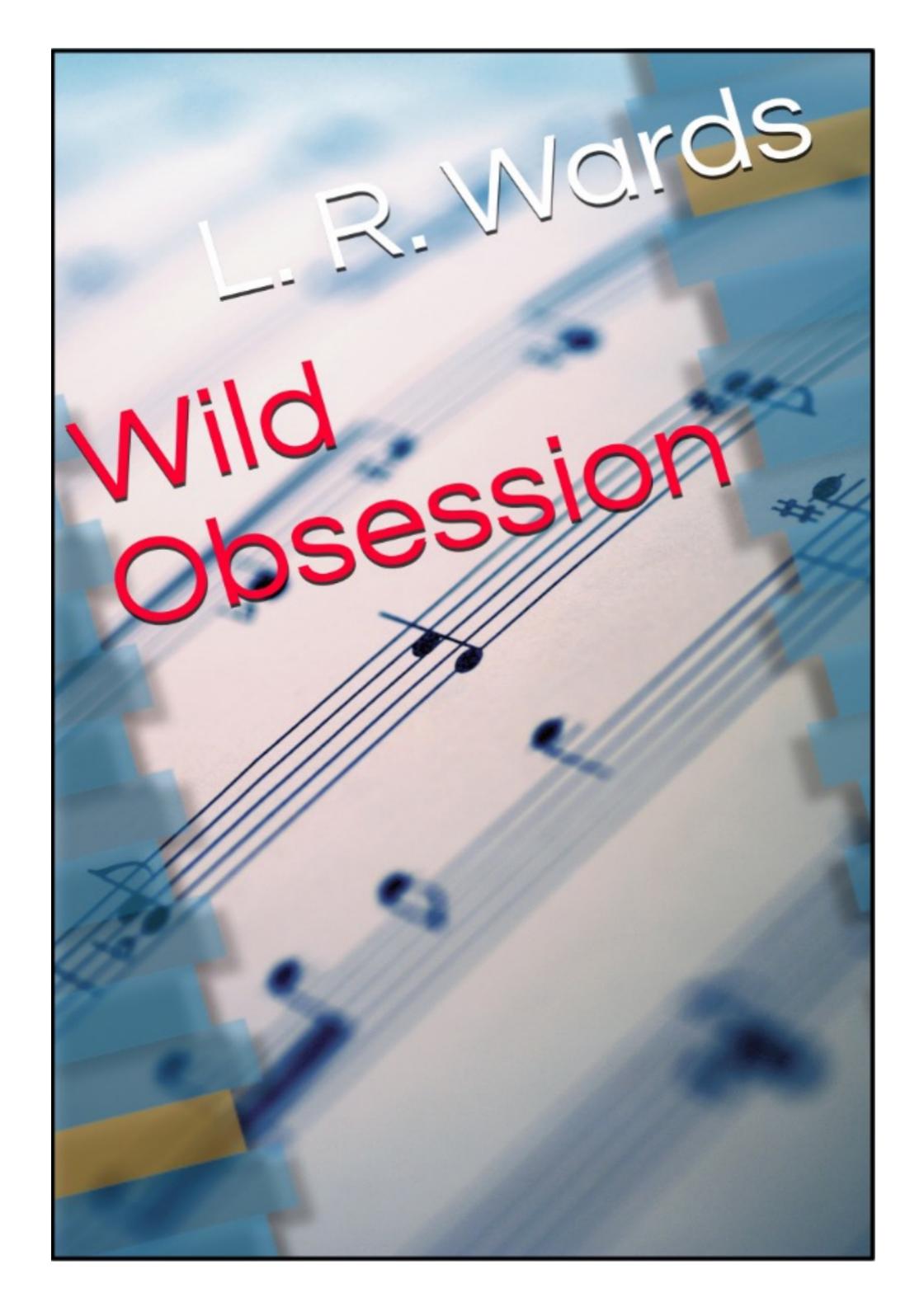


L. R. Wards

Wild
Obsession



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CHAPTER ONE

Tess concentrated on the music, so much so that she didn't hear the screen door open and her father's boss step in and pause while listening. She was always in a world of her own when she played the violin.

Ever since she was old enough to walk she'd had one in her hands. Her mother was a member of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra after she attended Julliard. But she gave it all up when she married her father. Tess smiled thinking of her mother and her gentleness. "No regrets" she told Tess one day when she asked her why she did that "I love your father more than my career and I would be happy if he only picked peas for the rest of his life." She'd meant it too, thought Tess remembering the look of tenderness in her mother's beautiful dark brown eyes.

Tess never made it out of Sulphur Springs Montana after she graduated high school. Her mother died three years ago from breast cancer six months prior to her graduation, and she couldn't bring herself to leave her father who was clearly distraught. So she spent her time helping him out. Not that she really wanted to leave. She loved the country, her small town and the people with a passion. Then there was that other reason, who was standing behind her without her knowledge with his attention completely riveted on her. If she were to turn around she would see that his handsome expression didn't give anything away, but his intelligent dark eyes told a different story.

The music flowed from her violin as she let her thoughts and emotions come through in the music. When she paused to turn the sheet she suddenly felt like she wasn't alone and turned to see Jacob standing in the doorway just staring at her. He cast an awesome image with his large frame filling the entrance and the sunlight at his back creating a glowing outline around him.

Because of that she really couldn't see his face. However, just his presence alone affected her. Suddenly her throat seemed to close up and she swallowed thickly.

It was hard to admit years ago before he left Sulphur Springs to go to med school that she was in love with him. Of course she was just a child barely coming into womanhood and it was just a silly crush, but when he'd come home during the summer over those following seven years, it grew into something more. Now she was twenty-one and there was no doubt in her mind how she felt. The things that happened to her body when he was around have never happened in the presence of another man and she had absolutely no control over them. The air always seemed thicker when he walked in a room, her heart would start pounding faster and she had difficulty catching her breath, like now.

She watched him shift from one foot to another making him seem a little uncomfortable which surprised her, because the man was usually so self assured that could be comfortable at a hanging. Obviously the intimacy of her playing unsettled him a little and he must've felt like he was intruding. He shouldn't. He owned the house her father and her lived in and they sort of had an unspoken rule about not knocking.

As it was, her father worked as a veterinarian for Jacob, Lance and Colton Hartley who own the Lansdowne Ranch, a world famous producer of thoroughbred racehorses. Although Jacob, the oldest brother was the town physician, he still was the Patriarch of the Hartley boys because their father moved back to Texas after the death of his wife. All of them were raw, brawny and masculine, but Jacob was different. He had this air about him that made him stand out, at least to her. He seemed to have this current around him that jolted her whenever he settled those intelligent light brown eyes on her. He didn't even have to speak for her to be affected, yet when he did, she could hardly think on

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her own. Even standing there in her house wearing jeans, a blue chambray shirt and a weathered tan Stetson, he was a force to be reckoned with. So much for forgetting to think, she could barely remember to breathe. She thought he looked equally as handsome in his three piece suits when he went to work in his clinic in town. She actually worked for him one summer as a clerk, but being so close to him then affected her too much and it was a struggle to concentrate on the work. Not only that, the man was a magnet for women, who would parade in and out of there all dolled up pretending to have some ailment so they could try and win him. It literally drove her crazy how brazen women could be. She would never go so far to gain his attention. She had more pride than that. Yet, was it in her benefit to not say anything and pine for him at a distance? Probably not.

No matter how cool and detached he seemed, the man never had trouble gaining attention from her sex. He was handsome, rich, and a doctor. She was sure the fourth reason didn't leave anything to complain about either, with that tall muscular body of his made her think of other things he would be exceptional at. *Oh God*, she thought feeling her cheeks heat up, ashamed that her mind suddenly turned to the man's sexual prowess.

All the brothers had it, but she only had eyes for Jacob. The second oldest, Lance was a lawyer and Colton, the youngest, mainly ran the ranch, but all boys took time to share the responsibility, not that they needed the income. Their father came from Texas and made money in oil, but sold out before the price of oil dropped, which, rumour had it, set him for life. Then he came north to buy the ranch and marry the ranch's former owner's daughter who gave him three strapping sons.

Colton wasn't without talent either. He had some finance degree from a fancy university somewhere. His main responsibility was the ranch while Lance and Jacob worked in

town. However, they made decisions together on how it was run. It seemed like each one of the boys had brains besides brawn.

"I'm looking for your father." He finally said guiding his eyes around the room.

She took that opportunity to secretly slide her eyes over his body. He wasn't the only one that was unsettled. The man's presence always made her feel so disturbed, but not in a bad way. In fact she was beyond elated that he was there, but she couldn't help but also feel vulnerable, especially when the air surrounding her seemed to heat up a few degrees at his presence. Not only that, he caught her playing. It was something that she always kept intimately to herself. She took a deep breath and tried to steady her voice the best she could. "He had to go to town to get some supplies."

Switching his gaze back to her he nodded, "My top mare is in labour."

Every time his eyes settled on her she felt a twinge in her chest. Sometimes she wished he wasn't so darn handsome, because that had to be hard on her heart. Either it galloped, stopped or ached. *Gosh*, she thought, *I'll probably need a pacemaker before I reach twenty-five.*

It didn't help that he had nice eyes either. They were a light honey brown with a dark ring around the iris and framed with really thick black lashes. Those alone made her blood warm when he landed them on hers. Combine that with his dimpled smile and she was hopelessly spellbound. "Oh?" she finally said understanding his concern about his mare and feeling stupid for the pause while she admired him. More and more she found herself feeling silly at the way she acted around him. Thankfully he didn't seem to notice. It was probably because all women acted like that around him and he honestly thought it was just part of her gender.

"Can you leave a note for your father and come and give

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us a hand. I don't anticipate a problem, but just in case."

It was no secret that she helped out her father and probably knew more than her fair share of veterinary medicine, but she didn't quite feel as confident as him and she never did it alone. Although it thrilled her that he had that much faith in her, she still felt a little uneasy. What if something were to go wrong? She could never forgive herself for not being able to help Jacob or the mare. She was about to protest when he spoke again.

"I'd feel better Tess." He said in that deep timbre he possessed sensing her uncertainty.

The sound of her name on his tongue made her knees go weak. How could she possibly refuse that? Slowly she nodded and set down her violin, "Okay then, I'll leave him a note like you said." Her hand went to her stomach for a moment. Bending over and straightening started that dull ache just below her gut again. It had started when she got up that morning and it had been awhile since she had the stomach flu, and she really didn't want it right now.

"What's wrong?" he took a step forward concern etching his handsome face.

She held up her hand, "It's nothing. I just have a touch of the stomach flu. But I'll be fine. I don't have a fever or anything, just a bit of mild pain."

"When did it start?" his dark brows lifted in question.

She shrugged, "This morning, but nothing Tylenol can't cure." She straightened and gave him a sly look, "Quit being a doctor for a few minutes Jacob. I'm fine." Although she had to admit, his concern made her feel warmth stir in her belly despite the pain. Even though he was a physician and it was his profession, it still made her feel good that he was concerned for her.

He looked doubtful, "Maybe we should—"

"No—" she interrupted with a smile trying to squash his

worry knowing that he was going to ask her not to go with him, to rest instead, but she hadn't seen him in what seemed like months and really wanted to be with him for a few minutes. The man was like the pied piper with women trailing along after him and he was always with one woman or another, but this time she could have him all to herself. The dull ache in her abdomen could be ignored just to do that.

He stopped, "If you feel you can." He said hesitantly casting her a suspicious look, "I really don't want to put you out Tess."

Put her out? Good lord, what any woman would give just to spend a few moments alone with such a man. "Not a chance and I feel I can." She forcing another smile hoping he didn't notice. Thankfully he didn't seem to.

The ride to the ranch was only a few miles because the house they lived in was on the land itself. The Hartley's paid her father a healthy wage besides the living arrangement. And it was by no means a shack. It was a sprawling ranch house with four bedrooms, five bathrooms and a large study for her father to work out of. Of course it was no comparison to the southern style mansion that the Hartley's had, but she loved it regardless. Her father used to work in a fancy vet clinic down south, but after he married her mother they moved north and settled into a relaxed life. Tess was born shortly after and had never been out of Sulphur Springs, but she didn't care, she loved it there.

"How old are you now?"

Tess turned to look at him. Jacob wasn't one for conversation and this question took her by surprise. Personal questions weren't in his vocabulary, she was sure of it. Usually they talked horses when they were alone and sometimes he'd tease her, but his expression usually held a glint of mischief when he did. However, as he focused on the road she didn't see anything that would indicate her that he was. "Twenty one." She

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answered, "Why?"

He flicked her a glance as he fished for a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. Taking a long draw off it he answered her. "I was just wondering after hearing you play a moment ago why you never did anything with your life and that talent."

He thought she was talented? She swore her heart stopped for a moment at that statement. All she could do was try and shrug indifferently, "I'm really not that good."

"That's a lie Tess." He gave her a knowing look causing her to blush. "In fact I didn't realize how good you were. I knew you played and your dad told me how good you were, but I just summed it up to a father's prejudice."

This time she managed a shy smile, "Thanks." If Jacob was going to give her a compliment she certainly wasn't going to ignore it.

He pulled the Ranch truck up to one of three long sprawling stable buildings just as Tom, his lead hand came running out.

"It's fine boss, Angel wings just had herself a healthy colt." He grinned, "Hi Tess." He said as his eyes guided over the pretty blonde.

"Hi Tom. Is he up yet?" she smiled.

"Yes, and suckling like a contented kitten. You look good honey." He said genuinely.

Tom was handsome and only a few years older than her, and always flattering her in one way or another, but she honestly didn't think about him that way because she was too infatuated with Jacob. He also had some sort of degree in animal husbandry which is why he was young, but in charge of the best stock.

Jacob narrowed his eyes on him, "I don't pay you to flirt, get back and tend to the mare."

Tom snapped his mouth shut and gave Jacob an odd look,

“Yes sir.” He turned and trotted back into the stables.

After he watched Tom disappear back into the stables, he turned to Tess, with complete intentions of telling her not to get too attached to Tom, when there was a look across her face he instantly recognized. It was the look of someone in pain. Then she confirmed his thoughts by bending forward clutching her abdomen, “Tess—what is it?”

“It’s my side.” She inhaled deeply as a shard of pain shot through her.

“When did this start?” he said with building concern, “This morning?”

“I don’t know. Last night I think?” She reluctantly admitted. She winced as another pain took hold

“Did it start near your stomach?” he noticed she was clutching her right side.

“No. It was always in my side, but I thought—“

“Flu, my ass!” he said and shifted the truck into gear and tore up gravel as he swung the truck around.

“Where are we going?”

“The hospital.” He said gunning the accelerator.

She let out a groan of pain and bent forward, “Why?”

“That’s not the flu from the way you’re clutching your right flank. It’s your appendix. I should have been more insistent.” He swore under his breath. As a physician he knew about that sixth sense when something didn’t fit right, and it went off when she first bent over at her house, but he listened to her downplay it and he knew now he shouldn’t have ignored it.

“Oh God Jacob, It hurts!” It felt as if someone started twisting a hot knife in her side.

Not good, he thought. Just my luck she probably ruptured from the look of her. His eyes flicked over her face. “We’ll be there soon Tess. Stay strong.” He may have sounded calm but from that quick glance he saw the pale skin, the sweat

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now beading on her brow, and the immense pain reflected on her taut expression, he was beyond worried. This was serious.

That was the last thing she heard before another cramp hit her, that was so painful she fell over and blacked out.

Jacob swore as she slumped over in the seat beside him, “Hang on honey.” He could pull the truck over and tend to her, but if it had ruptured he could be costing her precious time. Absently he placed a hand on her cheek, “Stay with me. We’ll be another ten minutes. Don’t you dare die on me!” He said raising his voice as if it would penetrate her consciousness.

Tess came around enough to hear Jacob arguing with the Emergency doctor. It was something about getting her in the OR without confirming the blood tests and listing her symptoms. It took her a moment before she recognized his voice because he sounded furious. She hadn’t ever heard him take that tone with anyone before in her life. Finally the doctor relented and told a nurse to call the OR staff in.

Next time she came to, her father was standing beside her pale with a worried expression. It took her a moment to realize that she was lying down in a bed and another few seconds to remember where she was. Her memories seemed distant and blurry. An image flashed in her head of Jacob assaulting another man by gripping him around the throat and shaking him like a rag doll while yelling at him. *Wow, what crazy dreams*, she thought. Jacob was a large strong man, but by no means could he ever do such a thing.

Seeing her eyes flutter open Chuck leaned over and kissed her forehead, “Hey baby, welcome back.”

“Dad? What happened?” she managed in a hoarse whisper, and winced at the dryness there, “My throat hurts.”

“They had to put a tube in your throat for the surgery.”

“Surgery?” her eyes widened, “What? Where’s Jacob?” she finally remembered that she was talking to him in the truck

and now she was in the hospital. She needed some answers.

“One question at a time baby.” He chuckled, “First, you had a ruptured appendix. Jacob caught it before it was too late. The surgeon says that you were very lucky. It could have killed you.” He said trying to hide his fear from his daughter. The thought of losing Tess was terrifying. He was thankful for Jacob when he got a hold of Colton and told him to find him to bring him to the hospital and why, because in his panic there was no way he could have driven there.

“Well that explains the pain in my abdomen.” She murmured thinking that it must’ve taken Jacob by surprise. She expected him to show up and give her hell over ignoring her symptoms any minute. Still she couldn’t help but think that it probably worried him.

“You have a small incision. The surgeon says you need to stay here for a few days. Thanks to Jacob they caught it before you went septic.” He took a shaky breath, “Honey, you scared me half to death. If Jacob hadn’t come to get you, chances are I would have found you dead on the floor.”

“Sorry.” She managed a smile trying to reassure the older man whose expression paled further with his confession.

“You should be.” He managed to tease despite feeling like his insides being in turmoil at coming close to losing her. He loved his daughter more than his own life and this was too close to the feeling of losing his wife. When Colton found him, he had almost come undone with the news until he reassured him that according to Jacob she would be fine.

“Where’s Jacob?” she asked again and blinked a couple of times to focus and looked around the room.

“He’s talking to the surgeon. I guess he knows the man. He’ll be in later. You frightened him.”

“I did?” Now that was surprising. Jacob was a doctor and she was sure he had his share of emergencies. She suspected that

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he was worried but not frightened. She didn't think it was possible to frighten a man like Jacob.

"You passed out on him in the truck."

"Is that what happened? I only remember bits and pieces." She adjusted herself and winced in pain. "ouch!"

"Lay still honey. I don't want you hurting yourself."

A nurse came in at that moment, "Mr. Taylor, we need you to sign some papers." She gave Tess a smile.

"Of course." He spared the nurse a glance before looking back at his daughter, "Stay in bed. I won't be too long."

"Okay dad." She gave him another sympathetic smile after the look of concern he gave her before he left. She knew this must've hit him hard so she downplayed it quite a bit. She was actually still in a lot of pain, but her father was worried enough. Then she shut her eyes for a bit before the sound of the door opening brought them open again.

Turning her head toward it, she saw Jacob just outside the door shaking hands with a man in OR scrubs that could only be her surgeon. He was pushing the door open as he was saying his thanks. Then he walked in and shut the door behind him seeing her eyes on him he actually smiled at her. Instantly the pain was forgotten and her stomach started to flip over. The man could bring any woman to their knees with such a smile.

"If you wanted my attention, you certainly got it." He said reaching over and rubbing the skin of her forearm affectionately.

Despite how groggy she felt, her senses seemed to come alive with his touch and that handsome smile. And gosh, he looked so tall while she lay in the bed. And what did that mean? Did he know how she felt?

"Don't look so worried tidbit." He said misunderstanding her expression and taking the seat that her father occupied only moments ago. "You're fine—now."

She breathed a sigh of relief that he misinterpreted her

look of apprehension. She didn't think she could bear if he knew how she felt, because she knew it would never get returned beyond brotherly affection. "Of course. Thanks for saving my life. I guess that means I owe you."

"I'll think of payment later." He teased, but she noticed it didn't reach his eyes. He genuinely looked worried. "How are you feeling?"

"Groggy and my abdomen hurts." She admitted causing his smile to widen to a grin. There went her heart again.

"It's nice to know that you're being honest this time."

She gave him a mock frown, "Hey, I knew you would make me stay home and rest if I confessed that it hurt more than I let on and I know this foal meant a lot to you. Not only that Jacob, if it wasn't for that, I'd be—"

He interrupted her by lifting his hand, "I'll get you something for the pain." He stood to leave. He couldn't bear to think what would happen if he'd left her at the house.

"No please, can you just sit here for a moment. At least until Dad comes back?" She knew it was bold but she honestly didn't want to be alone.

He nodded and took the seat again, "You're sure?"

"I don't like hospitals. They seem so sterile. And they smell funny." She said wrinkling her nose. Tess liked the openness of the country, the smell of the woods and the rolling pastures that she was accustomed too. The only other time she'd been in a hospital was her birth.

"Really?"

She looked at him and noticed the seriousness of his expression and he leaned forward in the chair and asked her why so she told him. After a moment of him just staring at her nearly causing her heart to pound out of her chest he said something completely shocking.

"I could take you home for a few days and look after you

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myself Tess. It would be your comfort zone and you would heal quicker.”

What did he just say? She blinked a couple of times unable to find the words to answer him.

“Don’t look so surprised. I am a doctor, I think I can manage a little girl” he gave her a heart stopping grin.

Little girl? Whatever hope she felt just got crushed at that statement.

“What?” he said with a teasing smile when she didn’t respond, “You don’t think I can? I assure you, I’m the best qualified.”

“No, it’s not that.” Whoops, she let it slip before she could stop it at the slightest degree of giving away her feelings for him. Staying at his house with him was too intimate for her, even for a couple of days so she could recover. She had trouble working in his clinic so how was she going to cope with this, even if the other two brothers were there?

“Then what is it?”

She stumbled for an answer to cover her slip, “You work and—“

“It’s the weekend. You’ll be back on your feet by Monday. I’m sure I can handle a couple of days looking after one patient. Especially you.”

Oh how she wished he would elaborate on what that meant, but really she already knew. It was because he had always seen her as the little girl of his veterinarian and because of that he had a bit of a soft spot for her, “Your mare just foaled—“

“—quit making excuses Tess.” He interrupted and narrowed his gaze, “From the sounds of it you’d think that you were afraid of me.”

Only if he knew why. “No,” she quickly defended, “I just know you have other responsibilities.”

“Tess, you came out to help me out as a friend and ended

up having acute appendicitis—a ruptured appendix I might add. I feel a little responsible. Now do me a favour and help me ease my conscience.” He stood as the door opened and her father came back in, “I’ll be back with something for pain.” He nodded to her father as he left.

Friend? She sighed out loud. She should know better. Jacob would never settle down even if he was hopelessly in love with her, which he certainly wasn’t. He was his own person and didn’t like to stop and have someone else to set the pace for him. Her eyes scanned down his backside as he left. He was positively sinful in jeans too. His legs were long and muscular and there wasn’t another man she knew that could fill out denim like that one. She stared at the closed door that he just went through. It was obvious to Tess that she irritated him and she felt bad about that. Although she was grateful for what he’d done, she really didn’t think that she could deal with staying in his house even if Lance and Colt were about.

“He’s feeling guilty.” Said her dad after he left drawing her attention.

“What on earth for, he saved my life. Besides, “ She added, “I don’t think he’s capable of that.”

Chuck grinned, “No?” she shook her head, “Normally no, but this is you honey.”

“What does that mean?”

He raised his brows, “It means, he cares about you Tess. It’s quite obvious.”

“Jacob doesn’t care about anyone the way you think. He’s just feeling responsible as with all of his patients and he’s doing what he was trained to do.” She said almost absently.

“Do you believe that?”

“I just see how he acts toward people most times.”

“Does he know how you feel about him Tess?”

“What?” She said wincing in pain because she actually

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moved to sit up. When she realized it hurt too much she laid back down.

“Take it easy Tess.” He scolded right before he gave her an amused smile at her abrupt denial.

“I would if you didn’t say such things.” She flustered.

He reached out and squeezed her shoulder, “Honey a father would have to be stupid and blind not to see when his daughter is interested in a man. Especially when you have half the town of single boys chasing you and you’re not the least bit interested.” He wanted to add that the prolonged stare she gave the man when he was leaving the room was another indication, but he already knew she was embarrassed.

“That’s not true!” she tried denying but her father just gave her an amused look. Then she realized she was caught, “Oh for gosh sakes!”

He resisted chuckling at her discomfort. He’d been aware of this for a few years now. There was no mistaking how she looked at Jacob despite not seeing Jacob look at Tess the same way. Even though he wasn’t sure if he was the best man for his daughter because of his busy life and abundant of women that always seemed to be around him, he did admire him because he was honourable and honest. Also, he always thought he was way too worldly for a small town gal like Tess. However, he wasn’t one to interfere in Tess’s love life no matter what. He’d raised her to be independent and responsible enough to make her own choices. If she made wrong choices he would support her but he needed to give her room to grow as hard as it was for him to do that. “It’s very true. Now, have you told him?”

She slumped in defeat, “No.”

“Are you going to?”

Her eyes shot wide, “No—and Dad, don’t you either. I’ll never live this down.”

“I won’t.” he said after a pause, “But, honey, that man

does care about you. Maybe if you told him things would be different. He needs some love in his life, and quite frankly, you're perfect." Whether or not he thought that Jacob was good for Tess, she would certainly be good for him. He'd been working for the Hartley's for more than twenty years and not once had he seen Jacob with a steady girlfriend. Maybe it was about time that he had one. If anyone could get through to Jacob it was Tess. Whether she realized it or not, she was the closest female to him.

"You're just saying that because I'm your daughter." She offered, "He's a physician, he's supposed to care about people that way. We already discussed this."

Just then Jacob came back in with a syringe as Chuck was going to argue with his daughter about her ideas, but maybe this wasn't the time. Tess mouthed the words 'don't tell' and he grinned down at her.

Then he noticed something different in the man's expression as his eyes settled on his daughter. Jacob did look at Tess with more than genuine concern, and obviously neither one of them noticed that—yet. Maybe this scare made him realized some things. If he let it be, maybe things would fall into place. Jacob may have been one of the two town doctors who had a caring profession, but when it came to people outside of his clinic and involved business, he could be a really hard to deal with. However, he always treated Tess as if she was special. Not that she wasn't, she was, but this was a father's opinion of his daughter. He hid his smile and excused himself saying he needed a cup of coffee to calm his nerves. Maybe if he let them alone more, fate would work its magic.

She released a breath of relief when her father left. He was never one to pull punches and she wouldn't put it past him to tell Jacob how she felt, but if he didn't then, he probably wouldn't say anything at all. Hopefully she was right because she'd just die if her father let out her little secret. Then her eyes

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guided to the object in Jacob's hands, "What do you think you're doing with *that*?" Tess's eyes darted from the large needle then to Jacob with wide eyes.

He managed a smile of reassurance, "It's going in the line, not you. So don't worry." He flicked her an amused look before lifting the I.V. line and after swiping a port with an alcohol swab, injected the contents. "I know you're *not* afraid of a little needle." He chuckled.

"That is not *little* and what is in that?" she asked as he finished injecting the contents.

"Morphine." He let his smile get bigger, "You should be feeling it about—"

That's the last of what she heard before her eyes closed and she was asleep.

Jacob smiled as the familiar rhythm of deep sleep could be heard from her. He reached out to push a stray lock of hair off her face, but paused for a moment. Then slowly and deliberately he shifted direction and ran two fingers down one of her smooth cheeks while his eyes roamed over her face. There was no doubt that Tess was beautiful. Her mother was beautiful, so he expected as much, but the more she grew into a woman the more he found himself looking at her. If she was a little older, and maybe he a little younger, he might consider something with her. Even so, he was thirty four and she was twenty one and he hadn't ever seen her with a man, which he concluded made her very inexperienced, maybe even virginal and not the type of woman he got involved with. His eyes continued to study her knowing that when she finally gave herself to a man, she would have to be in love with him. That was the way Tess was. Yet, she was also painfully naïve and he hoped that she didn't fall for the first man that paid her attention, like Tom. He felt his eyes narrow remembering the day before when he saw the interest in his lead hand's eyes when he laid them on Tess. It made him feel very

possessive. Something he could never brag about with another woman, but this was Tess and she was special to them—to him. His terse response actually surprised him when he barked at Tom. His men were usually used to his authority, but this was over something entirely different.

Absently he ran a rough finger across her bottom lip. Her lips were as if sculpted from velvet stone. They were pouty, perfectly formed and as soft as warm velvet. It was a perfectly kissable mouth.

Abruptly he lifted his hand and placed it on the bedrail still looking down at her. He shouldn't touch her without her knowledge. First she wasn't used to a man's attention and he had no right to take advantage of her sedative state. Second, she didn't belong to him.

Both of his brothers and he were protective of her. Probably because they watched her grow up, but somewhere along the way he stopped thinking of her as a little girl and crossed that invisible line of propriety when he let his thoughts wander. Hell, anyone would. She had the face of a fashion model with those thick lashes, high cheekbones and creamy skin. She was about five four so he stood a full head taller than she did making her a little shorter than the women he dated but she was more nicely put together. She had a perfect hourglass figure with a tiny waist and nicely rounded hips that could turn any pair of jeans into a man magnet even if her face was hidden from view. Her breasts were round, pert and he knew from his experience with women that they would fill his hands nicely. Her waist length hair was a treat too. He'd always been partial to blondes but compared to the women he dated, Tess's color was actually natural and streaked lighter by the sun. After that brief touch a moment ago, he found out it was as soft as he'd always thought it was. Then there was her personality. She was fun to be around, kind and intelligent. Truth be told, if he fathomed the perfect

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woman for him, it would be Tess.

“Jacob.”

His name on her lips startled him. After a brief moment he realized she was still sleeping. Here he was memorizing every inch of her without realizing that she may wake up. At the time she said it his eyes were on the soft mounds of her breasts without realizing it. It wouldn't have embarrassed him to be caught admiring her, but she certainly would. He arrogantly knew how appealing he was to the opposite sex with good reason so when he admired a woman the way he was admiring Tess it was always well received. He never had a shortage of women around him or in his bed when he had certain needs to be satisfied. However Tess wasn't like those women, so he was more careful around her.

Only if she knew how much time he devoted to studying and memorizing her exquisite form, he was certain she would be mortified. Still he couldn't help but like the way she said his name in that sleepy way. Imagine waking up next to that sultry voice.

He ran a hand through his thick black hair and finally turned away with a curse for even thinking that. Tess wasn't his type. She was sweet and he could easily find himself falling for her. He dated her exact opposite for a reason, so he wouldn't get emotionally attached. It wasn't as if something had happened to him with a woman, he just didn't like complications and getting emotionally involved was definitely a complication. He liked his life and he liked being in control of it. Falling for a woman like Tess would take his control away. *I like my life*, he thought to himself as if it was going to convince him.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning a nurse wheeled Tess out to the ranch truck at the front entrance where Jacob was waiting.

“You were serious about this?” She said trying not to let the sight of him leaning lazily against his truck affect her. Then he grinned when he saw her and straightened himself to open the passenger door. Her poor heart probably had so much stress that it was equal to that of an eighty year old woman’s the way it kept beating around him and she doubted very much she could stand after that welcoming grin.

“Very.” He opened the door, “Get in—carefully and slowly.”

“Okay.” She didn’t protest when he reached down and helped her out of the chair because of how her knees felt. The nurse actually moved to help her but he held his hand up to stop her, “I got this.” He said and got her settled in the passenger side. Even though his touch made her nervous, she liked it. She swore that this tender side of him wasn’t seen often, but she chalked it up to him feeling guilty about her condition. He shouldn’t. He really did save her life, but no amount of reassurance was going to change his mind. She knew that much about him.

After he shut the door she noticed the nurse hand him a piece of paper. Pursing her lips, she released a frustrated breath through her nose, another fan no less. Obviously that was her phone number. She couldn’t help but get irritated because the woman never even considered that they were together and had the nerve to do that with her sitting there watching.

When he got in, she just asked him, “That was her phone number wasn’t it?”

He spared her a glance as he crumpled up the piece of paper and tossed it in the ashtray without a second thought, “Yup.”

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“She was really pretty.” She said looking at the crumpled paper wondering if that is how he’d treat hers if she offered herself like that. No, she thought after a moment, Jacob did genuinely care about her.

“They usually are.” He said with an unreadable expression as he shifted the truck into gear and drove away from the curb.

“What does that mean?” she asked. The nurse was pretty, but Jacob acted like she was no more than wallpaper.

He gave her a sideways glance, “Tess, I’m sure I don’t need to explain that to you.” Yet when she still stared at him with a puzzled look, obviously he was wrong. He resisted smiling at her refreshing innocence while he explained. “Women like that, chase me because I’m a doctor. I don’t date nurses.”

She wanted to point out that he was sexy, gorgeous and gave off the air of a sexual master and maybe that’s why they chased him. After all of that, the doctor thing was just a bonus.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” he asked offhandedly as he turned off the highway down the country road that led home.

“What?” she said swinging her head toward him in surprise.

He chuckled, “You know, a human being that sports a gender difference from a female.”

She blushed furiously, “I heard you.”

“Well?”

“No. I really don’t date.” she answered looking at him. Then she saw something odd reach his eyes, but it was gone before she could study it.

“Why not?” He gave her a curious glance, “You’re awfully pretty Tess. I know you look after your father, but you need to find time for yourself too.”

“I do.” She defended trying to ignore the compliment knowing he was just trying to make her feel better, “I have

hobbies.”

“Dating?” he hedged. For some reason he couldn’t let it be. She must’ve had at least one date in her life. It wouldn’t be possible that she was never asked out looking the way she did.

“No, I haven’t actually.” This conversation was way to intimate for her and why didn’t he believe her?

“You know after you left the clinic, every single male patient from four to forty was asking about you.”

This time she must’ve blushed to her toes.

“It just didn’t seem the same after you left.” He said as his eyes studied her face.

“I had to go back to school,” she defended almost too quietly.

“Was that it?” he said in a tone that sounded like he wasn’t convinced.

She turned to face him, “What does that mean?” she said referring to his suspicious tone of voice.

He shrugged, “I offered you a job there again the next summer and you didn’t take it.”

“My dad needed me to help him.” She lied.

“That’s horseshit Tess and you know it.”

“Jacob—“ she never heard him talk like that. Being blunt wasn’t the problem, but the undertone of harshness was.

“Linda is going on maternity leave next week, so I wouldn’t mind if you came back to work for me.” His eyes roved to her mouth, “I can trust you not to make a pass at me so it would be better if I hired you than spend endless hours interviewing another woman. Not only that, but you know the job.” He was being pushy and couldn’t help himself. After this incident he wanted her close to him for the next while so he could keep an eye on her. At least that’s what he told himself.

Tess knew he wasn’t being conceited at all with that statement. He had hired women in the past and they tried

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desperately to come on to him. "I don't know Jacob. Dad might need me."

"Your dad has the help of at least twelve men I employ at the ranch who all have experience with horses." He cast her an annoyed look, "Again with the excuses."

She couldn't come up with another reason after that except to blurt out, *I'm in love with you and it hurts too much to be near you and deny it*. "Let me talk to dad and I'll get back to you." She finally said unable to handle him being upset with her.

"Good." he said as he pulled down the drive to the ranch with his spirits picking up at her agreement. It's not like he gave her much of a choice, but he wasn't above manipulation to get what he wanted and having Tess close for the summer was what he wanted.

Jacob returned his attention to the road. They'd been on their land for the last ten minutes. He and his brothers owned over fifteen thousand acres. "I had Marie make up one of the spare rooms. I'll help you get settled before I go and see how Angel is doing."

"I can manage."

"I already told you I was going to look after you Tess. Don't argue." He said sternly.

The tone of his voice made her stomach do a little flip. She wished she could blame it on the drugs they'd given her for the uncomfortable ride home on the country road, but it would have been a lie. It almost seemed possessively affectionate, but she knew better. Jacob wasn't affectionate with anyone. As a doctor, he did care about people, but on a personal level his affection was locked up as tight as fort Knox. She knew he was only being this way because he felt guilty and maybe he did have bit of a soft spot for her, but she knew better then to read anything into it.

He pulled the truck up to the front porch of the house, cut

the engine and quickly got out to walk around and open her door before she tried to do it on her own, "Maybe I should carry you." He furrowed his brow looking at her pale skin.

"I can manage." She defended quickly. She wasn't quite sure if she could, but if he took her in his arms she would most certainly pass out.

"Suit yourself." He said taking her arm despite her words, "But if you sway even a little, I'm doing just that."

I won't sway, she thought to herself, *please don't let me God*. It surprised her that she didn't. He escorted her carefully up the stairs and into the bedroom and guided her to the bed only releasing her to open the curtains to let some light in. She sat down on the mattress with an inward sigh because she managed to stay steady even though he'd had his hand on her the whole time. It made her wonder if her weakness was from her recent surgery or his touch.

"Your dad brought a bag of your belongings over last night. Marie put them in the dresser." He nodded toward it. "do you need help getting your clothes off?"

Her eyes flew wide, "Jacob!"

"Give me a break Tess. I'll get Maria to help you." Then he let his eyes drop to her mouth again before locking gazes with hers, "But you do remember I am a physician, I have seen a naked female body before." He said with a glint of amusement in his eyes.

In more ways than one, she was sure. Even now as he gave her a lopsided grin she felt her insides quiver and she was sure he'd seen more women naked outside of his practice than in it. He probably learned Anatomy by Braille in med school. "Not mine." She defended, "I know you too well." She couldn't help but flush, "I don't feel comfortable letting you see me that way." Then something odd came over his expression that she couldn't quite read. It was the same look he gave her moments ago in the

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truck.

He knew as soon as he opened his mouth that he shouldn't have said that. It was bordering on flirtation and Tess was off limits. "How's the pain?" he said changing the subject pretending to look at something outside so she couldn't see the desire in his eyes.

"It's more of an ache than a pain, but I'll be fine." She lied, "No more drugs. They make me feel funny." He had thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans and it caused that fabric to be taut across his front. Why she felt the pull to look there, she'll never know, but it was obvious to her why he never had a shortage of woman after him. Quickly she shot her eyes back up to his just to see that he had glanced away to something outside the window. She was silently thanking God that she didn't get caught staring at the male part of him.

"As long as you sleep all right, I won't." he said after a moment and nodded to the open door, "My room is across the hall. Just yell if you need anything tonight. I'll bring you a liquid supper but I want you to stay in bed."

His expression suddenly seemed serious and she wondered if she irritated him again. "Liquid?"

"After surgery, your body goes into shock and it takes time for the digestive system to recover. If you handle broth well, I'll let you progress onto something more."

"Sure thing Doc." She couldn't help but tease.

Before she knew what was happening he bent over and actually kissed her forehead, "Get some rest Tess, I'll be back before supper." He said softly before he stood erect and walked out of the room without a backwards glance. She brought her hand to the spot his mouth had touched after he closed the door to her room. Never had Jacob been so attentive to her. He was always cordial, but not affectionate. Whatever the reason, she knew it wouldn't last when she began to feel better. Maybe he

was feeling some sort of guilt over not checking her out more thoroughly like he wanted before she passed out on him like her father said. Only if he knew how rapid her heart beat thudded in her chest from that gesture, he would probably rush her back to the hospital thinking she was getting an infection. Groaning she stood up and hunched over slightly while walking to the dresser and holding her side. She lied to him, she was in more pain than a dull ache, but it wasn't as bad as it was the day before. She didn't lie about how the drugs made her feel and she didn't like to feel defenceless for anything. Pulling out her nightgown she went back to the bed and slowly with careful movements as to protect her side she changed and crawled under the covers. Soon after, despite the pain, she fell asleep.

"He's a beauty, ain't he Jacob?" said Colt who was leaning over the stall door admiring the new addition when Jacob sauntered in.

Jacob peered in, "yeah. He's got great lines." The colt was magnificent. He was dark chestnut with four white socks and a white blaze down his face that ended at the soft velvet of his nose. He was healthy and the future stud to his breeding program. They had named him Landsdowne's Pride. He had Chuck go over him in great detail the night before after they'd left the hospital and Tess sleeping sound from the drug he'd given her. It was his excuse to get away from her after he'd practically groped her while she was sleeping. He only touched her face, but the guilt he'd felt at that was enough.

"How's Tess?" he cast a glance at his older brother.

"She'll live." He managed a bittersweet smile taking his eyes from the stall.

Colt pulled out his package of smokes and offered his older brother one. "Here, it looks like you could use one." He said seeing his expression.

Jacob nodded and took the smoke.

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“Is she in pain?”

“Yes, but she denies it. I’ll let her suffer for a bit before I give her something. It’ll serve her right.” He said with frustration while fingering the cigarette between his long fingers.

“She was always strong willed and stubborn.” Colt said as he lit his smoke leaving his eyes on his brother. He handed the lighter to Jacob.

“Yes she definitely is.” He said taking the offered lighter to light his own. After he took a long drag he looked back at Colt with an expression of concern, “She scared the shit out of me when she passed out.”

“I bet. Can you imagine how Lance or I would’ve handled it?” He shook his head, “We would’ve pulled over or something and she would’ve died. I shudder to think. Then there’s poor Chuck. He’d have lost both women in his life. All I can say is thank God it was you that went to get her yesterday.”

“Amen to that. I still felt useless when she passed out.” He admitted guiding his eyes back to the new addition on four shaky legs inside the stall next to his prize mare.

“Well, we’re all close to her Jacob. Whether or not you’d admit it, you saved her life.”

“Yeah, I know I did.” He finally agreed, “It just seems bittersweet in the way I reacted.” He actually was almost frantic over her and it surprised him. “It seemed as if I was a fumbling school boy. I should have diagnosed her sooner.”

“You are a good doctor Jacob. No one doubts that, but like I said she’s close to us and you let your emotions get in the way. It makes sense that you’d be worried. Either way she’s fine because of you.”

“I suppose.” He answered after mulling over his brother’s words. It was true he cared about her. Usually he was abrupt but professional with his patients, but this one he’d actually brought home. Not only that his temper got away from him at the

hospital. Just as he was thinking it Colt brought up that incident.

"Is that ER Doc going to press charges after you clobbered him?"

"No, Lance went and talked to him already." Jacob grinned arrogantly. The Doctor on call that day didn't want to let her go to surgery until she had all sorts of tests done, but Jacob knew she was in trouble and actually grabbed the man by the throat until he agreed to call in the Operating room staff for emergency surgery. According to the surgeon he'd done the right thing. "It helps to have a lawyer in the family."

"In more ways than one." Colt actually started a bar fight the week before last and Lance had to go soothe things over with the owner and the two men he beat the snot out of. After remembering that it was over a woman he grinned himself.

"He's going to tire of defending us soon I'm sure." Jacob took a long draw off his cigarette.

"Maybe, but for now I'm making use of it. As for Tess, if you see her before I do, tell her I'll be in to see her after supper."

"I will." He said dousing his smoke with his boot as he left the stable to head back toward the house.

"Mr. Hartley," came Maria's accented voice as he walked into the kitchen, "I have the little one's broth. Did you want me to take it?"

"No, I'll do it." he offered, "I have to check on her anyway. Just leave the tray on the hall table and I'll grab it on the way up."

"All right then." She said as he turned and went to the study to retrieve his stethoscope and draw up a syringe of morphine for her. Although she denied it earlier, he knew she was hurting. He'd seen the signs in patients many times before. She was favouring her side and let a grimace of pain escape every now and then, which she tried unsuccessfully to hide from him. Not to mention the pale color of her complexion which was

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usually creamy, pink and perfect.

As he thought she was curled up in a fetal position when he entered after a brief knock, "Are you ready for something for the pain yet?" he said with a knowing smile.

"I already told you that stuff makes me feel funny." She said trying to keep her face void of the discomfort she was feeling.

"I won't give you as much." He bent and set the tray on the bedside table. "And from the look on your face you need it."

She really did, she thought and so much for trying to keep it out of her expression. Obviously he knew. She sighed in defeat and finally nodded.

"Slide over Tess." When she did he sat on the bed beside her and reached over picked up his stethoscope and unravelled it, "I need to listen to your chest and bowels before I give you anything to eat." Seeing her worried expression he continued, "I won't have you undress, I can listen through your nightgown, it isn't that thick of a material." She gave him an odd look but didn't say anything. He knew what it was about. The nightgown was made of cotton, but to him, it was thin, very thin and Jacob couldn't help but notice the thrust of her breasts through it. Swallowing hard he asked her to roll onto her left side and placing one hand on her hip he used his other to press the diaphragm of the stethoscope to certain spots along her back while asking her to breathe deeply.

"How's the new Colt?" she tried distracting her body from his touch.

"Shush," he said softly, "roll onto your back."

Wincing from the discomfort she did as he said praying to God that he didn't notice the increased pace of her heart every time he touched her. The stethoscope would even amplify her shallow breathing.

Almost carefully Jacob guided the stethoscope over her

chest, over the healthy mounds of her breasts and under them. Usually he took a more thorough exam but from what he heard, her lungs were clear and he actually found himself reacting to touching her. Without a word he lowered the stethoscope to her belly and listened for bowel noises.

Tess didn't realize that she watched him so closely until he lifted his eyes and locked them on hers. His expression was unreadable. *Professional*, she thought, *that was it*. Then he reached up and removed the earpieces.

"It looks like you can eat something, but after your shot. Give me your arm."

"I don't like needles." She protested.

"I'll be gentle." He said as he swabbed her arm with an alcohol swab after feeling for the meaty part of her muscle. "It's this or you're back in the hospital for pain control. Also, I need to look at that dressing later."

Oh God, she didn't think about that. He inserted the needle gently and she barely felt it after hearing that. The incision was quite low on her abdomen and that would mean partially undressing for him.

"But after you eat, and after the drug kicks in."

Hopefully she'll be out like last time he gave her a needle. However it didn't turn out that way and she had to admit that he was really good at giving medication because the pain was all but gone. She was a little drowsy but not unconscious. She was even able to finish off the broth without a problem. He came back after about a half hour and told her to flatten out on the bed and lift her nightgown so he could see the dressing. She managed to hide most of her lower half with the blankets but it was obvious that she was wearing white lacy panties. Then she noticed that he'd brought a fresh dressing with him and proceeded to change the old one while examining the incision.

Jacob didn't miss the goose bumps that appeared on her

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flat abdomen while his fingers brushed across her soft, warm skin. Never in all of his life did he have a problem being professional until that moment. Even seeing the low waistline of her lacy panties and the flat belly caused him pause with the desire to lean down and taste the flesh there. In the process, he could run his hands under her bottom and lift her easily to his mouth. Tearing his eyes away from that area he tried focusing back on dressing.

Thankfully he had years of experience in keeping his expression straight as he gently inspected and replaced the dressing and it was a good thing he did because the images going through his mind were definitely not professional.

Again he had thoughts of spanning his hands around that tiny waist of hers to guide her movements while they made love. Being as little as she was and as large as he was, he could easily lift and move her into any position when he took her. She would probably fit to his body perfectly. Chances were, with a body like hers she'd be very pliable and—he clamped his teeth together and abruptly stopped the image in his head. Then he quickly pulled her nightgown down and the blankets up to hide the temptation.

Tess wasn't sure if it was the drug working on her or the tenderness that he displayed toward her that made her reach up and touch his jaw with her fingers, "Thanks Jacob. For everything." His brown eyes darkened and his jaw clenched for a moment as he just sat there and stared down at her. Slowly he reached up and took that hand in his and placed it on her chest.

"Get some rest Tess. I'll check on you later." He said in a strained voice. With that he stood and abruptly left the room.

Thankfully she didn't think much beyond the haze that she was in and fell asleep soon after.

On the second day, Tess awoke feeling almost as good as new, and when Jacob stopped in to see her she told him as much.

"Come down for breakfast then Tess, and we'll see." This

got him the first smile from her in days and he didn't realize how much he missed that from her until she did. "Put on some loose pants and a t-shirt, don't wear that flimsy nightgown down to the dining room."

She looked down at her nightgown, "What's wrong with it?"

"I can practically see through it and there's always half a dozen employees in and out of the house throughout the day, all male." he said tersely and left her without noticing the blush on her face.

How could he think that? It was brand new, made of warm cotton and covered her to her neck. Getting out of bed carefully she pulled on a pair of stretchy yoga pants and a loose cotton tank top before slowly making her way downstairs. She met Colt in the hall to the dining room.

"Hey imp!" he said with a wide handsome grin, "It's nice to see you're feeling better. I stopped in last night to see you but you were sawing logs and Jacob told me to leave you alone and not to wake you."

Jacob? "He did?"

"Yeah, he was sitting in the chair by the window reading." He raised his brows at her puzzled expression, "You didn't know?"

She shook her head. Was he really? She wondered how long he sat there and how insecure she now felt at him watching her while she slept. It was then that she knew not to let him give her any more medication to dull the aching. God, just thinking about him in her room all night watching her, had her completely unsettled.

Absently she reached out and touched the wall to steady herself. It felt weird to be on her feet after a few days. Colt saw her and quickly stepped forward to take her arm.

"Did the Doc say you could get up?" He said with concern.

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“Actually he did.” She smiled at him as he led her toward the table.

“—And she can have some solid food.” Said Jacob from behind them nearly making her jump. “—and let her go Colt.” He said tersely.

He shot his older brother an odd look before he released her.

“If she can’t walk on her own, she should be back in bed.” Then he contradicted himself by taking her arm and helping her into the chair.

“Is that so?” Colt said with a grin flicking his brother an amused look before taking the seat next to her. “I’m sure that doesn’t sit well with you.”

“Not one bit.” She agreed causing him to chuckle.

“Hey all.” Said Lance as he came through the door and paused long enough to kiss the top of Tess’s head affectionately, “How are you feeling?”

“Thanks to Jacob, almost one hundred percent.” She admitted while grinning at him, “I could probably go home tomorrow.”

“You can stay for a couple more days,” Jacob said as he took his seat at the head of the table not the least bit as happy as she was. He had a restless night with images of her body under his. Not only did it knock him completely off balance, he’d never had his dreams plagued by a woman before, “Colt, say grace.” He added as Lance sat down.

The three boys bowed their heads but Tess just gaped at Jacob as Colt said Grace. There was no mistaking that he was moody, but somehow she got the feeling it was toward her. When he was done she waited until Jacob lifted his head before she spoke, “Jacob, dad’s at home.”

He reached began putting food on his plate, “Nothing heavy like meat Tess, stick to the toast and eggs.” He flicked a

glance at her, “And to answer your question, its foaling season. If you break open those sutures or get a secondary infection chances are your father is going to be here, so I would feel better if you were here. I have to return to work tomorrow, but Maria is at least near in case something happens.”

“He has a good point Tess.” Said Lance reaching for a steak to go with his eggs.

“Yeah, I agree.” Said Colt.

She glanced around at the three of them, “You three seriously need a puppy to coddle, because I’m feeling a little overwhelmed.”

That brought several bouts of laughter except from Jacob.

“Regardless Tess, as your physician, I’m ordering you to stay here.” He said firmly.

She rolled her eyes not the least bit affected by his authority. She’d known him too long, “We’ll see how well that goes.” She noticed the corner of his mouth twitch before he removed his eyes from her and started to eat. Maybe he wasn’t upset with her as she originally thought and he did seem really careful about her recovery. She came to the conclusion that it was something else that irritated him.

“Almost back to normal.” Chuckled Colt remarking on her stubborn streak.

“At least let me get my violin. I haven’t played it in three days.”

“It wouldn’t hurt. I’ll take you over there later.” Said Jacob, “I’ve got to run into town anyway.”

As it turned out he stopped at his clinic to get some files he needed to review for tomorrow while she waited in the truck, and as he was coming back out was stopped by a gorgeous socialite Tess recognized as Lindsay Scott. She couldn’t hear what was being said, but when the woman reached up and smoothed her hands over his chest she wanted to scratch her

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eyes out. Twice he glanced at her reflection in the side mirror as the woman leaned in close to him and said something that got one of those rare devilish grins she'd witnessed before. It was a grin that could melt an iceberg. Then he nodded at her, said something Tess couldn't hear and left the woman standing there with a sensual smile on her face as he got back in the truck.

"Are you dating Lindsay?" Tess couldn't help but ask.

He shot her a sideways glance as he started the truck, "No, not really." He said pulling out onto the street.

"Not really?"

"Leave it be Tess." He said curtly without looking at her this time while making a left turn. He'd set up some time with her tonight because he was as horny as hell being around Tess the last few days. He couldn't touch Tess, but he certainly could take his sexual frustration out on Lindsay. She was experienced and could satisfy him for awhile.

She knew that tone and had heard it many times. Now she knew what he meant and felt her heart break. He wasn't dating her, so it was probably something physical. After all, he was a man in his prime and she was sure he had needs. Not only that Lindsay Scott was beautiful. However, she didn't expect it to bother her so much. She turned her head to look out the side window so he couldn't see the pained expression on her face. Regardless, he did and thankfully he misinterpreted it.

"You need another shot." He said.

"I'm fine."

"You lie terribly. When I get you home, I'll give you enough to give you a good night's sleep."

This time she wouldn't argue. She needed to forget what she'd just seen and knew that she wouldn't sleep a wink.

"No argument."

"Nope." She said solemnly.

He flicked a glance at her profile wondering if seeing him

with Lindsay bothered her. A part of him hoped it did and if it did, he wished she would say something. Although he certainly couldn't have a relationship with Tess, he was curious to know if she was attracted to him. If she was, she hid it well. She always seemed comfortable around him and never had a problem telling him how she felt or asking a question if something bothered her, but she never mentioned anything about her love life. Maybe that's why he'd been prodding her about it the past few days after all, she was old enough to have a relationship of some kind. He just didn't like the feeling that went through him every time he thought of her with another man. Here he was taking Lindsay out tonight so he could relieve some of his desire for Tess, yet he found himself jealous thinking of Tess with a man other than himself.

Jealous?

That word seemed so foreign to him. He didn't get jealous. Well if it wasn't jealousy it sure left a sickly feeling in his gut.

He shook his head. Time with Lindsay was sorely needed or he was going to end up following through on his urges with the young filly on the seat beside him.

CHAPTER THREE

Monday morning she heard him come in her room and check on her. She was asleep soon after he'd left on his date with Lindsay the night before and woke up once in the night to use the bathroom. Out of curiosity she checked the driveway from her window to see if his truck was back and it wasn't. He did spend the night with that other woman. She felt sick inside. Who was she kidding? She couldn't compete with that. Lindsay was striking and probably knew exactly what to do with a man like Jacob. Obviously it took half the night too, because it was four in

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the morning and he wasn't home yet.

She pretended to be asleep when he came in her room because she couldn't look at him and not show that she was hurt until he sat on the side of the bed and she felt his fingers on her chin.

"Tess." He said quietly.

Reluctantly she opened her eyes.

"How did you sleep?"

"Really good actually." She lied and absently stretched beside him.

Jacob swallowed hard, and placed a piece of paper on her bedside table, "that's the direct line to my office just in case you need me."

Did she ever need him. "Thanks."

"Use it okay. Don't pretend that nothing's wrong if you're hurting. I'll tell Rita not to let you wait if you call."

"I'll be fine Jacob. It only really hurts if I move." She added with a teasing look to hide the vulnerability she felt.

"Well, you have to move so pneumonia doesn't set in. I want you to start taking walks outside during the day, but no heavy lifting for at least four weeks. That means," He added with a knowing look, "No helping out your dad."

She groaned, "I'll be useless for a month?" then she noticed a strange look come over his handsome face.

"That is something you'll never be."

She blinked and just stared at him.

"I mean, you always are useful to me in some way. So quit feeling sorry for yourself." He gave her one of those sinful grins she seen him give Lindsay the day before as he stood up and left the room.

It wasn't until after she left that she felt her mouth hanging open and she hoped to heaven that she didn't gape openly at him when he said that to her face. She could tell that

his irritation had vanished so obviously he'd done something to get rid of that building tension she'd seen over the past few days. Is that how it was with men if they went without sex? She really wished she had a clue on how that operated so she could understand Jacob more.

Colt was the only one at breakfast that morning because Lance like Jacob, had eaten earlier and went to their other jobs in town. She had been twisting her previous thoughts around in her brain and after a friendly conversation with Colt she finally decided that she would just ask.

"Colt, if a man goes without sex does he get cranky?"

Unfortunately Colt was in the middle of swallowing a bite of toast and started to choke and cough.

Tess watched wide-eyed as he took a large gulp of coffee hoping that he'd be okay. Finally he set down his cup and cleared his throat while setting his eyes on her.

"Why on earth would you bring something like that up?" he asked, "Tess, that's not something you should ask a man."

She shrugged trying to do her best to act casual, "It's a simple question."

"Not so simple when you ask a man." He said, "Not only that if I say yes then it makes us look shallow, if I say no, I'd be lying through my teeth, but you don't need to know these things."

"I have no one else to ask." She said with exasperation, "My mother is gone, I have no female friends because they've mostly gone off to college and my life revolves around my father, and this ranch. You three practically raised me."

"there's Maria." He offered causing her to make a face.

"Maria's so religious she'd scold me for an hour if I ask her that question."

"Ask your doctor about sex." He suggested.

"You're kidding right? Jacob has taken over that responsibility from my regular physician. Knowing him, he'd

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think I was thinking about having sex. Look at the way he's been acting lately. I can't hardly breathe without him telling me not to hurt myself."

Colt cleared his throat again knowing that was very true, "He feels guilty Tess." He said knowing it was only the partial truth, but Jacob seemed to be having some conflicts of his own over Tess, and neither he nor Lance would interfere.

"I know, but he's going overboard." She sighed heavily, and studied him for a moment, "He had a date with Lindsay Scott last night." She didn't know why she suddenly felt the need to discuss what was bothering her, but she really didn't have any close friends and she trusted Colt. She felt bad about putting him that position, but she had no one else except Jacob, and this was about Jacob.

An expression of understanding came over Colt's face, "I see."

She lowered her eyes, "I'm stupid."

He smirked, "Now that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." When she didn't look up he said her name softly causing her to finally bring her eyes to his, "look honey, we don't choose who we love. God has his reasons for everything."

"Don't tell him."

"I promise." He said sincerely. "Now back to your original question now that I know what it's about. Lindsay is the type of woman—well—she's willing—ah hell."

She raised her hand and couldn't help but release a laugh at his embarrassment, "Forget I asked."

"No, I'll just put it a different way. My point is honey, that she doesn't hold a candle to you." Her surprised expression made him chuckle, "See, the fact that you don't even know that, just increases your attractiveness. Now men can be rutting brutes, I'm not denying it, but women like you—a woman like you." He corrected, "Should never think that you aren't special because

you don't behave like Lindsay." He watched her expression carefully, "Tess, you are very intelligent and kind and if I didn't think of you as a little sister, I'd probably be starting a few bar fights over you too." That got him a smile, "But I do think of you as a little sister and despite your misgivings, you are very beautiful. If you knew how to use those gifts God gave you, you could bring any man to their knees including my hard headed brother."

She blushed, "Thanks Colt, I think I really needed to hear that."

"But—" he added narrowing his gaze, "—if anyone tries to take advantage of you, I will knock a few of their teeth out."

She gave him a ravishing smile, "that's so sweet!" she said causing him to burst into laughter.

The day seemed to drag by slowly after that. She did as Jacob said and walked several times a day. He came home around six in the afternoon and she was sitting on the porch swing bored to her teeth.

Jacob set down his briefcase and sat beside her, "How was your day?"

"I'm thinking of ways to kill myself." She said causing him to laugh.

"That boring?"

"Watching a knitting competition would be more exciting."

He studied her for a moment, "Did you eat yet?"

"No." she said bringing her gaze to his. God he looked so handsome in his navy suit, white shirt and striped tie.

"Tell you what. Go put on something pretty and I'll take you out for supper."

She brightened up, "Really?" Then she narrowed her gaze, "You'd better not be baiting me Jacob."

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“Never crossed my mind.” He added with a sinful smile, “Let’s just say it’s time served for good behaviour.”

“Does that mean I can eat real food?”

“Real food?”

“Yeah, I’m starving for a steak.”

He chuckled, “That’s what I like about you Tess. Any other woman I take out to dinner would order salad, but you want a steak.”

“A big, juicy grade A steak.” She added with a smile then she changed her expression to a humorous one, “On second thought, maybe a salad sized steak.” Causing him to laugh again.

“Go get changed.” He patted her arm.

“I’m gone.” She stood up and went into the house, unaware that he watched the gentle sway of her backside and shook his head.

“Behave yourself Jacob.” He said to himself as he stood, retrieved his briefcase and went into the house.

Tess couldn’t be more elated. They went to a popular steakhouse in town and she felt a sense of pride as he placed the hand on the small of her back while walking through the restaurant and noticed that all female eyes lit on him then guided to her. Who could blame them? Jacob was earth shattering gorgeous, tall, and even walked with a sense of confident elegance. He made her feel like she was the only woman on earth and that she was totally adored by him. *No wonder why he had his choice of women like Lindsay*, she thought, *if they all felt this way around him.*

To her surprise, he’d changed into a dark gray suit and looked incredibly handsome and deep down she fantasized that it was a real date even though he was just feeling sorry for her.

He pulled out the chair for her and sat opposite. “Do you want some wine?”

“It’s okay?”

“Yes.” He told the waiter when he came to the table. Then he turned his attention back to Tess, “You look very pretty Tess.”

“Thanks.” She said bashfully.

“You certainly don’t look like the girl I took to the ER four days ago on death’s door.”

“I wasn’t.” she said with a surprised expression, “I was with you. I had no chance on dying.”

“You do wonders for a man’s ego.” He grinned.

Just then a familiar sight caught her attention and she looked past him, “Oh.”

“What is it?”

“Your—er—“ she didn’t know how to say it, “Lindsay’s here.”

With that he turned and looked over his shoulder.

Lindsay had spotted them and started toward their table. Tess felt better seeing that she had another man with her, but it didn’t last. She gave Tess a look of distaste that Jacob didn’t see before she addressed him.

“I called you this evening.” She smiled down at him.

Tess felt angry. The woman flipped expressions so quickly she could give lessons and it was obvious that she wasn’t going to let Jacob see her displeasure at being out with another woman.

“Did you?” he said casually.

“Yes, but your cook said you were out.”

He cast a glance to Tess, “I am.”

Tess noticed that he didn’t seem to be the least bit bothered by Lindsay’s appearance or her insinuations, but then again she was sure he was used to woman throwing themselves at him and was immune to their tactics. Lindsay then turned her attention to Tess, “I remember you. Didn’t you work at the clinic one summer? Theresa—isn’t it?” she said so sweetly that Tess near gagged.

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“Tess.” She corrected knowing the woman knew her name. “And I did work at the clinic.”

She turned back to Jacob, “I thought she looked familiar”

“Tess is a friend.” He answered missing Tess’s sinking expression.

“I see.” she added looking at the younger woman again before guiding her eyes back to him, “I forgot to thank you for last night darling.” She said while playing with the lapel of his suit.

For the first time Tess noticed a look of disapproval pass over Jacob’s expression.

“Why don’t you come by the office next week around noon and we’ll have lunch.” He finally said.

Lindsay looked delighted and tossed her hair flirtatiously, “Well, I’d love to.”

“I’ll see you then.” He said turning back to Tess.

If Tess didn’t know better his whole demeanour had changed toward the other woman after her reference of them being together the night before.

She cast a smile at Tess not seeming to notice, “Ta-ta Tia.”

Tia? Tess wanted to throw something at her. She was purposely baiting her. Tess waited until she was out of earshot, “What just happened?” she said looking at Jacob with a puzzled expression.

“Don’t fret over it Tess.” He said in a sobering tone as the waiter came back with the wine and took their orders.

She waited until he left, “Don’t fret?”

“I mean,” he leaned toward her a bit, “Don’t worry about what other women think of our friendship.”

Friendship? She was sure she heard her heart split in two.

Unlike Jacob who could conceal his emotions from his

expression, Tess couldn't and he didn't miss the look of hurt on her face. Obviously she didn't understand what he was trying to say and maybe he sounded a little abrupt. "Tess, Lindsay is the type of woman that a man—" he paused unsure on how to continue. It wasn't often he explained himself, "—what I'm trying to say is—"

"You use her for sex." She finished then instead of him seeming embarrassed a slow smile spread across his face and he nodded.

"I see you do understand, but it's more of a mutual issue."

"I understand that you have needs and you're a man, but I don't understand her." she nodded toward the woman who was now being seated by her date. She was feeling better about herself since Colt had talked to her that morning, but now seeing how beautiful Lindsay was again just washed it all away. No matter what Colt had told her, she was sure she wasn't half the woman Lindsay was. She was sexy, sensual, and the way she wore that green dress hid nothing of her body. Then there was her confidence. She basically told Jacob right in front of her that he was good in bed. If she thought she was hurt before suspecting why he was out so late the night before, knowing for sure just crushed her. Even if Tess tried to get as sophisticated as Lindsay, she could never bring her private life out in public.

Jacob sat straight in his seat, interested in what she had to say, "What is it you don't understand?"

It took her a moment to remember what she told him because she was busy trying to squash her hurt and anger at the whole situation. "She's not your type." She answered finally remembering.

"Is that so?" he smirked, "Who do you think better suits my type?"

She shrugged, "Someone who's intelligent—" she started to say, but realized that she sounded jealous and stopped.

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“Lindsay is.” He said with a glint of humour reaching his eyes.

Like a rock, she thought but didn’t say it. “No—not like that—I mean she needs to challenge you. Like some of the things you do, maybe keep you on your toes and always makes you think. Someone you can look at and know that your life isn’t half as exciting or complete if you should lose her.”

He chuckled, “It sounds like you’re talking about a wife.”

“Well, aren’t you old enough to be thinking like that?” What the heck was she doing? She didn’t want him to think of marriage especially with Lindsay. Then her heart would really break if he did.

“No. I’m thirty-four.”

“Don’t you want kids?” she found herself asking. Apparently she couldn’t find it in her to shut up.

Actually in the past week he’d been thinking about it and she was the first person to actually ask him, “I like kids.” However, that would mean marriage, and he wasn’t ready for that quite yet.

“That’s not an answer.” She said with a smile.

“I would like kids.” He admitted. Settling his eyes on hers for a moment he then reciprocated the question, “What about you?”

“I would love kids.” she said without hesitation, “Lots of them.”

This time he grinned at the way her face just lit up, “Wow, just when you think you know someone.”

She blushed, “What? I’m not that young. I think about things like that.”

“Interesting.” He said, “I never thought of you like that. You were always the freckled face, knobby-kneed teenager to me.”

“I’m not a teenager anymore.” She laughed, “Or knobby

kneed.”

“No you’re definitely not.” He said huskily taking a drink from his glass while looking at her over the rim, “you’ve grown into a beautiful young woman.”

Now she lost her tongue somewhere in her mouth. Every now and then, he’d throw out something like that and leave her speechless.

“I’m still surprised you’re not dating anyone.”

Why couldn’t he just let that go? “I—I haven’t found anyone that interested me in that way.”

“No?” he said letting his eyes drop to her mouth, “You’re out with me.”

Oh she was. “That’s different.”

“Is it?” he lifted a single dark brow.

“I’ve known you forever. I grew up with your family.” She almost fumbled the words trying to recover.

“You’ve known the rest of the town too honey. That’s not an excuse.”

“You’re the only one I’ve let get close.” *Oh God, shut up.* She thought.

“Really?” He sat back in his seat and stared at her, “Why is that?”

“I don’t know.” She said evading the question.

“Still a lousy liar.” He mused causing her to blush. Then he leaned forward and took her hand in his. “Tell me Tess. *Why* is that?” His eyes guided to hers and held them. He was hoping she’d say it even though he knew he couldn’t have her, it meant a lot to him that she was attracted to him.

“Maybe it’s because you’re a doctor and I’ve always seen you as trustworthy.” It was a partial truth and the feeling of his warm hand on hers near made her tell him all of it,

Slowly he released her hand, “That’s not all of it Tess. Like you said I know you.”

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Just then the waiter came with their dinner and she felt a sense of relief as they ate.

Unknown to both of them Lindsay narrowed her eyes when Jacob leaned over and took the young woman's hand. This was something she couldn't afford to interfere with her plans. If Jacob was feeling something for this woman, she would put a stop to it. She wanted him for herself. Not only was the man a mind-blowing lover, he was rich, handsome and had a body that could melt cold steel it was so hot and out of all the women that constantly chased the man she was able to get him into her bed. It made her feel arrogantly triumphant. However he did mention that he didn't want to get involved emotionally and although she was willing to oblige him originally just to keep him as a lover, things had changed over the past few weeks and now and he started touching her less and less. Last night he didn't stay with her even though she pleaded with him. All she got was a quick peck on the mouth. She even offered him oral sex but he had the gall to refuse. What man turned down a blow job? Now she knew why. When she saw the tenderness he displayed toward the young woman, she knew she had to stake her claim. She would have to move fast because not only was the other woman young, she was very beautiful and it was obvious that Jacob was attracted to her after that tender display. At least he asked her to lunch the following week. Maybe she imagined it all and he was just overtired lately after all, it was foaling season out at the ranch and she knew that he pitched in during that time. Satisfied she'd worked things out in her mind, Lindsay turned back to her date. At least she'd get some release tonight with him. Jacob may not have been able to give her what she needed but Ed certainly would.

On the way home, Tess was hoping that he didn't press her for the whole truth about why she didn't date and thankfully he didn't. His sudden interest in her love life surprised her. He'd

never asked questions like that before, and he certainly wasn't showing signs of letting up. It was as if he just noticed that she was no longer a child and took it upon himself to protect her virtue.

"I had a good time." He admitted as he led her into the house and turned her to face him.

"Me too." She said thinking that his hand on her arm was very pleasant even if he was making sure she didn't fall.

Neither one of them moved, but Tess could have held her breath for an eternity at the look that entered his eyes. They darkened to that hue that she had seen only a few times before and every time they did her stomach started doing flip-flops. Suddenly she wished he would kiss her.

"Hey Jacob, is that you?" Came Lance's voice, "Dad's on the phone."

He smiled while still looking down at her, "I'll see you tomorrow. Go to bed and get some rest, you're looking a little pale. I need you to fully recover before you come to work next week."

"Jacob?" came Lance's voice again.

"I'm coming." He answered, "Good night Tess."

"Good night." She said turning to go up the stairs.

Jacob watched her go before he turned and followed the sound of his brother's voice.

The rest of the week basically crawled by and if she thought she was bored before, it expounded. Although she did go down and watch her father pull a foal from a mare, she kept true to Jacob's orders and didn't help. He was right; there were plenty of people around to help him out. It was a busy time and a couple of nights her father stayed at the house not bothering to go home. She spent her evening playing her violin in her room.

Then Friday night Jacob came home exhausted from a long day at work. She remembered that Fridays and Mondays

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were always the worst. People trying to get their appointments in before and after the weekend when there was no clinic available. A lot of people would rather wait for Jacob and David Saunders, the other doctor that he shared his practice with instead of the long hours in emergency.

“Maria kept supper warm for you.” Tess told him as he came in the house. “Did you want me to go get it?”

“Not tonight,” he paused looking at her, “Why don’t you go and pour me a glass of scotch. I’m too damn tired to eat.”

“Scotch?” she made a salute, “Right away.”

He smiled at her back as she left and set his briefcase on the hall table. Then he reached up and loosened his tie and undid the first few buttons on his shirt and made his way into the family room to watch the late news. After he settled on the couch Tess returned with a glass of scotch and gave it to him. He patted the cushion beside him. “Sit down, I could use some company before bed.” It felt really nice to have her fetch it for him and he found himself wanting to visit with her for a bit before he retired for the night.

“Sure.” She sat down and watched him take a gulp from the glass.

“That hits the spot.” He sighed, then looked at her, “Did you want a glass?”

She shook her head, “I’ve never had scotch.” She admitted.

“Oh?” he lifted his glass toward her, “try it. It’s a bit of an acquired taste.”

After getting over the initial surprise of him offering her a drink out of his glass she reached for it, but he didn’t release it so her hand ended up covering his as she leaned toward him and took a sip while keeping her eyes on him and she noticed that he watched her to. She sat back folding her legs under her while tasting it on her tongue. Actually she liked it. Yet, somehow she

forgot to let go.

“Don’t get greedy.” He teased casting a glance at her hand on his.

“Oh sorry.” She blushed and released it.

“No problem. I like the way you feel.” He said as he settled his glass on his thigh and leaned back in the couch focussing on the television.

How could he say things like that and act like it’s nothing? It practically made her heart pop out of her chest. She glanced down at her hands then back up at him and her breath caught in her throat as she noticed that he was no longer watching the TV but just staring at her.

“What?” she said softly.

“Not sure.” He answered, “It just seems like I have trouble thinking right around you sometimes.” *All the time*, he thought to himself. He couldn’t believe that he’d told her that he liked the way she felt moments ago either. She made him forget his head so easily. It wasn’t until he saw the surprised look on her face that he recalled saying it.

She just stared at him.

“Tess, you have such a refreshing edge to you and I actually admit that having you greet me when I come home is something I could easily get used to.”

“Do you mean that?” There went her heart again.

“I do.” His eyes studied her, “I’m not looking forward to sending you home. A female besides Maria is really nice to have in the house again.”

She smiled, understanding that Maria was around sixty but quite gruff although she treated the boys as her own. “I don’t mind staying for a bit until foaling season is over. I like the company too.” Her heart must be drumming a rock band melody in her chest by now. *It was something*, she thought, however, it was bittersweet because she already knew he was referring to her

as a friend.

“I’d really like that.” He finished the last of his drink, “I’ll talk to your dad. At least then we can share a ride to work in the morning for awhile. That is until he steals you away from me.” He said in an odd tone.

“If it’s female company you need Jacob, I’m sure there’s dozen of women that would oblige you.” She teased resting back on the couch as he did.

He actually laughed, “Like I said before Tess, you do wonders for a male ego.”

She was actually hoping that he’d tell her there wasn’t another woman. That Lindsay was just a passing fancy. Disappointed that she didn’t get anything near what she hoped for she just settled and watched the news with him. Soon he said goodnight and went to bed leaving her there wishing things could be different.

CHAPTER FOUR

Monday Morning came soon enough and they were the first ones at the clinic. Jacob had another clerk work for him and a staff nurse. The day was crazy busy and she could barely keep up. Thankfully Rita, the other clerk was able to help her despite her own busy day. Tess couldn’t thank her enough.

At lunch a familiar voice caught her attention it was Lindsay’s

“I see you’re back working here.”

Tess looked up at the woman behind the counter and before she could say anything she basically snubbed her.

“Tracy, be a dear and go tell Jacob I’m here for our lunch date.” She said before she turned her head away and glanced at the occupants of the waiting room like she was a person of complete disinterest.

“My name is Tess.” She said trying not to ground her teeth into ashes

Lindsay looked at her watch acting as if she didn’t hear her, “Hurry up little girl, I know he only gets an hour.”

Little girl? “Right away *Ma’am*.” She said with a wide false grin knowing that it made the woman sound old. It worked because she shot her an angry glance and tapped her watch impatiently. Tess wanted to scream but instead turned and went to his office and knocked on the door. She was working for him, and although she wanted to leap on the woman and slap her, she would remain professional even if it meant grounding her teeth to ashes.

“Tess?” he said looking up from a patients chart as she opened the door.

“Lindsay’s here.” She said in a voice that didn’t hide her disappointment.

“Already?” he said not noticing her expression and got out of the chair.

“It is noon.” She added.

“Oh hell.” He said and stripped off his white jacket and pulled on his suit coat, “Time flies.”

“You’re telling me.” She mumbled as he went past her. She came out into the waiting room just in time to see a pleasurable smile cross the older woman’s lovely face and take Jacob’s arm before they left together.

“Don’t let her bother you honey.” Said Rita from behind her.

“It doesn’t.”

“Sure it doesn’t.” Rita said in a tone that didn’t believe her, “for the past five years I’ve worked for him, I’ve seen plenty of those types come and go, but sooner or later he tires of them.” She settled her eyes on Tess, “However, one like you, I’ve never seen.”

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“Like me?” she said puzzled.

Rita smiled at her, “Honest, sweet, and genuinely pretty inside and out, but a little wildcat when backed into a corner. He’ll figure it out sooner or later.”

“Figure what out?”

“That you’re in love with him.”

Tess groaned, first her father, then Colt, now Rita. She had to be more careful. “Is it that obvious?”

“From the first moment I met you that summer you worked here.” What Rita didn’t tell Tess is that when she wasn’t looking Jacob watched her. At first she thought it was just protectiveness because of what her father does and maybe he saw her as a little sister, but there was no mistaking the hunger in that handsome man’s eyes when he looked at her now. Also, the scowl on his face whenever a young man came in a flirted with her, couldn’t be faked.

Just then Tom walked in as if on cue, “Hey Tess. I love the uniform.” He said as he ran his eyes over her not trying to hide his interest in the least.

She gave him a genuine smile, “Hi, aren’t you supposed to be working?”

“I came in to get some fencing supplies and thought I’d come see how you’re doing? How’s the injury?” he pushed his Stetson high on his brow and leaned on the counter.

She laughed, “Surgery, not injury and I think I’ll live.”

He gave her a roughish smile, “I heard that you collapsed right after I talked to you. I got so excited because I thought it was over me.”

She laughed harder this time. “Don’t dwell on it too much. I’m not a lovesick fool.” she added in a teasing tone. She’d known him for over a year and he constantly teased her to go out with him. He was nice to her, but she didn’t think of him in the attractive sense even though he was really nice looking.

“Well,” he sighed dramatically glancing at her, “Seeing as I’m getting my heart broken, at least you could oblige me with a movie or dinner, or both?”

Tess studied him for a moment. There was no doubt that Tom was a good looking man and like Jacob, didn’t have trouble getting woman. Along with that came the talk of his reputation with women. In a small town, sometimes rumour spreads faster than wildfire even if it was only a partial truth, “I don’t know.”

“I promise I’ll behave.” He added with another grin, “Although, misbehaving around you would be all too easy.”

“Sure,” she said smiling, “Like you need an excuse.” Then she began to think about it. She was still angry from the way Lindsay treated her and Jacob liked women like that. If that’s the type he liked, she certainly didn’t have a hope in hell because no matter how mad someone made her she could never speak to them the way she was just spoken to. Not only that, the man never gave any indication that he was interested in her always referring to her as a friend. So why shouldn’t she date other men? It wasn’t like she was getting younger waiting for Jacob to notice her. She shrugged, “Okay fine. One date.”

“I’ll take it!” He leaned over the counter and planted a kiss on her cheek before she could protest. Then he turned to the others in the waiting room, “She said yes!” Then he was gone followed by a fit of laughter from the waiting room.

“Oh my God.” She flushed in complete embarrassment. Then, she could hear Rita laughing her head off behind her.

She turned to Rita, “thanks.”

“Anytime honey.” She said with a wink

“I’m going to go straighten the exam rooms while you sit here and laugh at my expense.” She shot over her shoulder as she walked down the hall.

About that time Jacob came back in and asked Rita what was so funny.

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“Tom was in here and made a big deal out of Tess accepting a date from him.” She laughed again and turned away missing the scowl that appeared on his face.

“She said yes?” He said with unmasked surprise.

“How could she not. He was as charming as all get out. I probably couldn’t resist him if he treated me like that and I’m almost fifty.” She said while sorting files.

“That charming huh?”

“Very.” She added grinning to herself.

Jacob frowned while going down the hall to his office. He really didn’t like the idea of Tess dating Tom. It was obvious how the young man had been looking at her over the past year and the light-hearted teasing between them bothered him.

Jacob’s scowl grew to a foul mood as the afternoon wore on. He became quite terse with Tess and finally she told Rita about it.

“I don’t think his lunch date went all that well, from the way he’s acting.” She said tucking away a file.

“Probably not.” Said Rita casting her a look, “Maybe bring him a cup of strong coffee.” She nodded toward the freshly brewed coffee pot.

“And get my head bit off again? No thanks. Let him suffer. Besides that, he deserves it for dating that woman and I might not be able to help myself and dump it on his lap.” She said before taking a file and calling the next patient.

Rita shook her head at the younger girl. She may have been very smart, but she was incredibly naïve.

An hour later, the last patient left, and so did Rita. Tess locked the door behind her and tidied up the waiting room while waiting for Jacob to finish his paper work. He came out around a half an hour later.

“Tess, why are you still here?”

She finished fixing the stack of magazines and stood

erect, "How do you think I got here?" she said incredulous.

"Oh hell, I forgot." He tossed his jacket over his shoulder, "Come on then."

"Don't put yourself out." She mumbled under her breath and grabbed her handbag following him out the door.

He never said a word until they were pulling up the long drive to the house which satisfied her just as well, because of his mood. He had already smoked several cigarettes and she wanted to remind him that he was a doctor and what those things do to your lungs, but in his frame of mind, she was sure he would snap at her.

When he finally spoke it wasn't what she thought it would be. "Rita said Tom asked you out." He tossed the butt out the window and cast her an unreadable glance.

"Yeah he did."

"You going?"

"I told him yes. What you said the other day got me thinking—"

"About?"

"Well, I'm twenty-one and maybe I should start dating."

"Not Tom."

She gaped at him. He sounded quite terse and he really had no right to tell her how to behave, but he didn't back down.

He studied her expression, "The man is young and likes pretty girls."

"So?" she said bristling.

"Tess, you don't have that kind of experience." He explained.

"You don't know that." She said stunned at his assumption.

He pulled up in front of the house, cut the engine and turned to her, "The hell I don't Tess. I've been around enough women to know an inexperienced one when I meet her."

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He had a point.

"Tom has no idea what you are used to—"

"He promised he'd behave. So don't worry about me so much, I'm not a little girl anymore"

"That's for certain." He said dropping his gaze to her mouth, "If he upsets you, I'll pound him into the ground."

"He won't." She meant it, because she didn't like the guy enough to have him hurt her, not like she did Jacob and even though he didn't feel the same way, the concern he was showing made her feel like he cared a bit, even if it was in a brotherly fashion, "If you're so worried, don't be. I don't like him the way you think so nothing will happen." That seemed to relax him.

"What do you mean you don't like him?"

She shrugged, "Jacob, speaking about the laws of attraction with my friend slash physician is not a comfortable subject for me. He's just a friend. Nothing more."

"No?" he said lifting his brows.

"Definitely not." She admitted shyly.

"Well, how about your friend slash physician asks you something strictly as a friend." He asked softly.

"Okay." She said after a brief hesitation.

"What type of man does do something for you?"

Oh God, he did have to ask that, "Why?"

"Call it curiosity."

"Okay then," she turned away to hide her expression, "He needs to be intelligent."

"—And?"

"Fun to be around," she shot him an amused look, "Likes horses, the outdoors—."

"—and the violin?"

Nodding slowly, "he should like classical music."

"Like Debussy, Chopin, Bach and my personal favourite Tchaikovsky's *Andante Cantabile*, that song you played the other

day.”

“You knew?” she said softly while staring at him in complete astonishment.

“Yes.” He smiled slowly, “It was very beautiful Tess. I honestly didn’t know you could play like that. It’s hard to imagine through all of these years that I’ve never heard you play.”

She just couldn’t get past what he just said, “You knew what I was playing?”

“I may seem like a rough and tumble horse wrangler, but I have a few hidden likes too.” What he didn’t tell her was that he’d convinced her father to send a recording of her work along with an application to a prestigious music college in New York. He did it for two reasons. One was to get her out of the town and experience life, and of course the other was to get her away from him before he acted on his desires. They kept the application to themselves and he was sure that she wouldn’t be happy at first when she found out but sooner or later she would realize that he did this for her.

“But I’ve known you a long time—How—?” She hadn’t even known he studied or knew classical music but he just revealed that he had knowledge on the subject. It completely amazed her.

“The first time I heard your mother play the cello. So you can blame her. I may have been born into money, raised by a Texan who made sure that we boys were raised earning every penny we had, but I know beauty when I see it,” he paused staring at her for a moment, “And hear it. When your father came to work for us, she would play sometimes and I thought it was incredible. So I started listening to all kinds. I’ve become quite the fan of the old greats.” He studied her astonished expression, “When you played the other day, I remembered your mother very well.”

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“I was thinking of her.” she took a deep breath, “When I was playing.”

“It seemed like it came from the heart. I felt a little guilty intruding. It felt like it was a very intimate moment.” He admitted.

“I don’t mind Jacob. I’m glad you heard me.”

His brows rose, “Really?”

She nodded. He was right, it was an intimate moment, but it was one that she wanted to share with him. She would play for her mother and father, but she was never really confident to play in front of an audience. She never thought she could measure up to how well her mother played.

“Then let me ask you something a little more personal.”

“I don’t think—”

“All of those things you mentioned that appeal to you in a man,” he said not letting her continue, “Aren’t present in Tom Richardson.”

“Yes, I know.”

“But because of what I said the other night, you agreed?”

“Well, it was a few things.” The fact that Lindsay Scott with her gorgeous body and beautiful face was able to be with him made her want to become a little more experienced so she would know how to approach him. She’d spent her teenage life pining after him and it got her nowhere except heartbreak to realize what kind of woman he wanted.

“Like?”

“I think I’ve said enough tonight,’ she said, “I’m really tired.” She opened the door of the vehicle.

“Of course.” He conceded and followed suit getting out of the truck.

They walked into the house together and before she went up to bed he reached over and grabbed her arm. “Do you like motorcycles?”

“I like yours.” She admitted with a grin. Just when a woman couldn’t think of a man like him getting any sexier, put him on a big roaring bike. You could feel his sex appeal all the way to your back teeth.

“Well, how about you and I go for a ride on Saturday?”

“I’d really like that.” She said unable to hide her excitement.

Then to her complete surprise he added, “Good, it’s a date. Goodnight Tess.”

She said goodnight to him unable to keep the astonished expression off her face as he turned and walked down the hall to watch the late news no doubt.

Friday night Tom picked her up and they went to a local movie, but afterward he took her to the towns popular country and western bar. Regardless, he did stay true to his word about behaving and then he began drinking and more of his friends started to arrive. Soon their table was quite crowded and at least half a dozen women began vying for his attention like she didn’t exist. A warm hand covered hers under that table and she turned to look at him. “Sorry babe, I’m trying not to ignore you.” He said.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind your friends.” In fact she really didn’t notice. Also she didn’t notice that she was on her fourth or fifth beer. Every time she finished one, Tom would order another.

“They can be a little trying after some time though.” He watched her expression closely, “did you want to get out of here?”

Did she? No she really didn’t. Not that Tom wasn’t behaving as he said, but he did have a few beers and she was wondering if he was feeling brave and forgot his promise. Before she could respond, he stood and tugged her to her feet. “Tom—”

“Look, “ he said, pulling her close so he could talk to her so no one could hear him, but her, “I just want you to myself for a

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bit. I'll keep my hands to myself honey, don't worry."

"I'm not worried." she said truthfully. Tom never worried her in that aspect and if he did try something she was sure that she could handle him.

"Good." He gave her a rakish grin while taking her hand and started leading her toward the door just as Colton stepped in front of him from out of nowhere.

"Not tonight Tom."

Tess was taken back at the menacing look on his face. She had no idea he was even there either.

"Hey boss." He stared up at the taller man.

"You're not going anywhere with Tess." He said sternly.

"We're just taking a walk Colt."

"Sure you are." He glanced back and forth between the two, "I think it's time Tess came home."

"Colt—" Tom protested but was interrupted.

"Tess go get in the truck, I need to have a chat with Tom." He said without taking his eyes off of the other man.

"Colt, I'm fine." She said with a bewildered expression.

Colt finally settled his dark gaze on her. "Regardless Honey, I would feel better if you came home, it's after midnight."

"My God—Colt—" she started to protest until his expression darkened.

"Look Tess, If you don't go get in the damn truck, I'm going to beat the snot out of Tom in front of you."

"What?" she burst out, "You can't—"

"Just go Tess." Tom finally said, "I think I know what this is about."

"I'm not leaving you to him." She defended. Colt, like his brothers was well over six feet, and Tom was maybe five-eleven if not six feet. Even though he was as tough as they come, the Hartleys were tougher. Not only that, Colt had a reputation for not only being a hot head, but fighting. Although she'd never

seen him fight, she'd seen the aftermath of the patchwork his brother had to do on him when he took on too many opponents.

"If you get in the damn truck I won't lay a hand on him." Colt answered.

"That's blackmail!"

"No, it's honesty." He answered.

"Tess—" Tom interrupted, "I've got a dozen friends inside, I'll just go back in." he said releasing her hand. He really liked Tess. She was pretty and sweet, but he also liked his job and knew Colt's reputation. He really wouldn't hesitate to beat the snot out of him like he said. He always knew that the Hartleys had a soft spot for Tess because of Chuck, but hell, all the men did on the ranch and Tom really liked her. She was different from the other women he'd been with and was shocked to find out that she was single when he first started there. He'd teased and flirted with her but when he finally asked her out she'd turned him down, but he still didn't give up. He knew she wasn't attracted to him the way he was to her, but he thought if maybe she accepted one date from him he could convince her of his feelings. Now, however staring up at the hardened expression of Colt Hartley, he figured out why she was still single. No one would dare cross the brothers to get close to her.

"That's right," Said Colt sarcastically, 'Go find a woman that will make you feel better.'

"You got it wrong Colt." He said as he turned and went back into the bar. "I'll see you tomorrow Tess." He added solemnly and with a final look at her, he went back to his friends.

"You have some nerve!" she seethed at him completely humiliated.

Colt grabbed her arm and practically dragged her across the parking lot to the truck not the least bit bothered by her outburst, "No, I'm right on the money. How many drinks did you have?"

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“A few—” she answered pausing briefly because she honestly didn’t know, “but I’m fine.”

“No you’re not. Get in.” He said harshly as he opened the passenger door and she climbed in too angry to speak.

“You may not realize it, but you can barely walk straight. Tom would have most likely gotten you somewhere and taken advantage of you.”

“He promised.” She said exasperated.

Colt made a frustrated sound and shut the door, walked around the front of the truck and got in the driver’s side. He turned to her. “He would have had an innocent little thing like you convinced. Trust me.”

“I’m not that stupid.”

“I never thought you were.” He started the truck and pulled out of the parking lot heading toward the ranch, “I just know from experience what it takes to convince a woman that she’s desirable. Also I know Tom, I’ve seen him work his charm.”

“I already told Jacob that I wasn’t attracted to him in that way.”

“Yeah he told me.”

“Oh God, If I die tomorrow it wouldn’t be soon enough.” She fell her face in her hands. “Jacob took this a lot better than you when I told him I was going with Tom tonight. Like I said before, get a puppy.”

“Who the hell do you think sent me?” Colt shot her a look.

This made her raise her head and look at him, “He *wouldn’t!*”

“He did. Only I went because I knew he *would* have pounded the snot out of Tom.”

“What?”

“So I spared Tom a night in the ER and my task of finding another ranch manager by coming myself. So it made perfect sense to do so.”

“Jacob knew I would be fine. I told him.”

He glanced her way, “That just proves my point on how naïve you are.”

“What does that mean?”

“Ask me tomorrow when you sober up.”

“I’m not---“ just then she felt her stomach heave, “—You’d better pull over.”

Hearing that more than once in his lifetime caused him to swerve the truck to the road just as she was reaching for the handle.

When she was done losing her supper in the ditch she stood up and swayed slightly causing Colt to give her a knowing look, “Okay, maybe I didn’t realize how sloshed I was. I felt fine.” She said sheepishly with her hand pressed against her forehead. She swallowed thickly and took a deep breath. Things were wobbling around her a little.

“So do most drunk people and everything they think of at the time they are seem perfectly logical to them. Now get in.”

She nodded and climbed back in the truck. “Fine. Lets go.”

Soon they were at the house and he got out to help her out of the truck and into the house.

“I can manage.” She said grabbing the banister and slowly climbed the stairs to disappear down the hall.

“How bad was it?” Said Jacob coming out of the study after Tess disappeared up the stairs.

“Just as you said.” He turned to his brother, “I’ll talk to Tom tomorrow and tell him to stay the hell away from her.”

“Yeah, you’d better. I might shoot him.” He said narrowing his gaze.

“Sure thing.” He eyed his brother intently, “Although, you should know that Tom was serious about her. It wasn’t like his other women, he genuinely likes her.”

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“Yeah, what’s not to like. She’s perfect.” Jacob answered without hesitation, “Beautiful as she is naïve.”

“Well, I just thought you needed to know that he may not be through even if I talk to him.”

“He is, or fire him.” Said Jacob with a knowing look, “I’m going to bed.” He said goodnight to his brother and had a shower before he checked on Tess, who was sound asleep curled under her covers.

The shit was going to hit the fan tomorrow when she tore his hide off, but what he and Colt did was for the best and hopefully she’ll realize that. He approached the bed and adjusted the covers around her tenderly. It was obvious he was lying to himself. He didn’t want another man touching her because he knew what she felt like, smelled like and how she was able to make him feel around her. He wanted her and he was a coward to admit it. Everything about the woman was incredible and as far as he could tell she had no faults. There was too much at stake for him. He never let anyone close and she was his employee’s daughter. Not only that he was a professional and she was staying with him in their house. He really didn’t care much for his reputation, but he certainly did for hers. That’s why he sent Colt. It wouldn’t look good for her if her doctor came barging in to the bar and beat up his employee because he was dating the woman he wanted for himself. Thankfully Colt didn’t even hesitate when he asked him. He just nodded, turned and went out of the house to find her and not to soon by the look of her.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning she met him at breakfast and he pushed two pills at her.

“What are these for?”

“Your headache.”

“Oh. Thanks.” She said shyly and took them, “How did you know?”

“Colt said you’d had a bit to drink.”

“I guess I did.” She eyed him for a moment, “But that didn’t mean you couldn’t trust me not to do anything stupid Jacob.”

He sat back in the seat and crossed his arms under his chest. “I never said I didn’t. I don’t trust men around you.” He actually expected her to be a lot angrier but he supposed she was feeling a little embarrassed about drinking too much.

She did her best to ignore how sexy that pose looked as it emphasized the size of his biceps and chest muscles “Why not?”

“Don’t you have a clue?” he raised a single dark brow.

“I can’t think with the freight train in my head.” She said placing her fingers at her temples.

“Well, you’d better hope that freight train is gone by this afternoon. We have a date.” With that he got up and headed toward the door. “Meet me out front around two.” He said before he left the room.

When she met him later that afternoon she was feeling better, especially after seeing him standing next to that big slick black and chrome machine. He was wearing leather chaps and a matching jacket and she swore she felt herself salivate.

“Here.” He said giving her a helmet. “Put it on.”

“Okay,” she pulled it over her head and had trouble with the chin strap.

“Let me.” He said after he put his on and brushed his fingers under her chin to adjust the strap, “It’s not easy to do blind if you haven’t done it before.”

She just stared at him unable to find the words to say anything. That was the second time he touched her skin and it felt like warm tingles. Tom was finding ways to touch her last night, she remembered, and not once did it affect her like that.

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Colton was probably right after all. Now that she had it in perspective, she did drink too much and remembered the man's hand on her bare knee more than once.

"What is it?" he said locking gazes with hers.

She managed a smile that he knew she couldn't see, "I was just thinking."

"About?"

"Well, Colton said some things last night when I was leaving with Tom. Maybe he was right. I just didn't see it at the time." Jacob made a noise and turned away from her, "I feel stupid about it."

He stopped and turned back to her, "It wasn't your fault Tess, don't make it out that way." He really couldn't blame Tom and after he'd thought about it, he had behaved around Tess which must've been very hard for him. Jacob was having trouble of his own, and he couldn't imagine how Tom dealt with it who was much younger than he was.

She wished she could see his face through his helmet to find out if that angry tone was aimed at her despite his words. "You did sort of warn me." She shrugged, "Regardless, Tom was really nice, he just obviously thought I was used to more affection than I am."

"Get on." He said not continuing with the subject. He swung his leg over the bike and started it with a solid kick.

It roared to life and she felt a thrill go through her at the sound of the powerful machine. She obeyed but felt awkward on what to do with her hands.

He turned and looked at her over his shoulder, "Put your arms around me Tess." When she didn't, he reached back and grabbed her hand and pulled it around his waist. Her other one seemed to follow suit and she found herself leaning her chest against this back as he straightened the big machine and shifted it into gear with a simple leg movement before he gunned the

motor and tore down the lane

They must've cruised for over two hours and she had to admit she loved every minute of it. Not just the freedom it gave her but the fact that she had her hands around Jacob the whole time.

He cruised down a road that looked like it wasn't used often and brush became thick as it turned into more of a path. Then it suddenly opened up and he stopped the bike on a cliff overlooking a large lake.

Tilting the bike to put the kick stand on he cut the engine.

Tess fumbled with the chin strap and pulled off her helmet, "this is gorgeous." She exclaimed looking at the scenery.

"I thought so too." He grinned having already removed his helmet.

"How long have you known about this place?" she got off the bike and walked to the edge of the cliff which she discovered wasn't really a cliff. It had a bit of a steep slope down to the lakeshore.

"My brother's and I used to come swimming here when we were kids." He said watching her expression, "You really like it huh?"

"I do." She cast him a glance. It was inspiring to say the least. She could see herself playing her violin on that hill overlooking the lake.

"I bought it last year."

"You did?" she said in astonishment, "What are you going to do with it?"

"Until recently I didn't know." He cast an odd glance at her before getting off the motorcycle and stepping up next to her to share the view. "I was thinking of building a house up here."

"That would be incredible." She said in awe while watching a family of ducks hop into the calm water.

Then out of the blue, he said something that stunned her.

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“You should apply to that music school in the city Tess.”

All she could do was turn her head slowly and stare at him, “What brought that up?”

“You’re better than you think and you shouldn’t stay here. You should see if there is more to the world than what’s offered in Sulphur Springs.”

“I’m happy.”

“I know you are, but you need a life of your own too. You spend your time looking after your father and help him with his job and me with mine. Yet you have this incredible talent.”

How could she tell him that she couldn’t leave her father, but him too? She waited years for him to come back to Sulphur Springs and now he was encouraging her to leave. He would come home in the summer during between semesters and on holidays, but it wasn’t enough. Now that he was here and had his own practice, she could see him more often. Everything she wanted was right here.

“Tess, staying here isn’t helping you.” He repeated studying her eyes.

“You want me to leave.” She managed in barely a whisper.

“No. Honestly I don’t. You’re a very efficient employee and a good friend.”

Friend? There it was again, that word that made her heart sink. Only he could say it and make it feel like a curse to her.

“I sent in an application for you several weeks ago.” He confessed as he reached into his jacket and withdrew an envelope, “Your father had a recording of your work—”

“Dad’s in on this!” she burst out.

“Tess,” he said while holding up the envelope, “This is the response.”

She was sure she paled as she stared down at the envelope with the familiar insignia on it. “did you open it?” now

seeing it, she suddenly felt curious.

“No. I wanted you to open it,” he said tenderly.

“I can’t” her eyes guided up to his, “I’m terrified Jacob.”

“Then let me.” He tore open the seal and pulled out the letter. Taking a moment to read it.

She wasn’t that good, was she? No, she couldn’t be. Her mother taught her well but she didn’t have any professional training. “Jacob I’m furious with you, but I’m dying to know—” she stopped talking when he furrowed his brow.

“Well—“ he glanced up at her, “The first word is ‘congratulations’. Is that good?”

She couldn’t help herself and screamed right before she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. Then she froze, “Oh—Jacob—I—“ That’s all she got out before his embrace suddenly tightened, his eyes darkened and he took her mouth with his.

Tess swore on the bible that the earth stopped moving at that moment and all she knew was the heat of his mouth on hers. She could smell the aroma of his leather jacket along with the faint smell of expensive cologne mixed with his masculine scent. Somewhere in there she was sure she heard herself moan, and when his tongue probed for entrance, she knew she did. Her hands fisted in the collar of his jacket to pull herself closer to him.

Suddenly he made a sound, placed his hands on her hips and pushed her back, “Tess—we can’t. I shouldn’t have done that.” He breathed harshly and turned away from her.

“Why?” she said after a pause.

“Because it’s just not right.” He still didn’t turn back to her. She had no idea of how that affected him and if he turned to face her she would definitely see the evidence.

“Jacob, I was a willing participant.” She defended feeling her eyes water. Did she do this? Entice him to kiss her? As the

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moments passed she started to feel humiliated at her behaviour. Now he would surely know how he felt. All these years she managed to keep it hidden, but it was too obvious, she couldn't deny it this time.

He took a deep breath and finally turned to face her. Seeing her expression he shook his head slightly, "Do not take this blame on yourself. It was my fault. I shouldn't have touched you."

"I kissed you first," she blushed with that confession.

He smiled down at her, "And it was good, but I'm trying to be professional here—"

"Be my friend instead," she said using his words, "We've know each other before you became a doctor. I wanted to kiss you. I have for a long time Jacob."

"Tess—"

"Please let me finish. This isn't easy." She took a deep breath, "now you're looking at sending me away and I know I won't be able to tell you the things I should have years ago. I'm sure you know this for sure now because of that kiss." She felt the heat rising to her cheeks, "I'm crazy about you. I always have been and if you and Dad insist that I go, I —"

"Honey," he interrupted, "You have to stop talking. I don't feel that way about you. We're friends, and I don't want to cross that line," he lied through his teeth and prayed to God that his expression didn't reveal it. From the crushed look on her face, he knew he didn't, "I won't be responsible for holding you back when there's nothing between us. You are a beautiful woman and I responded to the affection. A man would have to be crazy not to, but I only use women for one purpose and you know what that is. Don't become a statistic to me. I hate hurting you but I need to be honest. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly." She managed sorrowfully. After his statement, there was nothing else that could be said. "Can you

please take me home now.” Hot tears spilled from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. He responded to her because she was a beautiful woman? Could he possibly hurt her any more? Jacob was surrounded by beautiful women who threw themselves at him and he just labelled her in that category. She needed him to tell her he cared about her more than that.

“Tess.” *Don’t give in*, he thought painfully seeing her tears, *this won’t do her any good*.

“Please don’t make this any harder on me Jacob, I already feel like an idiot.”

“You shouldn’t.”

She tossed her hair back off her face and stared up at him, “I should have known that I’d never measure up to women like Lindsay Scott. It was stupid of me to think so.”

Only if she knew, he thought to himself, the only reason he dated Lindsay was to take his mind off of her. Truth of it was, Lindsay couldn’t hold a candle to Tess’s beauty or her sweetness but he could never have a relationship with her.

CHAPTER SIX

Three months had gone by and Tess had phoned her father regularly, but Jacob hadn’t gotten a word. He’d hurt her so he could let her go, and what she didn’t realize is that it pained him just as much. He missed her more than he’d miss a limb, but he just kept telling himself that it was necessary. Tess needed more experience with life. Keeping her here wasn’t right for a woman of her talent. There was several times he nearly jumped on a plane with the intent of hauling her home but this wasn’t about him.

Chuck was miserable too. He felt guilty about that because he was the one that convinced him that Tess needed to expand her mind, but seeing the older man brooding without his

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daughter was almost too hard to take.

Also he was stuck with finding a replacement for her at the clinic. The first woman he hired ended up undressing in his office after work so he ended up firing her after three days. The second actually begged him to have her children. Finally he hired a woman that was in her mid sixties who was showing signs of early dementia but she was better than the previous two even though Rita stated that she'd take the naked one back because at least she knew how to answer the phone.

Almost as if on cue Rita came bursting into his office with a frantic look on her face.

"What is it?"

"It's a Doctor Samuels in New York on line three." She choked out, "Tess is in the hospital!"

Jacob didn't hear anything else the woman said as he practically dove for the phone.

When Tess opened her eyes she thought she was dreaming.

"Hey little girl. I can't leave you alone for three months without you trying to kill yourself."

Jacob. Despite the pain in her head, her side and her abdomen, she managed a small smile, "Is this a dream?" she said blinking a couple of times to study the surroundings—familiar surroundings. She was in a hospital.

"No." he bent over and kissed her forehead affectionately before taking the seat next to the bed, "I'm really here."

"Why?"

"Because I'm your doctor and your friend." He said taking a cup off the bedside table, "Have a drink, you're voice is really hoarse."

"Thanks." She said lifting her head and wincing as she took a drink. "I meant, why am I here?"

“You’re in the hospital.”

“Obviously,” she smiled, “But why?”

He set the cup down, “Has anyone talked to you about what happened?”

“No, I remember some people talking to me but I don’t remember much so I must’ve been really out of it and from the look on your face I look pretty bad.” She said noting the strain in his expression.

“It seems you were run over by a delivery truck.” He frowned, “several cracked ribs.”

“My feet are numb.” She shot him a worried look after trying to wiggle her toes.

“Some nerve damage, but the surgeon thinks you’ll recover one hundred percent.” He said quickly seeing her eyes widen in fear.

“Surgeon?” she groaned, “How bad is it?”

He leaned forward and took her hand in his, “among the other bruises you have, your spleen was lacerated, a punctured lung.”

“Is that why it hurts so much to breath?” She said, “Wow, I don’t remember a thing.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, it was his fault and you don’t know how lucky you are. Usually when someone gets hit by a van or any vehicle for that matter, there’s usually a broken leg or two.” *Or dead*, he shuddered. “However, he wasn’t really going that fast so you were very lucky.”

“Yeah, I feel great now.” She said drolly,

He chuckled, “I’m taking you back home until you heal.”

He didn’t know how good that made her feel. She rolled her head on her pillow so she could face him, “I really want to come home Jacob,” she said as the hot tears welled up in her eyes and flowed down her cheeks. “I don’t like it here. I’m so alone.” *I miss you so much it hurts*, she added to herself. She agreed to go

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to the college after he confessed that he didn't care about her because she was so ashamed she couldn't face him after her confession, but she was miserable from the first day there.

"Shhh baby, don't cry." He said as he reached over and tenderly brushed the tears off her cheeks with his thumb, "It's not so bad."

"I'm really homesick." She hiccupped and winced. "I don't like these New York people. They all seem so closed off. It's not like home. I miss my friends." *And you*, she thought.

"I shouldn't have insisted that you go. So quit blaming yourself." He said with an odd edge to his tone.

Tess finally focused on his face. For some reason she didn't notice the worry lines and dark circles present around his eyes before. It looked like he hadn't slept in days, "Jacob, when was the last time you slept?" he gave her a reassuring smile.

"You had us worried for a few days." He admitted.

"A few days? How long have I been here?"

"Don't worry about that." He answered.

"How long?"

After a long pause he slowly nodded, "Ten days."

"Oh God!" she blinked in disbelief, "Dad—"

"I sent him back to the hotel to get some sleep. Colton and Lance were here too, but someone needs to manage the ranch, so they went home a few days ago when the prognosis came through that you were going to make it." Her expression changed to complete shock, "Look Tess, I won't lie to you. You had a head injury, so you were in ICU for a week in a chemical induced coma. They brought you about twelve hours ago when the swelling went down."

"That's why I have this killer headache?" she brought her hand to her head. A sharp intake of breath could be heard in the room as she felt her face, "Oh God, I'm all swollen!"

"Yes. It looks worse than it is. Over the last ten days it's

gone down significantly. You won't have any permanent scars on your face, just one on your abdomen where they removed your spleen and the one on your side for the chest tube."

She felt her rib cage and found a bandage. "Oh lord, I'm going to look like a patchwork quilt if I keep this up."

He smiled at her, "They'll be hardly noticeable when they heal right."

"Sure." She groaned.

"They pulled out the tube two days ago when your lung inflated." He glanced down at his hands for a moment, before bringing his gaze back to hers, "You had us all worried pumpkin. I think your father aged ten years."

"Poor Dad." Her eyes went to his face studying it carefully. This time she managed a slight smile, "you look a little haggard too."

"Maybe I was worried a bit," he added with a false smile to hide his concern, "But I know you're a tough gal."

"I must be to bounce off a grill of a delivery truck and stopping it with my face."

He chuckled, "I can see your humour is returning."

"When can I get out of here?"

"In a few days." He admitted, "The sutures come out tomorrow, then we'll see how you do at walking."

"If it means I get to go home, I'll do it." she said with determination.

He gave her a grin and stood up, "You need to get some sleep." He said squeezing her hand, "I'll be back later. I need to talk to your doctor here."

"Okay." She said feeling the fatigue, "you'll come back right?"

"I will." He bent over and kissed her again, lightly on the cheek this time, "Get some rest." He said just as a nurse walked in. She waited until Jacob left until she checked the dressings

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and the lines.

“My name is Tammy.” She said with a kind smile, “How are you feeling. You look brighter today,” she nodded toward the closed door, “Is that anything to do with doctor Heart-throb.”

Tess couldn’t help but release a laugh, but then groaned in pain.

“I thought so.” Tammy smiled as she adjusted the pillows around her, “I was going to see if he was single, but obviously he’s taken,” she said giving her a knowing look.

“Not by me.”

The nurse paused and looked at her, “Well, you could have fooled me. That man didn’t leave your side until now.” She paused looking at her shocked expression, “you didn’t know?”

She shook her head.

“Well he made our lives miserable ever since we called him.”

“You called him?”

“You had a piece of paper in your purse with his name and number on it. We had nothing else on your next of kin so Doctor Samuels called him.”

Tess remembered that she’d grabbed it from the bedside table where he’d left it in her room at his house. She kept it with her because she actually was going to call him a couple of times but lost her nerve. “He’s just overprotective. He always has been,” she explained remembering what he told her before she left for New York.

“Your doctor is very nice looking.” Tammy said with a wink.

“He’s not mine. I swear.”

“Tess, think about it. Your physician gave you a private number and you don’t think he’s got some ulterior motive?” said Tammy with a smirk.

“I’ve known him since I was a little girl. He acts like an

over protective brother.” Tess explained.

“I see.” She paused, “Speaking of brothers. Does your doctor’s brothers have girlfriends, because I’d take either one of them.”

Tess laughed seeing the teasing glint in the woman’s eyes, “Thanks.” She said.

Tammy shrugged, “It’s okay. Sometimes it feels good to laugh after such a traumatic event. However, I was serious about your man.” She said. “It was actually a good thing we called him because he knew your allergies and things could have gotten a lot worse. He came in here barking orders at all of us.” She stood straight and smiled down at her, “Actually because of him, you’ve got the best care. Of course it doesn’t help that the man is drop dead gorgeous and whenever he asked us for a favour, we’d all jump at the chance just to see that sinful smile of approval.”

I know what you mean, she thought. However, she wasn’t going to try and convince the other woman that Jacob didn’t feel about her that way. She seemed determined that he did. Regardless she was thankful that she was doing her best to cheer her up. “You’re going to make me bust my stitches,” Tess said trying to withhold another laugh and coughed instead.

“Sorry,” she said apologetically, “But I thought you would want to know because you don’t seem to understand how much that man cares about you.”

“they all act like big brothers.”

“No, not him—the other two do, but your doctor is crazy about you.” She said over her shoulder as she left.

Tess just stared at the ceiling thinking about the nurse’s words. He’d told her before she left that he wasn’t interested in her that way, but he was a friend. Obviously the nurse didn’t understand how close her family was to the Hartley’s. Sighing heavily, she adjusted herself on the pillows.

After Jacob talked to the surgeon, Chuck had arrived.

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When he was done briefing Tess's father, Chuck said he'd sit with her so Jacob could at least go home, shower and eat a decent meal. He actually had a point because he hadn't left Tess side since he'd gotten there. Chuck hadn't either, until several hours ago just to get cleaned up with Jacob's promise on staying with her in case she was to waken again. Thanks to the staff, he'd been using the Doctor's lounge and showers over the last week and a half and hospital food was not appetizing, even at the best of times. So when Chuck insisted, he finally relented and left the hospital to get some much needed rest.

Once at the hotel, he ordered room service before he took a long hot shower. Bracing his hands on the tile and tilting his head down so the hot water could hit his neck and run down his back he began thinking about the past few days. He had never felt such relief before in his life when she woke up this morning and looked at him even though the surgeon did tell him that she would have no permanent damage, he needed to see it for himself. Ever since he got that fateful call ten days ago it felt like he'd swallowed nails. Losing Tess was never an option for him and although he'd sent her away, every day that she wasn't in his life was torture. It took every bit of willpower he had not to tell her how he really felt when she opened her eyes and looked at him letting the fear in her eyes change to relief seeing him there. Although she had admitted to him how she felt, he couldn't allow her to set aside her life for him. He thought that maybe if she got out and had some experience with it that she would see that she was capable of so much more, only it nearly got her killed.

The whole time she was gone he was wondering if she'd found someone else and it almost made him crazy. Yet, he had hurt her to push her away and knew that she wouldn't phone him if she needed help. What she didn't know is he wasn't as he seemed. Tess got close even though she didn't know it. She got so close, she was under his skin.

He'd had numerous physical relationships over the past seven years after he came back to Sulphur Springs while she grew up but she was always in the background and he was always watching her. No woman he'd been out with could measure up to Tess. Not only was she stunning, she was as sweet as sin. With that waist-length fair hair, big green eyes, and a body that could disturb a man into changing religion, she was beautiful. Yet, she deserved more than he could offer her. As far as he was concerned, she had a lot of love to give, and he wasn't sure he could return it. If he could it would definitely be with her, but it wasn't fair to her either. However after that disturbing phone call ten days ago, he'd changed his mind.

Nearly losing her had set him straight. Only he knew that she wouldn't trust him enough to reveal her feelings like she did before because he had hurt her. Even today, he could see the evidence of hurt in her expression and hear it in her tone. Already he knew he had some damage to repair and with Tess, it would take some time, especially in the fragile state she was in.

Turning off the taps, he stepped out just as room service arrived. He tossed on a robe and went out to answer the door, still wondering how he was going to win her back. Truth of it was, he hadn't had a woman since she'd left Sulphur Springs. None of them appealed to him. The last time he'd even seen Lindsay was that day that Tom asked Tess out. He'd invited her to lunch to end their affair, only Lindsay didn't take it so well. All along she preached that she didn't want a relationship either, but when he told her he didn't want to see her anymore the woman was furious. He'd made that decision when she treated Tess like garbage when he took her out to dinner that night. He didn't condone petty jealousy and it fired his blood even though he didn't let on.

When he was done his meal, he dressed and headed back to the hospital to relieve Chuck denying himself a much needed

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nap. He found him in the hall fussing with the coffee dispenser.

"I'll relieve you Chuck, go back to the hotel and get yourself a decent cup." Jacob said as he placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

"It might be a plan." He slapped the machine and turned toward Jacob, "She's awake again and has been asking for you anyway."

"I'll go see her after I check with the staff about her pain control." He turned to go when Chuck stopped him, "Jacob, I don't know what happened between you two before she left, but whatever it is, I want you to fix it. It's like the spark went out of her."

Jacob nodded, "I'll work on that."

"That's all I ask." He said looking over Jacob's expression, "You didn't sleep, did you?"

He lifted his hand, "I'm fine."

"Sure you are," Chuck said suppressing a smile. Obviously he was wrong about Jacob's feelings toward Tess. He reluctantly agreed to send his daughter away because Jacob gave an amazing argument, and maybe he was right. Maybe he was stifling Tess from her full potential. At the time it made him realize that if Jacob could let her go then he didn't care about her like he thought, but looking at the man now, tired and haggard, made him realize that Jacob did an amazing job at hiding his feelings.

"I'll call you if she needs you."

"Thanks." He said giving the younger man a scrutinizing look before he left.

The next day Tess really tried to use the bars and get her numb legs to move, but it wasn't easy. Jacob was there encouraging her and it did seem to help, but she was also in pain. For some reason her head seemed to hurt more and especially her side where the chest tube was. It was distracting her from

her determination even though her feet felt less numb than the day before. After about twenty minutes of struggling with staying upright she started to crumble. Her knees began to bend and her head bowed in defeat.

Jacob approached her quietly and put one of his hands on the bar in front of hers while leaning down to meet her eyes, "Tess."

She met his gaze and tried like hell not to let those honeyed eyes affect her but it was no use, she was caught in his spell. His face was only inches from hers and the deep timbre of his voice didn't help either, "What?" she breathed unable to take his eyes off of his.

"If you don't try, I swear to God I'll leave you here. So get your ass in gear and go down those bars."

"You wouldn't." she said in a shaky breath searching his eyes seeing no sign of sympathy for her. He would.

"I would and you know it." he said with a steady look. Inside it was killing him to see her in pain. He felt a surge of triumph when her chin lifted slightly, she took a deep breath, grimaced, and managed an unsteady step and then another. It continued painstakingly Jacob thought, but he circled around and embraced her when she finished. The physiotherapist brought around the wheelchair and he lowered her into it.

"Good job Doc, I didn't think she'd do it." said the man.

"She's got a lot of spunk," he said casting her a sly look. She rolled her teary eyes, but still managed a smile.

"Well I have another two dozen patients to put through. You should stay. You'll make my job easier." He teased.

"Thanks, but I only have one priority here." He grinned at the other man and took the handles of the wheelchair to push her back to her room. Once there he made her get into bed on her own before he left to get something for her pain.

He came back with a syringe.

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“You’re going to make me an addict.” She complained looking at the needle as he told her to roll over.

“Nonsense, studies show that people in pain don’t get addicted. Now roll over.”

“Over?” her eyes widened.

“I have to put it in the muscle by your hip Tess. You don’t have an IV anymore.”

“Oh.” She said, “Last time you put it in my arm.”

“At the house, yes I did, but that was a different dose. This is too much to put in that area, now roll over or I’ll have you restrained.” He added with a smile.

“You are very bossy.” She said with a bit of a shake in her voice as she rolled away from him, but she was too exhausted to argue. This wasn’t going well at all. Again he would be touching her where no man has touched her before and last time he did that she could barely breathe.

As he eased apart the edges of her gown to reach the site on her hip, he couldn’t help but notice the look of her creamy flesh in more than a professional way. This time she wore black bikini briefs and he near groaned as his fingers gently eased down the hem so he could have access to the area which made the curve of the upper part of her bottom visible. Even there her skin was perfect, supple and soft, like warm silk. Even the gentle slope of her back toward there was exquisite. At that moment he was thankful that she couldn’t see his face because it was showing raw for need for her. He quickly swabbed the area before he inserted the needle hearing her little gasp at the initial stick. “Almost done.” He murmured as he injected the contents. If he spoke any louder she would have heard the crack of desire in his voice.

He knew what her ass looked like in jeans and although he was a fairly good judge of a feminine body, Tess’s surpassed his expectations. It was true that she was shorter than he was

used to but she was perfectly put together. Her waist was tiny, but it led to well proportioned hips and an equal width upper half.

When he was done, he gently pulled her panties back up and the gown back over her and covered her up with the blankets. Then he got up without a word and disposed of the needle in the sharps container as she rolled to her back and watched him intently.

“Jacob?”

“Just a minute honey,” he said as he walked into the bathroom to using an excuse to wash his hands but giving him time to conceal his emotions. When he was done, he adjusted the lines of his slacks to hide his erection thinking it was lucky that he chose black slacks to wear. Never in his life had he so easily been aroused with such a simple task. As a doctor he had women parading in and out of his office all day, but none of them even came close to stirring the response he felt now. He was always able to separate that line of professionalism with his patients, but Tess wasn’t just a patient, he’d known her all of her life and somewhere, somehow he’d crossed that line and got involved. Although he’d already made up his mind that he wanted her, it certainly didn’t help his self-control when he reacted so blatantly to a small caress. Several minutes later he emerged.

“Is something wrong?”

“Nothing.” He gave her one of his lady-killer grins and sat down on the chair beside her bed, “that shot I gave you should kick in soon. You’ll feel better.”

“Are you taking me home tomorrow?”

“Ask me again after your physiotherapy. If there’s an improvement I will.”

“You’re a slave driver.” She sighed fluttering her eyes to coincide with the effects of the injection he gave her. “I hate the

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way that stuff makes me feel.”

“Yeah, I know that, but people heal better if they’re not in pain.”

“Killjoy.” She sighed and closed her eyes, “don’t leave Jacob. I hate waking up alone.”

You and me both, he thought to himself as her breaths slowed and became rhythmic telling him she was asleep.

Even though he’d stared at her what seemed to be a thousand times in the past few days, he still couldn’t get over how beautiful she was to him. Even through all of the swelling and fading bruises it was obvious. Leaning back in the seat, he placed his chin in his hand and his elbow on the armrest to stare at her sleeping form. How he let her go in the first place, he’d never know, but she was coming back home now and he would make things right between them. Chuck was right, the spark she had seemed to diminish since he turned her away and sent her to the city.

Tess felt like she was strangling for air and in the middle of it, she heard Jacob’s voice calling her.

“Tess, wake up!”

She felt strong hands on her shoulders, “I’m awake.” She gasped out finally popping her eyes open.

He released her, “You were having a nightmare.”

“Don’t give me anymore of that stuff.” She blinked up at him, “I have horrible dreams.”

“I see that.” He smiled reaching for one of her hands, “I’ll make sure it’s something other than Morphine next time.”

“No more Jacob, please.” She begged loving the feel of her small cool hand in his large one.

“It does help you honey.”

“Jacob—”

“Look,” he said leaning over her and taking both of her hands in his this time while resisting the urge to kiss them, “I

know what's best for you and how to get you back on your feet again. Morphine has some side effects and the bad dreams are one of them. I'll get you something different that may not be as strong, but it'll help take the edge off. That way we'll both be happy. I'll even stay close by if that's what you want."

She nodded slowly, "Why are you doing this?" she asked quietly.

"Because we're friends."

"Not even a friend would go to the lengths you are doing for me."

"Obviously you don't know how many friends I have." He teased causing her to actually release a short laugh.

"I should have known." She actually teased back, "I'm being used."

Christ, she had no idea how he wanted to use her. Images flashed in his mind of their bodies naked and entwined. Despite this, he managed to grin even if it was forced, "You are, now go back to sleep."

"Right and have more nightmares about being choked to death. No thanks."

"I can get you a sedative."

"Jacob, just visit with me." She said quickly worried that he'd get more medication to drug her with.

"All right," he said sitting back down, "what do you want to talk about?"

She turned her head and looked at him, "Well, fill me in on who's covering for you at the clinic?"

"David."

"Oh, isn't that a lot for him?"

"Well, he doesn't have to worry about every single woman parading through there in Sulphur Springs right now, so I assume his workload is about the same."

She laughed, "you are so conceited."

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His response was a sexy heart stopping grin that told her everything.

She eyed him for a moment, “point taken. However, “ she continued with a teasing smile “David’s got a nice body, he’s not bad—“

“Be quiet little girl.” He said sternly dropping his grin.

She chuckled this time and spared him another glance, “At least the Morphine makes me giddy, and maybe a little brave.”

“I suppose you’re still pining over Tom.” He said coolly not knowing where that even came from.

Her grin disappeared and she became serious, “I told you I wasn’t interested in Tom. I went out with him to gain some experience.”

His expression darkened, “His experience you don’t need Tess.”

“God, I wasn’t going to sleep with him.” She protested and equally surprised she had the bravery to say that.

“You sure as hell wasn’t.” he added with unconcealed venom, “And you sure as hell aren’t. That man has more nicks on his belt then I do.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, you and I know that’s impossible.” She said giggling again. “He could sleep with every single woman in Sulphur Springs and still not match your conquests.” This time he laughed.

“That’s what you deserve for listening to rumour.” He watched her seriously, “I’m beginning to think that you’re right about the Morphine.”

“If you’re worried about my opinion of your reputation Jacob, that will never change. I still think you’re amazing.”

“Tess—“

“Oh yah, I know still friends.” She sighed heavily, “Still the cat is out of the bag so leave a girl her dreams okay?”

This time he stood and leaned over her causing her to still and just look at him. His eyes studied her for a moment before he spoke. It was done intentionally so she could see that he was completely serious. "I'll tell you what honey. Let's get you home and you and I will re-evaluate our friendship."

She stared up at him, "I can't deal with that again."

"We'll spend some time together just getting to know one another. Do you think you can do that?"

Her mouth fell open at that statement. Did he really mean it? After all of these months of pining for him, he wouldn't tease her would he? It would tear apart what was left of her heart "Please don't joke about my feelings."

He shook his head slowly not taking his eyes from her, "I would never do that with you Tess. I mean it."

"I thought—well, what about Lindsay—"

"I already explained to you about Lindsay and that day you saw her in the clinic was the day I broke it off with her."

"D--Did you really?" she stuttered in disbelief.

He nodded.

"But you said that it was the kind of relationship that you wanted."

"I have been known to be wrong honey." *Wrong and stupid*, he thought to himself. The truth of it was when they went out to dinner together and she brought up the subject of marriage and children he'd found himself thinking seriously about it especially when she left home to go to school and Lindsay Scott was not part of those thoughts.

"But—I thought you didn't care." She felt like weeping and could feel the tears well up in her eyes.

"Of course I care." He bent down and brushed his mouth across hers, "I'll make it up to you Tess. For now, I'm letting you know and your father, that you're coming home with me, not him and I'll look after you until your better."

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“I don’t know—“

“Don’t argue.” He said sternly, “I’ll be taking care of you from now on. So get used to it.”

“I think this drug has me hallucinating.” Was all she said, but she couldn’t stop the smile spreading across her face.

“Well, we’ll see how you feel in the morning. Hopefully you’ll remember this conversation.” He grinned again, “I’ve never had you speak so boldly around me. However, I like it and I meant what I said. Let’s take time to get to know one another and then we’ll take our relationship to the next step.”

“So you’re really not going to make me go back to school.”

“No,” it was too hard on him, and it took him long enough to figure that out after the first month of missing her glowing smile around the ranch. He knew he was being stubborn but pig-headed probably suited him better to admit defeat and go to the city to drag her home. His mood had changed too. He became more irritable and one man actually quit after he launched into him over something ridiculous. It was Colt who actually pegged it when he was looking at him over the table one morning at breakfast.

“We miss her too Jacob, but you sent her away and life does go on.” He said with a glint in his eyes before he got up and left.

Lance, as usual, didn’t say much but gave his brother’s shoulder a squeeze as he left the dining room after Colt. He may have been a lawyer and a damn good one at that, but he was quieter than most. However, he didn’t need to say anything, Jacob already knew he made a huge mistake.

He was hardly sleeping and he worried about her endlessly. Was she safe? Did she meet someone? He constantly hounded Chuck about her, but he only gave him minimal information and he did it with an amused look on his face as if he knew exactly what was going on inside his head when he didn’t

have a clue. He wanted to phone her himself but he wasn't sure how she'd take it after he'd hurt her and thought it in her best interests to leave her alone.

Then he got that dreadful phone call and everything came into perspective. He cancelled the rest of his afternoon appointments, called Chuck on the way back to the ranch to pack and both of them were on the plane less than two hours later. It was the longest plane ride of his life. He and Chuck hardly said a word. Then when he first saw her, he just about wept. Chuck did.

Jacob watched the older man and his chest hurt. He'd sent her away. He'd insisted on it with Chuck until he finally gave in. He accused him on smothering her and keeping her close because he was alone. He worked the man's guilt until he agreed. Was he wrong in letting her experience life? Giving her the chance to explore her talents?

Looking at her in ICU unconscious, bruised and battered and so small in the hospital bed, made him know he was. It was shocking because whenever he'd thought of Tess, she was laughing, smiling or teasing and vibrant. The person in the bed looked nothing like her and it actually took him a moment to realize it was.

He should have kept her home. He could protect her there.

Unable to look at her anymore, he left Chuck with Tess and sought out the doctor to find out about her prognosis. It wasn't good, but over the next few days, she started to show signs of improvement, and he attributed it to her stubbornness. It caused a great awakening in him also tearing down those barriers he'd kept up around her. Jacob became her advocate and Chuck let him. He was too preoccupied with his grief over Tess. It must have hit him hard having to deal with the death of his wife just a few years ago then nearly losing his only child. It certainly didn't

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do any favours for his own guilt, but Jacob shoved it aside and assumed the professional role.

Colt and Lance showed up to help after they left the Ranch well managed under Tom. Colt went and arranged the hotel rooms and Lance took care of the hospital bills while Jacob focused entirely on Tess's care. It didn't take long for the rest of the staff to realize he meant business, especially with the lawyer standing behind him with one of those authoritative expressions on his face that pulled no punches. The staff knew that if there was so much as one iota of injustice there would be a lawsuit. The words were never spoken, but Lance made sure he introduced himself in such a way that people knew.

After things got settled, Lance and Colt went home and Chuck and Jacob stayed to take turns watching Tess. Jacob didn't realize how tense he was until she actually woke up. A wave of relief went through him and he knew right then that he was getting a second chance.

"Jacob?"

Tess's voice brought him back to the present, "sorry honey, it's been a long few days. I'm tired."

"Poor Jacob." She said sincerely.

He chuckled, "poor me? Poor you. It seems you've had enough hurt for a lifetime. If you had nine lives, they're all gone."

"I agree." She said releasing a breath, "I'm tired to."

"Tomorrow is another day. So get your sleep. I'll stay."

"I'm being selfish. You should go back to the hotel and get some sleep. I'll take that sedative."

"I've had many nights like this in my line of work. Don't worry about me. I'll let you know when I've had enough." He said taking the chair beside the bed taking her hand again.

"promise?" She asked followed by a yawn.

"promise." He said softly as her eyes closed.

Jacob held her hand for a long time while thinking of how to win her back without much damage. He already knew that she still cared about him, but that wasn't the problem. Returning to Sulphur Springs and enduring the gossip would be hard on her and his ex relationships would be hard on her. He didn't care less about it, but she wasn't used to it. And lastly, the trust. He'd taken something beautiful and crushed it. She had thrown everything into the fire to confess her feelings for him and he treated her badly. Yet, he had plenty of reasons for doing what he did.

First of all she was too young and too naïve. He was used to experienced women and had thought that her confession was that of a crush of an innocent girl, but after she'd left he couldn't stop thinking about it and began to realize that maybe he wouldn't have responded so heatedly to that kiss if he didn't feel something too. Then there was his jealousy with Tom. He'd never been jealous over a woman before in his life so it took him some time to examine that feeling. At first he thought he was just being protective, but then why did he send Colton to get her home. Then there was the way he felt when he was examining her after her first hospital stay. He'd shoved that one out of his mind because he couldn't really explain his reaction and felt guilty over the whole thing, but he knew it now. It was desire.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next day she was able to walk the length of the bars and not falter. It wasn't easy by any means but she was determined to go home and get as far away from New York as she could.

"I feel like an invalid." She mumbled as Jacob helped her into the wheelchair.

"Look on the bright side." He said leaning down from

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behind and speaking in her ear, “No broken bones. Just a few measly cracked ribs.”

She held her breath hearing his husky voice in her ear and could only nod. It was then that she recalled some of the things he’d said to her the night before. Was she dreaming about him saying that they’d reconsider their relationship? She felt his hand squeeze her shoulder before he pushed the wheelchair back to her room. She closed her eyes against the touch hoping that it wasn’t a dream from the night before, but no way in hell was she going to bring it up. She’d already had her heart crushed by him and more than likely she was hallucinating from the drug.

Once back in her room he helped her back into bed and covered her up just as her nurse, Tammy came in.

“Well, I should be looking for another job Doctor Hartley?” She said with a smile nodding to the now neatly tucked in Tess.

“I only have one patient.” He said with a smile as his eyes lit on Tess. “So your job is safe.”

“Promise me.” She said laughing before pulling the blood pressure cuff out of the holder on the wall to put around Tess’s arm, “Because you do such a good job with her, you make me look bad.” She added with a wink in Tess’s direction. This time Tess laughed.

She liked Tammy and oddly enough she didn’t act as though Jacob was the only man on earth when she was in the room with them like other women did. “I know when I’ve been beat.” She told her one night when Jacob was out of the room getting a cup of coffee. But Tammy was very pretty. She was tall and leggy, with auburn hair and dark brown eyes. Not only that, she had a genuine compassion about her that was very likable.

Just then Jacob’s phone rang and Tammy gave him a disproving look. Phones weren’t allowed to be on in the hospital, but Doctors never did listen to the rules. He just gave her a smile

and held a finger to his lips in such a handsome gesture that Tess thought that anyone would have forgiven him. He wasn't even bothered by her expression and pulled it out of his pocket to look at the caller id.

"It's Lance," he flipped it open and turned toward the window.

"They never listen." Tammy smiled and finished the rest of Tess's vital signs and cast a glance at Jacob's broad back before settling them back on her, "Lance is the lawyer?" she asked.

Tess nodded.

"Single?"

"Very." She whispered getting a suspicious look from Jacob as he resumed his conversation.

Tammy released a purr causing Tess to laugh again.

"Don't get your hopes up," Tess added, "They're all womanizers."

"Except that one." She nodded toward Jacob. "He's only got eyes for you."

"I told you before—"

"I know you did Tess, but his behaviour tells me otherwise." She squeezed her hand, and then changed the subject seeing how this one made her uncomfortable. If she couldn't see how that gorgeous man coveted her, it was not her business to prove it. She was certain doctor gorgeous would make his plans known. The way he looked at Tess told her that. It was not a look of affection, it went way beyond that. She really couldn't blame him. The young lady was absolutely beautiful yet she never acted like it. She was full of humility and even though she'd gone through a terribly traumatic event, she coped with it very well. Obviously she was a lot of fun to be around by the way she constantly cracked jokes and took her constant teasing. Not once did she take anything Tammy said as an insult even when she called her admirer 'Doctor Gorgeous'. "How is your pain by the

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way? I know he's on top of things, but let me feel useful okay?"

"I don't like morphine." She frowned still trying to sort out the conversation from the night before not knowing if it was real or not.

"Not many people do who aren't used to it, but there are other things we can give you."

"Jacob mentioned that."

"Of course he did." That got another smile from her patient. "I'll leave your pain control up to him then. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Pray for a miracle so I can walk normally."

"I'll do that, and you are a miracle Tess because you are still here." She said tenderly. With that she left.

Tess wondered if it was as bad as that. Her eyes sought out Jacob who was still standing in front of the window talking on the phone. He emitted such striking profile with his erect posture and one hand shoved into the pocket of his grey slacks.

Despite the expensive suit he wore, he had about two days worth of stubble on his jaw which made him look like a man who had been too busy to shave. His tie was slightly crooked too which was completely unlike him. He always had an immaculate appearance and she knew why he didn't. She began to feel guilty. Her father would be in later this evening and she would convince him to go back to the hotel this time and get some much needed rest. Even when her father came to visit her over the past few days she suddenly realized that Jacob didn't go home. He just left to get a cup of coffee and a bite to eat. However, this was a different suit from yesterday, but she bet that he had several here and like Tammy had said before, that he was just using the doctor's lounge to get cleaned up in.

She waited patiently until he hung up the phone and shoved it back in his pocket. "Jacob?"

He turned toward her smiling, "Lance needed an update."

“Worry warts.”

“I can’t say I blame him.” He said walking back toward the bed.

“I need to ask you something.” She said seriously.

“Ask away.” He said raising his dark brows.

“Have you been here the whole time I’ve been in the hospital?”

“Of course.” He’d been there two hours after that wretched phone call and he told her so.

She could see that he didn’t understand what she was trying to say. “No, I meant have you even gone back to the hotel for some sleep?”

His face became masked, “I’m fine.”

“Jacob, you need rest too.”

“The hospital staff has been helpful.”

“It’s not the same and you know it.” She scolded. “Tonight, dad will stay with me and you’re going to go and get some sleep.”

“Tess, I told you before, I’m used to this.”

“I don’t think you are. I know you’ve worked long hours Jacob, but this is different—it’s me this time.” She said with hesitation not too sure if it was because of her or if he devoted this much time to anyone he cared about.

He leaned over her placing his hands on either side of her body on the bed and looked down into her eyes, “Yes, you are correct.” He said while his eyes searched her face, “This is you Tess, and I’m not leaving your side until I’m comfortable that you’re safe. I told you that last night.”

“—last night?” she breathed wondering if some of that was real. In the process she got the scent of his expensive cologne and wanted to close her eyes and breathe deeper. Could a man possibly smell as good as he did? He may look tired but he still smelled heavenly.

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He nodded, “think hard. I can see by your expression that you remember something.”

“I don’t.” she said quickly.

He let a bit of a smile pull at one corner of his mouth knowing that she wasn’t telling the truth. “I told you that we’d re-examine our friendship honey. Don’t you remember?”

“Bits.” She admitted softly.

He lifted a hand and grazed it down her cheek causing her to hold her breath, “Those bits are real.”

“—but—”

“Hush.” He said softly as he lowered his head and brushed his mouth across hers. Then he lifted it enough that his eyes could look into hers, “I’m taking you home to look after you and we’ll try and get to know one another right this time.”

“You meant that?” She could barely speak. Her mouth tingled from that brief but gentle gesture.

“I did.” He said allowing a slow sensual smile to cross his handsome face, “very much.”

“You feel guilty.”

“Yes, I do. However, this decision has nothing to do with it Tess. I don’t date women out of pity.”

“Date?” Even though he’d said it in a roundabout way, it still surprised her when he mentioned that word.

“If you’ll have me.” He answered.

“You want to date me?” she repeated still surprised.

“Don’t act so surprised you’re far from repulsive.” He teased causing her to smile.

“It’s just—well I thought that you wanted a ‘no strings’ relationship.”

“Before maybe, but not now.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Well, you did.” He said still hovering over her, “I missed you.”

“Really?” The wave of emotion that passed through her at his gentle admission near had her undone.

He nodded.

“I missed you too Jacob.” She felt tears burn her eyes, and he lowered his head again and kissed both of them and her cheek before raising himself up again.

“I know I’ve done some damage to you little one, but give me a chance to make things right okay?”

He meant it. She was sure of it. Jacob never said anything he didn’t mean. Slowly she nodded and it got her one of those heart pounding sexy grins she loved so much. How could she possibly deny him? She loved him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

She breathed a sigh of relief as the Hartley’s large house came into view. She was exhausted from the plane ride alone even though it was another three days before she was released from the hospital. The doctor made her walk twenty feet on her own without help before he would release her with Jacob’s promise to keep up her exercises. However he wasn’t doing such a good job. The wheelchair was left in the airport gate as he lifted her out of it and carried her onto the plane not even giving her a chance to try and walk.

“You’re too tired.” He said to her unspoken questions, “You have dark circles under your eyes.”

“You do to.”

“Ah, but I can walk fine.” He offered with a dimpled smile.

Her father just shook his head and led the way.

Once the plane landed he repeated the gesture to the waiting wheelchair. She swore she heard one of the stewardesses sigh. Well she really couldn’t blame her, Jacob was absolutely

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chivalric.

Colton was waiting for them when they landed and gave Tess a hug before Jacob hoisted her easily out of the chair and into the waiting ranch truck. He placed her in the middle seat while her father and Colt took care of the luggage.

After dropping Chuck off at their house they continued on to the main one.

"I'm surprised dad is fine with this." She said to Jacob when Colt was helping her father unload his luggage.

"I really didn't give him much of a choice."

She just stared at him.

"I told him—"he continued at her surprised expression, "That the only way you got released from the hospital is because I insisted that I'd be there to care for you."

"Aren't you going back to work?"

"In a few days, when I know you can manage the stairs."

"I never thought of that." She'd forgotten that she couldn't climb up and down stairs yet. Well, she may be able to, but she hadn't tried it. That would mean that he would have to carry her up to her room all the time. Not that she minded, being his in strong arms just that day was amazing. She could feel every hard contour of his body under his clothes as he held her tight to him. "I'll give you a back problem." She said trying to tease her way out of her wandering mind.

He smiled, "I doubt it." He bent down and kissed the tip of her nose. "stay put. I need to speak with your father before we leave." He said getting out of the truck while her laughter followed him. He knew damn well that she couldn't move even if she wanted to.

She watched in the side mirror as Jacob shook hands with her father and Colt joined them. She couldn't hear what was being said but several times her father looked toward the truck before he nodded and spoke back.

A moment later both of the brothers were back in the truck and Jacob stretched his arm across the back of her seat allowing his hand to rest on her shoulder. She had to admit that she cherished his protectiveness. Colt and Jacob began talking about business but she didn't mind as long as he didn't move his hand. He absently caressed the curve with his fingers while he spoke to Colt, and if anyone asked her what the conversation was about, she wouldn't have had a clue.

Maria must've heard the truck coming up the drive because she bustled out the front door and waited on the steps. Colt got out and started to unload the luggage as Jacob reached for Tess.

"You should try and let me walk."

"Not today." He said gathering her in his arms, "Besides honey, I like how you feel."

"Jacob!" she whispered harshly hoping no one else heard.

"They'll find out sooner or later when we are seen together around town."

"But I'm staying with your family."

"In a very plutonic sense honey." He gave her a hard look, "I would never compromise you under my roof and my family knows that."

"You poor little miss!" Maria said as Jacob carried her up the stairs to the porch and into the house with her on their heels, "You just have one thing after another happen to you lately. Are you hungry?"

"I'm very tired." She said laying her head against Jacob's thick shoulder.

"Would you like some tea?"

"Don't mother her Maria, she needs to have a nap before supper."

She stopped and placed her hands on her hips, "Well then I'll make her some cherry cobbler for desert and I'll mother her

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as much as I want.”

“My favourite.” She raised her head and grinned at the woman over Jacob’s shoulder.

“I know.” She said winking at her before she turned and went back to the kitchen.

Jacob took the long staircase easily with her in his arms and kicked the door shut to her room after he went in.

It took her a moment before she realized that he hadn’t set her down yet, but her eyes were closed as she leaned against him. Finally when she realized that he hadn’t moved she opened them to find her just looking at her.

“You’re very pretty Tess.”

She felt herself blush realizing that he was watching her enjoy his embrace, “Put me down.”

He grinned seeing the color change in her cheeks, “Chicken.”

“Call me what you like, but you know how I feel about you.”

He turned his head and nuzzled his nose into the hair at her brow, “It’s very flattering.” Then he kissed her forehead before he bent down and laid her on her bed.

She expected him to leave but he just pulled the coverlet over her and then sat beside her hip as she rolled on her side toward him. “I can’t sleep if you’re here gawking at me.”

He chuckled, “I just want a minute with you before I leave. There’s something I want to ask you.”

Her brain was working a hundred miles a minute to figure out what it could possibly be. Maybe he changed his mind about them seeing each other.

“There’s a dance next Saturday. I want to take you. I guess that way we’ll make ourselves known. You’ll be back in your house and your own bed by then.” He grew serious. “This isn’t going to be easy for you Tess. There’ll be gossip. Then

there's the age difference."

"You've thought about this haven't you?"

"At great length."

"It bothers you?"

"It did before, not now. I know how sweet you are and my concern is that you'll be gossiped about because of this." He indicated with a finger back and forth between them, meaning them. "I never did care what people thought about me, but I just want you to be prepared."

Lindsay Scott floated into her mind and she knew why. That was the type of woman Jacob was seen with and she would've let anything bother her. She was experienced and a socialite to boot, whereas Tess had none of those qualities. Although she had been to dances with the brothers before, they all had their own dates and she was under no pressure to perform. This time it would be different. The Hartley brothers were well sought after bachelors and all female eyes would be on her at the coming dance. She'd never had to deal with that kind of pressure even if she knew just about everyone at those events. She looked up at him thinking that through all of this he had thought this out, how she would feel being looked at in a different light. He must care more than she originally thought. Was Tammy right about the way he looked at her? She was too inexperienced to see it, but maybe he did. "I'm a big girl Jacob, it won't bother me."

"Brave words." He said with a suspicious look, "But—" he stood up, "We'll find out soon enough. Get some sleep." He turned and walked out of the room.

Colt was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs with his hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans.

"Oh, I know what that look is about." He said stopping a few steps above.

"I hope you know what you're doing. This is Tess."

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Because Colt was the one who picked them up at the airport and rode home with them in the truck he didn't miss one moment of affectionate exchanged between Jacob and Tess. Although he already knew how Tess felt because of her confession a few months back, Jacob was no monk.

He took a deep breath and released it as he ran a hand through his dark hair, "I hope so to."

Colt nodded and fished in his back pocket to pull out his pack of smokes, "Come on Jake, let's go outside and have a cigarette. Maria will kill us if we smoke in the house."

"Sure." He said following his younger brother out the door. Colt never asked him anymore about it. He wouldn't either. They didn't pry into each other's lives at all, but Tess was an exception. He just wanted him to know that Lance and he were aware of it.

That night at dinner Tess had to admit that she was proud of herself. She had managed to come down the stairs with Jacob walking in front of her as she held onto the railing with one hand and his shoulder with the other. It took her some time but she did it. It also earned her a nice but brief kiss on the mouth. Jacob took her arm and led her to the dining room which she was happy to see her father joining them for dinner.

After he helped her sit down Lance said grace and Jacob bluntly told the family that he and Tess were seeing each other. There was a brief hush of silence before Chuck spoke.

"Maria makes the best damn roast beef in this country." He said spearing a slice as if Jacob was just discussing the weather.

Tess whose cheeks pinked up from Jacob's announcement managed to burst into laughter followed by deeper throaty chuckles.

When dinner was over the men left to go about their

various chores on the ranch but not until Jacob escorted Tess to the swing on the front porch. Her father joined her about twenty minutes later.

"You seem almost one hundred percent better." He said taking the seat beside her.

"I'm beginning to feel normal." She said looking down at her swinging feet.

"Jake says I can take you home in a few days."

She gave her father a genuine smile, "You'd think he was my father the way he orders me about."

Chuck laughed, "Well honey, he does care about you. You should have seen him at the hospital. I know about animals, not people, but all I can say is thank God he was there. I was a mess."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that Dad." She said sincerely. "It must've been a nightmare."

He shook his head, "Jake was right, you needed to see if there was anything out there for you and I was glad he was with me and there for you. I don't know how I could have handled it if he wasn't. I owe him a lot baby."

"Me too."

Chuck smiled at her, "Let me shoulder that burden. You need to relax and enjoy life."

After a moment of contemplating her father's words she nodded, "Okay, but I'm really glad to be home."

"Me too." He said standing. "I love you baby girl."

"Me too." She said trying not to cry.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

She nodded and watched him get in the suburban and drive off. Hopefully he wasn't that lonely while she recovered here.

Maria came out about ten minutes later and gave her a glass of ice tea.

"Thanks, by the way the cherry cobbler really good!"

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“Of course it was.” She said gruffly before she went back in the house.

Tess just smiled. Maria acted gruff but she’d made her favourite dessert and brought her a glass of iced tea without asking her if she wanted it or not.

She sat there for the next hour watching a group of horses gallop around one of the distant pastures as the sun began to go down. This land was so beautiful there were times that she could have wept over it when she was in New York and she would have given anything to come home, but Jacob said he didn’t want her.

She really wondered if he didn’t pity her because he seemed to have suddenly changed his mind. She knew he felt guilty and most likely blamed himself for what had happened to her, but she never thought that once. She was clumsy and not used to the traffic and ended up stepping off the curb without checking. Even though she had the right of way, accidents do happen.

Regardless, she wasn’t going to tell him that she didn’t want him, because she did. Not only that, she was hoping that he might care like Tammy said, but she certainly wasn’t going to leap right in with her heart in her hands like before. Also the affection that he’d been displaying towards her was no more than small caresses or a small peck on the mouth, cheek or forehead. It was nothing compared to what a man and a woman who cared about one another displayed.

A sinking feeling went through her making her think that maybe he was just giving her what she thought he wanted which was to pretend to date her just to please her after what she’d been through. She knew he cared about her at least that much. But would he really do such a thing?

She bit her bottom lip thinking about it wishing she wasn’t so darn insecure where he was concerned.

“Hey!”

The familiar voice got her out of her downward spiralling

thoughts and she couldn't have been more thankful to see Tom walk up toward the porch. "Hi!"

He trotted up the steps and sat next to her. "How are you doing?"

"Oh, gee—I feel like I've been run over by a delivery van."

He laughed, "Well, it's good to see it didn't drive off with your sense of humour."

"That'll be the last of me to go."

Tom reached over and took her hand before she could stop him.

"We were all worried about you honey."

"Tom—"

He grinned, "Don't worry—I like my job."

Her brows lifted, "What does that mean."

"Colt laid down the law where you're concerned."

She groaned.

"It's okay, I'm beginning to think there's more than one man interested in you and Colt's right, and you're not the type of gal that I should chase when I'm not ready to settle down."

"Is there anything else you could possibly add to my embarrassment?"

He studied her face while giving her a handsome grin, "No, I've done my best I think." He glanced up, "Oh-oh."

"What?"

"Here comes Jacob. I'd better make myself scarce." He released her hand and stood up. "Take care honey."

Tess let her attention go to Jacob who had a scowl on his face as he approached the house, but she still couldn't help but admire his long legged stride. Wasn't there anything about the man that she didn't find appealing? "You too." She said before he left the porch and approached Jacob. It was obvious they were talking about her when Jacob gestured in her direction even though she couldn't hear what they were saying. Tom just

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nodded and cast her a glance. It seemed like there was a lot of talking about her lately and she wasn't included in any of it.

Finally she breathed a sigh of relief as Jacob shook Tom's hand before he left.

"I wish people would quit talking about me like I'm invisible." She said as he came up the steps.

He paused in front of her but didn't sit down. The look on his face was impossible to read. It was that Doctor-professional look she'd seen so many times.

"What?"

"You really don't want me to repeat what I said to Tom, Tess."

"I told you I wasn't—"

"You may not be, but that doesn't mean he wasn't." he bent over and placed a hand on either side of her shoulders while gripping the back of the swing bringing his face inches from hers, "I'll not have my employees chasing after my girlfriend when I turn my back."

He may not have touched her, but it certainly seemed like he did from the way her body reacted. Her whole body felt like it was just electrified, "W—What did you just say?"

"you heard me." He said sternly, "Stay away from Tom."

She blinked. He actually sounded jealous! Jacob didn't get jealous. Was it an act? After a brief moment of looking at his unreadable expression, she knew it wasn't. Another thrill went through her and she couldn't help the smile that draped across her face. He saw it and grunted as he erected himself.

"Don't wallow too deep in it Tess. I meant what I said. I'll fire him." He said pointing a finger at her in warning.

She pressed her lips together resisting another smile and nodded trying to look like she was taking him seriously and failing miserably.

He narrowed his eyes, "you are encroaching on dangerous

territory honey. I've been behaving myself, but if you keep taunting me like that, I'll turn you over my knee and show you why you belong to me, and it certainly doesn't involve a spanking."

"Jacob!" she burst, "don't talk like that!"

This time he grinned and allowed his gaze to run over her front scorching everything he paused on.

Tess just realized that he completely turned the tables on her especially when her cheeks started to heat up and she was sure they were as scarlet as roses. If it wasn't the grin itself which was downright sinful, it was the glitter of desire he allowed her to see in the honeyed depths of his eyes.

Then satisfied that he affected her, he shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and walked away whistling.

So much for not jumping in with her heart in her hands, she just handed it to him after that and he made sure she knew it. *Oh lord*, she thought, *I'm in trouble*.

CHAPTER NINE

The next few days seemed to fly by and in the process she hardly saw Jacob. He'd returned to work the following day after she showed him that she was able to manage the stairs by herself.

Tess had still been fighting fatigue from her overall experience and had been going to bed early missing Jacob when he came home late from the clinic. He was obviously trying to catch up on the work he missed while he took care of her. It really wasn't fair, he must've been exhausted.

Jacob was exhausted, but there was too much to do. He had sent Rita home before dinner but as with the previous two days he stayed late to go through the files of his patients that David had handled while he was away. He knew he owed the man a long overdue vacation for covering for him on such short notice.

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Lifting his arm he glanced at his watch. It was almost ten o'clock and he was tired. Unfortunately he hadn't seen Tess in two days and it was hard to admit that he missed her. He stood and gathered the files. He'd leave them on Rita's desk to put away tomorrow but he wasn't taking any work home with him tonight. He needed to see Tess. Hopefully she was still awake. If not, he had full intentions on checking on her whether she was in bed or not.

However, when he went out to the front he knew Rita had forgotten to lock the door behind her because there stood Lindsay with a long overcoat on. Then to his surprise she grabbed the edges and opened it revealing her long slender naked body.

It was after midnight but Tess was still awake. She stayed up late to wait for Jacob. It seemed like forever since she'd seen him. Everyone else had long since gone to bed and she was sitting in the family news waiting and the twelve o'clock news had just started when she heard the front door open. She got up and rushed to meet him.

Jacob was just taking off his coat when Tess appeared in the hall. A wash of guilt hit him looking at her. Unfortunately he couldn't mask his expression in time.

"What is it?"

He released a heavy sigh, "We need to talk."

"About?"

"Lindsay came to see me tonight." He said setting his briefcase down while looking at her.

Did she hear him right? Then she started putting things together. The look of guilt and the late hour he was coming home. A horrible feeling washed through her, "Jacob—" she said not being able to stop the crack in her voice.

It took a moment for him to register what could be going through her mind. "Wait a minute—nothing happened!"

Her rushed breath of relief was loud in the large hall but she couldn't stop the tremble that ran through her and he saw it.

"Oh for Pete's sake honey, give me some credit." He said stepping up to her and gathering her into his arms, "I'm ruined for other women, don't you know that?"

She shook her head against his chest causing him to release a deep throaty chuckle. Then he cupped her head in his large hands and made him look at her, "I said I wanted to talk to you because I suspect that Lindsay isn't done with us yet. I'm sorry you got dragged into this, but obviously she had other plans than what she originally told me. After I sent her away, I just went to the diner for a cup of coffee so I could think this through." He needed the time to unwind because Lindsay was clingy and not easy to dissuade. It took him at least forty-five minutes to get her out of his clinic. She was determined to have her way with him and show him that Tess was too young and inexperienced for him. He realized then that it was something he sorely needed to remedy. He couldn't concentrate at work, or on anything else for that matter because he was so preoccupied with thoughts of her.

"Okay." She managed looking up at him. "I trust you Jacob."

He smiled down at her, "Of course you do Tess because that's in your sweet nature." He looked over her head for a minute, "Is anyone else up?"

"No, Lance and Colton went to bed hours ago."

"Good."

"Good?"

"um-hm." He said lowering his head to hers.

"Jacob?" she murmured seeing that he was about to kiss her.

"Honey, I'm tired of playing the nice guy. I haven't had a decent night's sleep since you've been in this house."

"Really?"

He shook his head, "So let's take some time to get and know each other a little more intimately."

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He didn't give her a chance to answer him. The next second his hard mouth was on hers and she even forgot that he said anything. She could feel his hand circle around to the small of her back and the other tangled in her hair to help guide her mouth under his.

The last time he kissed her like that was before she left for New York, and for three long months she hadn't been able to shake it from her memory. However, despite his confession the other day on the porch, she still wondered if he saw her that way. When she felt his tongue probe for entrance, she knew he did.

"Honey you taste wonderful." He murmured before he took her mouth again.

She thinks that's when she moaned, but she wasn't sure.

Finally Jacob lifted his head and stared down at her. She looked so desirable that he groaned, "To the TV room." He said as he started backing her toward the door that she came out of moments ago.

Tess hardly noticed. Somehow her hands found the buttons on his shirt and began to undo them.

"Just a minute honey." He said releasing her to turn and shut the door, "I don't want us to be interrupted." He added locking it before he turned his heated gaze back on her.

"uh-huh." She said absently while stepping up to him and resuming the task of the buttons on his shirt.

"Ah hell. Could you possibly any more desirable?" he gathered her back into his arms and crushed her mouth under his while backing her toward the sofa. It had been almost four months since he had a woman which made his desire for her tenfold. He didn't want another woman. He wanted Tess.

As her hands finished undoing the buttons of his shirt she started pulling it out of the belted waistband of his dark slacks.

"Wait." He said softly while placing his hands on her hips and pushing her away from him so he could reach up and undo

his tie.

Tossing it on the floor, he grabbed her again, maybe a little too roughly from the small gasp that escaped her. "If you want me to stop, I will." He said taking her mouth again not giving her any room to answer.

Lord, if she could speak, that's certainly not what she would have said. She pushed his shirt off of his thick shoulders and he released her to allow it to fall to the floor joining his tie leaving his upper half bare. Her hands began to explore the contours of his body and she was amazed at how well built he was, "Everything about you is hard Jacob." She finally managed to say.

"Tess, you shouldn't say that to a man in the state I'm in right now." He said huskily

She didn't hear him, her hands went to his belt, but he stilled them with his finally bringing her out of her state and raising her eyes to his realizing how brazen she was being, "Oh God, Jacob—" She was going to apologize for her aggressiveness when he interrupted her.

"no, don't you dare feel embarrassed. I want you to, but I don't think it's fair that I'm half naked and you're not."

"What?" she said still recovering from the haze of desire she was in. She didn't know what possessed her but she had this deep raw need to see all of him.

"This—" he said reaching over and gently pulling her t-shirt out of her jeans, "—is in the way."

Suddenly she realized what he meant and had an attack of shyness. She stopped his hands with hers.

"No—" he said looking down at her, "You're not backing out Tess. You're a mature woman and I'm so turned on for you I can feel it to the back of my teeth."

For some reason she always knew that Jacob was assertive in this aspect, but it still surprised her, but not in the way she

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thought it would. The hot determined look in his eyes made her whole body feel as if it was on fire. He never said another word but just looked down at her with those striking eyes of his and she felt her resistance fold and diminish. a triumphant smile spread across his face as she released his hands and allowed him to lift her shirt over her head. He discarded it and paused to stare down at her.

“Nice.” He said reaching up and cupping one of her breasts in his hand. “I knew you’re breasts were going to be beautiful Tess, but like the rest of you they surpassed my expectations.” He said using his other hand to reach behind her and easily unsnap her bra.

Tess lost her voice again especially when his thumb rubbed over her nipple causing it to instantly tauten. She tilted her head back and moaned not even realizing that he’d undid the lacy material and slid it down her arms.

Jacob bent down and ran his mouth down her arched neck while he expertly played with her breasts. She was exquisite and completely helpless under his touch. He loved that about her. She lit right up when he touched her and reacted with such wanton desire, that he knew he could easily take her. He guided her to the sofa, sat down and pulled her on top of his lap so she was straddling him. It presented those perfect breasts for his eager mouth.

“Oh God!” Tess choked out as his hot mouth covered one of her breasts tasting and teasing it. She tangled her hands in his hair to force him closer to her. Nothing ever felt that good!

Jacob spanned his hands around her waist to move her back on his lap, enough so he could reach between them and undo the snap on her jeans. She didn’t notice. Maybe it had something to do with his mouth and tongue on her breasts. She certainly liked that which pleased him. There were other things he was going to do to her with his mouth that she would like even more.

After he unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans, his hands unbuckled his own belt and then he gripped her hips and pulled her close to him, twisted his fingers in her hair, and forced her mouth to his while his other hand expertly caressed her breast. He knew he was being aggressive with her, but her reaction to him just encouraged his behaviour. The more assertive he got, the more she responded to him.

His hands weren't the only busy ones. Hers continued to explore his body and every now and then she dug her nails into his flesh and released a throaty exotic moan. If he thought he had her where he wanted her, his groan of submission just told him how wrong he was.

The way she was responding to him made him doubt that she was a virgin, not that she ever said she was, but he came to that conclusion on his own.

He tightened his arms around her drawing her breasts against his chest; loving the feel of her soft flesh against his while he continued to assault her mouth with his own.

Tess was in a different world and was automatically in love with it. Jacob felt good, smelled good, and every time he touched her she was pushed further over the edge and deeper into this new realm he was showing her. She couldn't get close enough to him and knew there was more to this hunger that she felt. It swelled inside her with some deep primal need that she desperately needed fulfilled. Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard her name.

"Tess." He said roughly causing her to lift her head and look at him. "I have to know before we go any further if you're on the pill, because I have protection but in my room. Not here."

"Pill?" she breathed, what pill? Oh lord it was hard pulling her head out of the clouds.

"the pill," he said letting a devilish grin draw across his face. Was she really caught up so much that it was taking her a

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moment to comprehend what he was saying. By the look of her he would have to say so. Her mouth was swollen from his none to gentle kisses, and her face was flushed, but most appealing was the darkened color of her eyes. They looked like two wet emeralds.

“Oh,” she said and nodded.

“Thank God.” He groaned taking her mouth again. Then he flipped her onto her back and brought his weight down on her so quickly that she could barely blink.

She nearly said something, until she felt his body against hers. Tess couldn’t believe how amazing it felt to have that large muscular body stretched out on top of hers. She could feel him pushing her jeans down her hips and found herself lifting them to help him.

Jacob sat back on his heels and pulled her jeans off followed by her panties and flung them aside before coming back down on her again. He didn’t miss how beautiful her flushed naked body was and was impatient to feel her under him again. Her nails dug into his shoulders as he settled in between her legs and pulled one roughly over his hip. The only thing that separated them now was his slacks.

“Jacob, I’m dying.”

“Hell no, not yet you aren’t.” he breathed against her mouth as he reached down between them to free himself, “We’re just getting to the good part. I can’t wait any longer.” He said against her mouth.

If he expected a protest, he certainly didn’t get one. Instead she slid her other thigh up over his hip.

He raised himself up on his forearms and adjusted himself against her. “Tess, open your eyes and look at me.” He said in a rough voice unable to contain his desire.

Tess did but she could barely focus. He had her completely wild for him. Then he started to push into her and the invasion

was completely foreign, then there was pain.

Jacob felt her stiffen then go completely still. She slapped a hand over her mouth to stop herself from crying out. Somehow he was so involved in having her, he'd forgotten that she might have been a virgin. Not only that, she enveloped him perfectly and his own groan of pleasure drowned out her muffled cry. He instantly stopped, "Tess?" his voice sounded oddly distant.

"It hurts so much!" she sobbed.

"Oh baby, I'm so sorry. I'm such a brute." He murmured kissing the tears that started falling down her cheeks.

She could feel his arms on either side of her head tremble so much with restraint that the cushion beneath her head shook. Her eyes sought out his and she could see the strain in his expression along with the guilt as he was resisting moving within her. Then to her surprise he started to pull away which caused her to tighten her legs around his hips, 'no—don't.' she managed knowing he was about to end it, "I'd much rather have you in me than away from me."

That statement made him groan and he took her mouth again. Slowly the stiffness started to drain out of her and at the first movement of her hips under him, he began a slow and steady rhythm. About the third or forth time he moved in her she felt something erupt from their joining.

"you feel it don't you?" he said lifting his head to watch her after she released a gasp.

"Jacob—oh, that's—" she widened her eyes as the feeling started to become more intense and start to spread low in her pelvis.

He knew from experience when to change his rhythm and he was right on cue as noises started to pour from her parted lips. Soon he was lifting himself above her so he could get deeper, faster. He felt her climax but she also marked it with one of the sexiest sounds of release that he'd ever from a woman, and it

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just heightened his own. Those last few strokes he'd given her before his own release were hard and deep. He buried his face in her shoulder to resist shouting out loud and waking the whole house.

Tess could feel him pulse within her and besides the act itself, she found it so amazing. Then he went slack and brought his full weight down on her with a muffled moan into her shoulder. Actually she was surprised she noticed he did that because she swore she lost her own sight for a moment. Also with his weight on her, she could barely take a breath but loved the feeling so much, she didn't say anything. Finally he lifted his head and looked down at her. He never said anything, but there was an odd warmth in his eyes before he bent his head and kissed her tenderly.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"I think so."

"Wait until tomorrow honey. You'll be sore." He shifted and rolled against the back of the sofa pulling her against him, "so you can breathe."

She smiled, "Thanks."

He just stared at her for a moment and noticed that her cheeks started to flush. "Don't be ashamed. It's a natural act between a man and a woman Tess."

"It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"I—well, it just felt so good." She said in complete awe.

He chuckled, "As I said before, you do wonders for my ego."

"Is it always like that?"

"No, it gets better. There's different positions, different kinds of foreplay. I would have taught you a little more, but I was too desperate to get close to you." He said pushing a lock of hair off her cheek so he could run his fingers down it affectionately. Tess never looked so beautiful to him as she did at

that moment. Not another woman in his life could measure up to her and the fact that she just gave herself to him expounded that feeling. He was her first and it made him feel incredibly privileged and possessive. He knew right there that if Tom even looked at her sideways he was going to throttle him. As far as he was concerned she was his. Making love to her just blew his mind. Somehow being emotionally involved made the act more incredible than he'd ever thought possible. He hadn't been that impatient since he was a lusty teenager and in the process he'd hurt her. Hell, he was still wearing his damn pants. They may have been halfway down his ass cheeks, but he still had them on. He couldn't help but grin.

"What?"

"I think you're driving me insane."

"Is that right?" she said hearing the amusement in his voice, "Well, at least I know now that I'm not the only one."

He took a deep breath knowing he was going to disappoint her as much as him with his next words, "Okay honey, let's go up to bed, I don't think you'll be happy to be found by both my brothers in the morning."

"Oh heaven, I didn't even think about that. You had me so worked up."

"Come on." He said getting up with a reluctant groan and pulling his slacks back up his hips. It must've been one of the hardest things he ever had to do, leave her warm soft flesh like that.

Tess was completely embarrassed at getting up and dressing in front of him, even though he acted as if it were as natural as breathing. This was something she wasn't used to at all. Reluctantly she sat up and reached for her clothes from the mound on the floor. As she started to put them on she realized that it seemed awfully quiet in the room. Glancing up she stilled, Jacob was just standing there with an arrogant grin on his face

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and his hands folded across his bare chest as he watched her. “Jacob!”

“You have to admit, the view is exquisite.” He said huskily as she blushed scarlet all the way down to her breasts. “Maybe delicious.”

She quickly pulled her shirt over her head doing her best to ignore him. She finished dressing and was surprised when he pulled her back into his arms for another long deep kiss.

“Now you go first and I’ll wait twenty minutes before I leave.”

“Okay.” She managed a smile, “thanks Jacob.”

“I should be thanking you.” He said deeply.

She flushed as he released her. She gave him a final look over her shoulder before she left the room.

After she left, Jacob sat down on the sofa that they had made love on only moments ago and ran his hand through his hair, “what the hell are you doing Jacob.” He said to himself. It wasn’t that he didn’t want her, he did. However, he didn’t mean to take her on the couch like that. Tess of all people deserved respect but he was so bloody hot for her that he forgot his head. The last time he did that, he was sixteen and made love to his high school girlfriend on her mother’s couch while she was upstairs asleep. Problem was the living room had no door and it was in the middle of the house. He chuckled gathered up his clothes and headed upstairs to bed pausing outside her door for a moment. He would give anything to crawl into her bed next to that luscious body of hers but he couldn’t embarrass her anymore. Instead he went to his room and had a shower. That night for the first time in months, he slept like a newborn babe.

CHAPTER TEN

The next morning Tess realized that Jacob was right on the money. She was very sore. Even her breasts were sore and later when she looked at herself in the mirror there was an imprint of a large hand still visible on one. If he was rough with her, she didn't remember it at all. She actually smiled to herself. Nothing could have prepared her for how amazing that was. Finally she got to be with him and if it was the only time, it was worth it for the rest of her life. She was utterly in love with Jacob. Just thinking about last night caused heat to flush through her pelvis.

She stood up smiling and pushed her long hair over her shoulders. Maybe a shower would ease her sore muscles. As soon as she stood up, she moaned. Good lord she was sore everywhere. It didn't seem like she'd run a marathon last night, but it certainly felt like it now. At least she confirmed something. He *was* an amazing lover.

When she made her way downstairs the three men were just seating themselves for breakfast. Colt jumped up and pulled the chair out for her and this time Jacob said grace. She was a little disappointed that he didn't say much to her except 'good morning' but really, what should she expect. It wasn't like he could bend her over his arm and give her one of those organ melting kisses that he showed her last night without letting the other two know what they'd been up to, so she returned the polite greeting and tried her best not to blush as images returned from the previous night.

For the rest of her breakfast she kept her eyes to her plate and only spoke when one of the men talked.

Jacob tossed his napkin on his plate and stood up taking Tess's hand, "Come see me out." He said pulling her out of her chair not giving her a choice. It was driving him insane not being able to touch her. All through breakfast he couldn't get the

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images out of his mind from the night before and if he thought he'd finally satisfied himself by making love to her, the erection he felt now told him something different.

He was glad to see that she followed him without protest. More and more he found himself a little demanding about her.

Once out at the truck he turned, and pulled her into his embrace cutting her gasp off with his mouth.

After a full five minutes and his own satisfaction of tasting those enticing lips of hers he lifted his head loving the dazed look in her eyes, "I couldn't wait to touch you. It was driving me "crazy."

She grinned, "Me too."

"You should consider getting your own apartment Tess. That way we could spend more time together at night."

"It would still be obvious Jacob."

"Maybe but at least we could make all the noise we want." That got a blush out of her. He chuckled and took her hand pressing something in it.

"What's this."

"A credit card."

She gave him a look of shock before trying to hand it back to him, "I don't need a credit card."

"I want you to go and buy the sexiest dress you can find for the dance this weekend and spare no expense."

"Jacob, I can't do that." She said trying once more to give him his card back, "It looks like I'm a kept woman."

"You're my woman, and I want you to look your best for this event."

"I have money of my own." She said getting more and more offended. "Is this what you do for other women?"

His gaze narrowed, "No. And the type of dress I want you to wear is beyond your price range. I assure you I can afford it."

She placed her hands on her hips, "I'm not a Lindsay Scott."

I won't be bought and can't you see how insulting this is?"

"No Tess, you're not Lindsay. I never said you were, but take the damn card and buy an expensive dress." He said pushing her hand containing his card back toward her.

She released a frustrated breath, "Look, if you can't accept me the way I look in the clothes I can afford—take someone else."

"Don't temp me." He gritted back.

She snapped her mouth shut and just stared at him. Her chest clenched at the thought of him with another woman especially what they shared the night before. It was her fault for pushing him, "Jacob—"

"Hey—" he said softly letting the frustration drain out of him seeing the hurt enter her expression, "—I wouldn't." he reached up and cupped her cheek, "I'm sorry honey."

Tess nodded, "I was not very nice myself."

"This is new to me also. I find myself unbalanced by the whole thing so you're not alone. Come here." He said gathering her in his arms. "Don't think for one moment that last night meant any less to me. Okay?"

"You know me so well." She said burying her face in his thick chest.

"I just know how'd I feel if the roles were reversed." He bent and kissed the top of her head, "You've got to let me go, I'm already late."

She smiled and released him.

"Go buy a dress." He said sternly, "Something that'll make my toes curl."

She flushed, "You certainly have a way with words."

"You have no idea." He added with a heated appraisal, but I'll introduce you to that another night."

"Oh lord." She flushed further.

"Now today, get a dress." He repeated.

She stared down at the card, "It just doesn't seem right."

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"You can make it up to me later. I'll take payment out of your body if you like." He said teasingly.

"Jacob, behave yourself." She said in wide-eyed shock.

He planted a brief kiss on her mouth and gave her a sinful smile before he got in the truck and drove away.

Her father took her home after work on the end of the fifth day home and she was disappointed that she hadn't seen Jacob at all during those last two days. She knew he was playing catch up at the clinic, but at least he phoned her apologizing for his absence. It only made her miss him more.

However, she'd be sleeping in her own bed tonight. She missed it not that the one at the Hartley's wasn't comfortable, it just wasn't hers.

At least she hadn't had those drugs in a few days. Jacob gave her pills after that nightmare she had in the hospital. Now she was down to just plain Tylenol for the discomfort and was quite happy about that. It still felt a little odd walking but at least she wasn't unsteady. She even insisted on carrying her suitcase to her room despite her father's protests.

Friday afternoon she finally gave in and drove to town to buy a dress. She'd been putting it off for the past few days because she felt guilty about taking Jacob's money. Unfortunately even with the nonexistent spending limit she still spent all afternoon trying on dresses not satisfied with any of them. Although she didn't mind skirts, like the little tan one she wore now, she wasn't much of a dress person. Thankfully the sales lady saw that she was in dire need.

"I think I have just the thing for you." She said before disappearing through the back of the shop and reappearing with a gorgeous silver gown.

"Oh that's beautiful!"

"It's our fall collection, and I haven't tagged them yet, but I think it'll suit you perfectly."

She was right. It was a classy number that showed Tess's finest attributes. Most importantly it was downright sexy and she never felt sexy before in her life until she tried it on. She couldn't help the smile of discovery that appeared on her face.

"It suits you." Said the woman brightening when Tess came out of the dressing room, "the man you're doing this for will propose when he sees you in that."

Tess's eyes widened, "Not this man."

She smiled, "Don't be too sure." She said, "Now is this cash or charge."

Tess placed the dress in the truck and looked at her watch. The clinic would be closing in the next few minutes and she knew Jacob probably would be late again and not eat. So she walked across the street to the deli with the intentions of bringing him supper. That way she could spend a few moments with him before she went home.

Rita was delighted to see her and it looked like she was just getting ready to leave. "Tess!" she gave her a genuine hug, "My goodness honey, you look terrific. It's like you weren't even on death's door a few weeks ago."

"It wasn't that bad."

"That's not what Jacob said. I think he aged a decade he was so worried about you." That made her flush. "Now don't you worry. You're secret is still safe with me."

"I brought Jacob supper. Is he with a patient?" she said holding up the paper bag containing a freshly made sandwich.

"That's so sweet. He needs a little coddling because he's been working himself to death lately." She nodded toward the hall where his office and the exam rooms were, "Doctor Saunders left an hour ago along with the last patient. He'll be glad to see you."

"Thanks Rita." She said giving the older woman a smile.

"I'll lock the door this time." She said, "See you later honey."

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Tess went down the hall and saw Jacob bent over a patients file scribbling away. It was almost a full minute before he noticed her. Her heart jumped when he grinned at seeing her.

“What a delicious surprise!” he said standing up and coming around the desk as she stepped in his office.

“Funny you should say that. I brought you something to eat.”

“Great.” He said taking the offered bag and setting it on his desk absently, “I’m really hungry.” He grabbed her about the waist. “But not for food.”

“What?—Here?”

“Anywhere.” He said crushing her mouth under his.

One thing she could say about Jacob is that he was a master at getting her clothes off without her knowledge. Not only that, he already knew her body just from being together once before. He was skilled in memorizing everything that made her moan and used it so much that she was practically shouting. He easily lifted her onto the exam table he had in his office and before she could say anything his head was between her thighs. At first she was in shock at the intimacy but then when he started doing these amazing things with his tongue she gripped his hair and started making noises that were completely foreign to her. Before long she was arched off the table sobbing when she felt his fingers inside her while his mouth continued to pleasure her.

Stars exploded inside her skull when she climaxed, but he didn’t let her rest. With a deep growl he stood up, pulled her toward him and thrust into her with his own shout of pleasure and within seconds her voice was joining him again. Somehow he’d managed to get both of her legs in front of him with her ankles by his ears as he proved why he was such a masterful lover. She was so sensitive from her first release that her second was way more intense. Tears sprang to her eyes as she shuddered and trembled followed by his own shout of release.

He came down on her with the last drop draining out of him and kissed her. Then he raised his head and gave her a drop dead gorgeous grin, "Fuck me, I'm completely spent."

Tess burst into laughter. Not once in her life had she ever heard him swear like that. Yet for some reason she found it incredibly sexy. Maybe it was because of the reference it was used in. Regardless, it didn't bother her in the least.

"I always knew you were pliable." He added noting where her limbs were.

This time Tess blushed.

He bent his head and kissed her again while moving enough to release her legs.

Tess didn't have the strength to breathe let alone move so she didn't know where he'd got it from. However, if his body was any testament to his stamina, he could probably do this all night.

"Is it shameful to have dessert before supper?" He asked while his eyes searched hers.

"You're shameful Jacob. I had no idea that two people were capable—" she started flushing again unable to finish. He gave her another sinful grin.

"Oh honey you have no idea." He finally stood erect and pulled her up so he was still standing between her thighs and she noticed he was still inside her. To make her realize it he pulled her hips toward his causing her to gasp. "I'm still rock hard for you and you'd think that after what we just did, I'd be laid up for a week."

"Oh Gosh." She burst unable to get rid of the blush.

"are you sore."

"No." she said shyly.

"Good." He said adjusting his hips ever so slightly causing her to gasp and tilt her head back with all evidence of her bashfulness wiped clean. Maybe he wasn't spent after all. He bent her back over his arm and took one of her breasts in his

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mouth while beginning the slow torturous rhythm meant to drive her wild. And it did.

Jacob already knew he was in love with her. It had taken him the past few days to reflect heavily on how he had been so distracted, but finally after having her, all of her, made him realize it. Only he didn't like the vulnerability he felt around her. He started staying away from the ranch because of it. He made excuses that he had to work, but it was nothing that couldn't be caught up over the next few weeks. Then she showed up and something inside him flared. Now, as he watched her climax for the third time his arms, he knew he was in deep trouble.

She was a wildcat to make love to making her completely compatible to him because his appetite was just as lusty. He thought he might have introduced her to some things to early in their intimate relationship, but she took it with vigour and her shouts of pleasure let him know that she enjoyed it as much as him. You'd never know that she was the shy little virgin only a few days ago. She acted like she'd been at it for years with him. He knew he could try anything with her and she'd let him. This just proved it. Her skin was slick with perspiration as was his and finally when he felt himself come deep within her, he realized that this wasn't enough. It never would be. He could never get enough of her and quite frankly, it was driving him insane. Even being in the same room with her and not being able to touch her was almost painful.

Tess went to bed without supper and slept like a rock until morning. When she did finally get up, she was so darn sore, her teeth even hurt. Jacob had sucked the last drop of energy out of her until she could hardly have enough to drive home. A short laugh escaped her knowing she didn't mind it at all! Who knew that being with a man, with Jacob, could draw such things out of her, that she completely forgot herself. Did all couples make love

like that? Was it normal for a man to have the stamina of a stallion and draw such desire out of a woman? She told him she wasn't sore, but she certainly was now. Her insides flushed warm thinking of the things he did to her. She read books on the subject but absolutely nothing she read could have described that. Then there was the noises she made! Oh lord, she was so loud. Not that he was quiet, but thank God the Clinic was locked up tight. Everything he'd done to her and everything he'd shown her so far only made her more curious to what else he would show her. It actually made her eager to learn more, but only from Jacob because she loved him.

She glanced at the time. She'd made a hair appointment in town yesterday after she'd bought her dress so she'd look her best for tonight.

Pulling on faded jeans and a pink blouse she quickly brushed her hair before leaving the house.

At the same time Jacob was in town running some errands before the dance. He had to pick up his suit from the dry cleaners and ended up running into David so they stood by the truck and talked when he saw Tess. She was just getting out of her own truck and going into the salon. He felt himself smile. Obviously she was getting done up for him. However, David noticed too.

"I swear Jacob, if she wasn't my patient, I would have asked her out. She has this perfect body that any man would love to take his time and corrupt."

"David." Jacob said with barely contained anger drawing the other man's gaze. Once he got it he continued, "I'm going to let that slide this once because you didn't know, but just so you know Tess and I have been seeing each other."

"I thought you were dating Lindsay Scott?" the other man said in complete surprise.

"I never really dated Lindsay." He answered while nodding

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toward the salon, "But I definitely am dating Tess."

"Ah hell." David said, "I didn't mean to offend you. Tess is a peach and you have to admit its hard being professional around a woman like that."

Jacob knew all too well what David meant having ravished her completely on his exam table in his office the day before. Something he never thought he'd do because mixing pleasure with his profession was not in his nature. At least it wasn't. Now he knew he couldn't look at the bloody thing without getting an erection. He never treated patients in his office anyway and come Monday he'll have to have it removed from there or he'd never get any work done. "Now you know." He added.

"So," David said studying his friend's expression, "Is this serious?"

"Meaning?" he raised his brows in question.

"Meaning—" he smirked, "That if you don't see anything long term with her, I have a chance."

"You really want to lose your teeth, don't' you?" he said angrily.

That made him laugh, "Sorry, Jacob I couldn't help it. I've never seen you so possessive over a woman, but I guess you have good reason. I probably would have asked her out years ago if you three weren't always hanging in her shadow."

After David left he contemplated the whole event. Besides Tom, he thought he was the only one that saw her as a desirable, sexy woman, when he should have known better. Could it be that he and his brothers did cast a protective shield around her and that's why the woman never dated anyone? After all Colt did have a reputation for fighting and Lance was a damn good lawyer so it was possible that men stayed away from her out of fear of them. He never even considered that. This new awareness wasn't good news at all. Now he had the whole town to be jealous of, not just Tom and David. What the hell was wrong

with him? He was going to suspect every male at the dance tonight looking at her like he looked at her.

He got back in the truck and slammed the door to harshly to match his darkening mood. If he hadn't known what she felt and tasted like he might not be so jealous. *Hell, this wasn't jealousy*, he thought, *this was bordering on obsession*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"You look beautiful."

"Thanks dad." Tess said twirling in front of him.

"Jacob's going to have his socks knocked off."

"That's my whole purpose." She admitted with a smile.

"Good girl." He chuckled. Then he became serious, "Are you happy—with Jacob I mean?"

"Of course." She said seeing his concern, "Dad don't worry about me. I'm old enough to know that I may get my heart broken." She kissed his cheek. "I need to grow up sometime, but I wouldn't trade this time for anything in the world even if it didn't work out."

"Okay." He said just as a knock sounded at the front door.

"It's Jacob." She said.

"I'll go get the door, you take your time coming out. The suspense will just add to your image." He said grinning.

Tess did as he said and quickly checked her appearance before making her way out to the foyer. If she thought that she would throw him for a loop, he was more handsome than she though he could possibly be. He wore a black suit with a white shirt sporting high mandarin collar and black Stetson. Then he grinned with approval when he saw her and her legs nearly gave out.

Jacob let out a long slow whistle as Chuck suddenly made himself scarce not able to hide his smile. "Wow. Heaven help

me.”

“Stop it.” She murmured approaching him, “you’re a force to be reckoned with Jacob. I’ll be the envy of every woman tonight.”

“Is that right.” He said bending to kiss her. “You are absolutely beautiful.”

She flushed, “thanks.”

“We’d better go, or I’m going to haul you back to your room, father or not.”

She slapped her hand over his mouth causing him to chuckle through it, “Jacob!” she whispered harshly.

He reached up and removed it, kissed her palm and threaded his fingers through hers, “You have to be insane honey, to think that people won’t know that I haven’t touched you. Look at you. A priest would sin.”

She felt her cheeks go scarlet. “That’s not true.” She mumbled.

“Like hell it isn’t. I near busted out David’s teeth today for what he said about you.”

“What?” she said shocked, “He’s a doctor.”

“I know that, but it doesn’t mean he’s not a man.”

“Jacob, you shouldn’t have told me that. I mean—he’s seen me—oh gosh I’m so embarrassed.” She said burying her face in her other hand.

“He’s not your doctor anymore. I am. No one is going to see you naked except for me from now on.” He said tersely, “Do you got that?”

She lifted her eyes to his. He was deadly serious. Despite her embarrassment she smiled, reached up and caressed his jaw with her hand. She loved this side of him. Never in her life had she ever seen him possessive about a woman and that meant that she meant something to him. She could just about cry at that realization.

“Tess.” He said in the same strict tone trying to ignore how that simple gesture made him feel. Then she smiled and he felt his chest tighten.

“I heard you Jacob.” She finally said.

He groaned and kissed her again, “You’re driving me crazy woman.”

“Good.” She said, “Because I’ve been dealing with it for years on my own.”

“If this is any indication, I don’t know how you did it. I wanted to publically physically attack another man today because what he said about you. A man, I might add, that I’ve known since high school.”

This made her laugh.

“Yeah honey, you soak it up, because if you as much as dance with another man tonight, I might tear his limbs off. Now let’s go before I change my mind about dragging you to your room.”

The dance hall was packed and when Jacob and Tess walked in she felt like every pair of eyes were on them. Jacob didn’t act as if he noticed so maybe she imagined it. However, as they made their way to his two brothers who were saving their seats, she noticed that many eyes followed them.

“I feel like I’m on display.” She said to him.

“Get used to it Tess, you’re the most beautiful woman here tonight.” He said bending down to speak into her ear.

That statement nearly made her cry. Jacob had been so wonderful to her over the past few days that she knew she was in way over her head. Lance and Colt both stood and complimented her before Jacob pulled out her chair for her, then sat next to her.

Lance introduced their dates, Lizette was a beautiful ebony haired blue eyed woman who’s father had just purchased the hardware store in town. Colt’s date actually looked like a

stripper and knowing Colt she probably was. She had bleach blond hair and a rather unnaturally large bosom. Any minute she expected her to get on the table and she was sure by the way she was sitting next to Colt that her hand was on his crotch. From the way he was grinning she didn't doubt it. *Good lord*, she thought, *he was shameless*. Her thoughts about the woman being a stripper was confirmed when Colt introduced her. She near laughed when he said her name, Cherry. However, she was nice and if that's the type of woman Colt wanted who was she to judge? Besides the thoughts going through her mind about the gorgeous man sitting next to her were probably more sinful than Cherry's.

They didn't stay seated long after the introductions because Jacob dragged her up onto the dance floor. She'd danced with him before at events much like this when she would accompany the brothers on some occasions but he never held her the way he did now. His hand pressed against her lower back bringing her hips in close contact with his and his muscular legs. In all she found herself heating up over it. She always knew he was a good dancer, but he was practically seducing her on the dance floor.

"Stop it." She murmured causing him to give a deep sexy chuckle.

"You wouldn't ask me to do that if you knew how you affected me.

"I can feel how I affect you." She said with a blush in her voice causing him to laugh again. In fact she'd been feeling it push against her belly for the past five minutes.

"Jacob, you're driving me crazy." She groaned.

"You do know," he said, "that we're leaving early, so I can have you to myself for a bit before my family comes home."

"You're insatiable."

"Only with you." He said pulling her tight against him again.

Was that true? Jacob was loaded with sex appeal and for

him to say something like that didn't seem possible. For some reason she thought he was always so voracious. She couldn't stop the thrill that went through her over his confession.

After the dance ended she excused herself to go to the ladies room to freshen up. She was touching up her makeup in the mirror when no other than Lindsay came out of one of the stalls.

She approached Tess and turned around to lean against the counter so she could look down at her.

Tess stopped and stared back but never said anything.

"Well if it isn't the little tart."

"Excuse me?" Tess said setback by the woman's venom.

Lindsay gave her an icy smile, "You heard me little girl. If you think you can hang on to him with that young body of yours, you're out of your mind. I know what Jacob likes." She said with a toss of her head, "I've been all over that man."

Tess's mouth fell open.

"So have you I see." Lindsay narrowed her gaze, "But remember this. If an experienced woman like me can't hold on to him, what makes you think you can. Sooner or later he'll grow bored of you and come back to me."

"You don't know him very well." Tess finally heard herself say but her confidence was failing and Lindsay knew it.

"That's what you think. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve." She said giving her a malicious smile before leaving.

Tess took a few more minutes to compose herself. Never had she run into such a spiteful person. She took time to go over the things that Jacob had been saying to her over the past week. Jacob didn't say things like that unless he meant them. Determined that Lindsay wasn't going to ruin her night, she took a deep breath and went back out to the crowd.

It only took her a few seconds to realize that her self-talk had been in vain. Jacob was dancing with Lindsay and he was holding her like he held her only moments ago. Only Lindsay

had buried her face in his neck.

Was it physically possible to have her heart fall into her stomach? She made her way back to their table but it was empty. Lance and Colt were both on the dance floor with their dates. She sat down with her back to Lindsay and Jacob. She couldn't bear to watch them. Lindsay seemed to know exactly what she was doing like she said she did. She had seen the woman's hands playing with Jacob's hair as he turned her around on the floor. Tess knew she couldn't measure up to the woman. She was just as good at seduction as Jacob was. Brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear she reached for the glass of wine on the table and downed in a single gulp.

About fifteen minutes later Lance sat down and gave her an odd look. Maybe it was because she was on her third glass of wine and refused to turn around to see Jacob and Lindsay.

"Tess." He said in that big brother tone he used often on her when she was doing something silly and reckless.

"It's only my third." She said knowing exactly what he was referring to.

"And how many drinks did you have that night you went out with Tom."

Four, maybe, she thought. She released a heavy breath finally getting his point and set the glass down while staring at him. If it was possible a man could make her feel guilty from just a look, Lance was that man. No wonder he was good at his job, "I'm fine and don't you brothers keep secrets, geesh."

"No you're not." He said, "And not where you're concerned honey. Now cheer up."

"Where's Lizette?"

"Ladies room—quit changing the subject."

She lifted her chin, "I'll stop—okay?" she said referring to the wine. "Lizette's very pretty Lance." She continued.

"We're just friends." He said still studying her expression. It

was true. Lizette was a sweetheart, but he didn't feel an attraction to her. Maybe it was the fact that she was hung up on another man and he could take her out without worrying about her expecting something in return. Unlike his brothers, Lance kept his love life out of his home town. Colt and Jacob created most of the entertainment with their escapades around town and he wasn't about to do the same.

"Really?" Lance had those handsome Hartley looks, but he was quieter than the other two. He also never seemed to date women around town although she knew he travelled quite a bit so he must have women elsewhere.

"Honestly." He answered, "She's got a thing for Dutch Rush."

"The ex-hockey player?" Tess knew of him and she always thought he was scary. He stood at least six foot five and probably had a good fifty pounds on Jacob who was no small fry. He was a nice looking man with dirty blonde hair but his eyes were unsettling. They were a pale icy blue and when he set them on you, it sent a shiver up your spine. He'd lived hard. It was written all over him. She'd heard rumours that his father was an alcoholic and used to beat him when he was younger, but his father had died last year and Dutch had blown out his knees playing hockey. He came back home to take over his father's cattle ranch, but it wasn't as if he needed to, he had made millions as a professional NHL player. However, the Hartleys were wealthy too, yet they still worked very hard. Some people seem happy doing such things.

"The very one." Said Lance.

"She sure is pretty and sweet."

"Yes, but we *are* just friends." He repeated with a raised brow, "I swear."

"Well, since her family is new to town, it's nice to see that she has a friend." She heard herself say while sinking back into

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her chair thinking of Jacob and Lindsay but still refusing to turn around and look at them. She had proclaimed that she knew her way around Jacob's body, and as if to rub salt in the wound, she was clinging to him on the dance floor playing with his hair.

"Jacob's nuts about you Tess. Don't let Lindsay bother you." He said sensing her mood change.

She turned her head away to stop the tears from falling.

Lance ground his teeth together and looked over his head to see Jacob talking to Colton while Lindsay clung to him like wet paint. A moment later he left with the woman still gripping him like her life depended on it. He had a good mind to go after him, but he couldn't just leave Tess. She was upset. That whole display must've looked terrible and he couldn't blame her.

"Hey." He said drawing her attention back, "Dance with me."

She paused for a moment before she nodded and accepted his hand thinking that Lance was a very nice man.

An hour had passed and Tess swallowed hard. Colt had told her that Jacob was just taking Lindsay home, but he never came back. Maybe Lindsay was right and she did know her way around Jacob. During that time she was thankful Tom had joined them and he had occupied her attention with constant flattery. He didn't bring a date because he said it left him open to invitations there which made her laugh. He had barely sat down when some woman or another would ask him to dance. He told the last one that he needed a rain check because he was tired. Tess even danced with him twice after his constant prodding and she was glad she did, because he made her laugh despite how horrible she was feeling.

"Tom," Colt said, "Can you take Tess home?" He could see that she was having a miserable time and several people had already started talking about her being abandoned by Jacob. He made a mental note to tear into his brother's hide later. This

must've been very hard on her, yet she did her best to keep her chin up.

Tess turned and looked at Colt.

"You don't want to stay, do you?"

She shook her head.

"I'd take you but Cherry's having too much fun." He squeezed her hand, "And I think you've done enough to put on a fake front."

Tess managed to smile thinking Cherry could have fun at a chess match if she wanted to. "Thanks Colt."

"I don't mind." Tom said standing up and taking her hand. "I think I'm done anyway. I have a pocket full of phone numbers."

"You're a dog." Said Tess, finding her humour again, if only briefly.

"I know it." He teased.

Colt watched her leave wanting to thrash his older brother. He'd speak to him tomorrow. Tonight he had plans. Cherry had been less than subtle on getting him in bed, and he would oblige her.

An hour later Tess was crawling into her bed after practically tearing the expensive dress off of her body knowing it did her no good where Jacob was concerned. Her father had retired earlier and she was thankful because she couldn't face him. She said she could handle a broken heart, but she was so wrong. It was horrible the images going through her mind of Lindsay and Jacob together. It's the only conclusion she could draw with him being gone that long. It made her think of the first night they made love when he told her that Lindsay had shown up at his clinic. What if something happened then? She shook her head, It couldn't have or he couldn't have made love to her—could he? *Of course he could, the man had the stamina of a Greek warrior* she thought remembering their second time together in his

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office. It was almost three hours later when she first showed to when she finally left.

This time Tess did start crying and she couldn't stop the tears. She cried herself to sleep for the first time since her mother had died.

Jacob hung up the phone after receiving the answering machine for the tenth time. He shouldn't have left Tess, but he really didn't expect to be gone so long. Lindsay was inconsolable and causing a scene, so he couldn't just walk away. Somehow he did end up walking her to her apartment because she clung to him when he opened the door and helped her out of the truck. Once inside she tried to kiss him and actually got the belt of his slacks undone. He rejected her of course and untangled her arms from his neck causing her to start sobbing again. He didn't realize that he'd hurt her. He didn't mean to, but they had an understanding and Lindsay seemed fine with it at the time. Neither one of them were even monogamous. Part of him felt guilty which resulted in him staying long enough to make sure she had calmed down before he left. Unfortunately he'd lost track of time and in the process left Tess at the dance for over an hour and a half without him. It was inexcusable and he knew he screwed up.

When he got back to the dance, he found out Tess had left with Tom and he saw red. Then he looked at the time and discovered he'd been gone for over an hour and cursed.

Of course it wouldn't go across well with her. He'd taken Tess to the dance and left with Lindsay. The scowls on both of his brother's expressions let him know that. At the time, he didn't think twice about it. Tess would have understood, wouldn't she? He only had eyes for her. Now, however, running the events back over in his mind, it looked bad, very bad. Tess was young and naïve about things like that and he didn't give her

any promises or even told her how he felt so she had absolutely nothing to go by.

Cursing, he turned away and headed to the front door. He'd drive over to Chuck's and apologize to Tess in person. The guilt was eating him up. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was hurt her again. He'd broken the silent promise he made to her when she was in the hospital in New York, not to hurt like he did when he sent her away. Hopefully she would forgive him—again. He had handled this whole thing with Tess wrong and for a man who never had a problem dealing with women, it just let him know how much he really cared for her.

Chuck came out of the house just as Jacob was pulling up in front.

"She doesn't want to see you Jacob." Chuck said as Jacob was getting out of the truck.

He stopped, while looking at the older man. He never even considered that Tess wouldn't want to see him, "Why not?"

He shook his head, "Do you have any idea of the damage you caused?"

"I have an idea—yes." He said honestly, "I came to apologize."

Chuck studied him for a moment. He seemed sincere. However, Tess was devastated and he needed to protect her. He was clueless to what had happened this morning when he saw her red puffy eyes over breakfast. She wouldn't talk to him, but he found out later what had happened. "Let me tell you something. Imagine my surprise when I went to have coffee this morning at the diner, and I hear that my daughter was abandoned at the dance by her current beau because he couldn't resist the wiles of Lindsay Scott."

Ah hell, he thought wincing and shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans, "It wasn't like that."

"It sure as hell seemed like it." Chuck said allowing his ire to

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rise, something that never happened, but this was Tess. She was a spitting image of her mother all the way down to her sweet disposition and she was hurting, badly. "I encouraged her with you, you know? I realize now I've made a mistake but she loved you and I thought she'd be good for you Jacob, however, all she got was a broken heart and now she's the brunt of town gossip."

Jacob hardly heard anything past she loved you. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." Chuck said, "Now you stay away from Tess. This is harder on her than you think it is. If you so much as come around here without her say so, I'll quit and move out of state, and good luck on finding another Veterinarian on such short notice."

"I didn't sleep with Lindsay." Jacob felt the need to tell him.

"I know you didn't." Chuck said without hesitation surprising Jacob completely, "give me a break Jacob, I'm not stupid. Lindsay has nothing on my little girl."

"You got that right."

"However, you listen to what I've told you. Stay away from her until she figures things out." Chuck never thought he was a good actor until that moment. He lied straight faced to Jacob about everything except the rumour mills. Tess was heartbroken and would have loved to have Jacob apologize because she would have forgiven him in a heartbeat, however, he was older and wiser and Jacob needed to realize how he felt about Tess. Some time apart would do them both good especially Jacob. Tess was special, and the man who was meant for her should be crawling on his hands and knees begging for forgiveness. Jacob wasn't there quite yet. He was thankful that Tess was out back in the garden all morning and hadn't heard the phone ring. Chuck had actually erased the two messages that Jacob left and turned the ringer off so Tess wouldn't know. He sure hoped to hell that some good would come out of his interference.

Jacob looked past him to the house then after a moment he nodded. "You'll tell her to call me when she feels up to it?"

"I will."

Two weeks had passed and Tess wasn't feeling any better. If anything she felt worse and worse as time passed. Obviously Jacob had gone back to Lindsay or he would have phoned her or at least come by to see how she was. At least she stopped crying herself to sleep at night and thankfully she had her father, who was very supportive. He even offered to shoot Jacob for her, although, he explained, that would mean he'd be out of a job and probably end up in jail leaving her all alone. It actually made her laugh, something she didn't do since that night of the dance. In fact she hadn't even left the house so when her father told her to get dressed up so they could go for lunch together in town she decided that would be a good idea.

After lunch she felt better but she noticed that some people that came into the diner looked at her with sympathy and she knew exactly what it was about. Obviously it had gotten around that Jacob left her at the dance for another woman. "Can we get out of here." She asked her father feeling more and more on display.

He knew why seeing the same looks from the regulars at the diner and nodded, "Okay honey."

She started to get in the truck when she heard her name. Turning around she saw Colton jog across the street and immediately her senses prickled up looking around to see if Jacob was with him. He wasn't.

"Hey." He said, stepping up onto the curb around the front of the suburban to talk to her, "I haven't seen you forever, are you ignoring us?"

"No, of course not." She exclaimed surprised he would even suggest such a thing.

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"Then where have you been. Usually you pop over a few times a week. I haven't seen you since the dance."

"Oh I've been staying at home pulling the veggies out of the garden."

He narrowed his gaze suspiciously, "You need to talk to Jacob Tess. This is getting—" he glanced past her for a moment as Chuck was making a gesture to get him to shut up.

"Getting what?" she asked curious and cast a glance over her shoulder to her father who seemed to be waving at someone across the street.

"Nothing." Colt said returning his attention to her, "We just miss you."

"you do and maybe Lance does, but Jacob doesn't seem to care at all. Lindsay was right."

"Right?" this time it was her father.

"When did you speak to Lindsay?" Colt asked.

She shrugged.

"Tess." He said in a voice that was a little sterner.

"She just said some things to me. I shouldn't listen, but—"

"When was this?"

"Right before Jacob left with her at the dance." She admitted.

"He did come back Tess and was looking for you." he said looking carefully at her. It looked as though she lost weight and the light that she always seemed to emit when she was around seemed gone. "Are you all right?"

Her eyes met his, "I'm fine."

"Jacob doesn't think of her that way." He said finally getting a picture of what was going on.

"I don't know that colt. It's been two weeks and you'd think that if he cared about me he would have at least explained, but he didn't. he didn't call, nothing." She felt hot tears well up in her eyes. "I can't sleep, think, or do anything without him invading

my thoughts. It's horrible!" she wretched. So much for not crying anymore.

"Whoa honey," he said gathering her in his arms and casting her father an angry look. Obviously he interfered because Jacob was just as lovesick and he knew for a fact that he came over to her place the next day to apologize after not being able to get her on the phone.

He didn't know what occurred that day but when he returned he looked as if his favourite dog was run over. Since then Jacob had been keeping his distance from all of them. He would come home from work and hold up in the study before he went to bed. Maria started taking trays of food in there because he wasn't eating with the rest of them. He knew if he did that he and Lance would probe him for information and he was right. Yet from the look on Chuck's face a moment ago, he didn't know what Lindsay had said and how hurt Tess was over the whole thing. It obviously looked like Jacob had gone back to her, but what she didn't know is Lindsay was dating some banker and Jacob was beyond miserable. If Tess thought she looked terrible, Jacob had her beat. "don't cry okay. Things have a way of working out. Remember what I said about God not giving us a choice on who we love?"

"I hate him." She sobbed.

He actually found himself smiling at that. At least she still had some spunk despite how she looked. Not only that if she felt that strongly it meant she still cared about him. "Does Jake know what Lindsay did?"

"I'm not telling him—" she paused and gave him a firm look, "—and neither are you. I'll look like some jealous teenager. It's nothing I can't handle."

"If he knew, he probably wouldn't have taken her home."

"She was very convincing." Said Tess remembering the way she clung to him.

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“Yeah, I saw that too.” He said remembering how the woman practically threw herself at Jacob while weeping. She was causing a scene and although she didn’t seem to care as long as she got what she wanted, Jacob felt sorry for her. “Just so you know, there was no way he would have touched her.”

“You don’t know that Colt.”

“I do. I know Jacob, and the way he looks at you says a lot. Don’t listen to the gossip.”

She lifted her eyes to him, ‘I don’t care about the gossip. It had nothing to do with this. If he actually came and told me that nothing happened, I would believe him. Jacob would never lie to me.” She swallowed heavily, “But he didn’t, so I know something happened. Something had to have because he couldn’t face me.”

“maybe you should talk to Jacob Tess. I don’t think he’s as settled as you think about this whole thing.” She rapidly shook her head.

“I can’t possibly talk to him. I can’t face him at all knowing that he—with her—“ she couldn’t finish, “—he would have come and seen me if I meant something to him—“

“Tess.” Her father finally interrupted, not able to take the guilt anymore. “He did.”

She whirled around, “What?”

“Honey, you were so hurt. I felt that Jacob needed a bit of a lesson where you were concerned. Unfortunately I expected him to fight a little more for you. I told him to stay away until you contacted him. However I didn’t know that Lindsay said things to you and how you would take his whole absence because of it.”

“Oh dad, you didn’t!”

“He called you a dozen times the next morning and came by the house when you didn’t answer. I turned the ringer of the phone off and erased the messages he left.”

“Oh God!” He must think that she didn’t care at all! There was no way she could fix this.

“Look baby, I’ll talk to him.”

“You’ve done enough!” she said full of hurt. She knew he was trying to help, but she was in her own personal hell over all of this. It was two weeks of complete heartbreak and most likely Jacob had moved on. She felt sick to her stomach over her father’s and Colt’s confession and along with the overwhelming flush of emotion she turned and lost her lunch on the sidewalk right before she passed out.

Colt caught her before she hit the pavement.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“I’m beginning to think you’re using these little episodes to get my attention.”

It was the familiar deep voice that brought her around. She opened her eyes to see Jacob leaning over her and her heart began to gallop in her chest. She was mad at him, mad at everyone for deciding how her life should be run without her consent, but he still managed to affect her like no other. Then the familiar waft of hospital hit her nostrils and she groaned. A nurse came over at the sound but Jacob waved her away, “She’s fine.” He said turning his attention back to her. “Are you feeling better?”

“I hate everyone.” She mumbled.

“Now you know that’s not true. There isn’t a mean bone in your body.” Colt had called him at home and told him that Tess was in the hospital. Jacob must’ve set a few speed records getting there because his brother wouldn’t tell him why. When he got there Chuck and Colt were waiting for him. Colt told him that Tess was fine, but Chuck looked incredibly guilty and after he confessed what he did, Jacob was too elated to care. He thought he’d ruined his chances with Tess after what he did. Over the past few weeks he realized that it would have been less

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painful to lose a limb than lose her. So, maybe Chuck was right and he needed to figure things out on his own. No woman had ever turned his world upside down like Tess did and when Colt told him she was in the hospital again, he thought someone had pulled the earth from under his feet as all kinds of things were going through his head.

He'd spent the next hour trying to find out what was wrong with her because Tess wasn't a fainter. She was a hell of a lot tougher than that. After all, in the last four months she had a ruptured appendix and was run over by a delivery truck, not to mention that she could put up with his sorry hide.

When the blood tests came back he was beside himself wondering how she was going to take the news this time.

"I hate you most of all." She added angrily.

He pursed his lips together, "I admit, that I probably deserve that, but Tess honey, I've suffered because of it."

Not as much as I, she thought. "Where am I exactly?" she said changing the subject. It hurt too much to talk about this with him.

"On a stretcher in emergency—again—" he grinned, "However, I don't need to assault the doctor this time."

"this time?"

"I beat the snot out of the last one when you had your appendix out."

"You didn't!" She remembered that scene where he had another man by the throat and was shaking him.

"He was an idiot." He frowned remembering how close he came to losing her. "Lance was able to calm the man down from filing a lawsuit."

"Jacob, you're crazy." She said with wide eyes.

"Yes, these past few months I definitely can agree to that." He reached up and touched her cheek, "There's some things we need to discuss."

“Not now.” She whispered trying to ignore his caress. How she missed him!

“Yes now. And you’re going to listen because this has gone on too long and it was completely unnecessary.” He said sternly followed by a pointed stare. “first of all, I did not sleep with Lindsay.”

“Jacob—“ she started to say feeling the familiar threat of tears fill up her eyes but he raised a hand and cut her off.

“Of course what I did—leaving you, a beautiful woman to drive that manipulating bitch home was inexcusable. I should have figured it out. Colt told me that she said some things to you right before then. I didn’t know. If I did, I would have made her walk home.”

“She said that she could get you back.” He winced at her confession.

“Well, she did try, but,” he leaned down, “Honey no one could ever measure up to you. You set my blood on fire.”

This time her tears did fall.

He raised himself up to stare down at her, “secondly, you have to marry me Tess. I can’t possibly survive without you. I’m miserable to the bottom of my shoes. I love you.”

She sucked in a deep breath and released a wretched sob while reaching for him.

Jacob quickly gathered her in his arms and kissed her all over her face then buried it in her neck. “I’m the stupidest man alive. Will you forgive me?”

She nodded too choked up to speak.

“Now tell me you love me and say yes to my proposal.”

“I—I love you.” She managed, “I always have.”

“Thank god.” He moved back and brushed her hair off her face while studying her expression, “Now say yes honey.”

“Are you sure?” she hiccupped.

He gave her one of those sinful Hartley grins, “More than

anything in my life and I'm not giving you much of a choice in the matter anyway." His hand went down to her abdomen, "You're carrying my child."

She could literally feel the blood drain from her face. "That's impossible." She said softly, "I told you I was on the pill. David put me on it when I was eighteen to regulate—"

"Well," he interrupted with a widening arrogant grin, "apparently I'm really potent. When I discovered that you passed out and I told them to do a pregnancy screen on a hunch. The pill isn't one hundred percent effective either Tess. Apparently you fall into that category."

"Oh god—a baby." She mouthed as her hand covered his.

"A baby. Our baby. The first one of many." He corrected, "Say yes."

She was still fighting the initial shock to say anything else.

"Tess honey, you're killing me." He said starting to feel unsure of her feelings for him.

"Oh!" this time she laughed seeing his expression, "Yes-yes, yes!"

Her voice was cut off by another strong embrace knocking the wind out of her.

"Jacob I can't breathe."

He chuckled and released her. "I'll get you released, stay put." He said and kissed her hard before leaving her sitting on the stretcher.

Tess glanced down at her abdomen, *a baby?* She was still letting his news sink in. Not just a baby, *Jacob's* baby! Tears flowed from her eyes, but only because she was happy—very very happy!

When he returned she was still weeping he smirked and told her she was already hormonal causing her to laugh.

"I'm going to get fat." She heard herself say.

"More to love." He answered with a sinful smile right before

he bent over and kissed her.

Tess could have wept at how tender it was and she missed him so much over the past few weeks.

Someone clearing their throat made him lift away from her. Tess noticed that it was that same nurse that tried to give him her phone number when she had her appendix out. She actually looked a little embarrassed.

“Doctor Hartley, did you want me to bring a wheelchair?”

“No, she’ll be fine.” He said without taking his eyes from Tess.

The nurse nodded and left quickly and Tess narrowed her eyes at the woman’s back. “At least now she’ll think twice.” Causing Jacob to laugh. “It’s not funny Jacob, women are constantly throwing themselves at you.”

“No more than men are you Tess.”

“That’s not true!” she exclaimed.

“It is. Do you know that over the last two weeks about a dozen men stopped me on the street and asked me if we had split up so they could ask you out?”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“Oh dear, what did you say?”

‘I told them we were getting married and if I saw them gawking at my future wife I’d knock their teeth out.’

“You didn’t!”

“Tess, you have no idea how appealing you are to my sex.”

She blushed, “Okay, that’s enough.” She said holding up her hand then suddenly remembering what else he said, “You told people we’re getting married—I mean before you knew about the baby--?”

“Yes. I wanted to marry you after that first night we had together. I was just too stupid to tell you how I felt. Actually,” he said, “I really didn’t know how to tell you. I’ve lived quite

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recklessly with women Tess and this whole thing is new to me too. It just took me some time to figure things out. Your father was a great help when he wouldn't let me see you because it really did put things into perspective."

"You never called me back or came back to tell me."

"No, but I was busy on planning our wedding, honeymoon, and ordering your engagement ring. Then I had a construction company break ground for our house at the lake. Everyone seems to think I was brooding over the past few weeks, but I was a busy man. I may have looked like hell, but I was putting everything in order so you couldn't possibly refuse me."

Her mouth fell open. Is it possible for her heart to swell in her chest causing it to hurt?

Jacob reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box, "It came in this morning." She started weeping again, "Tess, you didn't think I was going to give up on you did you? I fully intended on carrying you off to the church over my shoulder if you denied me."

Her watery eyes looked up to his, "I didn't know."

"Here," he said opening the box to reveal a stunning emerald surrounded by a cluster of diamonds. Then he took it out and slid it on her finger. "You're father is going to faint when I tell him that he's going to be a grandfather." He grinned as she examined the ring.

"This is possibly the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"I chose it carefully to match those gorgeous eyes of yours."

She smiled as tears rolled down her cheeks, "I love you Jacob."

"Thank God for small miracles." He said kissing her again. "Come on, let's go home and celebrate with the family. They'll want to hear the news too. Besides, your father is feeling guilty thinking he's responsible for you fainting. So you need to talk to him."

If she thought she and Jacob were excited, her father was beside himself and Lance and Colton already offered to babysit until the child was in its teens. Tess got hugs from all of them and an “it’s about time” from Colt.

After supper Tess asked Jacob for her job back. They had gone into his study so she could see what he’d planned for their wedding so far. They were going over the invitations when she brought it up.

“Not while you’re pregnant.” He said in that authoritative tone she knew so well.

“Jacob, I’m not an invalid. You’re a doctor; you’ll take care of me.”

“Granted Tess, I would love to have you close to me until you’re ready to have the baby, but I don’t want to put any strain on you. Not only that, there’s the wedding to finish planning and that’s stressful in itself.”

“If I feel too tired I’ll let you know. Besides, Rita called me at home last week and begged me to come back to work. That woman you have there now has been filing folders under your patient’s first names, not the last ones.” She didn’t tell him that she’d heard what had happened at the dance and called to see if she was all right. Jacob had dealt with enough guilt over it.

“Is that right?” he chuckled looking at her, “Maybe you’re right, but I just don’t want you to overwork yourself.”

“I may have another solution.” She said suddenly remembering something.

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, “I know that look.”

“do you remember that nurse in New York that gave you heck about your phone?”

He shook his head. The only thing he was focused on at the time was her.

“Her name is Tammy. She’s very efficient Jacob, and she was the only woman there who wasn’t panting after you.”

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He chuckled, "You are exaggerating."

"Am I? Rita told me about the first two women you hired when I left Sulphur Springs."

Oh hell, he'd forgotten about that.

She gave him a I-told-you-so look as realization crossed over his handsome face.

"What makes you think that's she'd relocate?"

Lance. "She mentioned something along the lines of finding a different pace. I'm sure she'd love it here."

Jacob narrowed his gaze suspiciously, "What is it you're not telling me?"

Oh how well he could read her, "Absolutely nothing." She said with an exaggerated grin.

"Uh-huh." He paused studying her expression, "Lance or Colt?"

"Oh for heaven's sake!" she burst causing him to laugh.

"I've known you too long Tess." He said reaching for her.

"Jacob you're family is here!"

"I don't give a shit. I've dreamt about touching you again. Besides I locked the door and let them think whatever the hell they want, because I am marrying you and darling, you *are* pregnant. They'd have to be blind and stupid to think I didn't touch you. Hell, even if you weren't pregnant, they'd know, just look at you. You're beautiful and a man would have to be dead not to notice."

She blushed at his compliment. "Jacob, last time we were together I could barely walk for two days!" That got her one of the sexiest growls she'd ever heard before followed by the darkening of his eyes as he tossed the book of invitations aside and flattened her back on the sofa.

"Let's see if I can beat that record." He said taking her mouth under his.

If she thought about protesting it was gone when he hauled

up her t-shirt and started suckling her breasts. She had to bite her tongue from crying out loud at pleasure he was giving her.

Within minutes they were both naked and to Tess's complete surprise he flipped her onto her stomach, then adjusted her onto her knees bringing upright with her back against his chest while he cupped her jaw with one hand and snaked his other around her waist. He turned her head and ran his mouth over her neck. Tess never expected something to feel so exotic and within seconds soft noises were pouring from her. She had no idea what to expect from him and it lent to her desire. Then he reached down between her legs and really made her moan. Her head fell back against his shoulder.

"I love the way you respond to me." He growled in her ear.

She couldn't answer him and if she did, she knew she couldn't possibly form coherent words.

"Now for the best part." He said raggedly as he lifted her slightly and slid into her from behind with a deep groan of satisfaction that overpowered her own.

"Oh this can't be normal." She moaned reaching behind her and tangling her fingers in his hair as he began a sweet torturous rhythm.

"It's perfectly normal." He rasped in her ear between shallow heavy breathing and palmed both of her breasts in his hands without breaking stride.

Epilogue

It was spring when Jacob and Tess Hartley, along with their four week old baby girl moved into the log house on the lake. It wasn't small by any means, but Tess loved the view. Jacob had the house designed so that twenty foot widows overlooked the lake and she'd spend hours playing her violin while being a

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mother to their daughter Emily Jean Hartley named after both of their mothers. However that didn't mean she was alone often. At least one of the brothers or her father was there all the time to coddle Emily.

One particular evening she'd laid down for a nap when Emily was having one because she hadn't slept much the night before. When she woke up she noticed that the baby wasn't in her bassinet. *Jacob must've come home*, she thought and got up to search for her family. Often he would go directly to his daughter when he came home from work after a sweet hello kiss for her.

She found him sitting on the front porch swing with Emily snuggled on his shoulder while he hummed a melody. The sight of her large husband holding their small daughter in her fuzzy pink sleeper was possibly the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. He hadn't even changed and was still wearing his dark grey suit although it looked as though he had time to loosen his tie before he came and got her.

He hadn't noticed her yet, so she soaked up the image feeling like the luckiest woman alive.



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