

Unchained Melody

Love Song Standards Series

By

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Unchained Melody

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Contemporary

This Too Shall Pass

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Contemporary – Love Song Standards Series

Unchained Melody

Strangers In The Night

For Once In My Life
Can't Help Falling In Love
At Last
Chances Are

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Chapter One

Pamela’s silver CLS Mercedes Coupe hugged the mountainous, snowy terrain of Route 66 like an Indianapolis 500 race car. It was an expression of her accomplishments. A little pricy perhaps, but well-deserved. Driving it was beyond scintillating.

Pamela was not all about status, but she worked hard, and at the age of thirty-one, she finally acquired the title of senior partner at the law offices of McNeil and Ryan.

Her specialty was wrongful death and she was damned good at what she did. It was beyond being driven. She was a “Joan of Arc” for those families who lost a loved one due to someone else’s negligence, criminal intent, accidental liability, or stupidity. She was passionate about proving justice, above all else, winning her clients a sizable settlement and some sense of closure, so they could move on with their lives.

Ever since she lost her parents in a freak bridge accident at the age of thirteen, she knew this was the course she wanted her life to take. She lived through the hell of loss. Her grandparents spiraled to poverty from lawyers, who sucked the life from their souls and the dollars from their bank accounts. After years of deliberations, all was lost to them. The negligence was undeniable; as the evidence had been in their favor. But because of a small technicality and grave error made by her grandparents’ law firm, the case was dismissed.

Pamela never forgot what that did to her family. It compelled her to excel in school and graduate at the top of her class at Harvard.

Her palm glided over the rich leather texture of her steering wheel as she reflected on her accomplishments.

“Where have, the years gone,” she sighed? In a couple of years, she could be a full partner. It sounded good. Was it what she really wanted though after all the long hours, sleepless nights, lonely holidays and special occasions she spent alone; along with the loveless and empty relationships she endured?

It had been a long time, since she went on a holiday. The end of Winter was closely approaching. She had wanted to hit the slopes, ever since she bought herself a new pair of skis for Christmas. She wasn’t an expert, but she liked a good run downhill like anyone else. This was the last chance she had before Spring arrived.

A large billboard caught her attention.

SUGAR RUN ~ ADVENTURE AND ROMANCE ON THE OPEN SLOPES!

“Been a long time, since I had that in my life!” She chuckled. “Maybe, I’ll be lucky enough to meet a dashing stranger after all.” She harrumphed. “Yah ... right!”

She shook her head in disbelief. Success wasn’t everything, if you didn’t have someone to rejoice in it with. That kind of joy kept on evading her. Still, she looked forward to her skiing holiday. Romance, or no romance. A vacation was long overdue and she resolved herself to the fact delicious meals, great snow, and lots of sleep would do just fine.

Her stomach growled, reminding her she had forgotten to eat earlier. She glanced at the digital clock on the dashboard and decided there was plenty of time to make a pit stop. She loved the quaint village of Ashbury she was passing through. It’s downtown district was interspersed with a unique array of shops and boutiques, their store facades painted in muted colors of mauve, gold, green and other earth tones.

Sitting atop a knoll in all its historical glory was the Ashbury Inn and a popular country eatery for the tourists and locals in the area. The moment Pamela turned into the packed parking lot, she fretted over being able to get a seat alone. The loud buzz of conversation and clattering

silverware, along with the hustle of wait staff moving about that greeted her reaffirmed her suspicions.

She squished her lips with disappointment as the hostess informed her of a lengthy wait. Quickly, she scanned the occupied tables to make sure there was no oversight. When she saw, all the tables were indeed taken, she nodded her thanks and turned to leave. Her attention was redirected, however, when someone tugged on her coat sleeve.

“You’re welcomed to share my table, if you’d like.” A deep, masculine voice beckoned her.

Pamela turned, drawn by the sincere tone in the stranger’s voice. Her neck kinked as she was forced to gaze up at him.

“Really,” he enforced as straight, pearly-whites shone back at her and he pointed to the three empty chairs at his table. “You’re more than welcomed to join me.”

It was hard to look away from the pair of soft, amber eyes greeting her. A moment of silence passed between them and she wondered, if he was as enamored with her, as she was with him.

This is crazy, she dismissed the thought from her mind. She was thinking the invitation seemed a little contrived despite his charming good looks.

“That’s not necessary, but thank you,” she replied and started to zip up her ski jacket.

He reached for her hand and she was shocked by the feeling it stirred inside of her. She almost spoke aloud, “what the hell”, but caught herself.

She could feel her brow was tightly knit as she quickly gazed about the room one last time. She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

“Please, I promise,” he raised his palms in defense, “this isn’t a pick up.”

His smile was enchanting and her resolve began to weaken. Her attention was drawn to the prominent cleft in his strong jaw. Her eyes lifted and her stomach flipped at the alluring challenge she read in his eyes and then her traitorous stomach growled loudly in answer for her.

She could feel her cheeks burn and he did not give her time reply.

“Now, you must.”

He quickly pulled out a chair and; she hesitated momentarily as she slowly unzipped her jacket. Before she knew it, it was being slipped from her shoulders and he turned to catch the waitress’ attention, directing her to bring another cup of coffee and an extra menu right away. Mindlessly, she lowered herself into the chair and the buzz that filled the air upon entering, seemed to quiet considerably.

“Now, isn’t this better than leaving on an empty stomach?” He offered.

Pamela nodded and smiled.

“My heart, or I guess I should say, my stomach,” she jested, “was set on their infamous Belgian waffles, before I hit the slopes.”

She thanked the waitress and warmed her hands around the coffee cup placed before her, breathing in its brewed aroma. Slowly, she sipped the liquid and sighed contentedly.

“You on your way to Sugar Run then?”

She nodded as she took another sip.

“I am. A long, overdue getaway.”

“Well, let me be the first to welcome you,” he extended his hand. “I’m Gavin Templeton. My family owns the resort.”

She looked up from the menu she was browsing and lifted her hand, but halted it in mid-air. She knew her cheeks were blushing again, because of his admiring gaze and it somewhat infuriated her. His attention was a little unsettling. She didn’t know, if it was genuine, or not. Her inside voice was telling her to play it cordial ... get through with your meal ... he’s just being flirtatious.

“Um ... what a coincidence,” she replied, grasping the hand he offered. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Templeton. I’ve been trying to get there the past two years, but ...” she paused. “I just don’t know how to say no to the boss.”

He chuckled and pointed her way.

“Good for you. All work and no play ... well, you know the rest.” He interjected.

Then it dawned on her. *I’ll be damned.* She knew that name. Everyone knew the Templeton name. She was rather titillated by the fact she was in the company of such a prestigious pillar of the community. The Templeton’s were well known in the Northeast. Not only was Sugar Run a luxurious five-star resort, but his family had acquired over fifty acres of prime lakefront property and started developing it into one of the most eloquent gated communities, offering luxurious town homes, a 9-hole golf course, and private country club.

The cleft in his chin became more prominent when he smiled, and she found it hard not to be affected by it.

“And, please, call me Gavin.”

Her voice shook a little in introduction. “Pamela Landers ... and thank you for sharing your table.”

The waitress arrived, took both of their orders, and refilled their coffee cups.

“So, tell me Pamela, what line of work occupies your every waking moment?”

“Law,” she answered. “My niche is wrongful death.”

The look that registered on his face made her wonder, if the legal field was something he detested. She did not know why, but she wanted his approval and his opinion somehow mattered.

This is ridiculous! Why should I care what he thinks? She battled quietly. It’s not like they traveled in the same circles.

She was curious though and could not help but wonder, if they shared the same interests and decided to dig a little deeper.

“Do you ski as well, Mr.” She quickly corrected herself from the look he sent her. “I mean, Gavin?”

She felt somewhat satisfied, when he nodded in the affirmative.

“I’m not Olympic material, mind you, but I manage to keep upright without breaking my neck.”

She found his wit appealing and wanted to learn more.

His cell phone rang, tampering her need to continue.

He rose, politely excusing himself, and moved away from the table. He was only gone for a matter of moments before returning and stopped along the way to give the waitress further direction before rejoining her.

Pamela tried to hide the disappointment she felt.

“Pressing business?”

His regret was evident as he sighed heavily.

“I’m afraid so. There’s something I need to attend to in Ashbury.” He rose and handed the waitress two twenty-dollar bills upon her approach and told her to keep the change.

Pamela shook her head and raised her hand to argue, but he waved it off.

“Please, it was my pleasure to meet you.” He explained with a smile. “Perhaps, you’ll join me for a cocktail later this evening.”

As much as the offer was tempting, she did not want to commit to something so personal on her first night there. All she wanted to do was unpack, hit the slopes, order a late lunch to her room, and languish in a bubble bath.

She returned his smile just the same.

“Oh, thank you for the invite, but I have other plans. Perhaps, some other time.”

Gavin reached for her hand and stroked it tenderly with his thumb.

“Then, to some other time.” He bowed.

It bothered her to see the disappointment in his eyes and she found herself spouting aloud without thinking.

“It will be my treat though ... I mean,” she stammered, “since you were so gracious to pick up the tab.”

I can’t believe I just did that? Shit! I did.

“How can I refuse?” His beguiling smile made her stomach flip. “Until then.” He winked and turned to exit.

Her jaw dropped slightly both from the shock of her actions and the exuberance she felt, watching him leave, and appreciating ever-so-much how nicely his jeans fit his butt as he exited the building. Pamela relaxed and played back their meeting in her mind. Talk about fate ... it was all rather unexpected and the immediate attraction she felt for him was even more surprising. She looked down at the plump waffles on her plate and began devouring them with a hunger that was as strong as her desire to meet up with the dashing and charming owner of Sugar Run once again.

Chapter Two

Pamela sucked the cool, crisp air into her lungs as she took in the breathtaking panorama of Stowell Mountain in the distance, peppered with a forest of pines covered in white against a cloudless, soft blue sky.

To the West of her, bright red gondolas carrying excited skiers, glistened in the early morning sunlight, as they slowly glided upwards along massive steel cables. She had decided that morning to tackle one of Smugglers Peak's expert trails and felt a sense of satisfaction as she gazed out at the wonder and glory from her summit spot. She chuckled quietly over her earlier hesitation to do so. It had been a few years, since she last attempted this trail, which was at an elevation of over three thousand feet. She had pretty much stuck to the beginner's slope when she had first arrived.

Today, was different though. She was confident about challenging herself, and that, she did. Her movements were a little stiff in the beginning. But the powdery surface cushioned her impact and made her first run down an enjoyable one. She had worked muscles all day yesterday she hadn't challenged in a while. It was her second time down and already, there was a steady stream of enthusiasts slaloming past her on both skis and snowboards. She made sure she stayed clear of them. For her, it wasn't about the speed, but more the experience and view.

After some serious rethinking the evening before, she was glad she hadn't accepted Gavin's invitation. She had a habit of diving head first into relationships in the past and they always seemed to peter out shortly thereafter. It wasn't that she needed a man in her life. She had done quite well for herself. She just missed male companionship and that sense of abandonment one experienced in the beginning, when everything was new, exciting, and seemed to mesh flawlessly.

There was something about Gavin Templeton she found intriguing though. Sugar Run wasn't a massive resort. With only one restaurant, she was bound to run into him sooner or later. At least, she was hopeful.

A full three days had passed and Pamela's expected encounter with Gavin never transpired. She was somewhat dismayed by it and thought at first she would ask at the front desk of his whereabouts. But, she just as quickly dismissed the idea, since she did not know him all that well and resolved herself to the fact, if it was meant to happen, it would.

At breakfast on the fourth day, she decided to ride into town and check out some of the boutiques along the main strip in Ashbury. As she excited the elevator, she slowed her pace and

gazed about the lobby with the hope of seeing Gavin. She halted and looked in the direction of the reception desk and nervously chewed her lower lip.

It couldn't hurt to ask. Would it?

She turned and immediately caught the attention of the young, female receptionist. There was no way she could change her mind now, as the staffer smiled welcoming.

“Can I help you with something?”

Pamela exhaled slowly and returned the smile.

“I was wondering, if Gavin Templeton was still on the premises. We were to catch up at some point, and we just haven't crossed paths.”

“I'd be happy to ring his office for you, if you'd like.”

Pamela waved her off and was quickly interrupted by the male receptionist standing behind the desk as well.

“Mr. Templeton had errands to run and left the premises about fifteen minutes ago. Would you like us to tell him you were asking for him upon his return?”

“I'm afraid I'll be checking out in the morning, but thank you. I'll catch up with him some other time.”

Why didn't she follow through before now? It's my fault. I was the run, who put him off, damn it!

She was miffed ... more with herself than the situation. She could have left him a note easily enough the day after she arrived. But, no. She let her uncertainty get in the way of her judgment.

Large flakes billowed softly from soft, gray clouds as she exited the hotel. She handed the valet in his early twenties, the plastic card she had been given upon her arrival. In a matter of minutes, her car pulled up to the curb with a windshield cleared of snow and the interior already toasty warm.

Carefully she guided her car out onto the main road. The tires skidded slightly on the snow-packed highway. She questioned whether to continue her journey and quickly dismissed the fear that pricked at her brain. She had the best Winter radials on her car and was in no rush to descend the mountain road.

She knew dangerous s-turns awaited her ahead and watched her speed. She cautiously steered into the turn on the first curve that greeted her.

A few car lengths ahead on the straight-away, she noticed a driver moving at a careful pace as well.

Pamela slowly tapped her brakes to keep them at a safe distance. Her car skidded again she silently prayed she would not back-end the candy-apple red mustang in front of her as they approached a stop sign. Safely, her car rolled to a halt and she breathed a sigh of relief.

She gasped with surprise, as recognized the mustang's occupant from his reflection in his rear-view mirror.

Now, what are the odds of that!

She smiled joyously, when Gavin waved, recognizing her as well. Just at that moment larger, billowy flakes began to fall and stick to their windshields. Pamela turned on her wipers to clear her view and felt comfortable, knowing that Gavin was up ahead.

Slowly, they descended the mountain as she tried to relax and listen to her favorite soft rock station. She hated driving on slick roads. She hummed along with the popular oldie, while she kept her focus on the road and her grip firmly on the wheel.

It was still a scenic trip, despite the weather. Acres of protected woodlands were mixed with various evergreens, their branches bowed with the weight of the new virgin snow. Like welcoming arms, they extended out over the highway. When the wind gusted, or birds flitted from branch to branch, the loosened snow showered down upon them as they passed underneath.

A large timbered sign reading Babcock Lake appeared to her right. She knew then that Ashbury was only another twenty minutes ahead.

Gavin's car reduced in speed and hugged the next sharp curve ahead and; Pamela adjusted her speed accordingly.

Within an instant, an old, green Volkswagen also cleared the curve from the opposite direction and immediately began to slide, veering left, then right, and sideways, crossing into their land. Pamela could tell the driver desperately tried to gain control.

Her eyes grew wide, her body jerked backwards, as her elbow locked and she gripped her steering wheel, turning her knuckles white.

She focused on the inevitable accident unfolding before her. She felt helpless and did not know, which direction to steer into to or away from, as the Volkswagen headed straight for Gavin, who had no viable means to escape.

The young driver's attempts were fruitless, as Pamela watched in horror.

She could hear herself scream. "God no!"

She maneuvered her car off to the left, slamming on the brakes. Her body jolted forward and her seat belt locked her in place. She rested her forehead on the steering wheel briefly, sucking cleansing breaths to calm her quaking hands.

She felt nauseous and looked to the right witnessing with horror as she watched Gavin's mustang take flight.

"Dear God, no!" She bellowed,

The roof of his car sparked as it scraped against a low-lying cable. She could see his arms raised to shield his face, as the sound of screeching metal echoed around them.

Pamela shuddered uncontrollably as his car disappeared over the deep decline. She could hear it breaking through the brush during its descent and knew it would crash into the frozen surface of the lake she knew was there.

Sweat beaded her brow and ran in rivulets between her breasts. She pounded her knees with her fists and willed them to stop trembling. She unlatched her seat belt and twisted in her seat, noticing the young man exiting his car and heading her way.

Pamela opened her door and stepped outside. She was shocked to see it was only a teenager about seventeen.

“Lady, I’m sorry. I ... I just started to slide and couldn’t – “

Pamela swayed and he moved quickly to clasp hold of her shoulders and help steady her. She saw the worry in his misty, green eyes and her heart constricted. She noted blood was smeared on the sleeve of his jacket. She wondered how his tall, muscled frame could have possibly squeezed into the tiny confines of his car as she quickly gazed over at it.

“Are you okay? Shit, that guy –,” he pointed in the direction where Gavin went over the ledge.

She nodded, looking that way as well.

“I’m fine. You?” She grabbed hold of his chin. “Look at me.” She noticed a deep gash on his forehead and knew he would need stitches.

The boy flinched and chewed on his lip so hard, he drew blood.

“I’m really sorry, lady. I don’t know what happened. I ... I wasn’t speeding. I swear!”

He stumbled, losing his footing.

Pamela tried to grab for him, but lost her grip and he went down on one knee.

“Are you dizzy? Do you feel sick?” She asked.

Tears ran from his eyes.

She opened her rear passenger door and guided him to sit and knelt in front of him.

“The roads are icy and, I almost lost control myself. You’re not to blame.” She patted his leg and ran her fingers through his hair in a motherly fashion.

The boy took a deep breath and wiped at his tears with the heel of his palms.

“I’m okay,” he sniffled. “I’ll ... I’ll go for help.” He rose.

Pamela stood quickly and placed her palms on his chest to halt him.

“Hold it!” She pressed him backwards. “I have a cell.” When she reached inside her pocket, he stopped her, shaking his head.

“The service here is dead until you reach the village or Sugar Run.”

She checked her phone regardless and found it to be true.

“Are you sure you can drive? You might have a concussion. It looks like you banged your head pretty hard.”

The boy encircled her tiny wrist with his trembling hand. “Really, mam. I’m fine.”

Pamela sighed deeply and let him rise. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

He nodded and Pamela walked briskly beside him to his car.

The boy stopped in his tracks. “Maybe I should go with you first to check on him.” His head nodded toward the ravine.

Pamela followed his gaze and shook her head.

“I think it’s more important you go for help. I’ll go check on him.” She reached out to touch his sleeve. “You need to go. It’ll be dark soon. Just make sure you give our location at the curve on 66 near the Babcock Lake sign.”

“I won’t forget. Thanks for ... not blaming me and all.”

Pamela nodded. “There’s no need for thanks. What’s your name?”

“Tommy Dawson.” He replied.

“Let me see your license please.”

The teen did not hesitate, as he drew a wallet from his back jeans pocket.

Pamela look a photo of his license with her cell, and his license plate, and shrugged.

“Sorry. It’s precautionary.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

She touched is arm softly. “Just be careful and try to get them here as fast as you can. Hold on just a moment.” She crossed the road and walked to the edge where Gavin’s car disappeared from site. She could see through the trees his car slid across the ice and broke through. “You need to let them know this is a water rescue. He’s broken through the ice front end down.”

The boy nodded, entered his car, buckled up and took off right away.

She watched him for a moment and quickly moved back to her car. She did not know, if the rope she took from her trunk would be helpful, but a first aid kit, flairs, and a wool blanket would. She was glad, she had listened to her father, to always be prepared for the worse and an emergency.

She crossed to the other side and looked back down the road. The boy was nowhere in sight. A twitch of doubt stabbed at her brain, but she shrugged it off. It was too late now. She believed he was sincere enough and confident he would do the right thing and bring back help.

Pamela moved to the edge of the ravine and froze. She looked at what she was carrying and then back at the scene before her.

Shit! What am I doing? I don’t even know this guy.

Her eyes darted over the scene, weighing the odds of her getting hurt and being able to help him.

I should just wait right here. What if I fall and break a leg, my neck, my ... shit ... shit ... shit ... what should I do?

Seconds passed. Her eyes misted with tears as she gazed out at the scene. Her heart constricted as she visualized herself trading places with the man she hardly knew.

If that were me ... down, there ... I would want him to help me. Jesus, Pamela! Move your ass!

Slowly, she started her descent. She left fear and doubt behind her with the words, “You can do this”, repeating over and over in her head.

Gavin's car left a broken path in its quake. The gleam from twisted metal caught her attention against the stark-white blanket of snow. Shards of broken red tail lights and patches of black oil led a trail to the bottom.

Pamela shivered, wondering what other horrifying sights awaited her. She bent low and tried to look beyond the downed trees and trampled brush. One thing was certain, she sighed relieved, there was no visible sign of smoke, indicating the vehicle had not burst into flames on impact.

Pamela carried her rope like a bandoleer, worn over her left shoulder and across her chest. She draped the navy wool blanket over her left arm and carried the first aid kit and flairs in her right. Slowly, she descended the slope, placing one foot carefully in front of the other.

Branches scratched and stung her face. She swore as they snagged her designer slacks and wool jacket. She lost her footing, slipped and fell on her backside.

As she cleared the tree line, she was relieved to find the mustang was still fully intact. Frightening though, was seeing the front end submerged in the frigid water of the lake up to its windshield with its back end straight in the air.

Chapter Three

Holy Shit! What the fuck just happened?

Gavin couldn't believe his eyes as he slowly raised his head. He could feel something warm sliding down his forehead and along the bridge of his nose. He lifted his hand and rubbed at the area, wincing, and noticed the bright red blood smeared on his tan driving glove. It didn't surprise him. He knew he hit his head pretty hard on the steering wheel. His classic mustang didn't have the kind of safety belt that snapped across your chest either.

He looked up and the sight that greeted him scared him shitless. He slowly gazed to the right, then to the left and straight ahead. His front end was submerged in the god damned lake. He unsnapped his seat belt at the waist and felt lucky he still hadn't been thrown through the windshield. He turned to look over his shoulder and could only see his ass-end sticking in the air.

"God damn!"

He guessed he had to have skidded some twenty-thirty feet, before breaking through the ice. He looked out both his driver and passenger windows and it finally dawned on him, by the grace of God, his side mirrors somehow wedged in such a way, it stopped the car from sinking further.

He wasn't that naïve though. He knew his luck would run out eventually. He had to try and free himself from the car, but how?

Damn! Why now? Why this?

They just buried his dad a short while ago. This would destroy his sister, his grandfather, and he had so many ends to tie up with his dad's business. And his practice, it suffered from his lack of attention. There was so much he still needed to do. And then ... then ... there was Pamela.

He snickered. He couldn't help it, despite the situation he was in right now. Before he left his office, he had written a note to her and asked his assistant to deliver it personally. He knew from her reservation that tonight was her last evening at the hotel. He hoped this time, she would accept his invitation to dinner. She had surprised him ... not reaching out to him by now. Even when she blew him off over breakfast, he was still confident she'd reach out to him in a day. She hadn't.

He liked that. He liked her spunk. He hated when women fell all over him, because of his money, because of his family name. Pamela didn't, and he sure as hell found her to be an extremely attractive woman. There was something about her. He wanted to know more. But now?

And then, he remembered. She was following behind him. What had happened to her? Did she spin out of control? Did she slam into the massive pines along the road? Was she hurt and bleeding along the side of the road?

Fuck! I've got to get out of here! Think, man, think!

There was no saving his car now. He looked about, took in his surroundings, the position of his car and cleared his mind of how the accident happened and the fact that Pamela was behind him when it happened. It had a long hood and a short deck ... good in one way ... bad in another. He had no back windows he could crawl out of. He could roll down his side windows only so far, before the ice-cold water started to pour in.

And then, it dawned on him. The back window. He had a soft convertible top, that would make it possible for him to cut himself free. He cringed over the thought. He loved this car and the thought of losing it to the lake pissed him off royally. Thank God, he had a pocket knife to help make it all possible.

Chapter Four

Pamela's heart sank like an anchor and she screamed so loud her throat hurt.

"Gavin! Gavin, can you hear me?"

All she heard was the haunting echo of her own voice bouncing back to her from across the stark, frozen lake.

Gavin's car stood out like a blood stain on a white sheet of ice. Her body shuddered as she realized the seriousness of the situation. She questioned, whether he would be able to come out of this alive and unscathed.

A lump constricted in her throat and her eyes filled with tears.

Jesus, help me, she silently prayed.

She stretched her neck for a better look as she moved closer to the shoreline.

It was hard to see any movement coming from inside his car from where she was standing.

“Don’t you be dead, damn it,” she muttered.

She noticed the skid marks his car made when he must have locked on his brakes. The trail it left across the lake’s icy surface seemed endless as she gazed outward. Briefly, streams of sunlight broke through the clouds, reflecting off the car’s metal, marking its location like an X on a treasure map.

Pamela calculated the car must have traveled maybe twenty feet before it broke through the surface.

“I can’t believe this is!”

She trembled as her toes tingled from the cold. Puffs of vapor emitted into the air as she blew out long, cleansing breaths. Frustration consumed her when she noticed ominous, dark clouds sweep across the sky and begin to obscure the sunlight.

She wondered what she should do and absently patted her forearms to ward off the cold. She felt agitated as she looked down at her outfit. It had lost its appeal. It had more holes and snags than a pair of badly worn panty hose.

She turned and looked up at the ridge, following along the highway as far as she could see. She listened for sounds of sirens, looked for flashing red lights in the distance. Her Pulsar watch read three-thirty. The boy had been gone for nearly thirty minutes.

“They should be here soon,” she spoke aloud as reassurance.

A loud crunch permeated the air and Pamela gasped. Ice began to separate from around the Mustang’s front end, and it sank up to the door handle, grappling the ice.

She held her breath and closed her eyes, expecting it to disappear completely. Her fists clenched in terror as her well-manicured nails broke through the skin of her palms. Her exposed flesh stung in the frosty, March air and she whimpered.

The car held steadfast. She knew that at any moment it could shift and sink into the depths of darkness, taking its occupants’ life swiftly.

“Fuck!” She screamed.

She hated this. ... the unknown, fighting the elements and time itself.

She needed a plan, and a quick one.

Think, what? What the hell can I do all by myself?

She heard cars passing by overhead and bolted, moving back up the hill. She dug her heels into the snow as she clutched onto trunks of small trees to aid her climb. Her breath came in short, labored gasps and the muscles in her calves and thighs burned from her exertion and the angle of her climb.

She tripped and fell on her stomach, sliding backwards a short distance. She rose and swore like a trooper but did not give up and started back up again.

A car approached just as she reached the top and; she waved her arms frantically, screaming as loud as she could. Her efforts, however, were in vain.

“Damn!” she bellowed and stomped her feet in aggravation.

She was not giving up and began to pace up and down the road near the ravine, willing another vehicle to come into view. She sniffled as the cold penetrated her sinuses and made her nose run. She did not think twice about using the sleeve of her jacket to wipe it clean, knowing she was well past the point of looking refined.

Her heart leaped with joy as a sleek, Jaguar came into view. She stepped out onto the road to draw the occupant’s attention.

“Stop! Please, stop!” she called out, waving her arms.

The strangers looked at her as though she was crazy and the driver swerved around her, flipping her off.

She was royally pissed and motioned back in the same profane manner. She knew it was not lady-like, but did not care. She could not imagine why they would ignore her cry for help. She looked down at herself, noticing the condition of her outfit. The rips, blood stains, smeared mud on her knees was a clear indication she needed help.

Why didn’t they stop? How could they just keep on going?

She paced back and forth, glancing at her watch and knowing darkness would soon be upon them.

“This is ridiculous. I’ll do this my god damned self!” she sputtered.

Right now, she was Gavin’s only shot at staying alive. The feeling that washed over her was ever-consuming. She was a woman driven and nothing would stop her from succeeding. Gavin would survive this frigging travesty one way or the other even, if it meant sacrificing her own safety. She knew she was crazy for thinking so gallantly. But, she could not just leave him there, not try and do something ... anything. He would do it for her. Somehow, deep inside of her, she knew he was that kind of man.

She looked one last time in both directions and then spun about, descending the hill one last time. She was bound and determined to make good what daylight was left available to her. She had somewhat of an idea what she was going to do.

She stopped at the shoreline and looked skyward, hoping the storm would hold off a while longer and prayed for guidance and strength.

“Hold on, Gavin,” she called out. She doubted he could hear her, but she needed to say it for her own peace of mind. She made her descent quicker this time, determined not to fall and determined to save him from a fate worse than death.

When she reached the bottom, she looked about for a strong anchor, and found what she was looking for. She reached down for the roping she had brought with her earlier, slip-knotted one end of it securely around a sturdy, oak trunk and the other end around her slender waist. She

worked her way out onto the ice, cautiously scanning the area as she shuffled ever-so-slowly along.

Pamela could see spider-web cracks in the surface as she moved along like a toddler first learning to skate. She remembered it was best to go down on all fours to evenly distribute her weight and did so. She prayed the ice would hold her and continually scanned the surface with such an intensity, the heat of her gaze could have melted the ice.

It's holding, she silently cheered!

She smiled and swallowed the lump lodged in her throat; pleased that all her dieting and exercising kept her trim and athletically fit.

Valiantly, she continued, inching her way further out onto the ice. It made a hollow, popping sound as it expanded and shifted around her. Her head darted in all directions, watching the surface for any changes, so she would not be taken by surprise. She was scared to death and could not believe she was risking her life for a man she hardly knew. Her heart beat soundly in her chest and she was afraid of hyperventilating as her breaths puffed faster than a steaming locomotive.

Suddenly, she froze as the mustang shifted again less than ten feet in front of her. The sound of metal abrading against hard ice was ill-fated and brought tears to her eyes. She swallowed back a sob and pressed a clenched fist to her mouth as she watched and prayed that it would stop.

The desire to run forward and catch hold of his fender was strong, but she knew the idea was as ridiculous as it sounded.

“God, don't let it sink, please!” She cried.

She did not move. She watched and waited, her fingers nervously running through her hair as she bit down hard on her lower lip. She knew she had to keep her wits about her and tried to calm her nervous trembling despite the cold. Time was of the essence.

Even though help was on its way, she still knew that she was desperately running out of time. Gavin's car had to be secured, and she was the only one who could do it.

Chapter Five

She turned and looked up at the ridge, following along the highway for as far as she could see. She listened again for the sounds of sirens, and then she heard it ... a faint thudding coming from Gavin's car.

The ice continued to crack and pop beneath her and her nerves tightened like a bow string as little sounds of worry and fear escaped her lips.

The sound grew louder. THUD. THUD. THUD.

She stopped, and could make out what he was screaming.

“Go back! Go Back!”

Pamela's fear turned to elation. No, damn it. She wasn't going back now and quickened her pace, anxious to reach him.

Urgency overruled caution. She could not explain what drew her to him like a magnet. She smiled and waved her arms like a banner, even if he could not see her, she did not care. She noticed his door was wedged against the jagged ice. It was stopping the car from sinking and prevent him from escaping. She assumed the other side was blocked as well. She knew the only way to extricate him, would be using a wrench to drag the car ashore.

She dared to move closer, hoping the ice would continue to hold her weight. It was then, she realized his window was rolled down a short way. Her heart danced a salsa when his face came into view. He didn't look pleased, but she sent him a reassuring smile anyway.

"Are you crazy? You need to go back."

"Well, that's not about to happen. I'm tying this line to your underside, so just shut up."

"If you come any closer, the ice will break. I'm gonna cut out the back window. Please, Pamela. Turn around and go back. I can't have you risking your life for me."

She made a face at him.

"And you wouldn't do the same for me?"

He opened his mouth to reply and she didn't give him a chance.

"Like I said, shut up. Are you hurt?"

He shook his head.

"Just slammed my thick head."

Pamela smiled at his attempt to be humorous

"I thank God you're still alive."

"Me too. Will you have that drink with me now?"

Pamela smiled and didn't reply as she looked over the situation. She knew it was pointless to lie.

"Your door is definitely, as I'm sure you know. Help is on its way. It's important," she emphasized with her hands, "You stay still. The slightest movement could shift your car again."

She showed him the slack in the rope tied about her. "I'm going to try and tie this to your rear axle just in case. It's secured to a huge trunk on shore."

The color drained from his handsome face.

"No! You can't do that!" His jet-back hair fell with boyish disarray over his right eye.

She had an urge to brush it aside and give him a kiss to reassure him.

"I told you not to move," she scolded.

"Look," he interrupted, "I've already started to cut away at the top. I know I can squeeze out the back."

“That’s great,” she answered. “I still need to secure the car in case the ice gives way. I think I can do this. If it gets risky, I’ll back off, I promise. Besides, the rope is already anchored even if I fall through.”

Gavin slowly shook his head.

“I don’t know whether you’re just crazy, or brave as hell.”

Pamela wished more than anything they were back at the Inn, sipping a glass of Chardonnay in front of the fireplace instead of here right now.

“Believe me, taking a dip in this lake is not on my to do list,” she joked.

Gavin smiled at her attempt to be whimsical.

Silence hung in the air and Pamela shrugged. “Okay. I’m doing this.”

“Wait!” He shouted.

She stopped and turned, puzzled by the urgency in his voice.

“You won’t stiff me again, will you?”

She detected the fear in this voice, and knew it wasn’t due to rejection. She smiled tenderly and replied, “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Without incident, she managed to secure the cord of rope to the mustang’s rear axle. Each time the ice popped, she jumped, questioning her sanity. She was surprised to find the ice as strong as it was. It was almost as if it had hardened around the car’s framework.

She dragged the excess cord back to shore, untied it from the trunk and wrapped it three times around the thick, weathered base of a twenty-foot pine. She could not believe the car did not shift or sink again. She stopped briefly to catch her breath and sat upon a massive boulder that jutted up out of the frozen lake. There was a frigid change in the air and Pamela shivered. The snow began to fall heavier and she watched a front of gray clouds begin to move in swifter overhead.

She turned her head in the direction of the highway and listened intently. All she heard was the biting wind breaking through the trees behind her. Pamela felt so terribly alone and at that moment could not imagine what was running through Gavin’s mind right now. It seemed an eternity had passed since the teen had departed. She checked her watch and heaved a loud sigh ... only forty-five minutes had passed. The probability Gavin could walk away from this accident alive was getting slimmer as the minutes ticked by.

“Patience, Pamela,” she reminded herself. She knew how imperative it was that she keep calm. She wanted Gavin to survive. Losing hope was not an option. They were out in the middle of nowhere though, and that was not in their favor. She looked out at the car and noticed that he managed to cut a large section of top away. He had to be questioning his vulnerability right now..

She wanted so much to get to know him better. She remembered how easy it was to talk to him and the immediate attraction she felt. Would fate be that cruel to bring them together, only to tear them apart. No, she thought. As weirdly coincidental their meeting had been, she truly believed it was supposed to happen that way. Corny, chance meetings happened like that all the time. She just wanted to see his face again and assure him everything would be all right.

She jumped from the boulder, eager to do just that. She walked along the shoreline, parallel to the highway and listened one last time. All she could hear was the wind gusting through the trees carrying the sound of Gavin's efforts.

She was drawn to those sounds like a mother to her newborn. She stepped out onto the ice and halted as it cracked under her weight. She stepped back and immediately questioned her own vulnerability. She could not see the ice anymore. She moved further down shore and paced back and forth like a caged tigress. She stopped periodically to listen and gazed back out at the lake, with a long, haunting look.

She knew how she would feel if their roles were reversed ... alone, hopeless, afraid, and questioning her chances of survival. She felt compelled to be closer to him for some reason; to talk to him. It was beyond weird feeling the way she did with them both being strangers. Sharing a table at a restaurant did not constitute being familiar, or a friend. Still, she felt that and more.

She noticed that her footprints had disappeared and common sense blanketed her thoughts like a warning beacon. There was no way of telling where the thin ice was anymore. She had to be rationale. As much as she wanted to go back out there, she was just being plain foolish thinking she could get there and back safely.

"Don't even think it," Gavin shouted.

She shielded her eyes from the whipping snow and noticed his body was half out the back window.

"Oh, my god! You're free!"

She could see his bright fluorescent jacket as he carefully extricated himself from his car. She watched as he squirmed totally free and slip his body out over the back hood. Without warning, the car shifted and a loud crunching broke through the silence. Pamela screamed as the entire front of the car totally disappeared into the icy darkness, flipping the back end higher into the air. Gavin was thrown upwards like a wild, agitated bronco at a rodeo trying to unsaddle its rider.

She watched in horror as he landed on his side and rolled free of his mustang as three-quarters of it disappeared out of sight. The back end snapped as the rope lost its slack and straightened tight like a bow string.

Without thinking, she stepped out onto the ice and shuffled forward a few feet, and then stopped. She could see the vapor from his breath clouding in the cold, winter air and watched as he came to his knees and slowly rose until he was upright. He turned and looked for her, smiled, raised his arm and waved as a sign that he was okay.

She could tell his leg and shoulder were injured by the way he favored them and limped as he began to take a few steps forward. When he reached the rope, he grasped a hold of it, allowing the taught rope to take some of his weight. Blood started to stain the snow around his footing, and she knew he was injured more than she previously thought.

She moved forward, at least a few feet when he hollered out for her to stop. She shook her head in disagreement and her voice echoed her concern.

"You're losing a lot of blood."

With that, he fell, and she could hear the depth of the pain he was feeling as he groaned loudly. She felt it deep in her gut and her compassionate nature did not allow her to ignore it. Quickly, she scuffled forward, closing the gap between them.

It was then, she heard it, still rather distant, but ever-so distinguishable, the sound of sirens in the distance.

“Thank God,” she cried.

She saw Gavin’s head slowly rise and despite the slight distance left between them, their eyes met, held, and they smiled, knowing it soon would be over.

Gavin tried to stand, and as he did, the ice around him cracked loudly and his injured leg fell through the ice.

“Shit,” Pamela screamed and, she sprinted, holding onto the rope as a safety line in case it gave way beneath her.

Gavin managed to loop his arm around the rope, but she could tell that he had little energy and strength left to hold on for any length of time.

It took her only a matter of minutes to reach him. She turned quickly to gaze over her shoulder and saw the flashing red lights of a police cruiser and fire rescue trucks. Despite her hopefulness, she knew she had to get to Gavin before he lost his grip and disappeared under the ice. She directed all her attention to that task and prayed that their luck did not run out.

As she neared him, she knew his strength was just about gone.

“Don’t you dare let go,” she warned.

She saw the determination in his eyes as he gritted his teeth and fought to hold on. He grunted loudly, exerting the last ounce of energy he had left. His grip lessened and he cried out.

“I ... can’t hold on any longer.”

His teeth chattered uncontrollably and his right arm slid from the rope. He wrestled to bring his left arm up to loop over the rope, but the ice gave way totally beneath him.

Pamela screamed and ran the rest of the way. She stopped inches short of where he was, his forearms clapping onto the sides of the ice. She jumped, throwing herself onto the rope, balancing her stomach and looped her feet under Gavin’s armpits and screamed for him to wrap his arms around her legs.

He did so immediately and the weight of him pulled her legs under the water.

Pamela held on with all she had in her. There was no way in hell she was letting go. She managed to keep her chest balanced against the rope and hang on for dear life as she clenched her legs around Gavin’s waist like a vice. She could feel his body shivering against hers, and she increased her hold even tighter. She looked toward shore and could see the rescuers lowering what looked like an inflatable raft onto the ice.

“They’re coming, Gavin. Fire rescue is on the ice. Don’t you let go, damn it. Do you hear me? Don’t you dare let go now.”

“Not on your life,” he answered weakly.

She did not know how long it took for the rescuers to make their way out to where they clung to life. Snow was falling so heavily, it was an impenetrable blanket of white. She squinted hard to see and her head ached from the effort. She could no longer feel anything from the waist down. She thought she wiggled her toes, but was not sure they were still attached to her foot.

She gazed down to make sure that Gavin was still gripping a hold of her legs. She could not feel them either. She thought she heard wailing sirens. A voice filled with emotion spoke to her and it sounded comforting to her ears.

“We’ve got you now. You can let go, Miss.”

She could not stop her body from convulsing. The pain she felt was excruciating, as stinging, prickling sensations stabbed every nerve ending throughout her lower body. Her teeth chattered in unison with the tremors.

She was aware of muffled voices around them and tried to open her eyes. But, they would not react to the commands her brain was sending, as she drifted off into darkness.

Chapter Six

It was difficult for Pamela to fight off the lethargy that consumed her, forcing her to drift in and out of a somnolent sleep. When she did awaken, it was through half-opened eyes, her lids feeling so heavy, she could hardly keep them open. She needed to constantly reopen and close them before her mind could register what she started to see.

She was kept sedated to control the pain caused by her nerves coming back to life from the hypothermia she had suffered. For two days, she drifted in and out of darkness until her team of doctors decided she was stable enough to transfer her to a private room. On the third day of her recovery, Pamela awoke. Comforting rays streaming through the window of her room located on the hospital’s East wing warmed her.

Bayview General housed the Northeast’s top trauma center. Pamela realized that if it was not for the exceptional care she had received, she would not have her legs still attached to her body.

She lifted the starched bed sheet and tried to look at her legs, but could not see them. The insistent throbbing reminded her of their presence as it traveled a course up the inside of each thigh. She gasped and bit down hard on her lip, trying to ride out the tormenting spasms. When they subsided, she blew out a breath and slapped her hands hard on her thighs in frustration.

“Testing for feeling, Miss Landers, or are you just really unhappy?”

Pamela jumped from the intrusion and looked up to see Dr. Edward Gibbons leaning against her door frame, a concerned and fatherly look upon his face. She blushed with embarrassment, witnessing her little temper tantrum.

He was a handsome man for his fifty years and she could tell from the way his sterile, white jacket hugged his trim frame that he kept himself fit. The gray, which peppered his raven-black

hair made him look very distinguished and a nicely trimmed mustache caressed sculpted and well-defined lips.

“The latter, I’m afraid,” squishing her lips to the side.

He entered the room and moved to the laptop to pull up her records.

“You’ve had quite the ordeal,” he replied. “You and Mr. Templeton were extremely lucky that you weren’t exposed to the elements any longer than you were. Hypothermia is a serious condition that can lead to death.” He turned to move to her bedside. “You’ve suffered what we call second stage superficial frostbite. The throbbing sensation you are feeling is your body rewarming and could last a few weeks to a few months. There may be a lingering tingling, some sensory loss, but nothing chronic.

Damage, luckily, did not reach the tissue. Still, and I emphasize this, it was severe enough that long-term you will experience slight pain and abnormal sensations in your legs and toes, a sensitivity to heat and cold, excessive sweating in those areas, and probably arthritis.”

Pamela could not hide the shock on her face.

“I’d hate to think what severe frostbite does, if what you just told me is minor.”

She did not like the idea of having to contend with such long-term effects. Now, she understood why the average person didn’t get involved, when facing a decision to jeopardize themselves helping someone else.

She could not be that person though, could not live with the knowledge that Gavin could have died, could have lost his legs, if she had not stepped up and helped him.

Dr. Gibbons patted her arm affectionately.

“Like I said, you are a very lucky young lady. Now, let’s check you out.”

He pulled back her bed sheet and examined her legs. Pamela jumped from the pressure he applied to the tender, bruised area above her knee caps.

“Still a lot of discomfort I see.”

She nodded and depressed the control button at her bedside to raise herself to a more comfortable position.

“It’s a constant throbbing that doesn’t let up and keeps me awake at night. Now, I know why.”

His eyes reflected the compassion he felt and he sat down beside her. He touched her hand tenderly and she knew his concern was genuine.

“I’m going to order a light sedative to help you sleep through the pain. As I said, it will subside with time. You should be able to leave the hospital tomorrow. Take a Tylenol PM at night and then Ibuprophen during the day. Other than that, take it easy the next two weeks ... nothing strenuous, and no skiing.” He smiled.

Pamela had no intention of skiing. She had a funny feeling that her love for Winter sports was short-lived. Having an ongoing sensitivity now to the cold kind of put a kibosh on that.

“Is Mr. Templeton being released tomorrow as well?”

Dr. Gibbons stood and shook his head.

“He was released this morning.”

Pamela’s look of disappointment prompted him further to explain.

“You were still pretty out of it, when he came by to check on you again.”

Her head snapped up.

“Again? He was here often?”

Dr. Gibbons nodded with a smile.

“Oh, yes. He was rather worried and demanded updates on you quite often.”

It pleased her to learn that Gavin cared. She wished she had a chance to see him before he left.

“Will he be okay?”

The doctor nodded. “In time.”

“Meaning, what exactly?”

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss Mr. Templeton’s case, Miss Landers. You understand.”

The doctor leaned forward and patted her shoulder.

“I’m sure your young man will be in touch soon. The flowers attest to that.” He pointed to a gorgeous bouquet of lilies and roses setting on the window ledge.

Pamela shook her head in disagreement.

“Oh, we’re not a couple, Doctor. We just met a short while ago. We’re strangers really. I’m sure it’s just a beautiful gesture for helping him.”

He chuckled and sent her a look that said otherwise.

“Strangers?” He shook his head. “Maybe, then. Not, so much now, I think.” He chuckled and turned to exit her room.

What was that supposed to mean?

Her brows furrowed as she tried to reflect on what had happened. Everything was such a blur after she fell through the ice. She remembered they had a wonderful connection at the restaurant, which was kind of preposterous in a way. They never hooked up after that. Did they?

When she thought of all the parties, the meetings, the times her friends played match-maker, and all those stupid profiles she created on those dating sites ... what happened between her and Gavin did kind of seem destined. Maybe.

She sighed and looked up at the ceiling, offering a quiet thank you to the higher powers. She wondered if the angels did a happy dance when their initial meeting played out. This was certainly one for the memory books, if it did turn into something special.

What she needed to do next, was to call her office and let them know what had happened. Then she needed to settle things with the resort. She wondered, if perhaps, Gavin had done so already.

A wave of disappointment washed over her. She wished she had an opportunity to see Gavin, talk to him, and say good bye before he got released. Then she remembered what Dr. Gibbons had said and a little tee-hee escaped her lips. She was being silly. Of course, Gavin was interested.

She gazed over at the stunning floral display he had sent her and noticed there was a card attached. She looked at the intravenous line attached to her arm and exclaimed her displeasure. She reached for the buzzer and rang for the nurse. Within a few seconds, a pleasant voice came over the intercom. Shortly after, a perky young woman entered her room and retrieved the card for Pamela.

“What a gorgeous bouquet,” the nurse voiced, “and so was the man who sent them.”

Pamela smiled and nodded. Yes, Gavin Templeton is a strikingly, handsome man as she read his note quietly.

I owe you my life and will take great pleasure in showing you how much your effort is appreciated. Be well, Gavin.

The nurse interrupted her thoughts.

“Must be one heck of a love note,” she said pleasantly.

Pamela smiled.

“He’s something else, that’s for sure.” She placed the note back inside its envelope. “We actually just met a few days ago.” She shook her head still surprised by the chain of events. “Strange how life happens sometimes, you know?”

The nurse chuckled. “Sounds like a love story in the making. That man is smitten with you.”

Pamela’s head tilted to the side.

“Do you really think so?”

“Honey, all he did was ask about you the moment the paramedics brought you both in on gurneys. He was relentless,” she waved her hand slightly, “and, didn’t stop until he knew that you were going to be all right.”

“Was there any doubt?”

The nurse shook her head. “No. As serious as your exposure was, it was never life-threatening. Another half-hour in that freezing lake for both of you, however, would have played out differently. You were both very, very lucky.”

Pamela sighed deeply. “Yes. Yes, we were.”

“You may have started out as two strangers,” the nurse continued, “but, I would bet a week’s salary, that you have a new beau in your life, and whew! Is he ever a hottie!” She shook her hand to emphasize her meaning.

Pamela could feel her face flush as her stomach jumped excitedly. She hoped the magic would not end. It had been a long time, since a man made her feel the way he did. She generally did not trust men. She had too many disappointments in her life. Maybe, it was the profession she was in. Men, just did not hold up to her expectations ... not, that she set the bar too high. They were either too self-centered, too business oriented, cheaters, or downright opinionated.

It had gotten to the point she had just decided to wrap a chain around her heart and lock it closed from feeling anything at all.

Hearing the nurse fill her in about Gavin's attentions during her stay made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

"He was in here how often?"

"Three times a day," the nurse's eyes sparkled as she giggled.

Pamela's eyes widened with surprise.

"We all joked how we could set our watches to his visits." The nurse continued. "He stayed with you about a half-hour each time."

Pamela's heart quickened and she hoped to see him again soon. She hoped the attraction between them continued. It just had too. Fate would not be so cruel to throw them together, only to pull them apart. Would it?

Chapter Seven

Pamela could not shake the disappointment she felt, nor the sadness weighing heavily on her heart. She had wanted desperately to see Gavin again, but had to resolve herself to the fact it may not happen.

Her friend, Janis, helped her out of her car and inside her town home. She emptied her suitcase for her and put everything away where she knew it went.

"Pam, you've got to get out of this slump you're in."

Pamela looked at her dearest friend and knew that Janis was right. All she could manage was a shrug in response. She plopped down on her bed and blindly looked about the room. It had been two whole days with no word from Gavin. She told the nurses they could release her contact information to Gavin should he call to request it. All that he knew, was she worked for a law firm. And then, she guffawed aloud, realizing her contact information was available through his resort's reservation system. He had access to her office and cell number, and her home address.

"What?" Janis blurted.

Pamela looked at her friend. What a pair the two of them made. Janis towered over her own petite five-foot frame with legs that did not quit. Her friend's chick, blond cut was the newest rave and so was her fashion sense.

Despite their differences, they were the bestest of friends, surviving law school as roomies, sharing pig-out sessions of pistachio ice cream and fluffer-nutter sandwiches while cramming for exams.

She lamented with exasperation.

“It’s just that, well you know, he hasn’t called. It’s not like he doesn’t have access to my digits, and I just thought –“

Janis plunked down beside her and threw an arm over Pamela’s shoulder.

“You thought what? Look, he owns one of the biggest resorts in the State. His note said it all. He’ll call.” Janis bumped her side playfully. “Besides, there’s a fifty percent chance he already fell madly in love with you, or a fifty percent chance he still will, once he gets to know how fabulous you are.”

Pamela chuckled.

“You never cease to amaze me, counselor. No wonder you’re a powerhouse trial lawyer.”

Janis scrunched her nose and nodded.

“I know.” She shrugged. “But, right now, you need to follow the doctor’s orders and get better. You can’t expect me to chauffeur your ass around and be at your beckon call much longer now, do you?”

Pamela threw a bed pillow and hit her square in the face.

The two of them carried on like school girls and tossed pillows back and forth, until they both collapsed with giddy exhaustion.

Janis shrieked when she noticed her reflection in the large mirror, hanging over Pamela’s dresser. She hurried to rearrange herself and promised to pick her up later that day for her first therapy session.

When Janis left, Pamela sat and reflected on some of the things her friend had told her. She knew that Janis was right and appreciated her insight. She resolved herself to the fact that like herself, Gavin was a busy professional, and when time allowed, he would reach out to her. She believed in her heart that he would make good on the endearing handwritten note he wrote. Patience was a virtue. All she had to do was apply it and give time its due.

She rose and moved to the cozy window seat across the room, which faced a private and beautifully landscaped back lot. She snuggled back against the pile of fluffy pillows made from Waverly prints in soft shades of mauve and pink.

She looked about her bedroom, noting how they blended with the Victorian theme she had chosen and sighed. Her eyes scanned the perimeter of her property line. She liked how the newly fallen snow sparkled in the late morning sun as it dusted the massive pines and blanketed her vast lawn. The shimmering prisms of light brought back memories of her day on Babcock Lake. The snow had glistened then too, deceiving her with its beauty.

She couldn’t shake the connection she had felt that day. She was sure of it and when she briefly closed her eyes, his chiseled, good looks came to mind, along with those haunting amber eyes. She looked back at her bed and rose from the window seat. She picked up her luggage, walked to her closet, and put it away.

She walked to the kitchen and placed the copper kettle on the stove to boil. The Westminster chimes in the hallway rang, announcing a visitor was at her front door. She quickly gazed up at the quartz clock hanging over her sink to check the time.

Who would be calling at this hour, she wondered, as she turned toward the hallway.

The hard, burgundy slate tiles felt cold under her stocking feet and Pamela shivered a little. She caught her reflection in the bronze hall mirror and was satisfied with the way she looked despite her lack of makeup. Her peach complexion still glowed from the crisp, Winter air outside. The sunlight that shone through the etched-glass panels over her front door touched her honey-brown tresses, making her auburn highlights glow.

The doorbell chimed once more and she quickened her pace.

“Coming!” She hollered, as she forced a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She peeked out the lace curtain alongside the six-paneled oak door and her heart quickened as she recognized Gavin smiling back at her.

“Oh!” She blurted as her hand flew over her heart to stay its immediate pounding.

Gavin greeted her with a look that confirmed their attraction. She desperately wanted to fling herself into his arms, but controlled the urge.

He was handsomely attired in a black cashmere coat, wearing a double-breasted pin-striped wool suit. It molded his masculine frame to perfection. A silk jacquard print tie complimented his look, as did the leather, tasseled wing-tips he wore.

She had all to do not to gush like a teeny-bopper as his cologne ticked her nose when the wind swirled about him. It was a blend of the cold outdoors and a light musk that made her insides quake. She noticed his well-manicured nails when he removed his gloves to greet her.

She smiled and accepted his hand in greeting, drawing him into a hug. She just had to touch him, to hold him, and feel him in her arms. She could tell by the way he drew her tighter into his embrace, that he felt the same.

“You look wonderful,” his breath tickled her ear. “I hope it’s okay to stop by unannounced like this.”

She gazed into his eyes and cleared her throat nervously. Their amber warmth caressed her like a midsummer night’s breeze and she reached up to touch his cheek lightly with the palm of her hand.

“It is so good to see you. Please, come in.” She released him and stepped to the side so he could enter her foyer.

His smile was enchanting. When he released her, he turned toward her and took her face between his hands. He kicked the door closed with the heel of his foot and backed into it, bringing her with him.

Pamela gasped from his touch as a current passed through her. He held her as if she were a delicate porcelain figurine to be cherished.

“I couldn’t stay away another day. I wanted to give you enough time to recover more and settle in,” he admitted.

His eyes mirrored the affection he felt and her heart skipped a beat. He towered nearly six inches over her and she had to tilt her head to gaze into his eyes.

She knew she was going to be kissed and when his mouth lowered over hers, she moaned from the thrill it invoked deep within her.

His touch was light, yet very seductive as he slowly teased her lower lip with his tongue, then drew the sculpted peaks of her top lip between his teeth and sucked tenderly.

She felt herself sway and melted against the strength of his broad, muscled chest. The passion he stirred left her wet and she wanted more. She pulled away and knew her face was flushed.

She knew he found her reaction amusing and he pecked at the tip of her nose with a quick kiss while he clasped his hands behind his back.

“You’re adorable when you blush. You know that?” He chuckled.

She smiled and covered her mouth with her hand and looked down at her white crew socks briefly. When she looked back at him, she felt warmed by his smile and the laughter that reflected in his eyes.

“I generally don’t kiss strangers on my door step, you know.”

Gavin raised his eyebrows and leaned against her door, crossing his arms at his chest.

“We’re past being strangers; don’t you think?”

He was right, and after what they’ve been through, a kiss like that and the hope of more to come excited her.

She invited him in for coffee and the freshly baked Danish Janis had purchased earlier. They talked for nearly an hour, reflecting on the accident, how lucky they were, and agreeing that fate had played a hand in bringing them together.

Gavin asked Pamela out to dinner the following Saturday and she agreed only if he promised to let her reciprocate in kind.

Her therapy session that afternoon was taxing. She had to exert every effort towards not crying out from the pain working her muscles had caused. The rigorous schedule her therapist initiated consisted of fifteen minutes in a whirlpool, two sets of ten on a leg press, leg curl and stretch machines.

Her therapist was a kindly, fatherly sort with a rotund belly and squat frame. He used a little bit of consoling along with firmness to get her through her routine. She was glad to learn that if she faithfully swam an hour each morning for the next month and worked on the required machines each day, her legs would be stronger and close to new.

Thirty days she could deal with, she reasoned, as she wiped the beads of sweat from her brow. The painful routine was doable, considering how close she actually came to freezing to

death. She would do what she had to, she vowed, and gritted her teeth as she kept time with the repetitions her therapist called out.

Gavin's amber eyes and the kiss they had shared helped her push herself harder. She knew getting stronger wasn't going to be easy. Spending time with him again next week gave her something to focus on.

Chapter Eight

Gavin called mid-week to check on Pamela's progress and to reconfirm their dinner date that coming Saturday.

Her anxiety drove her to near madness.

"Girlfriend, you've got it bad!" Janis teased over the phone.

"I do not!" Pamela answered.

Her girlfriend laughed heartily in her ear. "Ah, yah, you do. You've only called me three times so far about what to wear."

There was a brief silence before Pamela responded.

"I have? Okay. Maybe I have."

Janis laughed. "I have an idea. What do you say I stop by after my last appointment, pick you up, and we go shopping for a killer outfit that'll turn him into a horny teenager?"

"Janis!" She squealed.

"Oh, come on! You know you want to do him. I would. I'll pick you up in about an hour and a half. Ciao kiddo."

Janis was true to her word, and in less than that time, she was at Pamela's door, whisking her off to the best boutique Bayberry had to offer.

Pamela was rather astounded by the welcome they received upon entering C'est Fini by nearly every clerk in the store. The personal attention they offered made her feel like a celebrity. Janis had warned her the tags were pricey, but she did not care. Gavin was worth every dollar. She wanted to WOW him, and leave him wanting more.

The small French salon was enchanting. A large, doomed pink and white canvas protected the walkway upon entering and supported by ornate white wrought-iron columns. A four-paneled door had white lattice inserts and two sixteen-inch moss wreaths were hung from them decorated with giant mauve bows, sprays of baby's breath, and pink and white tea roses.

An area to the right was partitioned off by a half wall topped with a flower box full of fresh blooms. There were twenty small round tables topped with lace tablecloths that reached to the floor, with a plate of glass for protection. Chintz, floral napkins shaped like fans were set in crystal holders. Thick, quilted cushions in a matching floral print offered a feminine touch. All

the tables were adorned with 18th century crystal vases filled with delicate white peonies and pink roses.

The tables were comfortably spaced apart so the models could walk around in tea room style to show the styles they wore more personally.

Pamela and Janis were seated immediately and welcomed with a complimentary glass of Chardonnay, along with a small basket of warm croissants and pastries. An associate joined them within a matter of moments

“Bon Jour, Mademoiselles and welcome to C’est Fini. It is my pleasure to assist you. What is it I can help you with today?”

Pamela was intrigued with her French accent and replied.

“I’m looking for a cocktail dress. Something that is a little alluring, yet not too daring.”

Jeannette smiled and replied.

“You are a size six, oui?”

Pamela’s surprise was apparent.

“Why yes! How did you know?”

Jeannette bowed respectfully.

“Tis my business to know body shapes, coloring and sizes, Mademoiselle.”

Pamela replied enthusiastically as Janis looked on with pleasure.

“I am impressed, Jeannette and yes, I am a six.”

“Merci. I hope what I chose for you will be to your liking. Excuse me,” she bowed, “While I go and collect a few I’m sure will appeal to you.”

Janis chuckled when she noticed Pamela’s look of awe.

“I bring only my dearest friends here, Cherie,” she teased, mimicking the clerk’s accent.

Pamela’s eyebrows peaked and the right side of her lip curved upward.

“Aren’t you suave one,” she replied, shaking her head. “I’ve got to admit though, Jan, this is really cool.”

“I knew you’d think this place was a gas? Makes you feel like royalty, doesn’t it?”

They both giggled and cleared their throats, when they noted the stares they were receiving from some of the snobby patrons. They tried their best to stifle their outbursts.

When a petite, slender brunette model appeared before them, Pamela knew the outfit she wore was exactly what she was looking for and could not wait to see Gavin’s reaction.

Saturday arrived and her doorbell chimed promptly at seven and her insides quaked with nervous jitters. She took two, slow cleansing breaths to calm the queasiness. She checked her reflection one last time before opening the front door.

The jewels that nestled around her slender neck shimmered richly. She touched the delicate, pear-shaped emeralds that circled an oval diamond. The matching dangle earrings complimented her off the shoulder evening dress of emerald chiffon, which pouffed below the waist to just above her knees.

At first, she thought it was ridiculous choosing a wardrobe entirely set around jewelry. But, the exquisite heirloom was bequeathed to her by her mother. This was a date as special as their meaning. She readjusted the belt accentuating her waist and folded the matching wrap over her arm and her small clutch bag in her hand on the way to the front door.

The look on Gavin's face as she opened the door told her he approved. It was what she had hoped for and she beamed happily. She stepped close, extending her wrap for him to drape about her shoulders.

"Can't I just look at you a little while longer?"

She winked and turned her back to him.

"Sorry. I'm too hungry," she joked.

He placed the wrap about her shoulders and turned her to face him, holding her at arms' length.

"You're exquisite," he murmured and leaned in to place a tender kiss at the curve of her neck.

His gaze focused on her lips and she knew he wanted to kiss her. She could feel the friction in the air between them and the excitement and anticipation was heady. Her stomach growled and they simultaneously broke into laughter.

"Come on beautiful," he spoke, placing her hand in the curve of his arm, as he led her towards his car. "Let's get you some food."

Nothing could have prepared her for his choice of venue. It was a new American cuisine restaurant known as, Expressions, and beyond what she could have imagined.

The interior was tastefully decorated with half-moon window cornices embellished with floor-length lace ruffled panels. Six-paneled pine boards were used as wainscoting for the walls painted a soft French blue. A stone fireplace was ablaze, adding a cozy warmth and ambiance to the rich table settings, flora and linens.

The Matre'd escorted them to a quaint round table set for two off to the right of the fireplace and introduced their waiter for the evening. A cherry wood baby grand piano was situated on a step-up stage. The entertainer was a handsome black man of about thirty dressed in a tuxedo with tails extending over his bench. He crooned in a soft tenor voice an old ballad, "It Had To Be You," while his fingers glided over the keyboard.

Pamela inhaled the sweet scent of lavender roses that complimented their table, its crystal vase reflecting the golden tones of the flickering fire burning nearby.

She exhaled softly, resting her chin in her hand, looking dreamily into Gavin's eyes. It all seemed fairy-like and her Prince Charming was sitting right across the table from her.

"This is simply charming, Gavin. I've never seen anything so lovely."

"I have," he replied, "and I'm looking right at her."

She could feel a warmth begin to rise from her belly as his smile melted her insides. He always knew the right thing to say.

"Are you always like this?"

He reached out and slowly traced the outline of her hand with his thumb.

She let him. It felt right. Normally, she would have pulled away. She did not like intimate touches like this in the beginning of a relationship. It always seemed forced ... too soon. She liked taking things slow. With Gavin, slow was not the speed she wanted ... at all. She felt like a swarm of bees were unleashed inside of her. She never responded that way to a man's touch before. She was having a hard time tampering the feelings he aroused in her.

"Only with you," he replied.

She returned his smile and felt a little disappointed when he released her hand as the waiter approached to pour their wine.

Gavin gave her his full attention once he ordered for them both.

"I have to commend you on your choice of restaurants. This one is going to be hard to top when it's my turn to treat you."

"Then let me treat you all the time."

"But, I like treating too."

He raised his glass to toast and replied, "Then here's to many evenings spoiling each other."

As the evening wore on, their entertainer delighted them with soft ballads from an era long gone. Pamela recognized a lot of the tunes he sang, many of which were her parents favorites growing up. She began to hum softly along to "I Only Have Eyes For You."

Gavin rose and pulled her out onto the dance floor. Immediately, they fell into step, sailing along the polished dance floor in perfect concord as though they had been dancing together for years.

She was aware of the placement of his hand at the small of her back and the way her nipples crushed against his chest as he held her tightly against him. The strong musk scent of his cologne and his warm breath tickling her neck made Pamela's spine tingle and her heart thunder in her chest.

Gavin tenderly kissed the curve of her neck repeatedly and she melted deeper into his arms. He encircled her fully into his embrace and continued to reign a trail of blazing kisses below her ear and along her shoulder.

She never believed in love at first sight. With him it was different. The connection was even stronger because of the history they shared. With their bodies pressed so closely together, feeling the blend of softness against hard plains, excited her even more.

They stayed on the dance floor, swooning to one slow dance after another. Delicately, she played with the hair at the nape of his neck, loving the feel of its texture between her fingers. The taut muscles of his neck flinched from the excitement her touch aroused and Pamela smiled to herself, pleased that she inflamed the same desire that he evoked in her.

Both had forgotten about dinner. It seemed as if hours had already passed, as they occupied every square inch of the dance floor. But, they had only reveled in the pleasure of dancing to just three songs.

Gavin noticed that dinner was being served and reluctantly broke the magical connection between them, and escorted Pamela back to their table. It pleased her how they responded to each other's touch; and she knew how easy it would be to jump into bed with him. The passion he aroused in her made her burn with desire. She never wanted any man so badly before and so soon.

She knew she had to practice some sense of control. She wanted ... needed to be sure. She was so ready for love and wanted nothing more than to have a real home and children.

She was infatuated and attracted to the perception of what could be. Her job was demanding. She wasn't willing to simply give it up or spurn her responsibilities on infatuation. She wanted to be sure, before she lessened her work load and made time for a true relationship. It was important she give it time to nurture and grow into something meaningful. She would give up her status at the firm for that kind of love.

Dinner was superb, consisting of soup du jour, a small romaine salad topped with a light house dressing and roasted duck coated with an orange-marmalade glaze.

Pamela passed on dessert, but could not feign off Gavin's attempts to share his creamy chocolate mousse. She watched with glee as he savored each spoonful. There was so much she found appealing about him. There was still just as much she needed to learn. She had to admit that it was the best evening she had ever had.

She took a tiny sip of the coffee-flavored liqueur she had ordered to help settle the hearty meal she just consumed.

"Where did you get those beautiful eyes," she asked.

His spoon halted in mid-air between his dish and mouth. A look she could not read left her bewildered.

"I bet you get them from your dad," she continued. "You're probably clones of each other," she joked.

His smile was forced and she could not figure why.

Don't they get along, she wondered. Maybe his dad passed away.

She was sorry she asked and swallowed hard as he looked away and watched another waiter serve the couple across the room from them.

When Pamela looked back at Gavin, he cleared his throat and placed his spoon down beside his dessert cup, slowly dabbing at his lips with his napkin.

The look in his eyes registered pain and became misty as she watched him fight to control the emotion.

She felt terrible and swallowed the lump that rose in her throat. She knew she was going to cry and could feel the tears burning the back of her lids. She reached out to brush her fingers over his hand.

“My father died almost two months ago. It was a tragic accident.”

“Oh, god! I’m so, so sorry, Gavin. I didn’t know. I’ve been working crazy hours the past couple of months and I can’t tell you the last time I saw or heard the news. I wouldn’t have –“

Gavin shook his head and touched a finger to her lips to quiet her.

“There’s no need to apologize. We still haven’t decided what to do yet. The police are still investigating,” he replied, wiping at a tear in the corner of his eye and shrugged.

His attention was drawn to the waiter that attended them and Gavin signaled for the check.

“Please, if I can help in any way, let me know.” She felt as though she placed a damper on the whole evening and tried to recover some of the magic. “What do you say we return to my place for a night cap and listen to some of my golden oldies?”

“How about a raincheck? I’ve got hours of paperwork to catch up on, plans I need to review, and a host of other things.”

She tried to keep the disappointment out of her tone.

“No problem. I understand busy.”

His smile was weak as he thanked the waiter and handed him three fifty-dollar bills and told him to keep the change. The waiter bowed graciously and wished them a good evening.

Gavin rose and gallantly pulled Pamela’s chair out for her and escorted her by the elbow out to the coat check where she retrieved her wrap.

They exchanged a light banter all the way back to her town house. She was curious as to why Gavin kept such a tight lid on his personal life and why he seemed so guarded.

She looked at his profile through the darkness and could make out his strong, masculine silhouette from the lights of passing motorists and street lights. She could tell he was very deep in thought and wondered what was on his mind.

Gavin walked her to her door in silence and turned to walk away after saying a quick good night.

“Hey! Wait a minute, you,” she hollered after him. “Get back here.”

He turned, a stunned look upon his face.

She stood there with her fists on her hips and what she hoped was a stern look on her face.

She softened her look and closed the distance between them.

“I can’t have you leave like that after the beautiful evening we just had.”

Her next move was a brazen one as she stood on tippy toes and entwined her arms about his neck. She drew his head down to touch her lips to his, and he did not resist.

His hands roamed up the small of her back, following the seductive outline of her waistline, leaving a blazoned trail of sensations in their quake.

Her insides quivered as his mouth warmly opened and his tongue worked its way inside her mouth.

He took her face between his hands and aroused her with long, ravishing kisses, bringing to life a passion that had been dormant for far too long.

The Winter night did not chill her wrapped in the warmth of his embrace. Even the silvery moon that glowed overhead cast a radiance over the newly fallen snow and the couple.

She hungered for more than just kisses and knew that he could carry her to heights of ecstasy she never experienced before. She knew by the way he kissed and worked his magic over her that he was a man expert in loving a woman.

Pamela forced herself to sever their tie. As much as she wanted him in her bed, she could not rush into anything she would be sorry for later.

“You sure know how to kiss a woman, Gavin Templeton,” she exhaled as she fumbled in her purse for her keys.

“The pleasure is all mine,” he rasped.

He lifted her chin with the tip of his finger and looked at her warmly.

“I’d love to see you again. I’m sorry about ... you know ... I promise to explain ... soon.”

“I would love nothing more. I’m starting back to work on Monday and taking it slow at first. My schedule needs to be reworked and I have to prepare for a major case I’m committed to.”

Pamela looked away briefly and gathered Gavin’s hands in her own, drawing them to her breast.

“Law has been my life 24/7. I’d like to change that. I’m a little mystified by the way fate has brought us together, Gavin. I also don’t want to rush things between us.” Her eyes pleaded for his understanding. “There’s so much I don’t know about you, and you me.”

Gavin grasped her by her shoulders and kneaded them softly.

“I’m not a love them and leave them kind of guy, Pamela. I’m attracted to you too, and not because you saved my life. I was drawn to you the moment I laid eyes on you. I’m fine with slow.”

Pamela’s eyebrow quirked playfully.

“Well,” he interjected, joking. “To some degree.”

She laughed and he drew her into his arms. When she tilted her head to gaze into his eyes, he captured her lips once again and she moaned softly with pleasure.

He broke the kiss and smiled knowingly at the sound she made.

“Slow, hah?”

She jabbed his rib playfully and replied, “You keep kissing me like that, and things could change.”

Chapter Nine

Pamela's strength returned by her third week of therapy. Dr. Gibbons told her he was thoroughly pleased with her quick recovery, attributing it mainly to her unwavering perseverance and dedication.

Her relationship with Gavin had developed into a cozy and harmonious one. She would have loved to see him more and talked to him less on the phone. The few times they got together over the following few weeks was to catch a movie or have dinner out.

Over the last month, she craved more intimate moments besides the passionate kisses they had shared and the groping that left her desiring more. As much as she wanted to take it slow, she found herself second guessing that decision.

She also felt there was something Gavin was holding back from sharing with her. Every time she brought up Sugar Run and the development that was making the papers, he evaded the issue and always changed the subject. She hadn't read or seen anything negative reported in the news and she couldn't quite understand why he constantly shut her down. His evasion led to more and more doubt and uncertainty. Pamela was very good at her job, and never set herself above hitting the streets and doing some undercover investigating to get to the heart of a matter. She could be a hound dog, if she wanted. The more Gavin evaded her questions about his personal life and family, the more shadow was cast on their relationship.

When she offered to visit him at Sugar Run, he always had an excuse for not being there. His evasiveness piqued her curiosity and her bewilderment made her start to question his integrity. It ate away at her morning and night, until she began to imagine such things as a family curse, a criminal past, or a wife and child tucked away somewhere unbeknownst to her.

Pamela was afraid her doubts would fester beyond control and poison her strong feelings for him. Still they began to chisel away at the bond they shared. She had always been the kind of woman to break off a relationship, if she got the slightest inclination something did not jive. It wasn't that she had a high opinion of herself. She just expected men to be as honest, open, and loyal as she was with them.

She had done the normal Google search on him. Gavin was on the board at Templeton Industries and joined the company straight out of college. She knew he had a sister, Caroline, who was stunning and resembled him in every way. His grandparents on his father's side owned a successful farm a few hours away, which had been in the family for three generations.

There hadn't been much written about his mom, and her side of the family, other than she divorced Gavin's dad six years ago and died shortly thereafter after a brief illness.

She read everything she could about his dad's tragic death and wondered, if the explosion that killed him had to do with some kind of conspiracy. It was still under investigation, and according to the reporting, highly suspicious. It was time, she decided, to find out what all the mystery was about that surrounded him, before she became totally and completely involved. The last thing she wanted, was to find herself trapped between misery and deceit.

Who am I fooling? She questioned herself. *I'm already in love with him.*

Spring had finally arrived and the drive to Marymount was invigorating. Their accident report listed his primary residence as that of his grandparent's farm. It was just shy of an hour from Sugar Run. Pamela felt uneasy as she drove past the site of their accident. There were no visible signs that such an ill-fated event had ever taken place, but she still shuttered at the thought of what she and Gavin had gone through.

A huge cedar sign sporting the Templeton family crest greeted her at the turn off for County Route #3 and New Hartford Drive. It wasn't until she traveled a short distance, that she realized it was a private road bordering wide-open spans of rolling farmland. The contrast of dairy cows with their Dalmatian coloring dotting the landscape made a charming, picture-perfect post card setting. Pamela could see the bright red of a silo in the distance and counted nine buildings before a huge red barn and vintage, white farmhouse came into view.

To say that she was surprised, when she pulled in front of a Circa 1800 blue fieldstone and clapboard farmhouse still in mint condition, would be an understatement. A wrap-around porch was accentuated by white lattice arbors and she immediately envisioned how beautiful they would look when adorned with colorful rose climbers in full bloom. Two matching cane high-back rockers with colorful floral fabric cushions encased in plastic for protection from the elements were upon the porch. Gingerbread accents extending over the porch added a delicate grace and country charm.

"He lives on a farm?" She shook her head. "Who would have thought." She gawked openly at the surroundings.

Why didn't he tell me this was where he lived? What's the big secret? Dozens of questions swirled about in her head as she exited her car.

She began to walk down a red brick pathway, leading to the porch. Pamela prayed that the occupants within the enchanting abode mirrored the same charm that the dwelling personified. She was greeted by an angelic little girl with soft brown waves that cascaded to her shoulders and golden, amber eyes that twinkled warmly.

Pamela's quick intake surprised even herself as she gaped at the delicate-looking child.

She cleared her throat and tried to calm the fear that built inside of her.

Is this child Gavin's?

"Excuse me, honey. I'm looking for Gavin Templeton?"

The child nodded sweetly and pointed to a direction behind Pamela.

"He's in the stables with mommy."

Pamela felt as though her heart had been pierced with a cold, steel blade and she gasped loudly as she tried to catch her breath. She stumbled backwards and turned as her eyes burned with tears.

"I'll go get him," she offered innocently and turned to leave.

“Wait,” Pamela shouted. The child stopped and turned her way. “What’s your name sweetie?”

The child hopped in place happily. “Becky,” she replied.

Leave. Just turn around and go!

The last thing she wanted, was to create a scene in front of the child.

“What a pretty name. Thank you for offering to get Gavin.”

Becky’s eyes grew as large as silver dollars as if, she remembered something.

“Grammy is in the kitchen baking cookies! Would you like some?”

Pamela squatted down and touched her nose. “Maybe next time. Why don’t you go run and see if they’re ready? I bet they’re going to be delicious.”

The child turned without argument and waved as she moved toward the front door.

“Okay.” She replied.

Pamela scampered down the walkway, anxious to leave before she was discovered. She could not believe what just happened. To think that he had a precious little girl, and even a wife ... it was more than she could bear. Tears stung her eyes as deception corroded her insides with regret. She began to sob, saddened by what would never be.

She stumbled and caught her balance before falling. She wiped at the tears that blurred her vision with the back sleeve of her sweater. She could not wait until she was safely in the sanctity of her car.

She quickened her pace and tripped, when her heel got caught between the cracks of a stone on the pathway. She fell hard on her knees, ripping her black wool slacks. Her torn, exposed flesh stung and bled, forcing her to bite down hard on her lip to stifle a cry. She looked in the direction of the barn and gasped.

She drew her knuckles to her lips and recognized Gavin exiting the barn with his arm wrapped about the slender waist of an attractive brunette.

Don’t look this way. Please dear lord, don’t let him see me.

They stopped a few feet away, still not noticing her and turned to face each other. Gavin planted a tender kiss upon the woman’s cheek and drew her into a loving embrace.

Pamela could not bear to watch any longer, rose, and began to run the rest of the distance to her car.

She could see that Gavin looked up and recognized her, waving his arms frantically and began to call out her name.

“Wait! Pamela, wait!”

She halted and turned, sending him a look that stopped him dead in his tracks. Then, she moved quickly towards her car, ignoring his attempts to try and explain.

“Pamela. Will you wait please!” He ran, catching up with her.

She did not want to hear his lies and excuses and opened her car door.

“Pam, let me explain,” he reached for her, but she pushed him away.

“No, Gavin. After what I’ve just seen going on between the two of you, save your breath. Now I know why you’ve avoided all my questions about your family. And, that precious little girl,” she pointed towards the house, “when were you going to tell me about her. Goodbye, Gavin.”

She got in and locked her car before he could stop her.

Gavin grabbed at her handle and pounded on her window.

“You’re wrong! Open the door damn it. Let me explain.”

She turned the key in her ignition and the engine roared. The silver spokes of her radials smoked as they rotated, hailing dirt and loose gravel into the air as she sped away, leaving Gavin behind, standing amid her settling smoke.

She cried the entire way home. She ignored his calls on her cell and felt as though her world was destroyed along with whatever dreams she had of sharing a life with him.

How could I have been so blind? Now, I know why he was so secretive and why he never told me anything about himself. It was all because he had a family already.

Her sorrow shifted gears. She was furious. To think that she was ready and willing to finally submit to his beguiling charms and passionate attentions.

“This is one heifer, Gavin Templeton, you’ll never get your hooves into. Never!”

Chapter Ten

Pamela arrived back at Bayview in under an hour, and headed directly to Janis’. She was relieved to find her light blue Audi parked in the driveway.

No one was closer to her than Janis. Janis was always there when things soured in her life. She was the sister she never had. Without her, Pamela’s life would be terribly lonely.

Janis’ smile faded when she opened her front door and noticed Pamela’s red, swollen eyes.

Pamela entered the slate foyer and broke into tears before Janis could ask her what was wrong. Between sobs and blowing her nose, she repeated her tale of woe.

Janis listened without interruption until Pamela quieted.

“I think you’re crazy, girl.” Janis exclaimed. “Don’t you think you should have given him a chance to explain? Maybe it’s not what you think at all.”

Pamela was shocked. She could not believe Janis did not interpret it the way she had.

“How can you say that?” She ripped off her jacket and threw it on a nearby credenza, spun around, and cast her hands into the air. “I can’t believe this. I’m the one that has been lied to here!”

Janis sighed and shook her head as she sat Indian style on the sofa.

“I’m not taking sides. I’m just trying to be objective.”

“Damn your objectivity!”

Janis moved closer when Pamela plopped down on the couch and grasped her shoulders, massaging them tenderly.

“Pam, look. You concluded that Gavin has a child, was sucking face with an attractive woman you assumed was his wife, and all without knowing all the solid facts. Am I right?”

Pamela moved from her touch and threw her keys and purse on top of the coffee table. She got up and walked through the foyer, pondering what Janis had said. Automatically, she headed for the kitchen in the back of the house.

Janis followed behind quietly, giving her time to digest what she had said, and waited.

Pamela set the kettle to boil on the stove and placed two cups and saucers for tea on the kitchen table. She had to admit she reacted irrationally. She still could not deny what she saw with her own eyes. She pulled out the chair from the table and plopped down onto the tufted cushion and placed her head in her hands.

Janis occupied the seat beside her.

“Well,” she prompted and waited.

Pamela gave her a look to be quiet and mulled over the situation in her mind. She reflected on the child, who resembled Gavin in every way, her reference about her mommy being with Gavin, not to mention the intimate exchange they shared that she witnessed.

She looked up at Janis and shook her head with dismay.

“You’re wrong, Jan. You weren’t there. You didn’t see what I did.”

Her eyes pleaded for understanding and Janis took a hold of her hand, patting it tenderly. The tone of her voice was consoling.

“Honey, it’s hard for me to believe Gavin would deceive you like this. He just doesn’t fit the m.o. of a dickwad.”

Pamela chuckled lightly, shaking her head, and Janis continued.

“I mean; I see the way he looks at you ... treats you. He adores you. If that isn’t love, then baby, I’ll eat this tea bag.” She waved a Lipton square under Pamela’s nose and raised her eyebrow in jest.

Pamela wanted desperately to believe her. She rose and paced in front of the French doors that opened out onto a beautifully landscaped enclosed two-tier deck. She tremored inside and absently rubbed her arms to warm herself.

The teapot whistled and Janis removed it from the stove. She stood behind Pamela and placed her hands atop Pamela’s shoulders.

“I know you’re confused. I just think you aren’t being fair to yourself or him.” She turned Pamela around. “Listen. You and Gavin shared something special, almost spiritual that day on Babcock Lake. The bond between you two is unexplainable. I just can’t believe he’d deceive you like that. And besides, you’re a lawyer! You mean to tell me you haven’t done a little

background check of your own? You did on every other guy you ever dated. Did ya Google the man?”

Pamela looked at her like she was nuts. “Of course, I didn’t find anything ... incriminating ... yet. I still know what a saw! And besides, he is a Templeton.”

Janis rolled her eyes. “So! Clinton was Governor of Arkansas, but does that mean he was a man, who could be trusted around the ladies? I thought you’d at least cross-examine him discreetly by now.”

Pamela’s brow furrowed and the lines around her lips tightened, dissatisfied with Janis’ drilling.

“You’re not funny.”

Janis’ eyes were bright with humor. “Well, darlin’, that’s what you do.”

Pamela’s look softened.

“It still doesn’t matter. We’ve been dating for a while now. Why hasn’t he told me about her, about the child, or his family? Why the big secret? I don’t like secrets. Yes, I’m a stickler for facts, but to keep all this from me when he predisposes to want the same things in life, doesn’t sit right with me. All the warning signs are going off in my head,” she flailed her hands in the air.

Janis reached out and took a hold of her hands.

“Give it some time. Think about what I said. Hear him out before you pass judgement on the man. Remember, counselor, a total stranger gets the benefit of testimony in a court of law to prove his innocence. Gavin deserves at least that much.”

Pamela’s eyes filled with tears and Janis drew her into her arms and squeezed her tight.

Janis huffed.

“For a smart lady, you don’t place much value on men or love, my friend. What is it your mom use to say? Yee, who have little faith.”

Pamela laughed and looked at her friend with the fondest affection. “Well, I don’t have the greatest track record, you know. What would I do without you?” She kissed her cheek and gave her a fierce hug. “You always see things differently. That’s why you’ll make full partner before I do. You’ve got the knack.”

Janis smiled. “I’m just more experienced with dickwads,” she joked.

Pamela stayed for the afternoon. Together they prepared a pot roast dinner, sat and chatted and sipped a few brandies. She left around seven to finish a brief that needed typing the next day.

The red button was flashing on her answering machine when she got home. She depressed the play button and waited as the tape rewound her messages. She recognized Gavin’s cell number as it appeared on her digital display. Her heart skipped as his voice quivered with emotion.

“Pamela, if you’re there, please, please pick up.” There was a brief pause. “Okay, it’s four thirty-five. Please call me at the farm as soon as you get in ... 338-1416. Let me explain ... please.”

The machine beeped three times before the next message played out. Her thoughts were in a tail spin. She could not get his voice out of her head. She hit the stop button to halt the other messages and rewound his.

He sounds sincere, she thought. Is Janis, right? Did I jump to conclusions?

She played out the other messages. She questioned her foolish pride and hasty judgement. Was it worth losing him forever? If she gives in and finds out he was lying, what then?

“What should I do?”

She stared at the machine and jumped when another message from Gavin played out. She sat down on the floor and drew her knees to her chest, listening.

His words whispered to her, and Pamela held her breath as she became hypnotized by his plea.

“Pamela, please, give me a chance to explain. Don’t ...”

The doorbell rang and a loud pounding jostled her with a start. Pamela stood, stopped the message playback, and walked to the door. She rose on her toes to peek through the security hole.

The repeated pounding made her jump back with a start.

“Pamela, its Gavin. I know you’re in there.”

Pamela made a face and swore under her breath.

“Not now, Gavin. Please go away. We’ll talk tomorrow.” She turned and rested her back against the door, hoping he would leave.

“Like hell. I won’t leave with this between us, with you thinking I deceived you. Please open the door,” he begged.

She turned back around and rested her forehead against the wood frame, wondering whether to give into her heart. She thought about what Janis said, weighing her arguments against her own fears. She did not want to make a mistake and accuse Gavin unjustly. But, she was afraid of what the truth might hold.

Slowly, she released the dead bolt lock and turned away from the door. She heard the handle turn and the door open slightly. She did not turn to face him when he entered and closed the door behind him. She walked into the living room. Absently, she built a pyramid of logs in the fireplace and tufted crushed newspapers to ignite the kindling she placed around and under them.

She wasn’t ready to confront him just yet. She needed time to gather her thoughts before facing him.

Those golden eyes, she thought. Don’t look at his eyes or, you’ll be lost forever.

He respected her silence and stood off to the side, watching as she set the logs aflame. He dropped his jacket on the mahogany ottoman and pushed the sleeves of his sweater up past his wrists.

She could tell from her peripheral vision he was checking out the room. She was proud of her home. It was a portrait of her personality. The fine artwork on the walls represented her sophistication. The lace curtains and throw pillows exemplified her passion and love of romance. The array of freshly-cut flowers in lead crystal vases set about the room symbolized her zest for life.

The crackling fire drew Gavin's attention and he moved towards her when she turned around.

She was stirred by the look of hurt in his eyes and the smell of his masculine cologne. Her skin prickled from the energy that passed between them and she slowly looked up into his eyes, despite her fear earlier.

Her heart melted, finding love reflected in their depths, and he lightly placed the palm of his hand against her cheek. He drew nearer and her breasts brushed against his chest.

A light gasp escaped her lips from the thrill his contact caused. Uncertain, she stepped back and tripped on the fireproof rug lying in front of the hearth.

His response was immediate as he caught her around the waist, breaking her fall. Before she could react, his lips were upon hers and she lost all sense of space as her mind swirled aimlessly.

The rapture of his kiss was numbing and her limbs responded to his touch. She wrapped her arms about his neck and molded her body to his, unable to bridle the passion that was ever-consuming. Her heart palpitated rapidly and she felt weak, fearing that her knees would buckle. She clung to him desperately and loved how her body fit against the length of him.

Gavin swooped her into his arms, continuing to ravish her mouth with kisses, his tongue exploring, teasing, and driving her to a point of infinite submission. He suspected where her bedroom might be and moved in that direction, dulling her senses with more blissful administrations. As he continued to play havoc with her lips, he slowly unbuttoned the silk blouse she wore, once he placed her down at the foot of her bed, slipping it from her shoulders.

A small table lamp cast a soft romantic glow about the room as he lowered her down upon the white cameo lace comforter, mounting her full length.

Her right arm was pinned to her side and her left was raised above her head, her fingers entwined in his.

Expertly, he sent a trail of kisses up the length of her arm's underside and then slowly ran his tongue down its length, sending a chill to course through her. He released the back snap of her bra and took one full mound into his hand, teasing the soft nipple until it hardened to a stiff peak.

She could feel his hardness against her and she throbbed with hunger. She wanted him. All of him. Her mind was screaming to stop, to talk before it went any farther. She slowly succeeded freeing her right arm and pushed against his chest before he took her other breast into his mouth.

“Gavin. Please!” She rasped, as she pushed against him harder. “We have to talk. I can’t do this when I think you deceived me.”

Gavin raised his head, his hair tousled down upon his forehead.

Instinctively, she smoothed it back and her eyes pleaded with his.

“Please. It isn’t fair.”

“All is fair in love and war, babe,” he proceeded as he kissed her with a fervor that got her blood pumping hotter through her veins.

She allowed him his kiss. After a moment passed, she cupped his face in her hands and broke the connection, pushing him away.

“I don’t want to fight. I want and need an explanation, and now.”

Gavin inhaled deeply, nodded, and rolled off to his side, drawing her to him, refusing to break the connection between them.

“I wish you called first to tell me you were on your way,” he stated. “I would have been more prepared for your visit.”

Pamela pulled free from his hold, amazed by his statement and rolled away from him. She sat up and reached for her bra, snapping it back into place. Her expression tightened, a sign her anger was surfacing.

“Why? So, you could hide your wife and child in the barn!”

“Hide my ... what?” He yelled, bolting into a sitting position.

“You heard me. You can’t deny that Becky isn’t yours. She looks exactly like you. And you can’t tell me that the woman you were kissing in the yard wasn’t her mother either!”

Gavin laughed, and hard.

“You’re right. Elizabeth is Rebecca’s mother. But, you little idiot, Rebecca is my half-sister, not my daughter. Elizabeth was my father’s mistress. We didn’t learn of the scandal, until Liz became pregnant with my father’s child. If you stayed around long enough, you would have found that out!”

Pamela’s jaw dropped to her chest as she sat there with a dumbfounded look on her face.

“Your half-sister?”

Gavin nodded sheepishly.

“It literally killed my mom. The affair had gone on for two years. She never knew. WE never knew. Mom divorced him immediately and sadly, died of a broken heart shortly after. His deception did a hell of a number on our family.”

She shook her head in disbelief.

“You never said anything. All this time we’ve been together you never once mentioned your family, except your father at dinner that time ... barely really. Nothing about living on the family farm. What else don’t I know about you, Gavin?”

Gavin threw his hands up.

“What’s the big deal? It’s not like I’m a serial killer. When we met, you were very familiar with my family name. I guess, I guess I just assumed you knew about my family’s other holdings. I mean, I Googled you and did a little research of my own. A man in my position has to be careful and aware of who he brings into his inner circle. I’m sorry, honey. I thought you knew.”

“Excuse me! That information WAS NOT on Google! Does Becky know, who her daddy is and that you’re her brother?”

Gavin nodded.

“And, now her daddy is dead ... how awful.”

She felt like an ass, yes ... somewhat. Janis was right ... somewhat. She admitted she had been blinded by the magic of what was happening between them and should have pushed more. She fucked up a little, but he still should have offered more. After all, they had been dating a little over two months.

When she looked at Gavin, the amused smirk on his face pissed her off.

A chuckle rumbled low in his belly at her expense and she sent him a look to let him know, that she did not find his humor amusing. She swatted his arm hard.

He jumped.

“What? No apology for your insanely, jealous accusations.”

Pamela waved her finger under his nose.

“You would have thought the same thing, if you saw what I saw, AND not knowing any of this. This is not amusing, Gavin Templeton. We’ve been seeing each other for a while now. Don’t you think this is something I should have known by now? Or, did you plan to keep this family skeleton tucked away for good? AND,” she pressed her point finger against his chest, “why haven’t you told me about your family in general? You know so much more about me, my job, and my family. I mean, my god, Gavin! Your dad died in an explosion a short while back.”

Gavin huffed and reached for her hands.

“You’re right. It’s just that ... since, I was a little boy, my sister Caroline and I, were taught to be guarded, because of who we were. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been deceived by women.”

Pamela pulled her hands free from his grasp.

“Not good enough, Gavin. Not after what we’ve been through together. You should know by now that I –“

“I do ... I did. It’s just ... it’s just that I was thrust back into the business when dad got killed, and then our accident. Pamela, all I wanted to do was just build on us, before I shared my family secrets.”

“You said you were thrust back into the business. I thought you worked with your dad. How many more secrets are there?”

He snickered. "I did ... for a while, then left. I'll explain everything, I promise. Accept, maybe, the explosion. We still don't know what caused that." He reached out for her and drew her onto his lap. "Can we please, please move forward."

She squirmed in his lap before offering, "I'm sorry for misjudging you. I'll make it up to you."

"I can think of something," he replied, as he rose, flipping her over onto her back.

Gavin did more than forgive her. He made her forget, proving himself the ardent lover she dreamed of. It had been a long time since she laid naked with a man.

They were like children at first, tasting, touching, teasing, and exploring ... finding every avenue to please and arouse, sending each other to the edge of climaxing and holding back.

She knew what foreplay was, but lord, he took it to a whole other level. He left no skin untouched. He was skillful in the art of lovemaking and man, what he could do with his tongue. Her body sweated with perspiration and her lips were swollen from his burning kisses. Her nipples throbbed and she pulsated with a burning, wanton need she feared would have her imploding into flames.

She entwined her fingers through his hair as he teased the tender lips between her thighs gently with his tongue, cupping her buttocks with his hands. She moved against him, matching the rhythm of his tongue as it slid against that spot that drove women mad. She moaned as quivers tremored deep inside of her, shaking her to her core.

He mounted and entered her with one easy thrust. It was exquisite how he fitted inside of her as they slowly moved to a beat that was as old as time itself.

She met his hunger with a hunger of her own, moving in unison and awed by the passion he ignited. She pleased in the feel of him and her hands roamed brazenly over his muscled form, kneading the tight mounds of his backside.

She spread her legs wider to take him completely and together they climbed a crest, until they reached the apex of fulfillment together.

They laid spent, breathing heavily, bodies entwined, sated, exhausted, and quivering from the ecstasy they pleased in.

Gavin kissed her tenderly and rubbed his nose against hers.

"I have feelings for you, Pamela. I want to introduce you to more of my world and family, so you can see who I truly am."

Pamela smiled. It was what she wanted too. She did not care if he hauled hay for a living, or milked cows. She was falling in love with this man and hoped he felt the same way. She would do her damndest to make sure that both their worlds fit together like a perfect puzzle. But right now, she would show him again just how much she cared for him, wanted him, and needed him in her life.

Chapter Eleven

She awoke at dawn to discover that Gavin had left. She missed the warmth of his body against hers and smiled when she turned to her side and found a note pinned to the pillow he had slept on. She sat up and stretched like a contented feline after a glorious night of lovemaking.

She had waited a long time for such a man to come into her life. It almost seemed too good to be true. She shook her head absently as she reflected on all the lonely evenings she had spent over the years.

She smiled and propped herself up against her pillows to get more comfortable. Those days were finally over. Now, she had a man in her life that she loved and adored. It was a wonderful new chapter they would journey together. She carefully unfolded his note and admired his neat penmanship, smiling at the way he flared off the “a” in her name with the shape of a heart.

How romantic, she thought as she read the note aloud.

“Pamela, sorry I had to go. I’ll call you later this afternoon. Don’t forget to pack a bag for this weekend. If your schedule allows, and I don’t hear otherwise, I’ll pick you up at your office at four. Gavin.”

A twitch of disappointment ruffled in her belly as she read his note one more time. After the night, they had spent together, she expected him to sign off with an endearment of love.

She tried not to let her discouraging feelings eat away at her in lieu of what she knew they shared. They were at a pinnacle in their relationship that could level off, fizzle out, or continue to grow into something more meaningful. She voted for the latter.

She scurried off her bed and hustled towards her walk-in closet, checking for something appropriate to wear. She rummaged through rows of casual slacks, and tossing hangers about. She realized her Perry Ellis and Anne Klein originals were not fitting for farm life. She made a mental note to hit the stores at noon for Wranglers, flannel shirts and a pair of Dunham boots and sneakers.

Her day at the office was passing quickly and she did not notice Gavin when he arrived more than twenty minutes ahead of schedule. She was engrossed in conversation with two of her colleagues in the front office lobby, fervently making her concerns known. She was strongly voicing her objections regarding the Company’s litigation that morning in court. Pamela was irritated when she noticed her arguments were falling on deaf ears as her colleagues Matthew and Timothy continued to ignore her.

Matthew ribbed Timothy playfully in the side and snickered loudly.

“Take a look, at the hick, who just walked in. God, I hope we’re not entertaining clients the likes of him. Christ, we’ll never make any money.”

“Holy shit.” Tim replied behind his hand.

She was mortified by their outburst and huffed loudly.

Who are they talking about? Didn’t they hear a word I just said?

Pamela turned in the direction they were pointing and; her heart skipped in her chest, when she saw Gavin standing at the receptionist's desk less than a foot away.

The blanched look on his face told her he had heard her colleague's demeaning remarks and, her ire erupted.

She turned, releasing her wrath, making her colleagues step backwards.

"Really? If a man doesn't sport a Rolex like you two fools, they aren't deserving of our respect, is that it? Your attitudes are unacceptable."

Her colleagues cleared their throats as they pulled at their neck ties nervously.

"I can't believe you two. Do you have any idea, who that man is you've so callously dismissed as some low life, because of how he's dressed?"

She pointed in Gavin's direction. But, when she turned and noticed he had left, she gazed at the receptionist and the girl shrugged, before speaking.

"He just turned and left, Miss Landers."

"Damn it," Pamela sputtered, as she glared at the two jackasses standing beside her.

"That was Gavin Templeton of Templeton Industries, Templeton Farm and Sugar Run Resort... the man ... I'm in love with ... you two ignorant assholes! Believe me. The partners will hear about this!"

She knew by the time she shut down her computer, grabbed her suitcase, and got to the lobby, he would be gone. Thankfully, she still drove her car in. Instead of leaving it in the garage over the weekend, she'd drive out to the farm herself. Hopefully, Gavin would accept her apology for her colleague's remarks. She didn't blame him for leaving. It cast dispersions on the kind of firm she was associated with. She probably would have done the same thing.

She would make them apologize in person, but right now, she needed to get out to the farm and make things right with Gavin.

Chapter Twelve

It turned out to be another gorgeous Spring day. Much of the snow had melted in the mountains, the fields were sprouting new blooms, calves were suckling from their mothers, ducklings and chicks scurried about as she pulled in front of the farm house.

The farm was bustling with activity, quite the opposite from when she first arrived. Farm hands were moving about feeding livestock, hauling bales of hay, branding cattle, and cleaning out stalls. She recognized Gavin's car, but not the Jeep Cherokee or Dodge Ram pickup parked in front of the house.

She quickly looked about and did not see the child, Becky, her mother, Elizabeth or Gavin himself. A well-muscled and attractive man with golden hair exited the barn and walked towards her, extending his hand in greeting.

“Hi there, mam,” he tipped a rather worn, black Stetson respectfully. “I’m Jimmy, the foreman round here. Can I help you?”

“Hi. I’m, Pamela Landers, and I’m looking for Gavin.”

His eyes sparkled with genuine joy. “Why, you’re that pretty lady we’ve heard so much about?”

Before she could respond, another male voice rang through the air.

“You flirting with the woman folk again there, Jimmy?”

The foreman chuckled and removed his cowboy hat and slapped it against his thigh, emitting a puff of dust.

“Dang it all, got myself caught again.” His smile was radiant as he placed his hat back upon his head. “I’ll leave ya in Mr. Templeton’s hands, Miss Landers. Been a pleasure meeting you.” He excused himself and turned in the direction of another out building.

When she gazed over at the older gentlemen, he took the stairs with the agility of a much younger man. Pamela noted the similarity between Gavin and him. His gorgeous amber eyes and broad smile were welcoming as he opened his arms in welcome.

“Come over here girl and give this old man a hug.”

Pamela knew her mouth was agape and she snapped it shut.

“I’m sorry,” she offered as she moved towards him. “For a minute there I thought you were Gavin’s dad.”

“No apology needed. Folks round here say I’m younger lookin’ than my eighty-two years.”

He wrapped her in a snug embrace and placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Pamela. I’m Bradford, Gavin’s grandfather.”

Pamela took one step backwards to take his magnificence in. He was striking with his pure white hair, bronze skin, gorgeous amber eyes, pearly whites and an athletic, tall frame.

“Now I know where Gavin gets his gorgeous eyes from,” she stated.

“Well, you’re quite a looker yourself. I can see why my grandson is so smitten with you.” He draped his arm over her shoulder and veered her toward the front porch. “Come on in and let’s get a little acquainted.”

She allowed him to lead her up the stairs and through the front door.

“I sent Gavin out to the South pasture. We’ve got three bulls down and not sure what’s ailing them. It’s best the doc check them over real good.”

“Did you just say doc?”

Bradford chuckled deeply.

“He didn’t tell you that either, I see.”

When she stepped over the threshold of their authentic, vintage farmhouse, she literally gasped in awe. It was chockfull of historic detail from its original plasterwork, wainscoting, poplar wide-plank flooring, crown molding, large ceiling beams and built-in cabinetry.

Bradford told her there were six bedrooms upstairs and two and a half baths, nearly 2,911 square feet of living space, not including the barn and a carriage house out back she had not noticed. A large pergola could be seen through double French doors off the family room, which had a full wall fieldstone fireplace on one side and an oak book case, fully stocked with many original classics on the other.

An English garden was designed by his grandmother when she was married as a wedding gift back in 1833. It bloomed from spring straight through to October with colorful perennials and rose bushes that were decades old.

The designer, gourmet kitchen was upgraded ten years prior and a haven any woman loving to cook would die for. It was set to a French-style with a stunning open hearth, a cozy area with high-back Queen Air chairs to sit and warm by the fire, granite center station, gorgeous honey oak cabinetry, a walk-in pantry the size of a small bath and state-of-the-art appliances.

“This is simply ... I mean ... words enough can’t convey how simply beautiful this home is,” she gushed.

Bradford chuckled heartily.

“It is and a wonderful legacy for the next generation,” he ribbed her lightly with his elbow, “if Gavin ever gets going, that is.”

Pamela did not know how to respond to that, especially with him taking off the way he did, and simply smiled. What woman wouldn’t want to be married to a man like him though, have his children, and live on a homestead such as this for the rest of her life? It would be any girls dream.

She did not want all this grandeur to influence how she felt about Gavin. She could not deny she loved the man and lusted after him. All those years she dated, waited, and hoped for something real, something meaningful to happen. Music was softly playing in the background when they walked back through the family room.

She recognized the song, Unchained Melody, and the words were so fitting for how she felt about where she was in her life. Her insides trembled a little when the lyrics “God speed your love to me” were sung, and she silently prayed that would happen for them.

Bradford touched her elbow and smiled.

“How about I show you to your room, so you can wash up and change into something more comfortable. Then I’ll take you out to the South Pasture to meet up with Gavin. I’ll have Maria, our cook, throw a small lunch basket together for the two of you. Seems something was eating at his craw, and you might just be what he needs to sweeten his mood.”

Bradford pointed out the boundary lines of the farm when he could and; Pamela was astounded over the enormity of the spread. The land was rich and fertile for growing staple crops they sold to local markets such as sweet corn, cabbage, and rutabaga. The fields had already been turned, ready for seeding.

The entire farm spread over three hundred acres, one hundred-fifty of which were set aside as a natural reserve for the wildlife in the area and protected by State law.

He told her of the spring fed lake over the rise, stretching thirty square miles and stocked with some of the best speckled trout the region had to offer. He was extremely proud of his land and Pamela could hear it in his voice when he retold some of the history of how his great, great grandparents came to America from England to escape religious persecution and vie for the chance to own their own land.

What a wonderfully, proud man, she thought as she looked at his profile. Gavin was so much like his grandfather.

She wanted to see if Gavin had confided in his grandfather what upset him and she broached the subject delicately.

“You said that Gavin was upset. Did he tell you why?”

He shook his head in the negative.

“Afraid, not. He’s been a little sensitive, since his father passed away. Michael’s death was so unexpected and hit us all pretty hard. I never thought my own son would go before me,” his voice cracked with emotion.

Pamela reached out to stroke his forearm affectionately.

“I am so very sorry for your loss, Mr. Templeton.”

“Thank you, dear. I can’t tell you what it means to the family what you did for Gavin. You saved his life. If that accident had turned tragic, dear lord,” he shook his head and exhaled deeply, “it would have been the death of us as well, to lose him so shortly after his father.”

“The angels were with us that day. I’m certain of it.” She waited a moment before she continued. “Do you mind me asking about his dad? Gavin has told me very little, accept for Becky.”

“Well, he had too, sense you bumped into the child. My son’s actions were a big disappointment ... a big disappointment. Tore this family up and broke Gavin’s mama’s heart. But, I love my grand-daughter. She’s a peach that one.”

Bradford drew a pipe from his coat pocket that was already packed with tobacco. The air filled with its sweet aroma once he ignited it and blew out the first puff.

“It was a brain hemorrhage that killed him. Not the explosion. He went quick. The minute he hit the floor, he was gone. Gavin and his dad were very close in the beginning. They didn’t agree over Gavin’s future and what was expected of him regarding Templeton Industries. When he graduated from high school, his father wanted him to work summers at the company and go to college to master in business.

Both he and Caroline have always sat on the board, since they turned twenty-one. My son made that mandatory. He wanted them to know everything about the business, even though they weren’t involved. Caroline worked for her father for quite a few years straight out of college, the accounting side, until she decided to purchase Sugar Run and convinced her brother to go in on it with her as a silent partner.

Gavin had his own ideas. He loved the farm and everything about it. Ever since he was little, he wanted to go to veterinary school.”

“He’s a veterinarian?” She questioned shockingly. “But, when I met him, I thought he was in charge of Sugar Run and helped run the family business. I thought ... I mean ... I’m confused. Gavin is a veterinarian?”

“Gavin only worked for his dad short of three years. His heart wasn’t in it.”

Pamela threw her hands in the air.

“Wow! Talk about being left out in the dark.”

“You have to understand ... when Gavin’s father died, his world turned upside-down. Everything was thrown in his lap and he’s been juggling it all with little time to spare. Sugar Run is Caroline’s baby. She manages it beautifully, along with her husband, Trevor, who you’ll meet tomorrow. Gavin goes there to unwind when he can.”

Her head was spinning. She understood the calamity and how he could have forgotten to tell her everything. She wondered what kind of relationship Gavin had with his father before his death.

“Were Gavin and his father estranged because he wanted nothing to do with Templeton Industries?”

Bradford nodded and squished his lips before he took a long draw on his pipe. He thought a moment before he spoke and answered her question.

“In the beginning. They both were stubborn and wouldn’t give in during Gavin’s first semester away. Even though my son wanted Gavin by his side at Templeton Industries learning the business, he missed him more. It wasn’t long after they started talking once a week. There was another long run though when we found out about Elizabeth expecting his father’s child. Gavin and his dad were estranged almost three years. Elizabeth didn’t know for almost a year my son was married. He kept many a secret back then. So, you see, we’ve had to do a lot of healing as a family.”

She was glad to hear that. Gavin had a lot on his plate. She could understand why he hadn’t told her everything about himself and his family. They barely had time to see each other as it was. The last thing he needed, was her jumping down his throat about not seeing enough of him.

She turned her head to scan the landscape, looking for his familiar silhouette against the beautiful azure sky. His grandfather’s Dodge pickup gripped the old unpaved dirt roads easily. She was anxious to see Gavin and make sure that he wasn’t too terribly upset with her.

“There he is,” she squealed happily, pointing her finger to the East.

Bradford looked in that direction. “Yep, I see him,” he chuckled and halted the truck briefly. “Looks like I’ll have to turn around here where there’s room. I’ll just honk and let him know you’re here.”

Pamela reached for his forearm to stop him. “I’d like to surprise him, if you don’t mind.”

The lines in his cheeks crinkled deeply as he sent her a beaming smile.

“Not at all. If he doesn’t have you back by dinner time,” he winked playfully, “I’ll send out the posse.”

She leaned in and planted a soft kiss on his cheek and jumped from the pickup with the lunch basket in her hand. She quickly walked the distance through the open meadow and was pleased to see Gavin taking off his shirt and flinging it aside absently.

She tried to approach him quietly and watched as the muscles in his back and arms flexed as he worked over the massive bull. It must have been tranquilized as it wasn't moving. A small portable radio was hanging from the handlebar of a large ATV.

Gavin was whistling along to the words of some country tune she did not recognize. Her stomach churned when he began to sing along with the romantic ballad, surprised by the soft tone of his voice and how in tune to the melody he was.

The warm, May breeze blew across the meadow and rustled her, long honey locks. It was at that moment Gavin turned and noted her standing there. The look of surprise on his face was reassuring and made her smile.

She moved toward him, her hips swaying seductively with each slow, easy stride she took.

She noted his hesitation when he stepped back. She feared being rejected, dropped the basket, and closed the gap between them quickly. She encircled his neck and inundated him with kisses. She was afraid that if she let him go, the magic between them would be lost. The song on the radio moved her to the point it carried their kiss to something deeper, hungrier, more meaningful. She clung to him, drawn to that manly, sweaty, fresh air smell of him.

And then she knew, he felt it too as he wrapped his arms tightly about her. She melded to his hardness, felt every hard plane, every muscle, his strength, and his arousal. He lifted her, cupping her ass with his hands as she wrapped her legs about his waist. She could feel him step backwards and somehow, he managed to prop himself up against the ATV and the position was oh so right.

His kiss became hungrier as she moved against him. He pushed his tongue into her mouth, roaming, exploring, tasting and she met his fury with a vigor of her own. She wanted him to feel what he meant to her in that kiss. She had to make him forget what happened at the office, make him understand it did not matter, and that he was the one she wanted in her life. She was afraid of offering words of apology in case he wasn't ready to hear them. She wanted this man bad in every way possible. She had to make him know it, feel it, crave it and want it too.

And then, it was like a light went on in his head and he dropped his hands and broke the kiss between them. He took hold of her waist and held her away from him as he looked intently into her eyes.

She did not like what she saw there and fear began to prickle at her brain, threatening, making her question and judge the strength of their connection.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, reaching out to caress his cheek with her palm. "It's inexcusable what happened today. You know I don't feel that way."

"I didn't stick around long enough to find out. I was more sickened by your association with their kind. Is that your firm's mantra ... superiority and narcissism?"

Pamela took a step back, aghast by the conviction in his voice.

"Of course, not. McNeil and Ryan would be livid they copped an attitude like that and I'll god damn make sure they know about it too!"

“Once they find out I’m a Templeton, right?”

Her expression darkened a little.

“That’s not fair, Gavin. Yes, their young, cocky, and opportunistic, but that’s the first time they stepped out of line, at least in my presence like that. If, you had stuck around you would have seen how I handled it. I can’t believe you’re copping this attitude with me. Maybe, I should just leave.” She raised her hands to emphasize her meaning. “On second thought, screw you!” She turned, kicked the lunch basket out of her way, and started to stomp off.

She was pissed, and royally. How dare he? I mean really, did he think she was like that? Is that the kind of woman he thought she was? She kicked at the dirt, the flowers, the grass ... she was so mad, she’d kick a bunny right about now, if it stepped in her path. Well, maybe not a bunny. He was acting like a real, what was it Janis called men ... yah, a dickwad! Damn him.

She knew she was out in the middle of nowhere, but there was a road Bradford drove in on and she would follow it even, if it took her until frigging sundown to get back to the farmhouse. She heard the sound of his ATV revving and knew he was approaching. Fine. He could just mosey along. She didn’t want to look at him, talk to him, or spend the rest of the weekend with him.

And then he was there, tooling along beside her.

“Pamela, come on stop. I’m sorry.”

She ignored him and looked straight ahead as she stomped along, her arms pumping as if she was power-walking a marathon. She heard him chuckle and it made her madder. She gave him a look that spoke volumes and snapped her head back, glaring straight ahead.

Laugh all you want, asshole. I’m not hopping on that thing and wrapping these thighs around you. She sputtered to herself.

He followed alongside her for a short distance, then revved the engine, sped up and turned quickly to block her way.

Pamela huffed, scrunched her lips and side-stepped around him.

He caught up with her and shouted, “We can play this game all the way back to the farm.”

She stopped abruptly, turned toward him with her fists planted on her hips.

“Fine. Take me back and I’ll go on my merry way.”

Gavin shut off the engine and threw his hands in the air in submission.

“Okay. I’m an ass. I admit it.”

“You’re so full of yourself, you know that. I’m a Templeton,” she mimicked, rolling her shoulders as she made fun of him. “You expect people to treat you differently, because of who you are. Well, get off your high-horse mister, cause you ain’t all that,” she snapped her fingers at him.

He squished his lips, and she could tell he found her statement amusing as he slowly nodded his head. His eyes washed over her like a scanner from her toes to the top of her head. His appraisal was scorching and she could feel a fire begin to burn deep in her belly.

“You’re fucking hot when you’re mad.”

She crossed her arms at her breasts and took a guarded stance as she tapped her right toe.

He chuckled as he rose off his machine and slowly moved towards her like a tiger ready to pounce its prey.

Pamela took a step back and raised her arm, palm out.

“You can stop right there.

He shook his head slowly and continued his approach.

Pamela squealed and turned, running as fast as her legs would carry her.

It did not matter how fast she ran. He was like a puma and closed the distance in a matter of minutes, swooping her up into his arms and twirled her about. As much as she wanted to hate him, she fell victim to the chase and wrapped her arms about his neck.

“Kiss me,” his voice begged.

She squinted slightly, trying to read what emotion she saw reflected in his eyes.

“I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“Because, I’ll forget why I’m so pissed at you.”

“I’ll remind you when we get home,” he answered, as he released her and let her body slide slowly down his.

His lips were arresting and took her prisoner. All reasoning vanished, erased like words on a chalkboard. They were out in the middle of nature and she was oblivious to the sounds around them. The only thing she was aware of was the heat of their connection.

Chapter Thirteen

A tall, beautiful brunette was standing on the porch as Gavin and Pamela approached the front yard. She descended the steps and wrapped her arms around Gavin’s waist, hugging him fiercely. She turned and sent Pamela a radiant smile.

“And, you must be Pamela.”

Bradford exited the house, joining them and moved behind Pamela, placing his hands on her shoulders.

“Pamela,” he began, “I’d like to introduce you to Gavin’s sister, Caroline.”

Pamela extended her hand in welcome. She had recognized her immediately from the picture she found of her on Google.

Elizabeth released her hold on Gavin and opened her arms as a sign of welcome.

Pamela relaxed, and moved into her embrace, and they planted a sisterly kiss on each other’s cheeks.

“I have so been waiting to meet you,” Caroline offered happily. Her light, brown eyes were kind and sincere and she smelled of honeysuckle. “Thank you for saving my brother’s life. If, well, you know,” she teared.

Pamela hugged her tightly and whispered in her ear. “You’re most welcome and he’s special to me too.”

Gavin came up behind them and wrapped his arms around them both.

Pamela looked over her shoulder. “Are there any other Templeton females I need to meet yet?”

Bradford and Caroline laughed at the private joke and Gavin joined in, turning her to plant a quick kiss upon her lips.

“Only mama,” he smiled warmly.

“There are three things you’ll love about mama,” Caroline interjected. She reached out to take Pamela by the hand and lead her up the porch steps. “You’ll simply adore her cooking, she gives great advice, and her laughter is contagious.”

Caroline was right about her mother. Bradford called her Maggie, and it was a fitting name too. She was a little on the roly-poly side and a gentle soul. Her hair was light silver and braided into a large bun secured at the nape of her neck.

A red and white calico apron, trimmed with eye-lit lace was a staple she wore constantly. There was always a trace of Jean Nate’ scenting the air in passing and her skin glowed a soft peach. She was genuinely affectionate, and always hugging and petting someone. Her eyes were the color of Gavin’s and they misted with emotion at the introduction.

Maggie thanked her also for saving her son and from that moment on, she felt like part of the family. She knew that what happened at the office earlier still needed addressing. She put it to the back of her mind and accepted the warmth and attention surrounding her for the time being. She was formally introduced to Caroline’s husband Tyler.

Dinner was a delight and Pamela was entertained with stories of Gavin’s childhood. Photo albums came out when coffee and dessert were served and they retired to the family room. Gavin protested profusely, but was ignored. She wondered what it would be like with his family during the holidays. Joy and love were abundant in this home. This was a family nurtured and weaned on those principles that mattered most in life.

She looked from face to face. Adoration and love was like a radiant light surrounding them. It was contagious and she found herself attracted to them like a bear to honey.

She wanted this, to be part of this beautifully, wholesome, loving, and caring family. She could see it all ... Sunday dinners, sitting around their large, polished antique table, home style dinner served, while Bradford carved whatever meat was placed at the head of the table, and

bantering with joy. She felt bad about what she said to Gavin earlier. He wasn't a dickwad, she smiled inwardly. She would apologize when the time availed itself later.

The table was being cleared and the women refused to let her help. Gavin's mother juggled a stack of cups and saucers in her hands and halted beside him before exiting the room.

"It's a beautiful evening you two. Gavin, go take Pamela for a walk in the garden." She jerked her head in the direction of the French doors.

Gavin grasped Pamela's hand in his.

"Come on. When mama says scoot, you scat."

"That's right and don't you forget it," his mother replied over her shoulder, arousing laughter from everyone in the room.

Pamela happily followed him out the door. As soon as they were out of view, he asked sheepishly.

"So, what do you think of us country folk?"

His tone took her by surprise and she looked at him questionably. Was he being sincere or just a smart aleck? She thought the latter by the glint of humor in his eyes. She decided not to go there right now, unless he pressed the issue even more.

"You have such a beautiful family," she answered instead. "I hope you realize how blessed you are? Makes me miss mine." Her voice cracked.

She hadn't meant to get all emotional. Being with his family, made her realize how very much theirs were alike, the closeness, the laughter, the fondness and genuine pleasure of being in each other's company. God! She missed her mom and dad. She felt so slighted and deprived of all the memories that had been lost to her, memories they never had a chance to share together.

"Don't cry." He drew her into his arms and held her tightly. He petted her hair and massaged her neck softly until her sobs subsided.

She pulled away slightly and wiped at her nose with the back of her hand.

"Sorry for being so emotional. Not exactly what your mom intended for us coming out here."

"Well, if anything," he replied, "it sheds a light on what's more important ... not what people say or think, but how you live your life and treat others. You were right what you said earlier. I live a very privileged life. I guess today, I lost sight of humility. You really threw it back in my face." He laughed. "I need you to keep me humble. I like you in my life, Pamela."

"You do?"

He nodded. "Yeah ... a lot ... a whole lot."

She laid her palm over his heart. "Show me," she teased.

He grabbed hold of her wrist and pulled her along, deeper into the garden, out from view of the kitchen window. It was an expansive garden, offering many hidden nooks where lovers could steal away kisses and intimate embraces.

"Do you think we'll be missed?" She whispered, nibbling the curve of his neck.

“Nope.” He groaned as he unbuttoned her shirt and followed with kisses along the base of her throat. “Gramps had two brandies and will retire to his room. Mom and Caroline will be busy another forty minutes and I’m sure Tyler is watching a game. Now stop talking and kiss me.”

Pamela obeyed and lost herself to his kisses. His hands were like skilled instruments as they slid beneath her sweater and snapped her bra free. He worked each pink nipple to hardened peaks within a matter of seconds, titillating them with the tip of his tongue, swirling, sucking softly, making her moan with total abandonment.

His hands worked their way down to the button on her jeans. They slipped past her lace panties and he had her tight, rounded backside cupped in his hands and held tightly against his erection. Softly his fingers worked their way around to her soft mound and between her velvety folds.

The friction of his hardness beneath the denim of his jeans against her flesh was maddening. She unbuckled his jeans and drew his zipper down. She smiled against his lips and moaned when she found he was going commando and contacted with his erection.

He moaned when she wrapped her fingers around its heated warmth. Kisses could not extinguish the passion that engulfed them and Pamela worked her own magic as she stroked him.

The sound of shuffling feet invaded her senses and she stopped what she was doing.

“Shh!” She whispered against Gavin’s ear as he made his displeasure known. “I think I hear someone.”

They listened intently as they began to right their clothing. The wind rustled the leaves in the maple tree beside them and they heard the hoot of an owl in the distance. Then, the distinct sound of little feet walking upon the slate path made them giggle lightly.

“Gavin, where are you?” Becky called out.

Pamela cupped her hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle as Gavin made a face. She watched as he tucked his shirt into the waistline of his jeans.

She combed her fingers through her hair as she peered around the edge of the hedge where they were hiding.

Gavin rubbed himself against her backside and she reached behind to slap him.

“Behave yourself,” she whispered as he pulled her backwards against his chest playfully and kissed her neck.

She turned and slapped him again. “Stop!” She giggled at his playful pout. “I’ll go first. Work your way over behind the fountain,” she pointed, “and we’ll come look for you. Now scoot!” She waved him off.

Pamela stepped in front of the hedges and waved to catch Becky’s attention.

“Hey, honey. What a nice surprise!”

“I was dancing in class. Grampie and Grammie said I could stay the whole weekend,” she spread her little arms out wide. “Did you see Gavin?”

“I haven’t. Would you like to help me find him too?”

Becky's wispy curls bounced in the moonlight as she jumped joyfully, clapping her hands.

"Are you playing hide and seek?"

Pamela chuckled as she caressed her cheek.

"Yes, honey, we are. I sure could use your help, because he knows all the best hiding spots."

"Don't worry. I showed him where they all are," she replied and reached a hold of Pamela's hand, and led the way.

Chapter Fourteen

The continuous crowing of a rooster infiltrated her subconscious, drawing her from a deep, languorous sleep.

She reached out and groped for the night stand, until her fingers contacted with the leather band of her Gucci watch. She placed it under her pillow and depressed the tiny button to illuminate the face. Her eyes squinted as they adjusted to the light and she grumbled loudly at the time.

"Five a.m.!" She sank deeper beneath the covers. "Damn bird," she sputtered.

It was intent on keeping her awake, and everyone else within earshot. She tossed the pillow onto the floor and dragged herself into a sitting position as she looked over at the window. A gentle breeze billowed the white Priscilla curtains and she inhaled the fresh, country air into her lungs. The sun hadn't risen quite yet. Now that she was awake, she couldn't help thinking how country living was the total opposite of what she was accustomed to.

She hugged her knees to her chest and rested her chin upon them. She wondered what it was that Gavin wanted to take her to see later that day. She suspected it might be his practice or maybe even to visit his father's grave.

There was a quiet knock at her door and she smiled when his head popped in. His eyes sparkled with delight to find her sitting up and he entered, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Mama sent me to see if you were awake."

"Do I have a choice?" She thumbed at the sound of the rooster's crow again.

Gavin laughed and walked to her bedside.

"That's Red Ben," he leaned down and kissed her softly. "He's been waking folks up around her for long as I can remember."

She dropped her knees and side-kicked him under the covers.

"You should have warned me I'd be rising before the sun did."

He crawled towards her like a silent cat and she giggled.

"How about I kiss you instead?"

She opened her arms wide to receive him and he stretched his full length over her as she slid back down. She traced his chin with her finger tip.

“This is nice. I could get use to this.”

He lowered his face to kiss her and there was a knock on her door. Pamela jumped with a start.

“Gavin Michael, you let Pamela get dressed now and come help me gather eggs for breakfast.”

Pamela chuckled and pushed at his shoulder.

He tried to contain his own laughter and nestled his face in the curve of her neck.

She slapped him on the back and scolded.

“Answer your mother or she’ll think we’re doing something!”

He cleared his throat and called out.

“On my way, mom.”

They exchanged glances and broke into laughter. He placed a firm kiss upon her lips and rose.

“See you downstairs,” he winked.

His mom outdid herself and did not allow Pamela to help. The kitchen was a chatter with morning greetings and plans for the day. Pamela brought the right kind of clothes as she looked at Caroline, Tyler and Becky. Everyone pitched in when they were there. She spoke up asking where she could fit in and do her share. She wanted to know everything about the workings of the farm and was rather curious.

After breakfast, Gavin began the day showing her the entire milking process, and the comparison between the old way and how modern technology made their lives easier. They were in hysterics when she tried to milk the tits of a cow with her fingers the old way. The ivory liquid squirted on the ground, on her newly acquired western boots, down the leg of her jeans ... everywhere except the aluminum pail it was meant to. The Holstein repeatedly side-stepped and bumped into her, nearly sending her backwards onto her butt multiple times.

She was relieved when Gavin suggested she ride with him in the cab of the tractor as he sowed the fields for planting. The tractor was monstrous as she sat at least four feet off the ground. The tall, smoky-glass towers of the city in the distance was no comparison for the richness of the open country, its lands vast and fertile.

She wondered if she could be happy, living a life as a farmer’s wife, away from the corporate world and high-powered lunches, never having to buy another designer original for a swanky social commitment. She gazed over at Gavin, noting a look of purpose on his face and smiled. He looked so strong and rugged behind the wheel of the powerful machine. She knew her life would be incomplete without him in it. She also knew she had to come to peace with what she’d have to give up. What would she say, if he asked her to marry him at that very moment? She could not answer that. She knew she loved him. But, could she change her life completely to be with him?

“What’s that look for?” He interrupted her thoughts.

She couldn't quite tell him and told a little white lie.

"Nothing really. Just taking this all in."

He reached for her hand and pulled her onto his lap. He cupped her breast with one hand, while driving with the other as he kissed the curve of her neck and sucked on her ear softly.

She loved that he was a passionate man and leaned back against him.

"You know how to get me excited." She moaned.

He smiled against her neck and ran the tip of his tongue along its length.

"You haven't seen anything yet," he toyed as the machine bounced and gamboled over the vast open field.

She gasped as the warmth of his hand found its way under her shirt and began to fondle her breast. She laid her hand over his to stop him.

"Gavin, you need both hands on the wheel. I mean ..." she hesitated shyly, "Don't you have to keep this thing in a straight line?"

He chuckled low in his throat and squeezed her softly.

"Only when I'm plowing and seeding, babe. There's five acres of open field in front of us. I'm going to take you on the ride of your life."

When she turned to look over her shoulder at him, he cupped her chin, drawing her mouth to his. That was all she needed and turned in his lap to straddle him. Gavin put the tractor in low gear and gave her his full attention.

She could not believe they were being so promiscuous out in the open like that and in full daylight. As she gazed out the back and side windows, there was not a soul in sight except a herd of cows grazing in a distant pasture.

The tractor scuttled along as Gavin slipped her breasts free from her bra. She entwined her fingers through his hair and opened to the feelings he erupted inside of her. She rotated her hips in unison with the gyration and bounce caused by the moving tractor. It was splendorous as their bodies matched the machines rhythm with theirs. She reached for his arousal and felt it rock hard beneath her touch. She undid the top snap of his jeans and worked his zipper down until the flap of his jeans separated, allowing her to slip her fingers inside.

She massaged his manhood and loved the definition between the silky softness of his skin and the stark hardness between her fingers. His kisses seared her lips as she wiggled out of her jeans and panties. He held her by her waist and guided her down. She gasped as he contacted with her wet folds and she lowered herself onto him and became filled with his warmth.

She began to ride him and loved being in control, dominating their strides as their tongues flicked and danced to a lover's serenade. Heaven help her, she wanted to scream. Her heart picked up its beat as his mouth explored hers. The throbbing deep inside her increased with a sweet, yet aching need.

Her muscles clamped over him with her hot wetness. A breeze from the open window touched her skin and she shivered. Her breath came faster as his hands covered every inch of her exposed skin. His mouth was hungry, fiercely predatory and she matched him kiss for kiss.

A low growl escaped him and she increased her pace. There was no holding back, as their need was too great, and it could not be bridled. He thrust up to meet her and she teetered on the edge of explosion.

His breath rasped against her breast as he suckled her nipples. His body was like a furnace and it teased the fire that built hotter inside of her. The friction intensified and she could feel herself close to tottering over the edge.

His hands tightened on her, firm and demanding and a primal satisfaction reflected in his eyes. His teeth clenched and he groaned deeply. She knew he was there with her.

She could feel her body convulse as the rippling pleasure coursed through every part of her body and finally, she fell limp against him.

It was then he allowed himself the same and exploded his release. She held him tightly against her breast as he pulsed inside of her, spilling his seed and kissing her seductively, firmly, and completely.

Later that day, Pamela accompanied Gavin to town. Marymount was smaller than Bayberry, stretching the length of two city blocks. The stores and boutiques were uniquely different and catered to the locals needs and interests. There was a handful of licensed professionals exclusive to their field of practice.

They passed a quaint cemetery on the outskirts of town and she quietly wondered if Gavin's dad was laid to rest there. When she glanced over at him, she noted no change in his demeanor.

He parked in front of an enormous, white clapboard building with three, wide, weathered brick columns that braced a colonial peaked roof. Large black italic letters read Marymount Veterinary Clinic and she smiled, realizing it had to be his practice.

She was awed by the enormity of the building, as well as the spacious grounds surrounding it. There was a huge barn to the rear and a large penned in area to the left. Four long windows with black louvered frames adorned with white flower boxes and scalloped edges were filled with colorful blooms. A majestic, black six-paneled door greeted them with a brass door knocker, matching mail slot and name plate etched with the name, Gavin Templeton, D.V.M.

She received the grand tour upon entering. Immediately, she was greeted by a bubbly, freckle-faced, sixteen-year old named Bridgette. She was his assistant, who helped with overnight patients during the summer and every day after school. He introduced her to the resident doctor on staff, Victor Wrangler, and judging from the full pens and patients in the waiting room, it was easy to discern, Gavin had a thriving business. She could not imagine how he managed to work both the farm, his business, and keep tabs on his father's company. The early hours he put in on the farm alone were gruesome. It would be nearly impossible to put another eight hours in at the clinic.

She turned to face him and her look reflected her concern.

“How do you ever manage everything?”

He touched her cheek and replied in a soothing tone.

“Bridgette and Victor are my saviors and carry a lot of the load. Once the board hires a new CEO for Templeton Industries, things will get back to normal.”

Pamela knew the interview process could take upwards of six months before the board found a highly-qualified candidate. She kept quiet. She wasn't in any position right now to offer an opinion unless, of course, he asked for one. It was a sensitive issue. With him, his sister, mother and grandfather the primary stockholders, she knew their standards would be set high on who would fill his father's shoes. For his sake, she silently prayed the process would move along quickly for all their sanity and peace of mind.

Chapter Fifteen

The morning dragged on for Pamela. It felt as though her day would never end. After a weekend on the farm, it was hard getting back into her McNeil and Ryan mindset.

She scribbled her name and Gavin's on the legal pad in front of her. She reflected on the hot sex they shared and craved those moments again. Just as much, she cherished the hours spent in the company of his family.

She turned in her chair and gazed out her expansive window at the skyline and wanted to be on the other side of the glass, out in the fresh air, out of her business suit, and spending time with Gavin. Pamela knew she was a slave to the firm. It was her own doing though. She did not regret one moment of it, and was rather proud of her accomplishments and the countless cases she won for all the victims she had represented. She lived a very comfortable lifestyle yet, she was very much aware of the void present in her life. She wanted more time to explore her relationship with Gavin, more time for herself, and more time to enjoy life in general and smell the roses. It was a cliché, but it was so true.

Telling her boss, Stanford, would not be easy. He could be ruthless, when crossed. She was still determined not to let that stand in the way of her own happiness.

Men like Gavin did not come along often.

Her concentration was broken when Stanford entered her office unannounced.

“Things that slow?” He spoke gruffly.

She swiveled around to find his massive frame blocking her doorway. Slowly she placed her gold Cross pen down on the desk and entwined her fingers together beside it. Her brow raised as she met his stern gaze with one of her own.

“Something you need, Stanford?”

He entered, slamming the door behind him and occupied the accent chair in front of her desk. Intentionally, he took his time pretending to look at his well-manicured nails.

She waited and watched, disliking his approach, which even more confirmed her decision to make a drastic change in her life. She was a wealthy woman now from the wise investment

decisions she had made with her lucrative earnings. She could begin a small practice of her own if she so chose.

She wanted to jump across her desk and slap the arrogant smirk off his face, but held her temper at bay.

What the hell was up his craw? She wondered.

“I need to talk to you about what happened on Friday in the lobby. I heard you had a tiff with Matt and Tim and laid them out in front of the staff and a few clients. I won’t condone that kind of behavior. You know better and should have been more discreet and taken it behind closed doors.”

She pushed back on her chair and felt her expression tighten, a sign that her temper was surfacing. Her teeth gritted to contain the words she wanted to spew back at him in response. She tried to ignore the shaking that started in her gut and inhaled deeply, then exhaled slow before responding.

“This your idea of being fair, taking the word of two associates before speaking to me first?”

His face registered his displeasure but masked it quickly when there was a knock at her door and her secretary excused herself for the interruption.

“Not now, Susann,” Pamela raised a hand abruptly. “Mr. McNeil and I are having a private discussion. Please hold my calls and no more interruptions.” She smiled warmly.

Her secretary nodded and exited the room promptly.

Pamela leaned forward and did not flinch a muscle as she peered into the deep-set eyes of her boss. She knew her younger counterparts undermined her, but his spin on it was way out in left field. He had showed compassion after her accident and patience during her recuperation. She tried to remember that and the fact he had been misinformed and lied to. She cleared her throat to bridle her temper so on the verge of exploding.

“Stanford, you’ve known me since I was straight out of law school. I’ve brought a lot of money into this firm and have shown my loyalty and dedication ten times over. But, I will not sit here and allow you to cop an attitude with me. Now, I’ll tell you how it all really played out and give you the chance to apologize when I’m done.”

Her boss opened his mouth and cautiously closed it when she sent him a challenging look. He sat back, interlacing his fingers and rested his elbows on the arms of his chair. His face was expressionless and his eyes unreadable as she told her version of what happened that day in the lobby. At one point, he tapped his two-point fingers against his lips, his eyes unwavering as he seemed to peer straight through her,

She did not flinch. She did nothing wrong. The fact that he sided with them before offering her the common courtesy of telling her side first, really pissed her off.

And then she saw it surfacing, a fleeting trace of a smile slowly upturning the corner of his lip.

“So, you’re dating a Templeton. Quite a catch you’ve –“

She cut him off quickly. “Forget it. You or this firm will not benefit from my relationship with Gavin, or his family.”

He lowered his chin and said earnestly.

“Pamela, how could you think that?”

She sighed with exasperation and shot him a stern look.

“Look, I won’t be a rung on Matt and Tim’s corporate climb up the ladder. They were out of line. Do something about it.”

She shifted her gaze away for a moment and knew she had to broach her wanting to cut back on her case load. She turned her attention back to him, drew in a breath and released it slowly.

“On another note ... I’m cutting back. The accident made me realize how swiftly life can be taken away, and now that I have someone very dear to me in my life, I’m making that a priority, Stanford.”

The lines around his lips tightened and she knew he found that unacceptable.

“You can’t pull back now! Jesus, Pamela, your division has grown nearly sixty percent over the last year. I can’t agree to that.”

Her tone rose a full octave.

“I don’t need your permission, Stanford. I’ll finish off the cases I have, but I’m not taking on any new clients. I suggest you start looking for a candidate to take on what I don’t want or—“

“What?” He bellowed rising from his chair. “You’ll leave. Why don’t I just let you go now?”

She responded with a tight smile.

“Because, you won’t. Because, you know I can walk without looking back. Because, you need me. Shall I go on? Do you really want to play that game after the long run we’ve had? I mean really, Stanford?”

He ran his palm over his bald head and paced a few steps briefly.

She moved around to the front of her desk and stepped in front of him with a look that questioned the stupidity of his actions.

He shrugged lightly and smirked.

“I’m an ass, a pompous one at times. You know I’m aware of your value to this firm.” He reached to grab hold of her forearms. “I want you to be happy and, what’s best for my firm. I’ll have Peg start the search for a replacement, or would you be agreeable to a job share arrangement.”

Pamela nodded and smiled.

“That I would be agreeable to.”

He patted her arm and turned to leave. When he got to the door he stopped and looked over his shoulder before exiting and responded warmly with a smile.

“We’ll make this work, okay?”

Pamela nodded and returned to her desk, feeling as though a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders. This is going to work, she thought. She would not say anything to Gavin. She

did not want him to feel pressured by a decision she had made for herself before she had met him. If they made a commitment to each other, then great.

Now that she aired her concerns and a resolution presented itself, she could focus on her active case with Westchester Electronics.

Pamela was highly trained in Collaborative Law and Mediation. There was a lot of conflict involved with this case and she had hoped to resolve it without going to trial and reaching a settlement.

Her private line rang and she smiled recognizing Gavin's voice.

"Hey you. How's it going over there?"

"Better than expected. You at the farm?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm in your neck of the woods. I had to drop some things off to dad's CFO. Are you free for lunch?"

The hopefulness in his voice was inviting, but she had to decline.

"I'm sorry," she replied. "Really, I would love too. But remember, I need to fly out to California tomorrow and meet with a client in Huntington Beach. I still have some things to prepare and just can't."

His voice was consoling. "Pamela, it's okay. Need a ride to the airport?"

"We have a service for that, thank you."

He chuckled. "Nice perk. How about letting me get you on the way back? We can do lunch, dinner, whatever meal fits the hour."

"I would love that. I'll email you my return flight info. and see you when I get back."

"Looking forward to it. Have a safe trip."

Chapter Sixteen

Westchester Electronics was pleased with Pamela's court presentation, particularly since she convinced the judge to grant a docket date and have their case heard against Controlled Access Systems Inc. (CASI)

It was not her first time up against the big boys, she smiled, reflecting on her day in court, while on her flight back home. The soft hum of the jumbo's engines was pacifying. She looked around the cabin at the other passenger's in First Class. They were either sipping martini's, scanning the Wall Street Journal, and dressed in high-end designer wear.

She gazed out her window at the mass of white, frothy clouds. It allowed her mind to wander off.

She hoped, that working with this West Coast client would not put too much of a strain on her social life. This was her last big case. She had already received a procurement fee from the

firm based on twenty percent of her projected settlement. There was no doubt in her mind that she would kick ass. The numbers would be staggering.

Her throat felt dry just thinking about it and she took a long sip of the Vichy water the stewardess had brought her earlier.

How would Gavin feel when he learned what she made on one case opposed to what he brought in for his practice the entire year? There was no turning back now. She had committed to the client way before meeting him.

She dwelled more on the case. She knew she could convince a panel of white collar jurors that CASI fraudulently failed to fulfill their contractual obligations, resulting in the death of three Westchester Electronics employees. Meeting with her client's security people before trial, researching correspondence between the two parties, and conferring with the nation's leading security consultants, sealed her confidence. As scared as she was about intimidating Gavin, her heart pounded with the excitement of knowing she had the ammo to make CASI beg for settlement out of court. CASI could not chance negative media coverage.

She rested her head back against the seat, closed her eyes and smiled as she thought of how she used their own full-page ad in a major Security Management Magazine against them. Their guarantee of delivery accompanied by a testimonial from the American Society for Industrial Security, proclaiming CASI a leader in their field, cut deep. She wondered what price CASI paid the Association for their endorsement.

The list of clients CASI enclosed in their bid proposal to her client proved bogus. Sixty-two percent of those executives polled denied having done business with them. It was the bargaining chip they needed, assuring her client of a substantial settlement out of court.

The low, baritone voice of the plane's Captain sounded over the speaker, notifying them of their arrival. She snapped her seat belt into place as soon as they were instructed. Her heart raced with excitement as the thought of seeing Gavin filled her mind.

Their short separation clarified how much she loved him. There was no doubt in her mind he was the man for her, the person she wanted to have a family with, and do the happily ever after dance with.

The plane's tires squealed as they contacted with the hot, asphalt surface. The engine's jet thrust into reverse and the huge 747 sped down the long, runway. She hated this part of flying, and held her breath as the pulling force kept her pushed against her seat. The brakes strained to reduce the plane's speed and bring it to a slow taxi onto the jet way.

Eight passengers ahead of her slowly exited the cabin and she could hardly keep her impatience at bay. She smiled and nodded her farewell as she passed the flight crew and scurried down the brightly lit corridor leading to the main waiting area.

She could hear the excited squeals and cries of loved one's waiting, and she craned her neck to look for Gavin's handsome face amongst the crowd.

She hurried in and around the bodies, her eyes scanning the many faces of strangers. Her smile was a permanent fixture and her eyes sparkled with anticipation.

She turned about quickly when a man's voice shouted, "Sweetheart, over here!" It sounded so much like Gavin's amid all the commotion. Her smile faded quickly when she noted an

attractive blond run into the arms of her loved one. Disappointed, she moved to the right of the ticket counter, out of the way of departing passengers.

Slowly, the crowd began to dissipate; singles, pairs and small groups leaving to retrieve their baggage. Across the corridor, passengers began to board a flight out to San Diego. She gazed at her watch and knew that her plane had landed on time. She checked in all directions and there was still no sign of Gavin anywhere.

He must have gotten held up in traffic, she rationalized. She began to walk with her carry-on in hand to a small waiting area.

Minutes passed. Mindlessly, she watched people of all ages and shapes flit past her. Soon, thirty minutes had gone by and she began to wonder if something was terribly wrong. She dug for her cell phone, and as she began to roam through her contact list, she heard her name being called and looked up.

She recognized Janis, her arms waving frantically to catch her attention as she ran the rest of the way to greet her, looking ever so disheveled and worried.

Pamela knew that look and fear clawed at her soul. She dropped her cell back into her shoulder bag.

“What is it? What happened? Why isn’t Gavin here?”

Janis held Pamela by the shoulders as she gasped to catch her breath.

“I never could hide anything from you, could I?” She tried to direct Pamela back to the seating area, but met with resistance as Pamela shrugged her shoulder free.

“I don’t want to sit down damn it! Just tell me straight out.” She pleaded as she dug into Janis’ forearm.

Janis’ eyes and the tone of her voice reflected the pain she felt.

“He’s been in a serious accident.”

Pamela fought for a breath and took hold of her friend’s hands.

“He’s alive, at the hospital, and the doctors so far are optimistic.”

Pamela picked up her carry-on and took off at break-neck speed as she yelled, “Take me to him now!”

Pamela was in the lead, her attaché case cradled close to her chest. They darted in and out of the crowds down the length of the corridor leading to the main lobby. She did not care about her luggage as she knew it would go straight to lost and found and she could retrieve it later.

The fifteen-minute drive to the hospital was tortuous. She was frustrated that Janis did not know all the details about what had happened. The fear of losing him made her nauseous. Nervous sweat beaded between her breasts and she could feel her knees tremor. Quietly, she prayed, asking that his outcome be one of survival, not loss.

Her palms were clammy to the touch and her complexion was colorless as she checked her reflection in the visor mirror. Tears slowly ran down her cheeks as her mind replayed in slow motion the endless tragic scenarios he had endured already. She hated to think of the pain he was in now. She did not respond to Janis’ nervous chatter. Her mind tuned out everything

around her and she thought only of him, praying for the Lord to watch over him and keep him in the protection of His saving light.

She ran into the comforting warmth of Bradford's open arms when the elevator doors opened onto the trauma floor. He cuddled her like a wounded child, petting her head as she whimpered her fears, assuring her with soothing words.

He rocked her in his arms and Gavin's sister joined them as they swayed in unison, drawing strength as they embraced as one.

Bradford took her face between his palms, wiping away her tears gently with the ball of his thumbs. His look was reassuring and she drew strength from him

"Our Gavin is going to make it. Believe only that," he shook her lightly. "He must not know your fear, but feel only your love and support. That is what will see him through what lies ahead."

She was puzzled by his remark and her brow knitted with concern.

"I don't understand, Bradford. What lies ahead? Please tell me what's going on." Her voice rose an octave and she clutched onto his hands, drawing them from her face. "What happened? I've need to know."

Bradford draped an arm about her shoulder and led her to the waiting room. Caroline sat down beside her and clutched Pamela's hand in hers as Bradford sat down before them atop the coffee table in front of their chairs.

Slowly, and calmly, he reenacted the accident.

Her face registered horror as he began to speak.

"Becky snuck into the barn to play and her doll fell into the baler. It was on. When she tried to reach for it, her clothes got caught and started to pull her in. Gavin was close by and heard her screams. His only recourse was to use his steel-toed boot as a wedge long enough to rip her free and throw her clear of the machine.

While doing so, his foot turned. The teeth caught onto the hem of his jeans and pulled him further down, crushing the bones up to his knee."

He took a deep breath before continuing.

"Thankfully, one of the hands had arrived and shut the machine down."

Bradford and Caroline walked with her to Gavin's room and she held onto them for support. Her eyes darted about the room when she entered, absorbing everything her mind was registering. She started to shiver, daunted by the alarming machines that hovered over him.

His sheet was stained with blood and his severely injured leg was elevated by a pulley suspended from the ceiling. Pamela was apprehensive to move. Only his toes were visible and they looked black and swollen. An IV needle was taped to one arm, while the other had a blood

pressure cuff wrapped around it. He looked ghostly and she quickly looked at his chest to make sure it rose and fell with each breath.

She walked to his bed side and bent over to place a kiss upon his lips. His skin was hot and she looked at the nurse who just entered the room with alarm.

“Do you know he’s burning up?”

The nurse’s tiny name tag was small in comparison to the large bosom it was pinned to. Her touch was gentle as she leaned over to sponge away the sweat from Gavin’s brow.

“We’ve been watching it since surgery,” she replied casually as her squat frame waddled to the other side of his bed to take his temperature again.

“His leg is infected, isn’t it?” Pamela asked, stepping back out of her way.

The compassion that Pamela read in the nurse’s eyes when she turned to respond was comforting.

“That is a concern, dear. But, you mustn’t worry. Dr. Fowler will see to that,” she smiled.

“Is Dr. Fowler here?” She asked.

She could tell that someone wearing white had just entered.

“I’m Dr. Fowler,” a feminine voice responded.

Pamela was taken back by the tall, attractive black woman standing now beside Bradford. She extended her hand in welcome.

“And you are?”

Pamela grasped hold of her hand and replied, “Pamela Landers.”

Bradford walked up behind Pamela and hugged her to his side.

“This beautiful young lady is the woman my son is smitten with,” He stated lovingly.

Pamela liked Gavin’s doctor from the start. Her smile was warm and reached her eyes as she looked from Pamela to Bradford.

“He’s a very lucky man.” She replied as she checked his charts on the laptop nearby.

“May I speak with all of you in the hall please?”

Pamela was worried and looked at Bradford and Caroline. They all followed the doctor into the hall until Gavin stirred and cried out Pamela’s name.

Immediately, she turned and ran to his side, followed by everyone. She leaned forward and kissed his lips softly. Tenderly, she caressed his cheek and forehead and spoke to him in a soothing, gentle tone.

“I’m here, sweetheart. Gavin, it’s Pamela. Can you open your eyes?”

Gavin moaned and his face grimaced with pain as he tried to move his injured leg. His eyes rolled about behind closed lids and his head swayed from side-to-side. His hands clenched tightly at the sheet.

She leaned closer and placed her cheek beside his, kissing him tenderly, petting his face to calm him.

“Lie still, sweetheart. Try not to move your leg. Shh, it’s okay now,” she stroked him, “that’s it. Relax ... just relax.”

He responded to her voice and touch. Slowly, his eyes began to open.

She kissed his lips again, firmer and longer this time.

He reached up to caress her hair when it fell across his chest. His smile was weak when he absently curled a ringlet around his finger. His voice was low and raspy as he spoke.

“You kiss good.”

The words were splendor to her ears and they received a jovial response from everyone in the room.

Bradford winked and slapped his thigh, while Dr. Fowler nodded happily and Caroline cried.

Pamela beamed with joy and squeezed Gavin fiercely.

“Oh, I’ve missed you so much.”

Gavin smiled weakly then turned his gaze toward the doctor. He coughed to clear his throat and swallowed before speaking, “My ... leg.”

The doctor moved forward, concern clearly written on her face.

“Mr. Templeton we won’t know right –“

He interrupted her before she could continue and slightly pushed Pamela away.

“Talk please ... privately?”

Pamela felt as though a wall went instantly up between them as she felt Gavin shrug away and avoid looking at her. Her heart felt heavy but she offered to stay.

“If you want, I can stay ... please, let me stay?”

His head shook slightly and his brows furrowed as he glanced at the doctor to emphasize his decision to be alone.

The doctor nodded understanding and looked at everyone in the room. “Will you excuse us please?”

Moments ticked by, and then fifteen minutes, and now half an hour. What was going on?

Pamela was tired of waiting. It seemed more like an hour had gone by as they sat in wait for the doctor to exit Gavin’s room. She tried to remain calm as a haunting fear rumbled inside of her. She paced the hallway as she twirled her long tresses around her fingers. Something was not right. She could feel it deep down in her gut.

She thought about the four-hour surgery Gavin had gone through and the pain he must be enduring. What was it he needed to discuss privately with the doctor that he could not say in front of his family?

Chapter Seventeen

Caroline had to return home to give Maggie a reprieve from watching Becky so she could be at Gavin's side.

Pamela's nerves at this point were strung tighter than guitar strings. She just could not sit by any longer. Her active imagination was creating scenarios that took on a life of their own.

She turned and stared at the closed door to his room. She had an awful feeling and felt it was going to affect her directly.

Her gaze was intent, willing the door to open. Mindlessly, she walked slowly towards the door, eyes glued without wavering, her arms crossed tightly at her chest. She was not aware of Bradford, nor the fact she stopped in front of Gavin's door, quiet and unmoving.

Finally, it opened abruptly and she was snapped from her daze, jumping with a start. A squeak escaped as she moved to the side to enter. Dr. Fowler blocked her access into Gavin's room.

Pamela's astonishment was apparent as she blurted questionably, "Doctor?"

The apologetic look the doctor gave her, was not comforting as Pamela tried again, and the doctor raised her palms to stop her.

"I'm sorry, Miss Landers. Gavin has requested that you not be allowed to visit while he is in the hospital for reasons I will try and explain." Her look was sympathetic as she noticed the pain registered on Pamela's face. "Please, Miss Landers. As his doctor, I am obligated to honor his request. I'm sorry. You must understand my position."

Bradford moved close behind Pamela and began to stroke her arms softly.

"Understand? No, I don't, doctor. Why?" She shook her head.

Bradford intervened.

"Dr. Fowler, perhaps we could go somewhere privately and talk."

The doctor looked at one, and then the other, nodding her head in agreement.

"Of course, Mr. Templeton. We can use my office at the end of the hall. Please, follow me."

They followed her lead quietly, Pamela solemn and unresponsive to Bradford's attempt to offer words of encouragement.

She fought an overwhelming urge to break down and cry. She sat down on a settee upon entering the doctor's office, folding her hands and waiting patiently for an explanation.

Dr. Fowler took a stance in front of her desk, directing her attention toward Pamela and trying carefully to choose her words.

"Gavin learned that his injury was severe enough to damage the muscles in his leg to the point his range of motion will be limited. Therapy will be long, arduous, and very painful in the beginning. He will be able to lead a normal life, but again restricted."

“Explain normal,” she interjected.

“Well, his gate will be sluggish and most likely, he’ll walk with a severe limp, needing the support of a walker in the beginning and then a cane for the rest of his life.”

“But, he’ll still be able to walk. That’s what’s important here!”

Dr. Fowler nodded.

“I agree wholeheartedly. I’m afraid, however, Gavin doesn’t quite see it that way.”

Pamela looked puzzled.

“I don’t understand. At least he isn’t going to be a cripple.”

“True. From his perspective, though, he will be. His ... well, his manhood has been compromised by the restrictions he now has to face.”

Pamela tried to rationalize in her mind what she had just been told. He wanted to push her away, because he thought he was less of a man. That was absurd. His leg was injured, not his fringing manhood. Her eyes sparked with fire and she jumped to her feet.

“This is ridiculous. If he thinks he’s going to keep me at arm’s length, he is so wrong,” she argued and moved toward the door.

Bradford was on his feet in an instant and moved to block her path. The compassionate look he sent her was easily read, but his voice was stern and meaningful.

“Stop right here, darlin’. Don’t be so dang pig-headed.”

Pamela’s mouth flew open and she halted to a stop. His warm, golden eyes melted her heart and her chin dropped sadly.

Bradford lifted her chin with his fingers, forcing her to look in his eyes. He smiled and leaned down to place a tender kiss upon each cheek.

“My grandson needs your love but mostly, your patience. Give him time to swallow what he’s just been told. I know he loves you and the family will be your staunchest supporters. He’s a fighter, not a quitter. Once he realizes the stupidity of this decision, he’ll be eating crow. I stake my life on it.”

Pamela returned his smile and moved in to hug him fiercely.

“I love you, Bradford.”

He wrapped his arms about her tightly and replied, “And, I love you too. Just be patient. Give him some time.”

She drew away a little and looked up at him sadly, but hopeful.

“I will try. It won’t be easy to stay away like this, but I want to do what’s best for him.” She exhaled deeply, puffing out her lips. “I just hope it’s not too terribly long before he comes around.”

It was the longest wait of her life. She did not do well sitting out the first week. Her concentration at the office was nil. Her temperament was less than desirable to be around.

Janis convinced her to reschedule her appointments and to take a few days off to clear her head.

Pamela called ahead to make sure her grandparents, Lilly and Martin, had no plans for the weekend and was relieved to find they would be home.

It had been almost a year since she saw them last. She kept in constant communication with them though, updating them about Gavin and their budding relationship. As much as her grandfather was pleased she found a decent, upstanding man, he was more interested hearing about her cases and how she won in court.

Her drive home was relaxing and their loving welcome lifted her spirits. They agreed that she needed to give Gavin space to adjust to his disability.

Pamela loved their old colonial home with its grey slate shingles, thick stone walls and rustic, black wood shutters. The inside was full of 18th century reproductions. Her favorites were in the family room. A hand-crafted pine estate desk graced the wall beside the brick fireplace. English wedge tables were set before the couch and a European-style armoire with carved panels and brass accents was on the opposite wall, hiding a flat screen tv.

The second day of her visit was a dismal, grey one and the constant rain dampened her spirits. She sat in the sun room at the back of the house, which overlooked a beautifully landscaped yard and pool area. It was a peaceful, attractive room, decorated with white-wicker pieces and overstuffed tufted floral cushions. Skylights overhead and windows on two walls that extended from floor to ceiling offered plenty of light. She had this room added along with the pool and gardens when she had won her first big case nearly eight years prior. She took great joy in taking care of her grandparents and making sure they lived comfortably.

She stared blankly at the page of the romance novel she had been holding. The young heroine's happiness made her feel more depressed and miss Gavin that much more. She did not hear her grandmother enter the room while she dialed the number for Gavin's hospital room.

Her heart thudded against her chest when she heard a voice she barely recognized. He tried to clear the frog from his throat and repeated a hello.

"Gavin, hi, it's Pamela. I miss you, sweetheart. I just wanted to ... hello! Gavin, are you there? Hello."

The dial tone echoed in her ear as she lowered her phone and let it slip from her fingers. She could not hold back the tears that threatened to fall and; she sobbed. She held her face in her hands as her shoulders shook with each heart-wrenching release.

Her grandmother closed the distance between them, sat down beside her, and pulled her into a comforting embrace. She rocked her, tenderly petting her head like she did when Pamela was little.

Her grandmother did not ask any questions. She just held her and offered her quiet support. It was a beautiful bond they shared. She knew when to talk and waited until she felt Pamela needed to hear some words of wisdom.

The moment Pamela stopped crying and sat back against the sofa, her grandmother handed her a clean handkerchief from the secret compartment that was always there inside her sleeve. Pamela smiled when she saw her extract it and chuckled lightly.

Her grandmother stroked her cheek softly with the back of her hand.

“I’ve lost him, Grandma. I just know I have.”

“Love is a very strong virtue, dear. Its power is almighty. It’s capable of combating anything life throws its way. His pain has just blinded his judgment and love for you a little, that’s all.”

She took Pamela’s face between her palms and held it lovingly.

“Make him remember. Make him feel the power of your love. You can’t give up when he needs you the most.”

She kissed Pamela’s forehead and released her.

“You have to be strong for him. He doesn’t need to hear you love him. Show him, child. Chisel away at his fears and inhibitions. Romance him.” Her eyebrows raised roguishly and she winked. “Make him feel like a man again.”

“Grandma!” Pamela squealed, surprised by her frankness. She had to laugh though, because she knew that she was probably right. That part of him wasn’t dead or injured.

“Oh, pooh!” Her grandmother waved. “I may be old, but I ain’t dead, and I know as sure as I am sitting here, that fire between you two hasn’t died inside of him. It’s just been tampered down by what’s happened to him. You need to rekindle that flame.” She pointed.

Pamela leaped from the couch, feeling hopeful and revived.

“You are the best! Thank you, Grandma.”

Pamela looked for her phone, picked it up, and dialed Dr. Fowler’s number to check on Gavin’s progress. She was disheartened to learn Gavin was not progressing as expected. He was losing weight, refusing to eat, and being uncooperative with this therapist.

Pamela was on a mission now. She would not stop until she broke through his defenses. Her heart became alight with anticipation and she knew she would have the full support of his family, once she shared her plans with them.

She arrived at the farm early in the afternoon on that Sunday and the Templeton’s were all there in full force. One-by-one they greeted her fiercely, inundating her with kisses and joyous words of welcome. As they sat around the large oak table in the kitchen they answered her questions regarding Gavin.

It was good to hear his leg was healing beautifully. She told them how he had hung up on her and what she had planned to bring him back around. She didn’t get into explicit details on how she planned to reignite the passion within him, but they were all behind her.

She learned of his concern regarding his practice and immediately offered to step in. She called her personal accountant in front of them and asked her to meet Pamela at his office the following morning to discuss setting his books in order and pay whatever bills needed addressing. Bradford said her would call Gavin's office manager and let her know the accountant had the family's approval to help, however, she could.

Pamela also informed Gavin's family that she had called the veterinary school and asked if they had top students nearing graduation, who might be interested helping at Gavin's clinic on an intern basis with the patient backlog. Possible candidates were being put in contact with Victor, Gavin's resident doctor, to interview right away and bring them onboard.

Pamela made them all promise that Gavin not be told what she was doing. She wanted him to think that the family managed to keep things going. They promised to honor her request, until they felt it was time to tell him the truth.

Maggie suggested that Pamela accompany her to the hospital that afternoon. She told her how his eyes would light up whenever they would talk about her.

Pamela blushed when Bradford nodded his head and rose his eyebrows playfully.

"Still, I don't think he'll want to see me," she uttered.

Maggie patted her hand. "Wait until we get there. He won't be ignoring you with his momma there. Don't you worry. Why don't you go upstairs and freshen up a bit? We hope you'll stay the night."

Pamela nodded. "I'd like that, thank you."

Gavin's room was empty when Pamela and Maggie arrived. The nurse on duty did not recognize Pamela and told his mother that he would be back from therapy in less than ten minutes.

Pamela made sure she occupied the chair behind the door, so Gavin would not spot her right away when he returned. Her stomach churned and flopped nervously as she anticipated his arrival. She started to chew her nails and Maggie slapped her wrist lightly.

"You'd think you were going before a hangman's jury. He'll be riled at first, but once he sees you, he'll be moved. That's all you need to accomplish today. Shakin' his insides up." She nodded matter of fact.

Maggie winked and drew a finger to her lips when she saw Gavin being pushed down the hallway.

"Be real quiet now behind that door, until I give the word."

Pamela nodded and moved in as far into the corner as she could behind the door.

Maggie's jovial welcome and plump profile did well hiding Pamela from view.

The sound of his voice made her tremor and she drew long, slow breaths in and exhaled just as slow to calm her nerves. She fidgeted slightly and nearly gasped out loud when he asked Maggie if she had heard from Pamela.

"You know that girl loves you something fierce, son. You're gonna loose her forever, if you don't wise up and let her in." She scolded.

“Mom, please! I know what I’m doing. What can a cripple offer a beautiful woman like Pamela? You tell me that.”

Pamela heard Maggie slap his arm.

“You reading minds now and think you know what that woman wants? You actually think that little of her?”

He sighed deeply.

“I’m not the same man she fell in love with.” He pounded a clenched fist onto his bedding. “I just wish she would let me go.”

“Letting go of love isn’t that easy, Gavin. You can’t just ask her to walk away like you mean nothing, like everything you’ve been through doesn’t matter.”

“Well, she has too!” He snapped.

“I see. Then answer me this. Can you still kiss her tenderly with those lips, hold her in your arms, whisper endearing words, and love her physically?”

There was a deafening silence in the room.

“Answer me, son.” She pressed.

“Christ, mom”

“Don’t you be using the Lord’s name in vain. I expect an answer.” She scolded.

Pamela stifled a giggle. *You go Maggie*, she cheered quietly.

His voice was barely a whisper and Pamela smiled when she heard him answer.

“Yes.”

“Well then, don’t be laying there telling me you’re not man enough for her. You talk to her face-to-face. She deserves that much. If you don’t love her anymore, then say so.”

She moved from his bed side and turned towards Pamela, her hand extended.

“Come here, child,” She smiled warmly, taking her hand when Pamela came visible.

Pamela hesitated briefly, looking from Maggie to Gavin. When their eyes met, her heart skipped more than once.

Quickly, he masked his disapproval.

Her lips quivered nervously when she smiled at him.

Margaret hugged her and turned to look at her son.

“Now’s the best time as any, and don’t you go and snap at her either. This was my idea, not hers. You two need to talk this out here and now.”

Maggie turned and left the room.

Chapter Eighteen

Gavin diverted his eyes and refused to look at her directly.

She moved closer to his bed and ran her finger slowly along the inside flesh of his arm and felt him tremble beneath her touch. It reaffirmed that her touch still stirred him. Her eyes scanned over him. Beneath his reserve was a man who knew passion, whose kisses were like hot flames that seared hers when they connected. He was a man she pleased being intimate with and knew every sound he made when he was deep inside of her. She would seduce him slowly, teasing those senses back to life once again.

“Please don’t be upset with Maggie. It was my idea. I just wanted to see you so badly, sweetheart.”

His eyes were void of emotion when he looked at her and shrugged her off.

“Did you see the legs on that babe who wheeled me in here?” He smirked.

She clenched her teeth and fisted her hands at her side. She wanted to slap the smirk from his face. She knew he was trying to taunt her enough into leaving.

So, he wants to play dirty, does he?

She sauntered slowly over to the window at the other side of his room, clearly within his line of vision. She quietly commended herself on her choice of wardrobe that day. It was the most important artillery she had in her arsenal right now., along with her body, that is.

Slowly, she ran her hands down her waist and hips to straighten her outfit. The short, sleeveless denim dress with button down snaps, clung to her curvaceous figure like a second skin. The last snap was only six inches above her knee and undone. It separated when she emphasized her walk, exposing the inside flesh of her creamy thigh.

Her hair was piled high atop her head with a comb and fell in wispy ringlets about her face, accentuating her long neck and the low dip of her rounded neckline.

She turned to look at Gavin and caught his admiring gaze. Perspiration dotted his brow and above his full lip. She smiled inwardly, praising her tactic as she turned to look out the window.

She took advantage of the large sill, rested her forearms on it as she lifted herself to look out and admire the view, tempting him with a view of her backside and shapely calves. When she glanced over her shoulder at him, the heat in his eyes sent a message of their own.

“It’s such a beautiful day outside. Maggie told me a few calves were born today. Isn’t that exciting?”

He leaned over to grab the remote control for the television and clicked it on. He turned up the volume to annoy her and ran through every channel until he came across a football game. He hated football and never watched sports.

She knew that too and pursed her lips, moving from the window and walked towards him.

He pretended to ignore her and feigned an interest in the game. He did not respond when she stood by his side and started to watch the game with him.

A few moments passed and an aide carried his dinner in.

Pamela took the tray from her and placed it on his table and wheeled it in close to his reach. She removed the cover from the main dish and showed surprised at the pleasing aroma.

“Um, smells good. Looks like you’re doing Italian tonight.” She smiled.

He pushed it away with his hand, refusing to look at her.

“I’m not hungry.”

Pamela squished her lips to the side and shrugged.

“And how do you propose to get stronger, if you don’t eat?”

He looked at her reservedly and did not reply.

She walked over to his door and closed it and climbed up on his bed and stretched out beside him.

“Maybe you’re hungry for this instead.” Her shift rose high on her thighs as she leaned in, encircled her arm around him, and kissed him with a hunger that took his breath away.

He tried to push her away, but she clung to him like a vine, her kisses deepening, her hand moving beneath the sheet and up under his hospital gown. Her palm glided past his navel, tickling the hairline that led to the tip of manhood.

His skin quivered under her touch and he moaned, weakening. He fought her for another moment, until his hand contacted with the flesh of her thigh. Slowly, his hand ventured upward, beneath her dress and touched her silk panties. Softly, he kneaded her velvety backside and another moan escaped his lips.

She pulled away and looked in his eyes. It was desire she saw. There was no denying.

He removed his hold on her and the magic was gone.

It was okay. She accomplished what she wanted and did not say a word as she straightened her dress. Words weren’t needed. She leaned over still, placing a loving kiss upon his cheek then turned, slid off his bed, and began to move toward the door.

He called out her name and she stopped briefly and looked over her shoulder.

“Forget me, Pamela. I can’t give you what you need anymore.”

She smiled demurely.

“Oh, baby. I know what you can give me. You just showed me.”

Chapter Nineteen

Another week had come and gone. The following day proved a joyous one for the Templeton clan.

Pamela had been held up in Supreme Court all day and unaware they had tried to get a hold of her. It was not until later in the day, when she was told by her secretary they were looking to

talk with her. She did not have time to call them back and decided to head straight out to the farm when she finished her day.

When she called out and entered the house, big band music was blaring and Becky was jumping and clapping excitedly. Glasses were being readied, Maggie was sobbing happily, and Bradford was dancing in a circle with Elizabeth.

“What is all this?” She chuckled as she stood under the archway, leading into the family room.

Becky ran straight at her and Pamela scooped her up into her arms, receiving a hug and sound kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you, honey,” she smiled and twirled her about.

Becky squealed with glee as her shiny curls spun in the air. “Gavin coming home. But, he not here yet.” She admitted happily.

Pamela squeezed her and kissed her freckled nose. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all day.”

Becky squirmed in her arms and Pamela set her down.

Maggie walked over to greet her and handed her a glass to celebrate with.

Pamela’s eyes filled with joyous tears. “I’m so glad he’s coming home finally.” She reached out to hug her with one arm, careful not to spill the champagne being poured in her glass. “Is he arriving tonight? I’m glad I got here in time.”

As she took a sip of the effervescent drink, she noticed a change in the room.

Maggie touched her arm and looked sadly.

“Sit down for a minute, dear.”

Pamela’s stomach sank and her eyes grew large. “Maggie you’re scaring me, what is it?”

Maggie reached for her hand as she sat down beside her.

“We tried to call you but just couldn’t reach you and didn’t want to leave a message. That son of mine bargained to cooperate only if you promised to stay away.”

Sadness engulfed her as her eyes brimmed with tears.

“I ... I don’t understand.” Her voice choked as she wiped away a tear that trickled down her cheek.

Elizabeth left and took Becky upstairs so as not to upset her.

“Give him more time, Pamela.” Bradford said as he sat down beside her.

Pamela smiled weakly and shook her head in disagreement.

“No, Bradford. He’s had plenty of time. I think it’s pretty clear that I’m not what he wants in life.” She rose. “Um, I think I should leave.”

Maggie jumped to her feet and shook her head rapidly as she reached out to pat her arm. “Please stay the night. It’s such a long drive back to town.”

Pamela embraced her and kissed her cheek.

“It’s better that I go. It’ll just be easier on us all.” She reached out and caressed her palm to Maggie’s cheek and a heavy sadness tugged at her heart strings. “I am so, so happy that Gavin is going to be all right and coming home. He’ll get stronger here, surrounded by the people who love him. And your cooking,” she chuckled as tears rolled down her cheeks, “will pack those pounds right back on him.”

She hugged Bradford for a long time.

“Please tell Elizabeth and Becky I said goodbye.”

They all nodded and followed her out onto the front porch. She hugged them all one last time before she climbed down the stairs.

Maggie called to her and Pamela stopped and turned. Maggie blew her a kiss as she sobbed openly.

“Please ... please stay in touch.”

Pamela nodded, but knew that she wouldn’t. If she was to survive through this, she had to break the ties from them completely.

When she pulled away and looked at her rear-view mirror, her heart shattered as she saw Maggie whimpering in Bradford’s arms. She could not stop the deluge of tears that began. She felt sick to her stomach as she turned onto the main highway and the farm was gone from sight. She felt broken, as broken as the day she had lost her parents. She was forced to pull over to the side of the road. Sobs took her prisoner as they racked her body and blurred her vision.

She leaned her forehead against the steering wheel and hugged it as she emptied herself of every emotion she had ever felt and shared with him over the last three months.

She had to try and forget him to survive. She had to wipe the slate clean as though nothing existed between them. She had to become hard, cold and unfeeling. She had to force the memories of him, his family and how he made her feel way, way back where the trauma of hurt and pain lurked and pricked at the borders of one’s subconscious.

She did not know how long she stayed there on the side of the road. She cried until the tears no longer flowed. She sat there until her vision cleared and her body stopped shaking. She did not put her car into drive, until her stomach emptied the loss that ravished her unmercifully for nearly an hour.

When she pulled away, she wasn’t the same woman. She was a woman lost, a woman drained of emotion, a woman changed forever and just went through the motions of existing.

Soft, classical music played in the background, as Pamela sat and ate dinner alone. The Carousel Room at the Radisson where she was staying was decorated to match its name. Authentic carousel horses were situated at various locations throughout the room.

As she picked at her Julienne salad, she was mindless of her surroundings though.

She had decided to stay out in California until her case was settled. It made no sense to be in Bayberry. She rather enjoyed the tropical landscape and gentle breezes that rolled in off the ocean. Huntington Beach was a gorgeous area and she loved the condo she rented on the ocean. Thanks to modern technology, she did not miss a beat with the office or her clients.

A male voice interrupted her silence.

“Penny for your thoughts, Counselor.”

Pamela was bumped on the shoulder by the defense attorney representing the firm her client was suing. He shuffled into the booth across from her without invitation.

Warren Anderson was an attractive man, but extremely cocky and arrogant. He tried earlier that morning to worm his way into her room before court began. It was a pleasure slamming the door in his face.

She was just as agitated now and her voice carried that tone.

“How’d you find me?”

“The front desk clerk told me he saw you come this way. Mind if I join you?”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Not really.”

He caught the waiter’s attention.

“Get the lady another of what she’s having and bring me an Absolute Martini, dry and not stirred.”

She raised her hand.

“I’m leaving. My check please.”

Warren reached out and caught her hand when she lowered it.

“Come on, Landers. We can discuss an arrangement over cocktails,” he rubbed the side of her hand with his thumb, “What do ya say?” He smiled sheepishly.

Pamela pulled her hand from his and slid to the end of her seat.

“The only discussions we’ll have, counselor, will be in front of a judge.” She quipped as she collected her purse and jacket.

She stood and handed a fifty to the waiter.

“This should cover everything including your tip and Casanova’s Absolute.”

The waiter winked and bowed his thanks.

She could not believe the audacity of that asshole. She heard he had a reputation for using his sexual charms to try and sway female opponents. She rode the elevator to her floor with a well-deserved smirk on her face. She had him by his family jewels. Tomorrow would be her day of triumph and she could not wait to drop the bomb on them.

Chapter Twenty

Pamela did more than win. She wiped the floor with their defense team. She had twenty percent of a thirty-three-million-dollar settlement coming her way. Not chump change at all! Over six million was hers to do with what she wanted, and she knew what that was going to be.

She looked around at her boss's office. The black, high-gloss finish of his Chinese horn chairs lacked the luster they usually held whenever she entered the room. She stood in the center of his office and it did not seem as formidable at seven a.m.

The ornate, brass pumpkin-shaped lamp he had purchased on his last trip to Thailand was lit on top of his credenza, shedding a soft, ivory glow over the Renoir reprint of the "Spring Bouquet," hanging above it.

She checked her watch and decided to sit and wait for him. He promised the night before to meet her early that morning before his hectic day began so they could talk.

He arrived shortly and moved to his chair.

"I'm afraid to ask what it was you wanted to talk about?" He tossed his briefcase on the black and white striped sofa as he passed it. "Obviously, it's something of great concern."

Pamela clasped her hands on her lap as she looked at him and it bothered her a little that he looked so upset.

He waited a moment and spoke.

"Well," he pointed, "Is it about your share of the settlement? You did one hell of a job in L.A. I'm very proud of you."

She smiled appreciatively.

"Thank you. I'm here Stanford, because I'm handing in my resignation."

He sent her a surprised look.

"So soon? You have such a promising career here. We want to make you a full partner."

She nodded and raised her hands.

"That's not what I want any more. I need a change. And, this shouldn't come as a surprise to you. Even though Gavin and I are no longer together, I'm itching to travel, maybe take up a hobby. Did you know I could paint?" She chuckled. "Well, I can, and I'd like to do more of it. I need ... I need to get away from here."

He rose and walked to the front of his desk and looked down at her.

"I know. You haven't been the same since your breakup. I don't want to lose you, Pamela, and yes, maybe for selfish reasons. But, you're like a daughter to me. So, take as long as you need, set up a satellite office anywhere you'd like. You can still be a partner. Just promise me," he occupied the seat beside her and reached for her hand, patting it, "Promise you won't break all ties with the firm. Whatever you decide, we'll agree too."

She nodded her head slowly.

“Okay, but I need time away to think and decide how much I still want to be involved.”

His head nodded rapidly.

“Take a month, hell, take three! Just keep in touch. Call me every week. Let’s keep the lines of communication open. Agreed?”

She smiled and rose.

“Agreed,” she replied.

Stanford drew her into a warm embrace and placed a fatherly kiss upon her forehead.

She loved the seaside city in Southern California she went back to. There were eight miles of pristine, white sandy beaches with a sunny, warm Mediterranean climate that attracted surfers by the dozens and offered a casual lifestyle.

The temps rarely climbed above ninety degrees and she loved the constant breeze that billowed through her open French doors throughout her condo. There were recreational piers and public parks she could visit. She took up riding at a nearby stable, went on boat rides frequently at the gorgeous marina, and utilized daily an eight-mile biking trail where she could inline skate, jog or walk along the ocean.

She had just enjoyed the season’s annual U.S. Open for Surfing and was looking forward to the AVP Pro Beach Volleyball competitions coming up shortly.

It did wonders for her figure; the entire two months she had been here. She even hardly recognized herself. She lived in short shorts, tees and flip-flops and loved, loved, loved it! She did not know if she would make it her permanent residency, but she was tempted. She loved waking up to gorgeous blue skies and sunshine every day. She loved being in the outdoors, buying fresh fruit and flowers weekly at the open markets. She adored walking through the weekly art fairs that hosted craftsman and artisans from all over the country.

She was healing and getting on with her life. The ice was slowly melting around her heart, and Pamela finally felt at peace. She thought of him still, but no longer cried. She hoped he was well and happy. She no longer thought of what they could have been. She only thought of what she had ahead of her.

Pamela knew she would start a satellite office and had told Stanford as much. She wasn’t quite sure whether it would be back in New England somewhere. She liked being a California girl and knew that she wanted to stay a little while longer. She was working a new case right now and everything meshed rather nicely. She flew to New York to meet the client and agreed to take on the case. Whenever she needed to fly back East, a small leer jet was at her disposal.

She got back into painting and her condo was decorated with some of her finished pastel prints. It was becoming one of her life’s greatest pleasures. It not only enlarged her world, but kept her grounded and at peace with her inner self. She loved the colors that were at her disposal because they were so vibrant and alive.

She took some private lessons and learned all about blending and matching colors, creating form, how to paint in shadows, contrast and textures. It was her release, her medicine, her prescription for healing.

The sunsets were breathtaking on the beach outside her condo. She had taken multiple digital shots with a new Cannon camera she purchased to capture them.

It was almost five in the late afternoon and Pamela began to do what she always did this time each day. She set up her easel out on her large balcony and started to pick up where she had left off the night before with her canvas.

The sunset she was painting was starting to take shape. She already painted three-quarters of her canvas in the blue/green for the ocean, with the beach down along the border. Now she wanted to start adding the waves rolling in against the shoreline.

She had her favorite song list playing softly in the background. It was a wonderful blend from some of the greats she adored listening to. There was a fabulous mix of Jim Brickman, Celine Dion, Andy Williams, Johnny Mathis, Michael Buble, and Englebert Humperdinck. She was a terrible romantic and listened to nothing else when she was painting or working.

She took a small sip of a white signature Robert Mondavi Moscato and slowly licked her lips. She was ready now to begin. The mood was set and life was good.

She hadn't taken one stroke of her brush when the intercom buzzed. It was her security system and the doorman from downstairs. She was expecting a delivery of special oils she had ordered online and moved excitedly towards the intercom located on the wall beside her front door.

"Hi Marco. Do you have a package for me?"

"No mam, not a delivery. A gentleman is here to see you. A Mr. Templeton ... should I send him up?"

Pamela froze and her stomach did that all too familiar dance. She hesitated. It had been so long since the day she walked away from the farm. It had to be Bradford. Gavin wanted nothing to do with her. Stanford must have told him where she was. But, why would he just show up and not call first? Something must be terribly wrong for him to be here in person.

"Bradford Templeton?" She asked nervously.

There was a brief pause before the intercom hummed back on.

"No mam, Gavin Templeton."

Pamela gulped and shivered.

Gavin? Why? Why now? What could he possibly want? He could have sent a letter. Why come all the way out here after all this time?

She was finally back to her old self, comfortable in her surroundings, and starting a new chapter in her life. She did not need this interruption. She did not know if she was strong enough to see him, talk to him, or have him anywhere in her space.

Tears burned behind her lids.

No! Don't do this. Don't you dare cry. He ripped out your heart, she reprimanded herself. Don't you give him the satisfaction, damn it!

"Marco, please tell Mr. Templeton I'm not accepting any visitors this evening."

"Yes, Miss Landers."

She waited. Her pulse was racing, her heart was pounding, and her knees were shaking. She placed her palms against the door and pressed her forehead against the smooth wood grain. She felt slightly dizzy and tried to ignore what was happening to her body. She drew in a breath and released it slowly a few times and slowly, she had control over her body once again.

She moved out to her patio, chugged her wine down and walked to the kitchen to refill it.

Now what? Will he go away, come back, start stalking her? She prayed he got the message and respected her enough to stay away.

Chapter Twenty-One

Pamela awoke to a bright, new, and sunny day. She sat up and stretched her arms high overhead and breathed in deeply the fresh ocean air softly streaming in through her opened sliding door. The view from the tenth floor was spectacular! She loved falling to sleep at night to the sound of the waves crashing up against the shore. It was such a calming and lulling sound.

A week had passed without any further incidents. She did not expect Gavin to give up so easily, but glad that he had. She knew she would have weakened. Those amber eyes of his still haunted her sleep and called out to her.

She flipped on the radio beside her bed, to help dismiss him from her mind, and sprang from her bed. She had a routine. Every morning, she did a four-mile walk along the beach to start off her day. It gave her a chance to plan, mull over strategies in her mind for any particular case she was working on, and of course, the cardio benefit was pretty obvious.

It generally took her close to an hour to finish her walk and the feeling that washed over her each time was exhilarating. She smiled at those in passing, familiar walkers or runners fulfilling their morning regime just like her. She loved watching the various species of birds that made the shorelines their stomping grounds like the snowy white egrets, sea gulls and sandpipers.

Whenever she spotted a small pod of dolphins close in the distance she got excited. Sometimes tiny stingrays would come close to shore. There were all kinds of fish that stayed in the shallow waters along the shoreline as well.

Pamela had a brief to prepare that morning for her new client. It would take her a couple of hours and then she could send it off to her secretary back in Bayberry to prepare.

As she crossed the beach and headed toward the back entrance of her condo building, her attention was diverted by a male figure approaching from that direction.

She almost looked away until something caught her attention. He seemed familiar in some way. It was not his style of dress, as he looked like any other beach goer. Even from this distance, she could tell he was tall and in great shape.

Her curiosity peaked and it pricked at her brain. He was intentionally moving towards her, his gaze watchful, not distracted, and kept himself directly in her line of vision.

A little voice in her head told her to veer over to the right as though she wasn't heading back to her condo. She stopped briefly, uncertain, and then snickered.

This is ludicrous, she thought, that is, until she looked backed up and recognized him.

"Gavin!" she gasped. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

She turned and hastened in the opposite direction. This was not going to happen. Why didn't he go the hell home? Was her refusal to see him not clue enough for him?

He hollered her name and she ignored him. He sounded closer and she knew she must have imagined it. There was still some distance between them before she turned away. He could not have caught up to her so quickly. She wanted to look over her shoulder, but didn't. Just to see the anguish, the hope, the anticipation on his face, would do her in ... make her weaken and give in.

She headed for the front entrance. Once, she was safely inside, Antonio, the day guard, would stop him. She turned the corner and hastened her step.

"Damn it, Pamela, slow down. You know I'm a gimp and can't walk that fast!"

His cry hit her, like a bat to the head and she halted abruptly, but did not turn around. She knew he was closer, she could smell him, feel his nearness, and her insides immediately began to tremor.

Oh, God! Dear God. Give me strength please, she prayed silently.

She just stood there, looking down at the ground, breathing in and out slowly. She did not have the courage to turn around and meet his gaze. When his feet came into view, she closed her eyes and simply stood there.

This is stupid, you fool, she chastised herself quietly. *You just can't stand there and not look at him. Do you want him to think that you're weak? Open your eyes, damn it! Stand up to the man. Tell him, tell him he's a dickwad. Pretend your Janis. Janis would kick his ass.*

He reached out and touched her and she pulled away sharply as her eyes flew open.

"Don't touch me. You've lost your right to do that."

It did not bother her that pain registered in his eyes.

Good, she thought. *Hurt. Hurt bad.*

"I don't want you here." She took two steps back as she held her body rigid and her hands fisted at her side. "We're done, remember? You made that choice for the both of us. I've made a life here without you and I need, I want you to go... now."

He took a step forward, his hands extending, pleading.

"Pamela, please. Hear me out."

She raised her hand, palm out, her stance determined, her tone unfaltering.

“No. No,” she shook her head. “You had every opportunity ... all the time in the world, but you chose to close me out, to push me away, to simply cast aside everything that we were together.” She stabbed at the air with her point finger. “You didn’t give our love a chance to help you heal, to fight off your depression, to support you through your therapy. I wasn’t enough for the both of us.”

She tried to walk around him, but he blocked her attempt to move forward. She did a quick about face and walked back towards the beach to enter through the rear entrance.

He followed in pursuit.

“You’re right,” he hollered.

She noticed they were drawing the attention of people around them. She quickly looked over her shoulder. It did not stop him. He was like a man on a mission and hastened his steps, even though she could tell it was difficult for him to move that fast.

“I was a fool and ... and I was scared,” his voice cracked, “scared that I ... I wouldn’t be enough ... enough for you.”

She turned then and the abrupt action had him almost lose his balance. He righted himself quick enough and he looked hopeful as he waited for her to respond.

She fought the tears that misted her eyes and threatened to run down her cheeks. It was then she fully looked at him, really looked at him and she knew, she could not hate this man, could not stop loving him, and wanted him desperately back into her life.

She was not complete without him. She would not tell him that. He haunted her dreams constantly. She would not tell him that. He was like an addiction and she craved him deep inside of her. She would not tell him that.

This wasn’t her time to litigate, it was his. She just stood there and waited for him to fight for them. She knew he expected her to respond, but she was done. It was all up to him now. And so, she waited.

She could tell the wheels were turning in his head. He was realizing that she wasn’t going to say a word. He looked out at the ocean, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply before he looked back at her.

The look of love was in his eyes and it made her gasp ever so slightly. Her heart quickened as he moved closer. She knew that she would not pull away if he reached for her. He did not. There was a mix of emotions playing on his face hope, fear, love and determination.

He ran his fingers through his hair and his cheeks ballooned as he blew out his breath slowly.

“I didn’t realize how great the loss was, until I did not see you, hear your voice, or know where you were, what you were doing. When you left, it was so final and I felt empty ... like I was drowning on the inside. Mom and granddad were so upset with me,” he chuckled lightly. “I didn’t blame them. The physical attraction between us,” he shook his head and chewed on his lower lip, “was so powerful, so physically arousing ... I couldn’t get you out of my head day and

night. I look at you even now, and Christ, I'm so aroused ... I hunger for you and afraid that my leg, that I won't, I mean, I can't perform like before."

Everything he said was all well and good. She felt the same way. For her it was more than just the sex. She fell in love with Gavin, the vet and farmer, the man who loved his family, adored his half-sister, and had a precious and ridiculously close friendship with his sister. She loved his compassionate heart, his loving nature, his quick wit and sharp mind.

Her eyebrows rose and her tone reflected her disappointment.

"Is that what this is all about," she motioned with her hands, "your fear of performing?"

His eyes grew wide as he realized the error of his delivery and he reached for her, capturing her face between his palms.

She clasped a hold of his wrists and shook her head sadly.

"Because if it is –"

He shook his head rapidly and blurted, "No! No! It's not. Damn, I'm screwing this up royally." His eyes misted with tears and his voice grew thick with emotion. "Baby I love you. God, I love you," he stroked her face with his thumbs. "I'll do anything, anything to have you back in my life. I'll sell my practice and start one out here, if you want to stay, whatever you want."

Tears fell from his eyes as he looked deeply into hers with the greatest of hope reflecting in their depths.

That was what she wanted, to hear ... those three endearing words. Nothing was more complete, than that rush of emotion that filled a woman's soul when a man avowed his love for the very first time.

He reached for her hands and smiled, that slow, sexy smile she adored. She did not expect him to bend down on one knee, but he did, and pull a small, blue velvet ring box from his back shorts pocket.

She knew, before he lifted the lid what it was, yet a gasp still escaped her lips.

"Are you still mine," his eyes pleaded?

She smiled and nodded slowly as tears cascaded down her cheeks.

"I need your love, baby. Will you be my wife?"

She lowered herself onto bended knees too and answered him with a kiss, a kiss that promised the kind of passion he feared would never be between them, a kiss that promised that every tomorrow would be theirs to share, and a kiss that hollered yes for always and forever.

THE END

I hope you truly enjoyed Unchained Melody and will take a moment to please write a review where you purchased this copy. I'm really excited about my new Love Song Standards Series and hope you check out my other titles.

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