mouth as he blindly kicked back, finally managing to kick the door shut behind them.

"Are you sure?" he asked, ripping her towel away.

She opened her mouth to tell him yes, but the word was drowned out by a loud moan when Danny suddenly wrapped his lips around her nipple and gently suckled. He forced another moan from her lips when he slid a finger inside her.

"Oh, God!" she gasped as he thrust his finger inside her.

"I can't wait to be inside you," he growled around her nipple as he shifted between her legs until he was kneeling.

With his free hand he reached down and ripped open his pants while she ran her fingers through his hair and over his back, encouraging him. She couldn't believe this was finally happening. She was finally going to make love with the man that she-

Okay, now was not the time to think about *that*. She wasn't going to think about how she felt about him, how much she loved being with him, seeing him or how just hearing his voice made it easier to get through her day when all she wanted to do was crawl back into bed and stay there. He'd gone from being the worst part of her day to being the best part in a very short amount of time.

For months she'd been fantasizing about just how good it would feel to have him slide inside her, how it would feel to have a man that actually cared about her make love to her. With Jerry it had been cold, awkward, uncomfortable and for the most part, she hadn't really felt much other than him jostling on top of her. When he'd finished, he'd left her feeling used, dirty and just.....

Alone and miserable.

Danny had never made her feel that way. It didn't matter if he fell asleep sitting on the couch by her side with his arm thrown over her shoulders or he was holding her after he'd made her scream until just the thought of talking hurt her throat, he never made her feel like she was worthless. With him, she felt safe, happy and wanted. With Danny, she knew that he wanted her more than-

"We shouldn't be doing this," he said as he shifted to her other nipple and pulled it between his lips before he abruptly released it and moved up her body so that he could look down at her as he slid a second finger inside her.

"Why not?" she managed to ask, spreading her legs further apart and licking her lips as he slowly moved his fingers inside her.

"*Because I have a game plan,*" he said tightly, the muscles in his neck straining as he removed his hand and settled on top of her, earning a startled moan from her when the move nestled his hard erection against her slit.

"Game plan?" she said, trying to focus, but it was an impossible job with the way that he was pressing down on her. She licked her lips, realizing that she could feel just how hard he really was. He felt so good as he subtly rocked against her.

"Mmmhmm," he murmured seductively as he leaned down to trace her jaw with teasing little kisses. "I'd planned on waiting another month or two so

that I could plan the perfect evening.”

“And what exactly did this perfect evening look like?” she asked, rolling her hips against him, unable to help herself.

“I’ve been putting a lot of thought into it, but I was thinking of a bed and breakfast in the woods, a blanket of snow on the ground, a romantic sleigh ride under the stars,” he whispered, briefly brushing his lips against hers before he continued kissing his way back to her jaw, “wine in front of the fire, a bubble bath before I laid you on the bed and made love to you all night.”

“Sounds like you’ve put a lot of thought into this,” she said, licking her lips as she ran her hands over his back, loving the way his muscles flexed beneath her touch.

He chuckled as he kissed his way back to her lips. “I’ve thought of nothing else, sweetheart. I’ve imagined just how good it would feel to slide inside you, how wet you’d be, how tightly you’d wrap around my cock and how loud you’d moan as I fucked you.”

“And now?” she asked, terrified that he’d stop.

“And now I’m going to find out.”

Chapter 32

Oh, he was truly fucking up his game plan, but as he moved down her delectable little body, licking and kissing every inch of skin that he came across, he couldn't have cared less. He wanted her and he was done waiting for the perfect moment.

This wasn't going to fuck up his game plan. He wouldn't let it. He'd give in and finally find out just how good she was going to feel wrapped around his cock and worry about the rest later. Besides, showing her just how good it felt to be fucked by a man that wanted her could only advance his plans.

He'd use sex to get what he wanted and by this time next year, she'd be his for good. Finally, one thing in his life would go the way that it should. He'd have what his cousins had, a woman that made his life worth something, and he couldn't wait. It had taken some time, but now he was sure that Tinkerbelle was the woman that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. She was beautiful, feisty, unbelievable sexy and she drove him out of his fucking mind.

"Spread your legs, Tinkerbelle," he said, kissing her belly button.

With a little whimper that had him licking his lips in anticipation, he pressed one last kiss just below her belly button before he shifted until he was awkwardly lying on the floor between her legs. He should pick her up and carry her to bed to do this properly, but he didn't want to chance wrecking this moment. He pressed a kiss against her slit, savoring her sweet scent and telling himself that he could at least take this slowly and make it good for her, but the first swipe of his tongue destroyed his control.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh.....*Danny!*" she screamed, tangling her fingers in his hair as she shifted wildly beneath his mouth, riding his tongue as she trembled beneath them.

He struggled to hold back, to make this last longer at least until he could clear his head and think straight, but the second she started tugging at his hair he'd lost what little control he had left. He moved up her body, taking her mouth in a demanding kiss as he reached down with one hand and shoved his pants down as far as he could push them. He was still pushing them down when he pulled back, groaning when the move caused his cock to slide down against her slit until the sensitive head was tracing her wet slit, getting coated in her arousal.

"Danny, please!" she begged against his lips as she wrapped her arms

around him.

“Dreamed of this,” he growled against her lips as he pushed in slowly.

She cried out in his mouth as he struggled to go slowly. He wanted to savor this moment. As he pushed in he groaned, long and loud as her sheath tightened around him. God, she was so fucking wet and tight. He’d never felt a hold like this before.

“You feel so fucking good,” he said, pushing in the rest of the way until he felt his balls press up tightly against her bottom.

She chuckled against his lips as he laid there, struggling not to come.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, his voice strained as he struggled not to lose control and embarrass himself. He raised his head and looked down at her, raising a brow in question.

“I can feel you,” she said, laughing as she hugged him. “I can actually feel you!”

Chuckling, he leaned back down and kissed her. “How do I feel?” he asked, slowly pulling back until the tip of his cock was positioned at her entrance. He swallowed her surprised gasp as he pushed back inside her, relishing the feel of her silk walls sliding over him.

“Good,” she moaned. “You feel so good, Danny.”

“Was it worth the wait?” he asked, starting to move in a slow, steady rhythm.

“God, yes,” she moaned as her arms tightened around him.

He brushed his lips against hers before he pulled back just far enough so that he could watch her. He gazed down into her eyes as he continued to roll his hips, sliding in and out of her, every stroke coating his cock and making the returning slide that much smoother. He’d never felt anything better in his life. He’d never felt like this before, like he was home. In her arms he felt like everything in his life was the way that it should be.

“You are so beautiful, Jodi,” he said, shifting his weight onto his right arm so that he could cup her face with his other hand. He traced her plump bottom lip with his thumb. “So, goddamn beautiful.”

Her lip trembled beneath his touch as her lips pulled up into a watery smile. “Thank you,” she whispered, leaning up and kissing him. He followed her lips as she laid back. She ran her hands down his back and over the curve of his

ass, encouraging him to continue.

He continued to thrust inside her, harder and faster to match the kiss, which had gone out of control. No matter how many times he'd imagined fucking her over the last few months, he'd never imagined that it could feel this good.

"Oh, *shit!*" he groaned as he felt her tighten around him.

She moaned, long and loud against his mouth as he quickened his thrust, slamming into her harder and faster, struggling to hold back, to hold on for her.

"Danny!" she cried out as he felt her clamp down around him. He growled her name as he lost control.

Gasping for air, he laid on top of her, kissing her face, her nose, and her chin, unable to stop smiling as he did it. It wasn't until he kissed her firm lips that he realized that something was wrong.

*_*_*_*

"Ow!"

"Don't move."

"How bad is it?" she asked, biting her lip as she risked a glance over her shoulder to find the bastard struggling not to laugh.

"It's ummm," he cleared his throat, "not that bad."

"Liar," she muttered pathetically as she turned back around and sat there, trying to pretend that she didn't have major rug burn covering the back of her arms, back and ass.

He chuckled as he leaned forward and kissed the top of her shoulders, one of the few places that wasn't covered with rug burns. "It's not that bad," he clearly lied, because every inch of her back and bottom was on fire.

Fire!

"Is-is it bleeding?" she asked, worrying her bottom lip, praying that he did a better job lying to her this time.

A long drawn out sigh was her answer. "I'm really sorry, sweetheart."

At that she turned her head and buried her face in her pillow. "It was worth it," she mumbled, because it had been worth it.....

At least it had been until the most intense orgasm of her life had slowed

down and she'd realized that her back was on fire. That's when she may have started freaking out.....a bit.

He chuckled as he gently ran his fingers through her hair. "I'm glad that you think so, sweetheart."

"It was," she solemnly said with a nod and a little snuffle.

"I'm a little out of my league with this one," he admitted with a sigh, which made her a little nervous because that meant-

"We have two choices here, Tinkerbelle," Danny said, taking her hand into his. "I can either take you to the emergency room or go get my brother."

Yeah, that's what she figured he was going to say.

"I'm fine," she said, and she was just as long as she didn't move or care that seventy percent of her body was on fire.

"Sweetheart," he said, giving her hand a small squeeze, "you've got some serious rug burn from a hotel carpet. Besides the fact that it looks really painful, I'm concerned about all the bacteria."

"I'll just rinse off in the shower. It will be fine," she said, moving to do just that when Danny decided to go into detail.

"Sweetheart, it's a *hotel room carpet*," he stressed. "It's probably coated with dirt, sweat, rotted food, urine, semen, fecal-."

"Okay," she rushed out, cutting him off as she squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to think about all the bacteria coating her body, "go get your brother!"

*_*_*_*_*

"Get the germs out! Get them out!" Tinkerbelle muttered into her pillow, her small hands gripping the pillow she had her face buried in, tightly.

"He'll be here soon," he said soothingly as he glanced down at his watch, wondering what was taking his brother so damn long to get his ass here.

"It's gross!" she whined miserably into her pillow.

"Shhh, I know, sweetheart. I know," he said, gently rubbing her leg as he tried not to look at the damage he'd done to her back and bottom.

He may have lost control a little at the end there.....

"No more sex on hotel floors," she muttered.

"Agreed," he easily agreed, because as far as game plans went, he'd seriously fucked this one up.

He should have waited and gone with his plans to make this special for her. He should have gone with yellow roses, her favorite, sleigh rides, holding her in front of the fire, champagne, chocolate and-*oh, fuck.*

Swallowing, he stood up and walked over to the bag he'd dropped. Even before he picked the bag up, he already knew he'd fucked up more than just the rug burn. He picked up the bag, looked inside and closed his eyes in defeat.

Condoms.

He'd forgotten to wear a condom, something that he'd never done before. His father had drilled it into his head to always use a condom.

Always.

Dropping the bag on the coffee table, he walked back over to the bed and sat down. "Tinkerbelle?"

"Hmmm?"

"I have to tell you something."

"What's that?"

"I, um," he started to say only to pause to take a deep breath, "I didn't use a condom."

"Oh, crap," she muttered with a groan that ended with an, "Ow!" when he tried to give her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Sorry," he said, wondering just how badly he was going to end up fucking this whole thing up.

Chapter 33

“Is your brother here yet?” she asked, simply to have something to say to break the silence.

When he didn’t answer her, she turned her head and opened her eyes to find him sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall. “Danny?”

“I’m going to marry you,” he simply said, taking her by surprise.

“I’m sorry. What?” she asked, trying to sit up, but the pain shooting up and down her back had her lying back down on her stomach with a wince.

“I’m going to marry you,” he said more firmly this time.

“Is this about the condom?” she asked, having absolutely no idea where else this could be coming from.

“Yes,” he said, sighing as he shook his head and said, “No,” confusing her even more.

“Okaaay,” she said, drawing out the word, even more confused now.

“This isn’t because of the condom, Tinkerbelle,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I planned on asking you. I have a game plan and everything, but I thought after what happened tonight that I should tell you that I planned on marrying you in case-”

“In case this got me pregnant,” she finished for him with a nod of understanding.

“Yeah,” he said, turning his head and giving her one of those smiles that she loved. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

She grabbed a handful of comforter as she struggled not to have a nervous breakdown. “I wasn’t worried,” she said, glad that she was lying down for this conversation. She wasn’t ready to get married, not yet.

After what Jerry had put her through, was still putting her through, she was in no position to get married. She was still cleaning up the damage her last fiancé had left her with. She had an insane amount of debt, barely any savings and a year before she’d be out of debt. She didn’t want to go into a marriage like that. When she got married it would be without debt and without the daily stress that she had to deal with.

She didn’t want her problems to become his.

“Good,” he said, leaning down and kissing her cheek, “I don’t want you to worry about anything.”

“Danny, I can’t-”

“Thank God,” he said, sighing with relief as he stood up to go answer the knock at the door that had stopped her from telling him that she couldn’t marry him.

It was probably for the best, she decided as she closed her eyes and prepared herself for his brother to see her naked, scratched up ass. What she wasn’t prepared for was Danny’s father seeing her ass instead.

*_*_*_*

“Aidan told me that you needed a doctor,” his father said before he could ask him what he was doing here.

For a moment he considered turning his father away, but Jodi needed him. With a nod, he stepped back and gestured for his father to come in. Without another word, his father walked into the room and headed to the bed where he suddenly stopped and stared.

“Is that, um,” his father cleared his throat just as he noticed Tinkerbelle’s beautiful skin turning a fiery bright red from the tips of her toes to the tips of her ears, “rug burn?”

“Is that Dr. Bradford?” she whispered.

“Yes,” Danny said, answering both questions at once.

“I see,” she said, lifting her head as she grabbed her pillow and in one move, pulled the pillow over her head and attempted to hide.

“From this rug?” his father asked offhandedly as he glanced down at the dark green rug.

“Yes,” he said, leaning back against the wall, waiting for his father to fix Jodi’s back and leave.

“You’re probably going to need a shot of antibiotics as well as a topical solution just in case,” his father said, clearly intent on acting like he wasn’t even in the room.

Like usual.

He wasn’t having that, not when it came to his Tinkerbelle. “She reacts badly to medicine,” he told his father, not at all surprised when his father didn’t bother looking at him.

“What’s her reaction?” his father asked, taking the black backpack off his shoulder and placing it on the edge of the bed next to Jodi’s dainty little feet.

Jodi mumbled something into the mattress, but since there was no way either one of them could understand her, and he doubted that she was going to pull the pillow off her head to answer them, he decided to answer for her. “She becomes disoriented and intoxicated.”

His father nodded thoughtfully as he looked over the damage done to Jodi’s poor damaged skin while Danny did the same. He felt like such an asshole taking her like that.

“I’m afraid it’s necessary,” his father finally said with a sigh. “Jodi, I’m going to clean the abrasions now and I’m afraid that it’s going to sting.”

He wasn’t sure, but he thought she nodded. “Once your abrasions are clean I’m going to apply a topical antibiotic, which also has a numbing agent and should give you some relief. After that I’m going to give you a shot to make sure that you don’t develop an infection. Is that okay with you?”

The pillow on top of her head shifted slightly again. His father took that as another nod. “I’m going to get started now,” his father said with a reassuring smile as he reached into his bag and took out a kit.

Another nod had him walking past his father and around the other side of the bed where he sat down on the bed next to Jodi and took her hand in his. She squeezed his hand, but didn’t say anything as his father cleaned her back, bottom and arms.

“She’s not going to feel like doing anything for a few days, which is for the best. She should relax, stay in bed and give the abrasions a chance to heal. She should refrain from taking baths for the next two days. Showers are fine, but make sure that you apply more antibiotic afterwards.”

She groaned, long and loud beneath the safety of her pillow.

“I’m going to have some antibiotic ointment delivered later,” his father explained as he pulled out a syringe and a small vile of medicine. “For now this should help you sleep.”

The pillow shifted from side to side and he knew that she shaking her head, because they both knew that whatever his father gave her wasn’t going to help her sleep.

“It will be fine. I promise,” his father said reassuringly as he leaned over and injected Jodi with the medicine that was guaranteed to make the next

twelve hours a living hell.

*_*_*_*

“Sit on her!”

“You!” Danny snapped back at his father, who was pressed against the door, trying to stop Jodi from making another escape.

“Please! I just want to go on one ride, two at the most,” Jodi said with that damn perky smile that she’d been trying to use on them for the last couple of hours as she pulled at the collar of the tee shirt they’d finally managed to wrestle on her an hour ago. It was one of his shirts and she was practically swimming in it, but at least she was covered.

“We’re not taking you to the Magic Kingdom,” he said, realizing that he probably sounded like a broken record by now.

“I don’t need you to take me. I can take one of the hotels super friendly, fast service shuttles,” she said with that damn smile that was starting to make his eye twitch.

“Jodi,” his father said softly, “sweetheart, I don’t think that right now is a good time for you to go to the park.”

“Oh,” she said, scrunching her face up adorably as she considered his words. “Then can I have something to eat?”

His father sagged against the door as he mumbled, “Thank God.”

“What would you like, Tinkerbelle?” Danny asked soothingly, hoping not to startle her into skipping to another subject since food was safe. They could handle feeding her and if she was eating, that meant that she wasn’t driving them out of their fucking minds and, not that he would ever admit this, scaring the shit out of them.

“Can I have a burger and fries? And a chocolate milkshake? Or a root beer float?” she asked with a hopeful smile.

“You can have whatever you want,” he said, leaning down and brushing his lips against hers, glad that she was finally settling down.

“Write down how she likes her burger and I can go get-” his father began to say, sounding eager for a reason to get the hell out of there.

“*I’m getting her burger,*” he snapped, turning around to face down his father.

“*I’m getting it,*” his father snapped back, pushing away from the door.

“You’re the one that gave her the medicine,” he pointed out, keeping his gaze locked on his father as he reached out and grabbed his wallet. “You should stay and monitor her.”

“You’re the one that gave her rug burn!”

“He really did,” Jodi said with a dreamy little sigh and smile that he forced himself to ignore and headed for the door.

“I’ll be back in twenty minutes,” he said to his father. “Please just watch her.”

He thought that his father was going to argue, but much to his surprise, his father stepped away from the door with a nod. Thankful for a break, even a small one, he left the room and headed towards the elevator, praying the entire time that Tinkerbelle would be sound asleep by the time he returned so that he could pretend for at least one night that his father didn’t know that he’d skipped getting matching Mickey ears so that he could fuck his girlfriend raw.

Chapter 34

“So.....,” he said, facing the small woman watching him curiously and having absolutely no idea what to say to the woman that his son was obviously head over heels in love with.

She blinked adorably up at him.

Just blinked.

“Have you ever been to Disneyworld before?” he asked, just to break the increasingly awkward silence.

Nothing.

“We brought Danny here when he was two, but shortly after that the ban started,” he said, expecting a comment or question about the ban, but instead she simply stood there, blinking and starting to freak him out a little bit.

“When they finally lifted the ban a few months ago Mary decided that it was time to bring the kids down here. We-”

“Why do you hate Danny so much?” she suddenly asked, startling the hell out of him.

“I don’t hate him,” he said, blinking down at the small woman.

“You don’t talk to him,” she said, blinking up at him curiously.

He rubbed his hands roughly down his face as he admitted, “I don’t know what to say to him.”

“You don’t look at him.”

He sighed heavily, suddenly wishing that he hadn’t put Aidan in a headlock and threatened to beat him within an inch of his life if he didn’t tell him where Danny was staying.

“I look at him,” he said, wondering when the medicine was going to kick in and knock this small woman out and put him out of his misery.

“No, you don’t,” she simply said, not sounding mad, but curious. “Why?”

He chuckled without humor as he double-checked to make sure the door was locked and then walked past the small woman, pausing only long enough to pat her on the head simply because he couldn’t help himself, and sat on the couch. “He doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

“Why?”

He rubbed his hands down his face and leaned back against the couch as he studied her. “Will you remember any of this in the morning?” he asked, watching as the small woman walked over to the bed, sat down and winced.

“Remember what in the morning?” she asked, looking adorably confused.

Chuckling, he asked, “Has Danny ever told you how he ended up a Marine?”

She shook her head, cringed, and flopped down onto her side with a little sigh.

“Danny was a cocky kid, but a good kid. I never had to ask him to help his mother or look after his brothers and sister. He always got good grades. Didn’t do drugs. Never caused any real problems, and then.....,” he looked off, shaking his head, still unable to believe how badly he’d screwed everything up.

“Then the first time he’d fucked up, seriously fucked up, I lost it. He’d scared the hell out of me and I reacted poorly. I was so determined to make sure that he never did anything so stupid ever again that I made everything worse. I dragged the poor kid out of the ER and made him take his SATs when he should have been taking it easy and getting an earful from his mother. Instead, I pushed him and when he fucked up his SATs I kept pushing him. I was so goddamn angry that he’d done something so foolish that could have cost him his life, cost me my son,” he ground out, flexing his fists and wishing like hell that he could go back to that morning when he’d found his son barely breathing on the bathroom floor and do things differently.

“When he joined the Marines.....,” he paused, taking a deep breath as he locked his trembling hands together, “I was terrified for him and that didn’t stop until he was brought home three years ago when they shipped his body back to the States. Then my terror turned into something that there are no words to describe.”

He looked up to find her worrying her bottom lip as she watched him. “Did you know that they’d shipped him home to die?”

She shook her head against the mattress.

“He got shot saving his unit, and a medic unit along with a truck full of patients. He should have died in the shitty hospital they’d sent him to, but his CO called in some favors and once he was stable enough to travel they sent him

home...to an even shittier hospital.”

“My son was dying, Jodi, because of me,” he said, rubbing his hands down his face. “I took him out of that hospital, brought him to mine, and for the next two months I put his body through hell to make sure that he not only lived, but walked again. I kept him in a coma so that he wouldn’t have to deal with the pain and to give him a better chance to survive what we had to do to him.”

“The best moment of my life was when he opened his eyes, but it was also the worst because I knew that there was nothing that I could say to make up for what he’d been through.”

“You love him?” she asked with a sad smile.

He met her gaze head on as he said, “More than my own life.”

“I see,” she said seconds before things took a turn for the worse and the small little woman that made his son smile for the first time in years showed him what hell on earth looked like.

*_*_*_*_*

“Stop crying! Please stop crying!”

“What the hell?” he asked, ramming his keycard in the reader as he struggled to hold all the bags of food in his other arm.

Terrified that she was in pain or that his father said something to upset her, he shoved the door open, walked into the room and nearly tripped over his own two feet when he spotted Jodi, bundled up in a blanket and curled up on his father’s lap, crying hysterically.

“What did you do to her?” he demanded, dropping the bags on the coffee table so that he could kneel in front of her. He ran shaky hands over her neck and arms, looking for a reason behind the tears.

“I didn’t do anything to her!” his father yelled, sounding a bit hysterical as he handed her over to him. He happily took her in his arms and stood up so that he could sit on the couch next to his father.

“Shhh, Tinkerbelle, it’s okay,” he said, throwing his father a questioning look only to find his father blindly stuffing french fries in his mouth.

“One minute she was fine,” he said, between shoving food in his mouth, “and then next she was crying hysterically and wouldn’t stop!”

“I-It...it was so...sweet!” she said, sobbing hysterically against his chest. “It’s so sad!”

“What’s so sad?” he asked, looking back at his father to see him taking a big bite out of one of the burgers he’d bought.

His father paused to shoot Jodi a nervous glance as he muttered, “Nothing.”

“So,” snuffle, “sad,” she mumbled, clutching his shirt in her small fists as she once again buried her face against his chest.

He glanced back at his father to find him chugging one of the shakes down. His father shrugged and returned to finishing off the shake while he sat there, holding Jodi and wondering what the hell he’d missed.

*_*_*_*

“Is it your Mom again?” she asked, shifting on her stomach so that she could look back at Danny.

He sat against the headboard, staring down at the phone in his hand. “It’s fine.”

No, it really wasn’t.

He was supposed to be here with his family, but instead he was here, spending his vacation trapped in this hotel room with her and rubbing antibiotics on her ass. It was really sweet, but he shouldn’t be here. He should be spending time with his family, making his mother happy and dealing with his father.

God, it was just so sad.....

“Are you crying again?” Danny asked, tossing his phone aside and quickly moving to her side to take her hand.

“No!” she rushed out, turning her head quickly and discreetly wiping at her eyes before she turned back around and plastered a big smile on her face. “I’m fine.”

“Do you want to rent another movie?” he asked, shifting on the bed so that he was lying on his stomach next to her.

“No,” she said, shaking her head and refraining from telling him that she was all moved out for the moment. “I thought I’d read a book or take a nap,” she said, deciding that a nap would probably be the best choice since reading a book like this wasn’t very comfortable and well, there really wasn’t anything else that she could do thanks to the rug burn on her ass.

“A book sounds like a good idea,” he said, nodding approvingly. “Do you want me to go find you something to read?”

“I was actually thinking about taking a nap,” she said, nibbling on her bottom lip as she looked over at him, a little terrified that he was going to bring up marriage again, but thankfully he didn’t.

“A nap sounds good, too,” he said, nodding.

“Well,” she said, clearing her throat uncomfortably, “I was thinking that while I took a nap that it would be a good time for you to go spend some time with your family.”

He shook his head as he laced their fingers together. “I’m fine where I am,” he said, smiling as he leaned down and brushed his lips teasingly against hers.

She nearly whimpered when he pulled away. After finally knowing what it felt like to really be made love to by a man, she was back to hand holding and chaste kisses that lasted less than a second and she *hated* it. She wanted to kiss him, to sit on his lap, to move on to all those sexual positions that she’d never tried, because Jerry had only been able to handle one, and he’d hardly been able to handle even that. She wanted to have sex in the bed, on the couch, in a car, against the wall, in the shower. Basically, she wanted to have sex, lots of sex with her incredibly hot boyfriend, but until her ass, back and arms were rug burn free that was wasn’t going to happen anytime soon.

“You’re not tired,” she said, sighing as she pulled her hand away from his.

He shrugged, taking her hand back. “We’ll take a nap, watch a movie, have dinner and maybe I’ll run out to get us a few new books later,” he said with that charming smile that she loved, but was adding to her frustration.

“Look,” she said, licking her lips, “I really appreciate you staying with me for the last couple of days, but you don’t have to stay here. We’re in Florida with your family and you haven’t spent any time with them, because you’ve been stuck babysitting me.”

“It’s not babysitting,” he said with a reassuring smile that she wasn’t buying....not at all.

Her eyes narrowed on him, studying that charming smile, the lazy way that he played with her fingers and what she saw had her pulling her hand free. With a glare, she did what needed to be done.

Chapter 35

“Stop pushing me, you evil little munchkin!”

Taking a sip of her soda, she simply shoved him and kept walking. He threw her a murderous glare over his shoulder, but he smartly kept that incredibly fine ass of his going. Shaking her head in disgust, she took another sip of her soda as she watched the pouter walk towards the ticket booths where his brothers were waiting for them.

She still couldn't believe that he'd used her to get out of spending time with his family. It was shameful, she thought eyeing an Eeyore stuffed animal that she decided the big baby in front of her was going to buy her for playing this little game with her.

“You shouldn't be out of bed,” he threw over his shoulder, obviously trying one last pathetic attempt to get out of this. Her ass hurt with every step she took, but it wasn't anything that she couldn't handle.

“Keep walking,” she said, making note of where that cart selling the Eeyore doll was for later.

*_*_*_*

“Little demon!” Lucifer snarled reaching for the stuffed Eeyore only to get his hand slapped away.

“*It's mine,*” Tinkerbelle snarled back, hugging the Eeyore that she'd made Danny buy her a few minutes ago when she'd discovered that it was the only one left in that size in the entire park.

“I hope you get trampled by dwarves,” Lucifer bit out with a glare aimed at Tinkerbelle as he shook his hand off.

“Lucifer Bradford!” his mother gasped, looking absolutely stunned as she came to a stop beside them.

“She started it,” Lucifer muttered, sending the stuffed Eeyore in Jodi's arms another glare as he folded his arms over his chest and walked off to glare at her from a distance.

“Keep walking, mama's boy,” Jodi said, making a pathetic attempt at trash talk with a taunting smile only to let out a little squeal of surprise when Lucifer suddenly came back, forcing her to jump behind Danny and hide.

“Mama's boy?” Lucifer snarled, trying to reach around him to grab her.

Sighing, because this was just getting sadder and sadder by the minute, Danny reached behind him, grabbed Jodi by the arm and gently pulled her in front of him where he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close as he glared over her head in warning. Lucifer grumbled something about little bullies as he walked off with a pout.

“Where would you kids like to start?” their mother asked, adjusting the Mouse ears she’d made his father buy her.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” he said, while the rest of his siblings started debating where they should start, kissing the top of Jodi’s head as he noted the exact moment that his mother realized that he wasn’t going to be able to go on ninety percent of the rides.

“Oh, Danny,” she said, looking absolutely heartbroken. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking when I-”

“It’s fine, mom,” he said with a wink, pressing another kiss against the top of Jodi’s head as he pretended that he didn’t see the look that passed between his brothers and sister or the fact that his father looked like he wanted to put his fist through a wall.

“No, no it’s not,” his mother murmured as she gave him that look that he’d grown to hate soon after he’d come out of his coma. She reached up and rubbed her temples, with a little shake of her head she said, “I should have planned this better.”

He chuckled as he dropped his arms away from Jodi and took her small hand in his. “Stop worrying about it.”

“We can go somewhere else,” Duncan said with that same damn smile that was going to get him punched.

“We’re fine,” he said more firmly as he gestured to the guide map in his mother’s hand. “Where do you want to go first?”

She opened her mouth to say something, but his father cut her off before she got the chance. “Why don’t we start with Splash Mountain?”

*_*_*_*

“I’m not sharing a room with that bastard!” Garrett snarled, getting into Duncan’s face.

“Stop your bitching!” Dr. Bradford snapped, shoving a keycard in his son’s hands and gesturing towards the elevator where she stood, watching the show with morbid fascination as she waited for the elevator.

“Behave yourselves!” Mrs. Bradford said, hushing her boys with a look that left her sons looking appropriately chastised.

“Why don’t we go grab something to eat?” Danny suggested, leaning down and giving her another one of those chaste kisses that had her biting back a frustrated sigh.

“Sure,” she said absently as she glanced around the hotel foyer. “How exactly did they get kicked out of their hotel?”

“Room service,” he said with a shrug as he took her hand in his and led her towards the entrance.

“Room service?” she asked, frowning as she allowed him to lead her to double sliding glass doors.

“Probably for the best if we don’t mention it. Mom’s still pretty pissed that they broke the rules.”

“*Rules?*”

“It’s probably for the best if we don’t talk about that either,” he said, smiling down at her as she raced to wrap her mind around what he was saying. They had rules about room service?

“Where are you going?” Aidan asked, pushing away from the wall to join them as they walked past him.

“To grab food,” Danny said, not slowing his pace as they walked outside and forced his brother to jog to catch up with them.

“Great! I’m starving,” Aidan said, grinning hugely as he joined them.

“You’re not invited,” Danny said, not missing a beat. “So fuck off.”

“Where are we going? Pizza? Buffet? Burgers? Italian?” Aidan asked, ignoring Danny’s homicidal glare as he continued walking alongside them.

“What’s going on?” Reese asked, tapping his twin on the shoulder and gesturing towards them.

“We’re grabbing a late dinner,” Aidan answered before Danny had a chance, and judging by his glare, he desperately wanted to say something.

“I’m starving,” Duncan said from behind them, sounding relieved as he joined them. “What are we having?”

“I could go for Chinese,” she said, trying not to laugh at the look on Danny’s face when the rest of his brothers and his sister joined them.

“Great!” Garret said, as he joined them on the sidewalk. “There’s a buffet right down the street.”

*_*_*_*

“I’m sorry,” he said, having absolutely no idea what else he should say.

“It’s fine,” she said with a little snuffle.

“Really?” he asked, kneeling down in front of the bathtub and for some reason, not believing her.

“I-I just need a minute,” she said, squeezing her eyes shut tighter as she licked her lips and somehow managed to curl up into a smaller ball.

“No one got hurt,” he said soothingly as he reached down and touched her shoulder only to pull his hand back with a muttered curse when she flinched.

“I just need a minute,” she said, taking a deep breath as he knelt there, contemplating hunting his brothers down and kicking their asses.

“Sweetheart, it’s fine. It was just a little misunderstanding,” he said, reaching for her only to have her flinch away from his touch, again.

“I-I just can’t get the screams out of my head,” she whispered. “The screams.....they were just.....,” she said, swallowing as she shook her head, clearly unable to go on.

He sighed as he stood up and pulled his shirt off. He tossed it aside as he kicked his shoes off. “It goes away. Trust me,” he said as he unsnapped his fly and pushed his pants and boxers down.

“When?” she asked with a shuddering sigh that had him chuckling as he grabbed the shower curtain and pulled it aside so he could join her, careful not to step on the beautiful woman curled up in the fetal position on the bottom of the tub.

“Soon,” he promised her as he reached down and picked her up.

“It was horrible,” she said with a little snuffle that had him smiling as he kissed the top of her head.

He settled her on her feet, but didn’t let her go. “I know,” he said, still wondering how his brothers could have fucked up this badly, especially right after their mother had taken each of them by the ear and read them the riot act before they’d been allowed inside.

“Your mother looked mad,” she said, pressing her face against his chest as she grabbed onto his biceps and held on tightly.

He chuckled as he wrapped his arms around her, careful of the healing rug burn covering her back and arms. “Well,” he said, thoughtfully pausing only long enough to press another kiss to the top of her head, “they did break the rules.”

She sighed against his chest, but he did feel her relax. “Rules?”

“Mmmhmm,” he murmured, closing his eyes as he enjoyed holding her in his arms. Nothing in life ever felt more perfect than this. “My mother created a list of rules for us when we were little to help cut back on incidents like the ones today.”

“Smart,” she said, pressing a kiss against his chest as she settled more comfortably in his arms.

He chuckled as he closed his eyes and stood there, savoring this moment with her. For the past three days he’d forced himself to be content with holding her hand and small kisses when all he wanted to do was wrap his arms around her, touch her, kiss her, run his hands over her and slide back inside the tightest, wettest hold that he’d ever experienced.

“Is that why you were avoiding your family?” she suddenly asked him, but it wasn’t enough to distract him away from what was really on his mind.

“Hmmm?” he asked, kissing the top of her head as he gently ran his hands down her back, testing the waters.

“Your back,” she said, giving him an, “Oh,” moment.

Another kiss. “Yes, I didn’t want to wreck their trip. The bullet didn’t paralyze me, but it was close. It did a lot of damage and so did the surgeries. So anytime I go somewhere that has restrictions for back injuries I warm a bench.”

She nodded as she pressed another kiss to his chest. “That’s what I figured.” Which of course made him curious.....

“Is that why you didn’t go on any of the fun rides today?” he asked, tracing his fingers up and down her spine.

“I went on all the fun rides today,” she assured him, removing her hold on his biceps and wrapping her arms around him.

“You didn’t go on any of the rides that I couldn’t go on,” he pointed out, allowing his fingers to move further south, tracing the cleft between her cheeks.

She chuckled softly as she admitted, “I didn’t want to go on any of the

rides that you couldn't go on."

"Because you're in love with me?" he half-teased.

"Yes," she said softly, taking him by surprise before she added, "That and I'm afraid of heights."

Chapter 36

“Would you let go of me?” Danny asked with a heavy sigh.

“Will you forget what I just said?” she asked, tightening her arms around the large man that she’d just foolishly admitted to being in love with, because apparently she was incredibly stupid.

He stilled. “Did you mean it?”

She stilled. “Why do you ask?”

He sighed, trying to step back, but all he managed to do was to pull her away from the hot water since she refused to let him go. “Are you going to let me go?”

“Not until you answer me,” she said, tightening her hold as she buried her face against his chest in an attempt to save herself from further humiliation.

He sighed heavily as he leaned down and kissed the top of her head again, which she decided to take as a good sign that she hadn’t just scared him off. “I’m not in love with you, Tink, and I can’t make myself say those words to make you feel better,” he said softly, trying to soften the words with another kiss as she stood there feeling like her heart was shattering into a million pieces.

It surprised her how much hearing that he didn’t love her actually hurt. She hadn’t realized just how much she’d come to care about him until recently. Of course, the first clue should have been the fact that she’d been willing to ask for the time off, risk killing her credit card and using up the small savings she’d been able to put away over the past couple of months. She’d been working so hard to clear the debt she’d been stuck with and this trip was going to set her back a bit. She hadn’t wanted to do it, but she’d wanted to be here with him.

Of course, she also didn’t want to stand here, naked in the shower, mortified beyond words and trying to hide against his chest after she’d somehow confessed something that she was still getting used to either. How she wished that she could turn and walk away with some dignity...and clothes, clothes and dignity would be really nice right about now.

“I am however,” he said, pausing to kiss the top of her head as she stood there trying to figure a way out of this, “going to keep you.”

“Keep me?” she asked, tilting her head slightly to the side so that she look up at him as she frowned with disgust, “Like a puppy?”

Grinning, he leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. “More like my own personal fairy,” he teased.

Glaring, she opened her mouth to tell him that she wasn’t a freaking fairy when he cut her off with another kiss on the tip of her nose and continued, “I’m not in love with you,” he said, apparently deciding that repeating that fun fact was the best way to continue this conversation, “but I am planning on spending the rest of my life with you, Tinkerbelle.”

“Wait. What?” she said, blinking up at him, sure that somewhere in there he’d said something that had made sense.

“I might not be in love with you, Tinkerbelle, but I do know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you,” he said, smiling down at her. “You are the best part of my day, Tink. You make me feel whole and happy and when I’m not with you, I’m thinking about you. I’m not in love with you, but I know that I can’t live without you.”

She opened her mouth to....well, she wasn’t sure what she was about to say, because at the moment she was having a difficult time in trying to figure out what he’d just said. He didn’t love her, but he felt the same exact way about her that she felt about him. The only difference? She knew that it was love.

And she knew that he loved her.

Smiling, she dropped her arms away and stepped back only to release an embarrassingly high squeal when Danny grabbed her, turned her around and pushed her up against the wall. “Now, while I’ve got your attention, why don’t I tell you about my game plan?”

*_*_*_*

“Game plan?” she asked, trying to turn around, but he stopped her with a kiss to her shoulder and a hand.

“Mmmhmm,” he murmured, kissing her neck as he ran his fingertips down her arms. When he reached her hands, he wrapped his hands around hers, raised them and pressed them against the wall above her head.

“What exactly is this game plan for?” she asked, licking her lips anxiously as she looked over her shoulder.

He leaned down and kissed her. “For you.”

“For me?” she asked against his lips.

“For you,” he said with a nod as he pulled away just far enough so that

he could kiss her chin.

“Are you going to tell me about this game plan of yours?” she asked, sounding a little breathless as he kissed his way across her jaw.

“In detail,” he promised as he kissed his way down to her shoulder. “The first part of my plan is very simple.”

“Oh, and what is it?” she asked, closing her eyes and licking her lips as he traced the tips of his fingers back down her arms.

“Well, first,” he said, pausing long enough to lick a drop of water off her shoulder, “I thought we’d start off by answering a question that’s been bothering me for a while.”

“What’s that?” she asked, sighing when he continued to run his fingertips over her shoulders and down her sides.

He cupped her hips as he leaned in until his mouth was close to her ear. “What feels better, fucking you with my fingers or my tongue.”

*_*_*_*

“Are you ready to find out?” he whispered as he used his hold on her hips to gently pull her back so that her back was arched.

“Yes,” she heard herself whisper as she hungrily licked her lips, waiting to see what he would do next.

“Why don’t we start with my fingers?” he suggested in a sexy murmur as he used his foot to get her to spread her legs.

“Danny,” she said, moaning his name as she felt the tips of his fingers run down her hip, over her bottom and between her legs.

A startled gasp escaped her as he lightly traced her lips with his fingers. She could just barely feel it, but it was enough to have her spreading her legs wider, desperate for more.

“Do you like that?” he asked in a seductive whisper as he continued to lightly tease her.

“Yes.”

He kissed her shoulder as he continued to tease her slit, back and forth, back and forth. With each pass of his fingertips the pressure increased until a shuddering breath escaped her. His fingertips slid between her lips, teasing the sensitive bundle of nerves desperate for his touch.

“How’s that?”

“Better,” she admitted, licking her lips as she pushed back, needing more, but the bastard refused to give it.

In fact, the bastard pulled back just enough to make her reconsider her old plans to kill him with her bare hands.

“Danny!”

“What is it, Tink?” he asked, kissing her cheek as he continued to tease her.

“Please!”

“Please, what, sweetheart?” he asked as he kissed her jaw.

“Please don’t make me kill you!” she snapped, so close to turning around and....and...and...

“Oh, God!” she gasped as he suddenly slid a finger inside her from behind.

It was a sensation that she’d experienced before and one that she was quickly falling in love with. For the past month they’d been pleasuring each other with their mouths and hands and although Danny had introduced her to a number of interesting and satisfying ways to pleasure each other, he’d never taken her like this. It made her wonder just how good it would feel-

“Tonight,” he said, his voice strained as he slowly slid his finger inside her, “after I get my answer, I’m going to fuck you just like this.”

“Oh, God.....,” she groaned, because she knew that if he didn’t make good on his promise that she was going to end up needing that defense attorney by the end of the night.

*_*_*_*

Pressing one last kiss to her jaw, he leaned back so that he could watch what he was doing. He watched as his finger disappeared inside her only to reappear, glistening with her juices. Adding a second finger and wishing that it was the cock straining between his legs to get to her, he continued to thrust his hand between her legs.

He savored her moans as he worked his fingers between her legs. She felt so good and he knew that if he continued doing this that she’d come, but he wanted a fair comparison and to do that, he needed to move on to the next stage of his plans.

Licking his lips in anticipation of that sweet treat that he’d long ago

become addicted to, he dropped to his knees. “Are you ready, Jodi?” he asked, pulling his fingers away before she could answer.

He leaned in and ran the tip of his tongue through her slit, groaning as her sweet syrup coated his tongue. She tasted so fucking good, better than anything he’d ever tasted before. Closing his eyes, he leaned in further, savoring her as he ran the tip of his tongue over her core.

He loved the way she moaned, but he loved it more when she moaned his name so he made her do it again and again until he was forced to slap his hands against the tiled wall as his body trembled. He wanted her. God, how he fucking wanted her.

“Danny, please!” she sobbed, pushing back against his tongue.

He could have let her come like this, but.....

He needed to be inside her.

He gave her one last, long lick before he stood up. He shifted his legs, cupped her hip with one hand as he reached down and wrapped his hand around his cock, struggling to resist the urge to stroke himself as he quickly positioned the head of his cock at her slit.

“Which one did you like better?” he asked, simply to have something to distract himself with as he slowly pushed inside her.

“This,” she said, reaching back and slapping her hand on his hip, “I like this.”

“I like this too, baby,” he said, pushing the rest of the way inside her.

He reached around her and cupped her neglected breast, gently squeezing it as he weighed her breast in his hand, loving the way her hard nipple felt against his palm. He pulled back, groaning at the loss of her tight sheath only to moan when he pushed back inside, loving the way her silk walls tightened around him in welcome.

It felt good.

It felt like he was coming home.

“You feel good, Jodi,” he growled as he leaned down and kissed her shoulder, her neck, wishing that he could kiss her properly, but she had her forehead pressed against the cool tiles, panting as he took her from behind. “So *fucking* good.”

He dropped his hand away from her hip and reached between her legs,

needing to make this so good for her that it didn't matter that he wasn't in love with her. He needed her to love this, to need it so badly that it made up for everything else. He knew that it made him a selfish bastard, but he needed her to love him.

Chapter 37

“I could do this all fucking day,” he growled in her ear.

Keeping her forehead pressed against the tile, she licked her lips and spread her legs further apart to give him better access. He rewarded her with a kiss to the shoulder and a groaned, “Good girl,” as he added a second finger between her legs and pushed in deeper.

He rubbed the tip of her clit with the pads of his fingers in a circular motion so that there was a slight break in contact, teasing her in a way that she’d never expected. Her hand tightened on his hip, holding him close as she stood there on the verge of the most powerful orgasm of her life. She felt the muscles in his hips work as he thrust inside her. God, he felt good, she thought as the hand she had pressed against the wall fisted and a scream tore from her lips.

“That’s it, sweetheart,” he groaned encouragingly as he increased the pressure between her legs and made his thrusts shallow.

The immediate change in pressure tore another scream from her throat and this time there was no fighting it. Her trembling legs gave out and she would have fallen if Danny hadn’t wrapped an arm around her. He kept her standing as he groaned in her ear, her name coming out in a tortured snarl as she felt him harden further inside him. Another scream tore from her lips when she felt him coming inside her.

They stood there for several minutes, catching their breath while Danny held her in his arms. He kissed her shoulder, earning a shaky laugh from her as she wondered if her legs would ever work right again.

“I’ll give you a few more minutes,” he said, pressing a kiss against her other shoulder.

“Before,” she said, having to stop to catch her breath, “what?”

“Before we move on to phase two of my game plan.”

*_*_*_*

“Oh God, Danny, I can’t!”

“Yes,” he growled, bending her over the arm of the small love seat, “you can.”

Holding his erection, he traced the curve of her ass with the tip. She moaned as she wiggled that delectable ass that he’d just spent the last twenty

minutes gripping as he'd fucked her against the wall. He should be exhausted. Hell, he shouldn't even be able to move after the last four hours, but he couldn't get enough of her.

"*You bastard,*" she choked out with a groan when he traced the soft skin between her legs.

"*So fucking soft,*" he growled, licking his lips as he continued to run the head of his cock over her slit and the soft skin protecting his favorite place on earth.

God, he could come just like this, by rubbing the tip of his cock against her. He could-

"*Danny,*" she bit out, squirming that sweet little ass of hers back and forth, trying to entice him to take more, "if you don't put that sledgehammer between your legs inside me right now, *I will kill you!*"

Chuckling, he shifted until the tip of his cock was placed at her wet entrance. So fucking wet.....

He pushed inside, relishing the feel of her juices coating him as he slid inside. He groaned loudly as he dropped his head back and closed his eyes. So fucking good.....

"Now," he said, licking his lips, "where was I?"

"Stage three," she gasped, "you were telling me about stage three!"

*_*_*_*

"Stay on your side of the bed," she mumbled, pretending that she didn't end that with a whimper as she hugged her Eeyore doll tightly.

Danny chuckled weakly from his side of the bed, the side that she'd sectioned off with five pairs of his socks. "You have nothing to worry about, Tinkerbelle. I can't move."

She didn't believe him, but she didn't have the energy to say anything. Instead, she hugged Eeyore tighter and closed her eyes, praying for sleep to come and put her out of her misery quickly. She started to drift off when she felt Danny shift next to her. She opened her eyes and waited, but when nothing else happened she closed her eyes.

Within seconds she felt herself start to drift off only to snap them open when she was once again startled awake. She waited, but once again nothing happened. She was just about to close her eyes when she felt him shift beside

her, again. Praying that she was imagining things, she hugged Eeyore tightly against her chest and glanced over her shoulder to find him-

Peacefully sleeping on his back with one arm folded behind his head and the other arm lying by his side. Frowning, she shook her head and turned back to close her eyes and-

Turned back around when she felt Danny shift behind her only to find him still lying on his back, sleeping peacefully. Realizing that she was being paranoid, she turned back around only to turn right back around when she felt him shifting behind her again. Once again, he was just lying there and she was being ridiculous.

Shaking her head in disgust, she turned back around, closed her eyes and decided that she was being ridiculous. Settling more comfortably on her side, she slowly exhaled and-

“You bastard!” she gasped when she suddenly found herself being picked up and dropped on top of him.

“Shhhh!” he hissed irritably as he quickly adjusted her until she found herself sprawled out on top of him. “I’m trying to sleep.

“Let me go,” she grumbled, too tired to play this game with him, but his arms locked around her, keeping her in place.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Let me go, you bossy bastard!” she snarled, slapping her hands against his chest and trying to push off him, but the large bastard wouldn’t let her go.

“No,” he mumbled sleepily with a little yawn as he kissed the top of her head, “I’m comfortable.”

She struggled for another minute until finally she gave up and grudgingly dropped her head on his rather surprisingly comfortable chest and closed her eyes. Wow, he really was comfortable, she mused with a sleepy little sigh as she once again started to drift off only to open her eyes when she felt him shift beneath her.

“Sorry,” he muttered sleepily and when he didn’t move after a minute, she closed her eyes and-

Dug her nails into his chest as he slid inside her.

“Oh.....my....*God*,” she choked out as her body instantly responded to the invasion.

“There,” he said on a satisfied sigh as he pushed all the way inside, “that’s much better.”

And as he palmed her bottom and rocked her on the large erection buried inside her, she had to agree.

*_*_*_*

“*Shit*,” he whispered, quickly glancing over his shoulder to make sure that he hadn’t woken Tinkerbelle.

When she didn’t move or throw anything at his head, he went back to writing her a quick note explaining why he was abandoning her. He’d promised his mother that he’d meet them for breakfast and he knew that if he didn’t show up that his mother would come knocking on his door, looking for him and waking up Jodi.

As he placed the note on the pillow beside her head, he couldn’t help but feel bad about last night.....and this morning. He’d taken her all night, only allowing her short breaks to catch her breath before he was finding another excuse to take her again. He would have taken her again when the chime from a text message woke him up, but it just seemed cruel so he’d taken a quick shower and got dressed all while he struggled to resist the very tempting woman passed out in his bed.

He regretted leaving her like this, but it was probably for the best, he tried to tell himself. He headed for the door only to curse when his phone started to ring. He grabbed it out of his pocket and fumbled to swipe his finger across the screen before it could wake up Jodi.

“What?” he demanded in a hiss as he headed for the door.

“*Where are you?*” Aidan asked, sounding bored.

“I’m on my way.”

“*Why are you whispering?*”

“I’m not whispering!” he hissed as he flipped the lock open.

“*Yeah, you really are.*”

“I’m not-” he started to argue only to abruptly end with a frown as he looked down and spotted the small woman that he’d thought he’d left sleeping on the bed, kneeling on the floor in front of him.

“Get your ass down here, I’m starving,” Aidan bitched as Danny watched with fascination as Jodi reached for his fly as she sleepily yawned.

He should probably be stopping her, but.....

He wanted to see where she was going with this.

“Danny? Where the hell are you, man?”

“Hold on a second,” he said, hoping to shut his brother up so that he could focus on the small woman pulling his zipper down.

When she reached inside his pants and wrapped her small hand around his hardening cock he forced himself to bite back a groan that his brother probably would have questioned. He didn’t have a chance in hell of biting back a groan when she wrapped her plump lips around the tip of his cock and sucked.

“Danny? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he bit out as he shifted his legs apart to bring himself lower so that Jodi could pull him into her-

“Oh, *fuck*,” he moaned as she moved her mouth over him, suckling just enough to cause his cock to jerk slightly in her mouth as she worked him.

She looked up at him with those pretty green eyes of hers as she slowly took him to the root, forcing him to blindly reach out and slap his hand against the wall when his legs threatened to give out.

“Danny? Shit! I’m on my way up. Just hold on!” Aidan rushed out, sounding panicked and grabbing his attention.

“No!” he snapped, shaking his head and dropping his hand away from the wall to gesture for Jodi to continue when she paused with the tip of his cock resting at her lips to shoot him a questioning look. “I’m fine. I’m just going to be a little,” he paused to lick his lips, “late.”

“Oh, well,...don’t take too long. We’re-”

Whatever was his brother was going to say was cut off when he ended the call and tossed his phone aside so that he could focus on Tinkerbelle as she added a whole new level to his game plan.

Chapter 38

Oh God, she was going to be sick.

“I’m really sorry, Jodi, but Eleanor shouldn’t have told you that we’d be able to get you set up on direct deposit. We don’t do direct deposit. We should, but we don’t.”

“I understand,” she said hollowly as the implications of what was about to happen hit her.

“I hope you enjoy the rest of your trip,” Anna said, sounding cheerful as Jodi struggled to hold it together.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, hanging up the phone as she sat down.

Her entire body felt numb. Her head was spinning and her breaths were coming fast. She couldn’t believe this was happening. It couldn’t be happening. Not after everything that she’d been through. Not after everything that she’d sacrificed so that she could fix her life.

“Tinkerbelle?” Danny said as he stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his hips. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, turning around and taking her time picking up her phone, needing a moment to pull it together.

“Are you sure?” he asked after a pause.

She nodded, keeping her back to him. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. “You wouldn’t be lying to me now, would you?”

“Of course not,” she said, pasting a fake smile on her face as she turned around in his arms. “I’m fine.”

He tilted his head to the side, studying her for a long moment. “Now, why don’t I believe you?” he murmured thoughtfully.

“Because you’re paranoid,” she teased, standing on her toes so that she could press a kiss against his stubborn chin. “Everything’s fine,” she lied.

*_*_*_*

“So, I was thinking that once we’re home that I’d take Jodi out to a movie or something,” Duncan said as they stood in front of the main alligator pit.

“And why’s that?” he asked, not really paying attention to his brother or the hundreds of alligators roaming freely in the large pit below.

All of his attention was on the small woman sitting on the bench, staring at the ground and looking a little lost. Something was wrong. He wasn’t sure what had happened between the time that he’d dropped to his knees and buried his head between her legs and the time that he’d finished his shower, but he was going to find out.

“Because she’s clearly done with you,” his brother said, confirming his fears that he was the reason why she looked so upset.

“Clearly,” he murmured absently, running everything that he’d said and done in the last forty-eight hours through his head and although he’d fucked up a lot, he had a pretty good idea where he’d truly fucked up.

He’d not only assumed that she was in love with him without actually hearing the words, but he’d fucked up by telling her that he not only wanted to marry her, but that he didn’t love her. He should have never opened his mouth and told her anything. He’d rushed his game plan and now....

He was paying for it.

She was pulling away from him and he had absolutely no idea what to do to stop her.

“Good. So, you’re fine if I ask her out?” his brother asked, already pushing away from the wall to do just that.

“Sure,” he said, facing his brother as he pulled back his fist and let it fly, because if there was one thing that little brothers were good for, it was beating the shit out of them when he was pissed.

*_*_*_*

“Get him off! Get him off!” the hysterical scream disrupted her self-pitying thoughts and had her looking up in time to see most of Danny’s brothers grabbing him by the arms and carefully pulling him off Duncan, but not before he got in another punch.

“I’m telling on you, you bastard!” Duncan yelled while he got to his feet as Danny struggled to break free and go back after his brother.

“Go ahead, you little bastard!” Danny said, pulling free from his brothers’ hold.

“Oh, I will!” Duncan said, glaring at his brother as he stormed off,

heading towards the gift shop where their parents had disappeared twenty minutes ago. When he saw Jodi, he stopped, grinned smugly and headed straight for her, which was when Danny came after him for a second time.

Really not in the mood to watch this and needing some time to herself while she tried to figure out how she was going to handle this, she got up and walked towards the exit, jumping out of the way when Danny tackled Duncan to ground, nearly colliding with her. Shaking her head and managing a small smile when Duncan screeched like a girl and yelled for his mother, she left the reptile park and headed for the bench she'd spotted earlier. She sat down, leaned forward and closed her eyes as she soaked in the warm Florida sun, hoping that it would help her figure a way out of this mess.

"Are you about to break my son's heart?" Dr. Bradford asked, startling her....a bit.

"Ow!" she cried out when she fell off the bench and landed, rather awkwardly, on a few of the bricks bordering the beautiful rock garden surrounding the gates to the zoo.

"Damn it," Dr. Bradford cursed, rushing to her side to help her to her feet. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, holding back a cringe, because she just wasn't strong enough to get through the embarrassment of having her boyfriend's father seeing her ass for a second time in less than a week.

He helped her up and when he gestured for her to sit down, she shook her head, deciding that it was probably for the best if she didn't put pressure on the fresh cuts marring her ass at the moment. "I'm fine, really," she said, pasting that fake smile that she'd been using all day back on her face.

Her hopes that he would walk away disappeared when he sat back down on the bench, folded his arms over his chest and settled in for the long haul. "Are you going to answer my question?" he asked, watching her closely and making her frown in confusion.

"Didn't I just answer your question?" she had to ask, because she was pretty sure that she'd just answered him.

His eyes narrowed on her. "Not that. I want to know if you're about to break my son's heart."

"Okaaaay," she said slowly, really not sure where this was coming from. "Why exactly are you asking me that question?"

“Because you’ve been ignoring him all day and you’ve been acting like you’d rather be anywhere but here.”

“I’m not ignoring him,” she answered, rubbing her hands down her face at the reminder of how screwed up her life was about to become.

There wasn’t any money in her bank account to pay her credit card bill tomorrow, which meant that she was going to get hit with late fees and her interest rate was going to be raised to thirty-four percent if she was lucky. It also meant that her credit score was about to take a hit. Basically, this meant that this mistake was going to add months if not years onto her plans to pay off this debt.

It was just a depressing thought to know that the reminder of what the jerk had done to her was going to follow her for another few years. She’d hoped to be rid of the debt, rid of the memories and rid of *him* soon. She just wanted to move on with her life and-

“Is this about your ex-fiancé?”

“What?” she asked, taken off-guard.

“Your ex-fiancé? You remember him, don’t you? Average height, a bit of a weight problem, thinning hair, below average looks, a real loser, who left you with over fifteen thousand dollars worth of debt and emptied your bank accounts the day before he dumped you. That fiancé,” he said evenly.

“How did you-”

“You’re the first woman that my son has shown any interest in since he came back. I made it a point of knowing everything about you,” he explained with a warm smile.

“Oh,” was the only response that she could handle at the moment as the mortification that she’d hoped never to experience again came rushing back. He knew.....

“I considered taking the boys and beating the shit out of him, but they would have just gotten in the way,” he said with a shrug as he looked up and met her gaze. “So, I did it myself.”

“I’m sorry, what?” she asked, positive that she’d misheard him.

“He cried,” he said, looking thoughtful for a moment. “I was embarrassed for him.”

“You beat him up?” she asked, hoping that she’d misheard him because otherwise that meant that he’d-

“I kicked the shit out of him,” he admitted with a shrug. “He had it coming.”

“Ummmmm,” she said, no longer sure how she should respond.

“I gave him the option of paying you back, but as I’m sure that you know your ex, besides being a piece of shit, is also horrible with money. He’s in serious debt so I doubt you’re ever going to see a cent from him. I’m sorry.”

“I already figured that out,” she said even though having it confirmed made her feel worse, because now she knew that there was absolutely no hope that he’d act like a man and take this responsibility away from her before she-

“I paid off the debt and replaced the money as an early wedding present,” he said with that warm smile that made her feel absolutely horrible and for a good reason.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t marry your son,” she said weakly as she took a step back. “I’m going to return the money and pay back the debt with interest as soon as I can, but,” she said, pausing to lick her dry lips, “I can’t marry him.”

“Then maybe you should have told me that last night when I proposed,” Danny said, making her realize that he’d been standing there listening. “But, it’s fine, Tinkerbelle. I can take a fucking hint,” he said, giving her a mock salute as he walked off, leaving her standing there realizing that there were worse things than being screwed over by the man she’d promised to marry.

It was watching the man that she loved walking away.

Chapter 39

“Don’t walk away from me!” she yelled. “We’re going to finish this once and for all!”

“We’re done!” he snapped, not even bothering to look back when he said it, which he paid for seconds later when she broke out into a run, jumped on his back and took him down hard to the ground where the saddest wrestling match that Danny had ever witnessed took place.

“Shouldn’t you help him?” Jodi asked, gesturing towards Darrin and Marybeth just as Marybeth managed to yank Darrin’s arm behind his back.

“No,” he said since he was sure that his brother had this one coming.

“Can we talk?” she asked, reaching out to take his hand with a slight hesitation that told him that she was expecting him to pull away.

As pissed as he was, he would never do anything to hurt her. As soon as her hand touched his, he closed his hand around hers and gave it a gentle squeeze, letting her know that everything was okay. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you,” he said, sighing heavily as they watched his brother get his ass kicked. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” she said, giving him the out that he didn’t deserve.

“Yes, there is,” he said, not willing to take the easy way out of this one. “I overreacted and acted like an asshole. You never agreed to marry me, but I’ve been acting like it’s a done deal and that’s not fair to you.”

“Thank you,” she murmured with a small nod and a wince when Marybeth reached down, grabbed hold of Darrin’s nipple through his shirt and twisted.

“Mother fucker!” Darrin roared as Danny bit back a yawn.

“You want to tell me why you don’t want to marry me?” he asked, praying like hell that it wasn’t because she wasn’t in love with him, because honestly, he wasn’t sure if he could handle that kind of a blow right now.

Not after hearing what his father had said.

He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but after his mother had made a big deal out of him beating the shit out of her baby because he could end up paralyzing himself, he’d realized that Jodi had left. Afraid that he’d scared her off, he went

after her only to find her talking to his father.....about the asshole.

Or rather, he heard his father talking to her about the asshole.

He still couldn't believe just how badly that piece of shit had fucked her over. What kind of a man does that to a woman? Not only does he dump her, but he also leaves her destitute and responsible for cleaning up his mess? There was no doubt in his mind that if he'd been home when he'd found out the extent of just how badly that piece of shit had fucked her over that he would probably at this very moment be getting arrested for killing the bastard.

All those times that he watched her deny herself something that she wanted, watched her settle for less and it was all because of that fucking loser. When he'd realized just how incompetent and lacking the piece of shit had been in bed he'd been pissed off on her behalf, angry that she'd been with a man who hadn't appreciated her, but this.....

This was too fucking much.

And she'd been willing to marry this fucking asshole?

That's the part that he really didn't understand. The guy had been a fucking loser in every way possible, sucked in bed, been lacking downstairs and hadn't treated her the way that she'd deserved. Now he knew that it was actually so much worse. According to his father, the guy was a pudgy, ugly, balding piece of shit who thought it was okay to steal from women and ruin their lives just before he dumped their asses and his Tinkerbelle had dated *that*.

Not only that, but she'd been willing to marry that fucking bastard, but not him....

That was the part that he couldn't understand.

It was also the part that made him feel like shit.

He was supposed to be the one for the her, the one that took care of her, made her happy, loved her and.....

Oh.....*fuck*.

He loved her.

He fucking loved her.

"Shit," he said, dropping her hand so that he could rub his hands roughly down his face, needing a moment to come to terms with this.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sounding concerned.

"Nothing," he said with a small shake of his head, not particularly

happy with this revelation.

He didn't like this, not one fucking bit.

She was supposed fall in love with him, not the other way around. This was his game plan! She was supposed to come to need him, want him and ultimately love him so that he could marry her and have what his father, uncles and cousins had. He wasn't supposed to fall in love with a small woman who not only didn't love him, but also didn't want to marry him. He needed her to fall in love with him so that when he finally fell in love with her, his game plan would be over and she would be all his.

"Tell me why you won't marry me," he said, taking a step back, needing the space to clear his head.

"It has nothing to do with you. I'm just not interested in marriage," she explained with a wobbly smile that caught his attention.

"You don't want to get married?" he asked casually, waiting for her answer and the confirmation that he needed as he quickly formatted a brand new game plan, one that would end with him getting exactly what he wanted.

It was risky and something that he'd told himself that he wouldn't do, but the stubborn woman standing in front of him, searching for the right way to tell him that she wasn't interested in marrying him really wasn't leaving him with much of a choice, now was she? Then again, he really shouldn't be shocked. The woman didn't seem to know what was good for her.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm just not interested in getting married," she said softly as if that would somehow make it easier for him to accept.

It didn't, but it did make his decision to follow through with his new game plan easier. There was a real possibility that she would never speak to him again after this, but....

What the hell, it would be worth it. She'd be his forever and she would know for the rest of her life that a man loved her, truly loved her and wanted her then that was a risk that he was willing to take.

"I understand," he murmured absently as he reached down and took her hand in his, running several possibilities through his head. "I understand."

*_*_*_*_*

"Danny?"

"I need to make a call," he said, picking his phone up from the bureau

as he made his way towards the door. "I'm going to be a while."

"That's okay," she said around a yawn as she laid back down on the bed and snuggled back beneath the covers, more than happy to have an excuse to get in a few more minutes of sleep before she was forced to face a long day of standing in lines at one of the parks.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he promised just as she started to drift off.

*_*_*_*_*

Nine hours later.....

"Baby pink or baby blue," she contemplated out loud to the empty hotel room as she tried to decide between the two small bottles of insanely expensive nail polish that she'd bought from the hotel store.

Sighing, she shot another glance at the alarm clock bolted to the nightstand and once again couldn't help but wonder what kind of phone call took nine hours. When she woke up to discover that she'd managed to sleep for three whole hours she'd been admittedly surprised. When she'd managed to get in a shower and get dressed she'd become a little concerned and now, she was becoming a little pissed for good reason.

Because apparently Danny had ditched her ass again this morning so that he could go out without her. Not that she would begrudge him some time alone with his family if that's what he wanted. She would absolutely understand if he wanted to spend time alone with his family. In fact, she'd encouraged him to spend some time alone with his family more than once.

But, he wasn't doing that.

Apparently last night she'd bruised his ego, but instead of admitting that, he'd given her some piss poor excuse that he had something to do and left her stranded with his family at the reptile farm. She'd been pissed, but she'd been willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, figuring that he needed some time to himself. When he wasn't at the hotel when they got back, answered her calls, returned her texts, or even returned to the hotel until after two in the morning, exhausted and distracted, she'd decided that perhaps they should have a talk in the morning. He'd apparently decided that wasn't necessary.

Now as she sat there on the bed in the room that she'd decided to rent after she'd found out from Darrin, who'd been buying Advil, ice packs and an insane amount of snacks from the hotel store where she'd run into him two hours

ago, that Danny had ditched the family to go out on his own, she was counting down the hours until she had to leave for the airport in the morning.

It was over.

Of course, Danny probably didn't know that she'd dumped his lying ass yet. But, that was okay, because he'd know soon enough. She'd left him a note in his room along with an IOU note promising to pay him back for the airline ticket as well as one for his father for the credit card he'd taken upon himself to pay off. She'd also called Zoe and informed her that she was moving out effective immediately. When Trevor grabbed the phone away from his wife and tried to argue with her, she'd informed him that she was more than happy to pay whatever it took to break her lease.

When he asked why she needed to break her lease and she informed him that his cousin was a lying bastard whose ego couldn't handle it when a woman refused to marry him, he'd sighed heavily and wished her luck. Once that was done she'd made a phone call that she'd been putting off for quite some time.

Her father had been understanding, more than understanding actually and had even offered to come down to Florida to get her and bring her home. She promised him that she was fine right now, but she needed a place to crash while she paid Dr. Bradford back and got her life back together. She'd also called Greg and asked him if he could get a couple of the guys together and move her stuff to her dad's house.

After promising to kick Danny's ass and then promptly ignoring her when she'd told him that she didn't want his ass kicked, he asked her the one thing that almost broke her. He'd asked her if she was in love with Danny and she'd lied since the last thing that she needed was Greg worrying about her. He'd seen enough of her humiliation over the past year and he didn't need to see anymore.

Chapter 40

“Danny-”

“I’m busy,” he said, not bothering to look up from his phone as he headed towards his room.

“I need to tell you something,” Darrin said, quickening his pace to catch up with him.

“Tell me later,” he said, pulling out his keycard.

“But-”

“Later,” he said, opening his door and stepping inside only to come to a halt when he spotted his father sitting on the edge of the bed.

“She’s left the hotel,” Darrin said, unnecessarily it would seem since the note Tinkerbelle left for him on the mirror said it all.

“When?” he asked, trying not to panic.

“A little after ten this morning,” his father said, standing up.

He glanced around the room and noted that all her stuff was gone. Nodding, he turned around to go after her, but he barely managed to turn around before his father stopped him by saying the one thing that he’d been waiting for his father to say for the past eight years, but never thought he would.

“You fucked up,” his father said, stopping him in his tracks.

“Dad,” Darrin said, shaking his head, but his father wasn’t listening.

“You fucked up and then you ran away like a coward.”

Jaw clenched, he met his brother’s shocked gaze and slowly, so fucking slowly, turned around so that his father could call him a coward to his face.

“I made a mistake,” he said evenly. “I was a kid and I made a mistake.”

“No,” his father said, shaking his head as he moved closer, sounding furious. “You didn’t make a mistake. You fucked up. You fucked up your life and instead of being a man and fixing it, you ran off like a fucking coward!”

Without thinking, he swung. He swung and he hit his father and he kept on hitting his father, not caring that his father was just taking it or that his brother was trying to pull him off. He didn’t fucking care. There were too many goddamn years, too much pain and anger to ignore a comment like that. His father had ignored him for *years*. Fucking years! And the first time that he really

acknowledges him it was to call him a fucking coward?

“Get off him!” he heard Aidan scream, but he couldn’t stop.

This was his father and he loved him. He loved him so goddamn much and his father had abandoned him when he’d needed him the most. He’d turned his back on him and made him feel like shit, like he was fucking worthless and a failure and like his fuck up couldn’t be fixed. That was bad enough, but when he’d joined the Marines he’d waited for word from his father, waited for his father to call him, to visit him, to send him a letter telling him that he’d fucked up but that everything would be okay, anything, but there had been nothing.

The message had come through crystal clear. His father had washed his hands of him. Nothing could have been clearer than the moment he woke up and found his father standing in his doorway, watching him with a detached expression. Then his father had turned his back on him and walked away while he’d laid there in that fucking bed struggling not to scream from the pain. That had been the worst fucking moment of his life and now...

He couldn’t stop.

He just couldn’t and God, how he wanted to stop swinging his arms, but he couldn’t. There was just too much pain and he couldn’t stop. So, when he felt his brothers grab him and pull him away from his father, he was unbelievably grateful. But as they pulled him back and took him to the ground that gratitude turned to pure agony.

*_*_*_*_*

“Breathe, Danny,” he said, trying not to lose it as he watched Danny struggle to breathe through the pain.

“Dad?” Darrin said, putting everything into that one word as he looked up from Danny, pleading with him to make his brother okay with one look, a look he recognized all too well.

“He’s going to be fine,” he said firmly, absently wiping away the blood trickling down his chin on the back of his arm as he looked his son over.

“Hold still, man,” Reese said, taking his brother’s hand in his. “Just hold still.”

“Call for an ambulance,” Aidan said calmly, but his hands shook as he grabbed Danny’s shirt and pulled it up. Ethan pushed his son’s hands away and examined Danny’s stomach. When his fingers moved over his scar and Danny screamed, long and loud, he tried not to panic.

Please watch over my son, he chanted in his head, the same prayer he'd said every day for the past eleven years. *Please watch over my son, Please watch over my son, Please watch over my son....*

"Lucifer, go get Jodi and meet us at the hospital," he said, trying to remain calm as he watched the first signs of bruising and swelling spread around Danny's scar, a clear sign that his son was going to need one more surgery that he might not make it through.

Oh, God.....

"Someone call Mom," Aidan said hollowly as he looked up and met his gaze.

"What's wrong with him?" Darrin demanded, taking Danny's other hand in his. The fact that Danny didn't try to pull his hands away and tell his brothers that he was fine told them everything that they needed to know.

"It was an accident," Reese said, staring down at his brother, shaking his head in disbelief. "God, it was an accident."

"It's okay," he told his sons in his most soothing tone, the one that he saved for frightened parents that were forced to stand around helplessly while their kids suffered.

"He shouldn't have hit you," Darrin bit out evenly, sounding pissed even as he gave Danny's hand a reassuring squeeze.

"I had it coming," he told his son, because they all knew that he had that coming and more for what he'd done to Danny.

"*T-Tinkerbelle*," Danny whispered weakly.

"Hey, what's going on?" Kenzie asked as she walked in the room only to stop when she spotted Danny on the floor. "Danny?" she said, rushing to his side. "Oh my God, Danny!" she said, trying to take Danny's hand away from Reese, but he wasn't letting him go.

"He's going to be fine," Aidan said, forcing a small reassuring smile as he took his sister's hand and gently pulled her to her feet and into his arms. "He's going to be fine."

"I can't feel my legs," Danny said weakly seconds before he finally, passed out and all hell broke loose.

*_*_*_*_*

"How long will he be in surgery?" Duncan asked.

Aidan looked up to see if his father was going to answer, but the look on his father's face had him answering. "We don't know."

"He'll be fine," their mother said, nodding at her own words even as she released a shuddering breath while she sat there, holding their father's hand tightly.

"We broke his back," Reese said hollowly, looking as close to crying as he'd ever seen any of his brothers come and the fact that Darrin's expression matched his twin's terrified him.

None of the men in his family had cried when Danny had been shipped back to them, bandaged and in a coma with a poor prognosis. They hadn't cried as they'd waited surgery after surgery to find out if their brother would survive. They hadn't cried when his brother had gone through hell and back to learn how to walk again, but today they were all struggling not to lose it.

For the past couple of years they'd all treated Danny with kid gloves, careful not to hug him too tightly, put too much into their punches or headlocks, always pulling back, too terrified of what could happen if they didn't and today....

Today they'd seen him finally react to their father and gave him the beating that even he had to admit that his father had coming, and they'd reacted. They'd all grabbed onto him without thought. They'd grabbed him by his arms, his legs and he'd grabbed Danny around the waist and they'd yanked him back, stumbled and tripped, bringing Danny down to the ground in an awkward pile. He'd heard the snap and he'd swear until his dying day that he'd even been able to feel it as it happened.

"Has anyone heard from Lucifer?" Duncan asked, tightening his arm around Kenzie, who'd been quietly crying since the doctor came out and confirmed that Danny had broken his back.

"No, he-"

"Put me down, you overgrown bastard!"

As one, they all looked towards the double doors for the surgery wing in time to see Lucifer carrying Jodi in. At first he'd thought that she was pissed about being brought here against her will, but then he noted the orderly pushing a stretcher behind her, followed by two nurses and a doctor, who all looked resigned as they followed Lucifer and the woman who wouldn't stop squirming wildly in his arms.

“Put me down!” she screamed.

“What’s going on, son?” their father asked, standing up slowly as Aidan noted the large ice pack Jodi had pressed against her hand.

“I-I broke her hand,” Lucifer admitted, shifting nervously.

“What?” Aidan asked, shooting his father a look even as they both moved their asses and rushed over to her side.

“Put me down!” Jodi demanded, struggling to get out of Lucifer’s arms.

As soon as they reached her side, his father was reaching for her. In seconds he had her in his arms and was carrying her over to the gurney. “Why wasn’t this break set?” he demanded, looking up just long enough to send the doctor shifting nervously by the gurney a glare before he returned his attention to Jodi’s damaged hand.

“She wouldn’t let us,” the doctor snapped defensively even as he took a healthy step back.

“She’s going to need surgery,” Aidan mumbled absently as he gently picked up her hand and examined it.

“I didn’t mean to do it,” Lucifer said, sounding miserable.

“How the hell did you break her hand?” he asked, drawing Jodi’s murderous glare.

“Like this,” she snapped, pulling her injured hand back and showing him exactly how she’d managed to bust her hand.

Chapter 41

“Tinkerbelle,” he managed to get out before his throat burned in protest.

“Don’t try to talk,” Aidan said as a straw was pressed against his lips. “Take a small sip.”

Blinking his eyes open and trying to force them to stay open, he took a small sip as he waited for his vision to clear and when it did, he couldn’t help but ask, “What the hell happened to your face?”

“Ummm,” Aidan said, licking his lips nervously as he shot a quick glance over his shoulder. “Nothing much,” he muttered, which earned a snort of amusement from somewhere to his right.

Groggily, he looked to his right to find his sister and brothers standing by his bedside, looking exhausted, relieved and somewhat amused. Frowning, he looked back at his brother, took in his black eye and then shifted his gaze to find Lucifer standing in front of his bed, looking just as exhausted and not quite meeting his gaze behind another black eye that actually looked a hell of a lot worse than Aidan’s.

Deciding that he really didn’t care, he shifted his attention back to Aidan. “Where’s Tinkerbelle?”

Aidan shifted nervously as he shared a look with Lucifer, a look that he didn’t like. “She’s umm,” Aidan said, pausing as he pursed up his lips thoughtfully. “She’s ummm,” he cleared his throat nervously, “taking a nap.”

“A nap?” he asked flatly as he looked back at his brothers and sister to find them all looking anywhere else but at him. “Where is she taking this nap exactly?” he asked, looking back at Aidan, who couldn’t quite bite back his wince.

“She’s right here,” his father said, drawing his attention to the closed curtain behind Aidan.

“Open the curtain,” he demanded, trying to sit up, but he was too exhausted and weak to do much more than glare at his brother as he registered the feel of metal and bandages wrapped around his torso.

Aidan held up his hands. “Before I do that, please let me explain that it’s not as bad as it looks and that she’s going to be fine.”

He let his brother’s word register before he opened his mouth and

shouted, “Move the fucking curtain!”

The pathetic whimper that followed had him reaching for his brother, ready to throw him through the curtain. Aidan smartly realized this and moved his ass. He grabbed the curtain and yanked it back and-

Who the fuck were all these people? he couldn't help but wonder as he took in all the men standing around the other side of the room. The only people he recognized were his parents and Greg. Frowning, he looked away from the men glaring accusingly at him and looked at the-

“What the hell happened?” he demanded when he spotted Jodi, out cold with one arm in a cast and the other one attached to the bed with a soft restraint. A quick glance down at the foot of her bed told him that her legs were being restrained as well.

The middle aged man with hair as blonde as Jodi's answered him, “It seems my daughter took exception to what happened to you.”

“She beat the shit out of your brothers,” Greg clarified with a huge shit-eating grin.

“Why is she restrained?” he asked, wishing that he could touch her, but he could hardly keep his eyes open never mind move.

“Drugs,” all the men in the room said as one, making him smile, because he could only imagine what hell his little Tinkerbelle had put them all through.

“Is she going to be okay?” he asked as his eyes slowly slid shut.

“She's going to be fine,” he heard someone say just as he his brother asked, “Can you move your legs?”

*_*_*_*

“Sweetheart,” he heard his father say, “put the pudding down.”

“Get away from him!” he heard Jodi yell just as he registered the feel of her small body crawling onto the bed next to him.

There was a tired sigh as someone said, “I told you that she was faking.”

“How were we supposed to know that?” he heard Aidan snap. “It's been four hours since her last dose!”

He felt his lips pull up into a small smile as he realized that his little Tinkerbelle was still drugged out. “It takes twelve hours to get it out of her

system,” he whispered hoarsely as he somehow managed to open his eyes, not exactly surprised to find Tinkerbelle in an oversized hospital gown that was hanging off her, kneeling next to him on the bed, holding up a spoonful of chocolate pudding threateningly in front of her.

“Move back!” she snapped, giving the spoon in her hand a little jiggle in warning.

“Tinkerbelle,” he said, reaching up and placed his hand on her back, drawing his hand down her bare back, enjoying the feeling.

Still holding that spoonful of pudding up, she glanced back and whatever she saw had her nodding firmly and returning her attention back to the small group closing in on her. He opened his mouth to tell them to back off, but felt himself drift off before he could get the words out.

*_*_*_*_*

“She needs to be in her own bed,” he heard a woman say sometime later.

“She’s fine,” he heard his father say just as he registered the feel of Tinkerbelle curled up by his side, her small casted hand resting on his chest and her soft light snores lulling him back into a deep sleep.

“I’m sorry, but we need to move her to her own bed,” the woman said again, “hospital policy.”

“And I’m overriding that policy,” his father said firmly. “She stays.”

*_*_*_*_*

“You broke him!”

“Stop hitting us!”

“And we told you that it was an accident!”

“Ow!” he heard one of his brothers, Reese? yell followed by Tinkerbelle’s cry of pain.

It was Tinkerbelle’s cry of distress that had him opening his eyes and trying to focus on the blurry figures surround him.

“Tinkerbelle?” he said hoarsely, searching desperately for her.

“She’s right here,” the blurry object to his left said.

He looked in that direction and blinked, and blinked again until the blurry image sharpened and he could make out his brother Lucifer struggling to

hold Jodi back as she tried to lunge at Darrin.

“Get the restraints!” Lucifer yelled, sounding a little desperate as he tried to place Tinkerbelle back on the bed next to his, but she wasn’t having that.

“You broke him!” she yelled accusingly.

“It was an accident!” Lucifer snapped back, but that only seemed to piss her off more. “Would someone get the goddamn restraints?”

“Tinkerbelle,” he said weakly, trying to raise his arms, but whatever drugs they were pumping in him made it impossible.

“Danny!” Tinkerbelle said, sounding relieved as she suddenly shifted her attention from beating the shit out of Reese to going to him.

“Thank God,” Lucifer muttered, picking her up and carefully placing her on the bed by his side.

With one last glare at Lucifer, she curled up by his side, placing her injured arm across his chest and her head on his shoulder. Within minutes he was once again dozing off, absently wondering why they were keeping him drugged out of his mind.

*_*_*_*

“Danny?” he distantly heard his father say. “Danny? I need you to wake up now.”

“Tired,” he mumbled, turning his head to the side as he tried to go back to sleep, but his father wasn’t having that.

“Danny, I need you to try and move your toes,” his father said when all he wanted to do was go back to sleep.

“Go...away,” he muttered, feeling like he was drowning in a haze.

“Danny, move your toes,” his father said more firmly.

He shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut as the move threatened to make him hurl.

“Come on, son. Just wiggle your toes for me and you can go back to sleep,” his father said, starting to sound desperate.

“I can’t,” he mumbled, starting to drift off when he heard the sweetest voice in the world say, “Danny, wiggle your toes.”

“Tinkerbelle,” he said, feeling his lips pull up into a pleased smile.

“Move your toes, Danny,” she said, as he registered the feel of her soft

lips brushing against his.

“Hurts,” he muttered, numbly realizing that he was hurting, everywhere.

“I know, baby,” she said, “but I need you to move your toes for me.”

“What will I get if I do?” he asked, still struggling to open his eyes even as he bit back a groan as immense pain shot up his spine.

“What do you want?” she asked, her voice cracking.

“You,” he simply said.

There was a sniffle before she said, “You’ve got me, Danny. Now just move your toes, okay?”

He nodded even as he felt himself drifting off again and this time when they tried to wake him, he was able to ignore them.

Chapter 42

“You left me,” Danny whispered hoarsely when he finally managed to open his eyes.

“You didn’t leave me with much of a choice,” she said, trying not to cry or show him how relieved she was that he was finally awake.

“Had to,” he said, glancing around the room as she poured him a small cup of water. “Where is everyone?”

“It’s three in the morning so I’m guessing that they’re either sleeping or getting kicked out of a buffet,” she said, earning a weak smile from him.

“Take a sip,” she ordered, holding the cup in front of him with her good hand.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, obediently taking a sip.

After a minute, she pulled the cup away and placed it on the tray, wishing that his father was here to help with this, but around an hour ago Mary had finally managed to browbeat her husband into going back to the hotel and getting some sleep. Now, she was sitting here by herself, terrified that she was about to find out that Danny was paralyzed.

She should call a doctor, but instead she found herself climbing into bed with him and curling up by his side. She needed this after everything they’d been through over the past two weeks, she needed a moment before their lives went to hell and stayed there.

“What happened?” he asked, pressing a kiss against the top of her head as he reached over and placed his hand carefully on her cast.

“I beat the shit out of your brothers,” she admitted with a snuffle.

He chuckled weakly as he pressed another kiss against the top her head. “That’s not what I meant.”

“You beat the shit out of your father,” she said, still regretting that she hadn’t been there to stop that. “Your brothers had to pull you off and in the process your back was broken and the scar tissue from your old injury and surgeries tore, pulling free and caused some internal bleeding. They were able to stop the bleeding and remove the scar tissue, but your back-”

“I had weak spots in my vertebrae from the shrapnel,” he said matter-of-factly as she struggled not to cry again. “I was supposed to take it easy.”

“They broke,” she said, her voice breaking.

He was quiet for a long time before he asked, “Was my spine compromised?”

“Can you move your toes?” she asked, repeating the question that they’d been asking him every time he regained consciousness and terrified of his answer.

“Yes,” he said, and just to prove it, he brought his leg up slowly, bending it before he slowly returned it back to the bed and just like that, she lost it.

“Shhhh, don’t cry, Tinkerbelle. I’m fine,” he said, soothingly.

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to stop, but heaven help her, she couldn’t.

He’d scared the hell out of her!

“Did you really beat up my brothers?” he asked, kissing her head again and obviously trying to distract her.

“Yes,” she admitted with a sniffle.

“Why?”

“Because they hurt you.”

“It was an accident,” he said, but she didn’t miss the amusement lacing his tone.

“I don’t care,” she muttered, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in her hand. She could take one of the painkillers the doctors had prescribed her, but she’d been out of it enough over the last two weeks to last her a lifetime.

“I shouldn’t have hit him,” Danny said, sighing heavily. “He started talking and I just lost it.”

“Your father’s not mad.”

“That’s great, but that’s not really what I meant. I want to know why you left me.”

“Because you were pulling away,” she said around a small sob, and wow, did she sound pathetic.

“I wasn’t pulling away,” he promised her.

“Yes, you were,” she said, because she knew the signs. She’d seen it before with Jerry. When she’d felt Danny do it, she’d decided to leave before he could hurt her. She hadn’t been able to stomach the idea of going through that

with Danny.

“I would never leave you, Tinkerbelle,” he said, gently cupping her chin and tipping her head so that she was looking up at him. “Never.”

“Then what were you doing?” she demanded, wanting to know what kind of bullshit reason he could come up with for the way that he was acting. He said that he hadn’t been pulling away from her, but-

“I was planning your abduction,” he said, blinking innocently down at her.

She opened her mouth, but couldn’t quite find the words to respond to that declaration.

“I had to make a few phone calls and call in some favors to get the ban temporarily lifted from Vegas just long enough for me to drag you off and marry you before you got a chance to run away,” he explained calmly as she continued to lay there, staring dumbly up at him.

“I’m sorry, what?” she finally managed to get out.

“We’re getting married,” he said, shrugging like what he’d just said was no big deal.

“I told you that I didn’t want to get married,” she reminded him.

Another shrug. “I chose to ignore that.”

“Okay.....,” she said, because really, what else was she supposed to say to that?

“As soon as they release me, we’re going to get married,” he announced and yeah, now she was wondering if they’d missed a head injury when they’d examined him.

“And why exactly are you so determined to marry me all of a sudden?”

“Because I love you,” he said with another shrug as he nodded towards the cup of water. “Can I have another drink?”

“D-did you just tell me that you love me?” she asked, staring at him and unable to help herself, because now she was pretty sure that he was suffering from a brain injury. It was either that, or the drugs in his system making him say this.

“Yes,” he said, closing his eyes. “Figured it out the day at the reptile zoo. It pissed me off that you didn’t love me back, but I figured in ten years or so with enough mind blowing sex, you’ll end up falling head over heels in love

with me so it's okay."

She chuckled, she couldn't help it. "You're planning on using sex to make me fall in love with you?"

"Mmmhmmm," he mumbled sleepily. "I'm willing to make that sacrifice."

"Wow, you're a giver," she said, smiling down at the man that she loved.

"That I am," he said, smiling that sexy grin that drove her crazy. "And you're marrying me. Soon," he said, firmly even as he started to nod off.

"I am," she said, nodding her head solemnly in agreement, sniffing as tears started to roll down her face, "because I love you."

He stilled for a minute, that sexy grin of his turning into a frown. "What about all the mind blowing sex?"

Smiling, she leaned down and kissed him. "I'm still willing to have all the mind blowing sex."

"That's very big of you," he said, grinning against her lips.

"It really is."

*_*_*_*

"She finally fell asleep, huh?" his father asked softly as he glanced down at Tinkerbelle, who was snuggled up by his side.

"Yes," he said, smiling down at the woman who loved him.

Not that he was surprised, he was a fucking catch after all.

"Looks like we finally found the right combination of pills," his father said, picking up a blanket off the other bed and carefully placed it over them both.

Frowning, he looked down at the woman softly snoring in his arms. "You drugged her?"

"Put it in her apple juice," his father said with a shrug. "She was in pain and refused to take anything for it so I drugged her."

"I see," he mumbled and just like that, the silence became awkward.

That is until his father decided to pick up where they'd left off.

"I'd raised you to face your mistakes, Danny."

"Don't start this shit again," he said, grinding his jaw as he looked up to

face his father.

“You ran off, Danny,” his father said, rubbing the back of his neck as he shook his head, looking a little lost. “You just ran.”

“You didn’t give me much of a choice,” he said evenly.

His father met his gaze as he said, “No, I didn’t. I kept pushing you when I should have just accepted the fact that you weren’t perfect, Danny.”

“I never said that I was.”

“No,” his father said softly, “you didn’t, but in my eyes you were. You were a smart kid, a great brother, a wonderful son, a cocky little bastard, but to me you were perfect. When you proved me wrong, I lost it. I’ve never been so scared in my life as I was that morning, Danny. I thought I was going to lose you and when you pulled through and I thought about how easily I could have lost you over something so stupid,” he paused, shaking his head, “I just lost it.”

“Things worked out,” he said, surprised by just how much it hurt him to hear his father admit that he’d fucked up. For years he’d imagined this moment, imagined his father taking the blame, but right now, for the first time since he’d come out of that coma, he wished that his father would stop talking.

His father nodded. “For the most part, they did. The Marines did for you what I never could, but at a cost.”

“Why did you stop talking to me?” he forced himself to ask.

“Because I didn’t know what to say to you without pushing you away again, Danny. I just.....,” he shook his head, looking away, “I just didn’t know what to say that would make what I did to you okay.”

“You didn’t do anything to me,” he said, sighing, because his father wasn’t to blame for how his life had turned out. “You were right. I was cocky and when I fucked up I acted like a spoiled brat and ran off, thinking that I was taking the easy way out with the Marines. They taught me a great deal and helped me grow up.”

“I still pushed you away,” his father said, looking tormented. “I never should have done that. I never should have done that...”

“Yes, you did, but so did I. We both fucked this up.”

His father raised his hand and laid it over his where it rested on Jodi’s hip. “I won’t make that mistake again,” his father promised, giving his hand a squeeze.

He opened his mouth to promise his father the same when the small woman in his arms cut him off.

“If you girls are done talking, I could really use a double chocolate donut.”

He looked up at his father just in time to catch the panicked expression on his face. “Oh, shit.....,” his father mumbled, swallowing nervously as he released his hand and stumbled back away from the bed as Danny sighed, resigning himself to the next twelve hours of hell with the woman that he loved.

Epilogue

Five Months Later.....

“Do you need anything else?” she asked, absently rubbing her large belly.

Danny rolled his eyes playfully as he placed his hands on the wheels of his wheelchair and rolled away from the table. “I’m fine, Tinkerbelle.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, walking over to the refrigerator so that she could make sure that everything was within his reach. Once she’d made sure that he could reach the beer and soda to watch his game, she moved onto the counters and double-checked that he could reach all his favorite snacks.

“Tinkerbelle.....,” he said in a chiding tone with a touch of exasperation. “I’m fine. Go take your shower.”

She glanced around the large country kitchen of their new house and sighed at the stacks of boxes that she still needed to go through and nearly groaned. She should go through a few more of these boxes before she even thought about taking a shower, but she was just so tired. All she wanted to do was take a shower and curl up in bed and sleep for the next two days, but there was just too much to do.

They’d been back for almost two months, but it felt like only two days. It seemed like she’d been going non-stop since the moment that she came out of her drug induced haze. Danny had broken his back in three places and had needed around the clock care and two additional surgeries to fix everything. A week after her surgery to fix her hand, she’d made the choice to stay with him in Florida while he recovered.

She’d taken a leave of absence from work and prepared herself to be fired, but instead her boss had found a way for her to run the library from Florida and save her job. When she wasn’t sitting with Danny, holding his hand and trying to distract him from the pain, she was working and trying to fit in a few hours of sleep.

Thanks to her father and Danny’s father, she hadn’t had the additional stress of worrying about her bills, car or anything else. They’d even rented her a house down in Florida so that she could have a place to rest when she wasn’t at the hospital with Danny. They’d moved all of her things into Danny’s apartment, boxed up their stuff, taken care of their cars, made sure that all their bills were

paid and even found an old colonial farmhouse that needed a lot of work. His father and Trevor bought the house and all the men in their family, including their cousins up in New Hampshire, had spent the next two and half months repairing the house, making it livable and handicap accessible for them.

When they'd discovered that she was pregnant a month into their stay down in Florida, they'd tripled their efforts. They'd made sure that there was always at least two people staying in the house with her at all times to help with Danny and to make sure that she was taken care of. Unfortunately, they hadn't been able to do anything about the morning sickness.

Or the exhaustion...

The raging hormones.....

The insatiable appetite.....

The spontaneous crying.....

And about a hundred other problems that went along with pregnancy that managed to turn the men in his family into mother hens. They'd done their best to take care of her even those times when it was obvious that they wanted to run away screaming. They'd been great, but even with all of their help and babying, she'd still been exhausted and that hadn't changed since Danny was released from the hospital.

If anything, she was even more exhausted now. It seemed like one minute she'd been helping Danny into his wheelchair and waiting for his discharge papers and the next he'd been kidnapping her with the help of his family, whisking her off to Nevada, sneaking her into Vegas and marrying her. From there he'd whisked her off for a honeymoon that had drained every last ounce of energy she'd had left, but it had been amazing.

After they'd finally come home, things had only become more hectic. They had a new house that needed to be organized and set up so that Danny could get around with his wheelchair. On top of that she was running the library, making sure that Danny made all of his appointments, running back and forth all day between the library and home to make sure that he was okay and trying to set things up for the babies.

She was just so tired.

"Go take a shower. I'm fine," he told her with a reassuring smile.

"I'll only be a few minutes," she promised him, leaning down so that she could kiss his cheek. He shot her a wink as he pushed away with his

wheelchair and rolled towards the living room, leaving her standing there, wondering if she should follow him to make sure that he had everything that he needed.

With a shake of her head, she forced herself to walk to their bedroom and strip her clothes off while she ignored the incredibly comfortable bed only a few feet away. A shower, she needed a shower and more importantly, a shower would help her wake up so that she could make a run to the store, pick up Danny's medication, come home, make dinner, do the laundry and make something decent for Danny to have for lunch tomorrow before she helped him with his shower.

Sighing, she resigned herself to the long night ahead and turned the shower on. She waited for a minute for the water to get hot and when it did, she placed her hand on the wall and carefully moved to climb in the tub. She placed her foot on the bottom of the bathtub and-

Slipped.

She barely managed to get out a startled gasp when she found herself falling forward and-

Suddenly in the arms of the man that she loved.

"Shhhh, Tinkerbelle, it's okay," he said, brushing his lips against hers.

She opened her mouth only to sob and shake her head, because it wasn't okay. She was exhausted, but that's not why she was crying. He was standing. Danny was standing and holding her in his arms.

He was also completely naked.

"I was trying to surprise you," he said with a rueful smile as he carefully turned with her in his arms and carried her into their bedroom.

"Well, you did," she said around a sob that was borderline hysterical as she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

"Dad suggested that I should wait until I got the all clear from the doctor tomorrow, but I couldn't wait," he said, pressing a kiss against her forehead as he laid her down on the bed.

"I'm glad," she said with a watery smile as she forced herself to release him.

"Now," he said, sitting down by her side and placing a hand on her belly, "I get to take care of you."

*_*_*_*

“I don’t need anyone taking care of me,” she said with the most pathetic sniffle that he’d ever heard. “I’m fine,” the little liar said.

“Too goddamn bad,” he said, carefully lying down next to her and biting back a wince when his legs and back protested, but not enough for him to notice, not when he was able to crawl in bed with his wife for the first time on his own and pull her into his arms. “Go to sleep, Tinkerbelle.”

“But-”

“Sleep.”

She stubbornly shook her head and tried to sit up, but he wouldn’t let her, not when he knew that she was planning on babying him. He appreciated everything that she’d done for him, more than he could ever say, but those days were now over. He wasn’t a hundred percent yet, but he was at the point where he could say fuck it and take care of his wife.

He didn’t give a rat’s ass if rushing this meant that he would never be able to run again, or that he would have to accept that job offer from his uncle to be a field supervisor because he’d rushed this and fucked up the bulging discs in his back and couldn’t pick up anything heavier than a gallon of water for the rest of his life. She was exhausted and she needed him. She needed him to step up and put his own shit aside and take care of her and that’s exactly what he was going to do.

“Go to sleep, Tinkerbelle,” he said, gently guiding her onto her side so that he could curl up behind her.

“But, I need to go to the store and get your medicine and-”

“No,” he said, pressing a kiss between her shoulder blades, “you need to rest, sweetheart. Just rest.”

*_*_*_*

“Which bedroom am I taking?” Duncan asked as he ripped open another box.

“You can have the master if you want,” he said, pressing a hand to his back as he walked stiffly towards the kitchen counter where Jodi kept all his medicine. He ignored the major painkillers and grabbed the bottle of Advil liquid gels and swallowed four dry.

“Are you sure?” Duncan asked, glancing down at the bottle of Advil,

but he didn't say anything.

"Yeah, we're not going to need it for a while," he said, walking over to the refrigerator and grabbed one of the ice packs that his wife kept on hand for him and pressed it against his lower back. "I don't want her climbing the stairs."

"Good idea," Duncan agreed with a nod as he grabbed another box to unpack. "Why don't you go lie down for a while?"

He hated how much he needed to do just that, but he knew that if he seriously fucked up his back that it would only make things worse. "Call me if you need anything," he said, heading for the kitchen door, pausing along the way to pull his little brother into a one armed hug. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Duncan said, returning the hug. "Go get some rest. I've got this."

Nodding, he released his brother and continued the long journey back to his bedroom. When he walked past his wheelchair where he'd left it against the wall, he forced himself to keep going. Biting back a groan, he pulled his shirt off and pushed his pants and boxers down. He slowly crawled back into bed and curled up behind his wife.

He wrapped his arm around her, kissed her shoulder and slowly exhaled, forcing his mind away from the pain.

*_*_*_*

Two months after that.....

"You don't have to wake up," she informed him as she shifted, careful not to fall over thanks to her very large belly, and slowly impaled herself on his erection.

Danny chuckled sleepily, reaching for her as he slowly opened his eyes. He gently cupped her hips to help guide her. "Couldn't wait?"

Licking her lips, she shook her head as she reached down and grabbed onto his arms to steady herself. "You were taking too long," she moaned, using her hold on him to raise herself only to slide back down.

He felt so good....

Over the past two months she'd been able to get more rest, her stress was practically gone, Danny was doing so much better and she'd finally been able to enjoy being pregnant. She ate whatever she wanted, slept whenever she wanted and did this whenever she wanted, which was admittedly a lot.

She'd quit her job at the library, which had actually helped quite a bit with her stress. Okay, so she hadn't so much as quit the library as Danny had been called in to come get her, because she wouldn't stop crying. The realization that hated her job had been....kind of depressing. When she'd earned her Master's degree she'd never thought she'd have to use it to decide between French roast and Arabian roast coffee to sell at the coffee bar that she was forced to manage so that the library could generate some income for the City Council.

She'd hated it....just hated it....

When Danny had come to get her a month ago, he'd sighed heavily and quit for her. She'd been so happy to finally be free of that place that she hadn't argued with him. She'd allowed him to bring her home, tuck her into bed and curled up with him and spent the next two days sleeping. When she woke up at the three in the morning two days later she somehow found herself at her desk, writing that historical romance novel that she'd been toying with in her mind for years, but never really seriously considered.

Now.....

Now she couldn't imagine doing anything else and thanks to Danny, she didn't have to. He'd been amazingly supportive about this. He'd even bought her a MacBook so that she could work wherever she wanted. He'd turned the large old den that he'd been planning on turning into a game room into an office with a large comfortable sitting area and play area for the babies so that she could continue to work after their children were born. He was such a sweet man, a wonderful husband and she knew without a doubt that he was going to be an incredible father.

"More research for your book?" he asked, sitting up so that he could wrap his arms around her and hold her as she slowly rocked herself on him.

"Mmmhmmm," she murmured against his lips. "You're a very helpful man."

"I do my best," he said as he reached up between them and-

"That's it!" Duncan announced, throwing their bedroom door wide open. "We're moving!"

"Get the fuck out!" Danny shouted, grabbing the comforter and yanked it up to cover her, because in her current state she was in no condition to jump off his lap and hide and she really, *really*, wanted to hide at this moment.

She opened her mouth to beg Danny to roll her off the bed when the

smell hit her, which caused her to promptly shut her mouth. She grabbed hold of the comforter and yanked it completely over her head as she buried her face against Danny's chest, right above the tattoo of Tinkerbelle, and hoped like hell that it was enough to block that odd rancid odor.

"Why are you covered in garbage?" Danny demanded as she struggled not to gag.

"That.....*woman!*" her normally loveable and considerate brother-in-law snarled, making her smile.

"Problem with the new neighbor?" Danny asked, sounding amused as she bit her lip, trying not to laugh. "Do you want me to go have a word with her mommy for you?" he asked in a mocking tone that had her chuckling.

"I hate you, you heartless bastard!" Duncan shouted dramatically as he slammed the door behind him.

She sighed happily as she pushed the comforter off her head. "I love our new neighbors."

Not even close to being the end.....

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“Looks like Trevor’s getting arrested.”

“Uh huh, that’s nice,” she said, not bothering to look up from the iPad mini that she felt was rightfully hers now.

“Marybeth-” the betraying bastard once again started with his bullshit apology, but after twenty years of friendship she knew the tone that he was using a little too well.

“Not going to work,” she said, absently swiping her finger over the iPad’s screen, sighing heavily when the new page didn’t look any more promising than the last one had.

“But, I’m really sorry,” Darrin, the bastard that she couldn’t seem to shake, said, sounding like he was pouting, which he most likely was since his charming tone hadn’t worked.

“Rot in hell, you selfish bastard,” she said, trying not to cringe when she saw the asking price for a basic one bedroom apartment on Royal Ave, which wasn’t exactly encouraging since Royal Ave was located in one of the worst parts of the city.

“I can’t believe that you’re still mad,” the asshole muttered, grabbing her beer and finished it off.

“Believe it, you male whore,” she muttered, once again swiping, cringing, and swiping again.

“But, she attacked me!” Darrin said with the typical Bradford arrogance and drama that she was, unfortunately, used to.

“Uh huh, that’s nice,” she said, wondering if she should look for a new roommate only to dismiss the idea seconds later. There was no way that she was going to be able to go through that again, not unless she cut the jerk stealing her

hotdog out of her life and after twenty years of friendship and bullshit, she just couldn't do it. She'd put too much time in training this one and at her age, she really didn't like the idea of breaking in a new best friend.

“What if I told you that I could make it up to you?” Darrin asked, putting his arm around the back of her seat so that he could lean in next to her and look at the screen.

“I'd call you a lying bastard,” she said, not bothering to shove him away since it wouldn't do any good. The bastard simply didn't understand the concept of personal space, at least not where she was concerned.

He'd always been that way. When they were kids he'd grab her by the hand and drag her everywhere, demand to sit next to her at lunch or in class, and he always had his arm thrown around her, always. If he'd been any other guy, she'd probably shove him away or kick him in the balls, but....

It was Darrin, her best friend for twenty years and by this point she barely noticed it anymore. She did notice when the women that he was dating took exception to it, mostly because they got all bitchy and pissy and thought to try to lay claim to Darrin and shove her out of the picture. It never worked, but she did appreciate the entertainment. She was a permanent fixture in his life and if a woman couldn't accept that, Darrin dropped her without a second thought.

She would like to say it was the same way for her, but Darrin really didn't give her a choice in the matter. If any guy that she was dating took offense to their friendship, Darrin, the asshole that was currently eating her chips, would take it upon himself to show the guy to the door. It still pissed her off when he did it, but at this point it just wasn't worth bitching about, not when he did other things to piss her off, other things that caused her roommate to have a meltdown, had the swat team breakdown her door, her landlord getting a restraining order against her and being forced to sleep on her brother's ratty old sofa. With Darrin Bradford she learned a long time ago that she had to pick and choose her battles or deal with his glares and bitching.

“I was going to tell you that Trevor had a townhouse for rent, dirt cheap, but since you're not interested.....,” he let his words drift off, shrugging as he sat back in his chair.

She had to snort in disbelief, she really did. “You're forgetting that he swore that he would never rent to either one of us again after what happened with that delivery kid from Papa Ginos.”

She still hadn't forgiven Darrin for that one. Trevor had been the best landlord that she'd ever had. He wasn't a jerk, never raised her rent, always took care of his properties and never rented to any assholes, well, any assholes that he wasn't related to anyway. She missed her old apartment. It had been large, newly updated, weather proofed and cheap, really cheap, but the bastard next to her had ruined it for her, because of a late night craving he'd had for buffalo wings.

"He's looking to sell it, because it's not bringing in much money. He's just looking for a tenant to stay there while he tries to sell the place, to make it look occupied. He said it's harder to sell a place if it's empty, looks less attractive to perspective buyers," Darrin explained as he signaled to a vendor passing by their row.

It was tempting, very tempting but.....

"I need a place longer than just for a month or two," she pointed out, knowing that it wouldn't take long for Trevor to sell the townhouse. All his properties were in perfect condition.

"True," Darrin said, handing the vendor five dollars for a cold Coke, "but I was thinking that he might finance you if you wanted to buy the property."

She had to roll her eyes even as excitement bubbled inside her at the prospect of finally owning her own home. It was tempting, really tempting. She would love having a place of her own, love to be able to work on it without having to ask her landlord's permission for every little thing, love to have the peace of mind and security that owning a home would bring, but she knew that it would never happen. As a single woman in her twenties with only a GED, decent, not perfect, credit and none of her family willing to co-sign for her, she probably would never own her own home. It also didn't hurt that her savings, while decent, was nowhere close to being enough for a twenty percent down payment.

"He's not going to finance me," she sighed, finally looking up from the iPad's screen so that she could swipe the Coke from his hands.

He narrowed his beautiful green eyes on her as she made a show of opening the soda bottle and taking a long, satisfying sip, trying not to smile as he, still glaring at her, signaled the vendor for a second bottle. As she took a second, and just as satisfying, sip of her soda she couldn't help but appreciate the man now glaring at her. With short, messy black hair, a golden tan, perfect masculine features, even the slight bump on his nose, incredible build, he was a woman's walking wet dream, not hers, but that didn't mean that she couldn't

appreciate a hot guy when she saw one.

“If he doesn’t, then Uncle Jared probably would,” he said with a shrug, finishing off his soda before grabbing hers and finishing that off as well.

“Uncle Jared isn’t going to help me,” she mumbled, looking past Darrin to watch as Trevor was shoved down to his knees by three cops and handcuffed while Zoe frantically tried to explain something to the officers, probably something to do with the twins, she thought with a yawn. She looked over to find Uncle Jared holding the twins, who were looking a little too innocent as they ate ice cream cones. She knew without a doubt that whatever was going on, the two year olds were definitely behind it.

“Of course he would,” Darrin said, watching the little scene to their right unfold, looking bored.

“I’m just an employee,” she pointed out, trying not to wince when Trevor was shoved down to the cement staircase, face first.

“Don’t let Uncle Jared hear you say that,” Darrin said, shifting back in his seat to get more comfortable.

“Shouldn’t you help him?” she asked, gesturing towards Trevor as several more cops raced towards them since she didn’t feel like arguing about her boss and her weird place in the Bradford family.

“Probably,” Darrin said around a yawn.

“Are you going to?” she asked, watching as Trevor was yanked back up to his feet.

“In a minute or two,” Darrin said, signaling for another Coke as they watched Zoe gesturing wildly between her twins, her husband and the field.

“*What the hell?*” Jason snapped as he was suddenly grabbed by two cops and shoved to his knees next to Trevor.

“Do you think the twins planned this?” she asked, taking the Coke from the vendor and gesturing for him to step aside so that she could watch the show.

“It’s hard to say,” Darrin said, taking the Coke from her and taking a long sip before handing it back to her.

“It’s kind of frightening,” she mumbled around a sip, watching as Haley walked over to join the drama.

Darrin chuckled, taking the bottle back as Haley, smiling hugely, pulled out her cellphone and started taking pictures of her husband as a three hundred

pound cop patted him down. After a slight pause, Marybeth pulled her cellphone out, deciding that she might need a good laugh later tonight when she had to fight with her brother's dog, affectionately named Killer, for space on the couch.

"I guess I should give them a hand," Darrin said, taking one last sip before handing her the now-empty bottle.

"Hold up," she said, reaching out and stopping him by placing a hand on his arm. "I just want to get this.....shot," she said, angling her phone to just the right angle so that she could capture this momentous occasion. "Got it," she said, with a satisfied sigh as she sat back and put her phone away.

"Text them my way," Darrin said, standing up as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his badge.

"You know my fee," she said, signaling to the vendor for another beer as she leaned back in her seat and watched as the Yankees creamed the Red Sox.

Darrin chuckled as he pulled out some money and paid for her beer. "I'm not doing your laundry."

"We'll see," she said, knowing that the need to rub his cousins' noses in this later would be his downfall. She might not have a place to stay yet, but at least she wouldn't have to worry about doing her laundry for a week, she mused, sipping her beer as she took advantage of Darrin's absence and bought another hot dog.