Breathless Descent

Lisa Renee Jones

Lisa Renee Jones
Breathless Descent

Аннотация

Ten years ago, an impulsive eighteen-year-old Shay White kissed Caleb Martin–her brother's best friend. The resulting chemistry was hot enough to send Caleb running. Now he's back…an ex-special forces operative getting his skydiving business off the ground. But Shay figures that all that sexual tension was a "forbidden fruit" sort of thing. A simple kiss should put that fantasy to rest, right?Wrong. Instead, Shay and Caleb find themselves caught in a web of need and decide to finally do something about it…in the most exquisitely carnal way possible. Now Shay and Caleb are tumbling into a lust-fueled freefall–are they headed for a safe landing or the kind of crash that will change their lives forever?

Содержание

“Better if they think we don’t like each other, Shay, than believe we want to…be together.” 5
Breathless Descent 7
ABOUT THE AUTHOR 8
Contents 9
Prologue 10
1 14
2 27
3 39
4 46
5 57
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 60

“Better if they think we don’t like each other, Shay, than believe we want to…be together.”

Shay poked Caleb’s chest, her body barely a hairsbreadth from his.

“You know what else isn’t working, Caleb? You pretending that dumb ten-year-old kiss didn’t happen, and then looking at me like you want to kiss me again.”

He reached down, took her hand in his, every nerve ending in his body aware of her. “I’m not trying to upset you, Shay.”

“Too late,” she declared. “Sometimes I just think…maybe…we’re like the apple to Adam and Eve. It was just an apple, but the forbidden nature of it made it tantalizing. Maybe if we kiss again, we’ll find that we’d blown that first kiss into something bigger and better than it really was. Then we’ll be able to move on.”

She thought that kiss—the one that had kept him fantasizing for years—wasn’t as good as they remembered? He must be insane because the idea wasn’t half-bad. He wanted the kiss to be nothing. He wanted the torment of wanting the forbidden to be gone. Then again, a part of him didn’t want it gone at all.

It simply wanted her….

Blaze™

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to the Texas Hotzone, where three ex-members of the Crazy Aces Special Forces team have opened a skydiving operation right outside of my hometown of Austin, Texas.

Breathless Descent is the final installment in the Texas Hotzone trilogy, and my hope is that the ending does indeed leave you feeling breathless and romantic. This is a story of forbidden love, much like Romeo and Juliet, but thankfully, with a happy ending. There is just something so enticing and seductive about the forbidden, and about a love so strong that nothing can hold it back.

I've so enjoyed writing Bobby's, Ryan's and Caleb's stories. I hope you will remember the Hotzone with as much pleasure as I do.

Best wishes,

Lisa Renee Jones

Breathless Descent
Lisa Renee Jones

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa spends her days writing the dreams playing in her head. Before becoming a writer, Lisa lived the life of a corporate executive, often taking the red-eye flight out of town and flying home for the excitement of a Little League baseball game. Visit Lisa at www.lisareneejones.com.

Special thanks to Casey, Rob, and Ethan Maxwell
for helping with my military research.
Janice, once again, for proofing
and proofing and proofing again while living the deadlines
with me. And Diego—for driving the U-Haul
from NY to Colorado so I could write this trilogy.

Contents

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Epilogue

Prologue

CALEB MARTIN LEANED against the Fresco Club bar, watching as Shay White celebrated being old enough as of today to dance the night away at the over-eighteen hot spot. Trying his best not to notice the way her red, silky dress accented her tiny waist and each sultry move of her slender but curvy hips. Oh, yeah, he thought, watching her dance with some guy from her school, it hugged those hips and her heart-shaped backside in a far too seductive way. And when said "boy" slid his hand to her waist and sidled up close to her, Caleb tightened his hand on the beer he held until he thought he heard glass crack.

"Should I go take care of that, or do you want to?" asked Kent White, Shay's big brother and Caleb's best friend since grade school. The fast pop tune changed to a slow, sultry tune, and the boy's hand slipped to Shay's backside.

Kent set his beer down so hard it splattered. "Oh, hell, no." He charged toward the dance floor, and silently, Caleb cheered him onward, watching as Shay flipped her long blond hair over her shoulder and shoved her hands onto her hips to square off with Kent.

Caleb had wanted that hand off Shay's butt and now it was, thankfully—and if he was honest with himself, it wasn't brotherly protectiveness fueling that desire when it should have been. After all, the Whites had taken Caleb in six years before, and

treated him like family after he'd lost both his parents in close progression at the ripe young age of fifteen. He felt like family, too. Heck, in a family filled with fair hair and eyes, he even looked like family with his sandy brown hair and light green eyes.

But for the past two years, since about the time Shay had turned sixteen, she'd been flirting with him. Even back then, he'd been smart enough to know nineteen was too old for a sixteen year old, regardless of the fact that she was like a sister to him. And so, Caleb had quickly, and frequently, discouraged her advances.

Tonight though, her teasing looks and purposeful smiles, when combined with that dress—that sexy-as-hell dress—had the man in him standing at attention. Had him wondering what she would taste like, what she would feel like in his arms.

As if she sensed what Caleb was thinking, her gaze whipped to him, and he felt that gaze like a punch right in the groin. Oh, yeah, he would have been a fool to believe he was going to resist Shay when she joined him at the University of Texas next month, and one thing Caleb Martin was not—was a fool. Thus why he'd made a long-debated decision official. He was leaving in a week. And not to head back to campus. She just didn't know it yet. She was the only one who didn't know. He'd sworn the family to secrecy until after she'd celebrated her birthday. He'd just found out his enlistment orders and he didn't want anything to ruin her party, or the bond he had with her or the family. And the temptation that was Shay White was a one-way ticket in that

direction and he knew it. He had to say goodbye.

Emotion welled in his chest, and he tore his gaze from hers. With a scrub of his face, Caleb sat his beer down and headed to the bathroom. Tomorrow he became a soldier, exactly like his pops, who'd died a hero saving another soldier's life. It was the right decision for Caleb, one that had called to him for a good while, and he was finally answering.

It was several minutes later, when he exited the bathroom into the tiny hall, his cowboy boots scraping the wooden floor, that he found Shay waiting for him.

"The Army?" Shay demanded, waiting for him in the narrow hallway. "When were you going to tell me?"

"Thanks, Kent," he mumbled under his breath. "I was going to tell you, Shay. Just not on your birthday, and Kent knew that."

"Don't," she said, and flung herself into his arms, all soft and warm and emotional. "Don't leave." Her chin tilted upward, her eyes filled with tears. "I can't bear the idea of something happening to you."

More of that damnable emotion welled in his chest. "Nothing is going to happen to me," he promised.

"Like nothing happened to your father?" she said. "No. I won't let you go. I…" She pushed to her toes and pressed her lips to his.

Caleb froze for an instant, but then that emotion, that deep burn he'd had for her, rose to the surface. She was right. His father had died in war. Hell, his mother had died of a heart attack. He could die, too. Once he left, he might well never come back,

and he wasn't going to die with any regrets. And never kissing her would be a regret.

He slid his hands into her hair, slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her—deeply, sensually, hungrily, reveling in the innocent sweep of her tongue against his. He moaned with the taste of her. Then reveled in the echoed, soft moan that escaped her lips, in the sway of her body into his.

Laughter permeated the passion threatening him, then voices. Caleb quickly ended the kiss and settled her away from him. Guilt twisted in his gut. "I'm sorry. That shouldn't have happened. It was a mistake."

"I'm not," she whispered. "I'm not sorry."

Kent rounded the corner, ending any further conversation, wiping away the moment, but not the kiss. The kiss had not only happened, it had changed everything for Caleb and Shay. A kiss worthy of sending a man off to the Army, maybe to war, and a kiss to justify why leaving was the right decision.

1

"IS HE COMING?"

"Is who coming?"

Shay set down the knife that she was using to touch up the icing on her parents' fortieth anniversary cake and glared at her older brother, Kent. "You know who."

"Caleb," he said, and reached for a strawberry from the bowl next to the cake.

Shay smacked his hand. "Don't eat the food before the guests arrive, and who else would I be talking about? Of course—Caleb." Just his name twisted her in knots.

"So is he?"

Kent snatched a strawberry and bit down. "Yes, he's going to be here. Why wouldn't he be? It's Mom and Dad's anniversary. They're his parents, too."

"He's been home for a few months," Shay said, "and I've yet to see him. That's why." And because she'd kissed him. Ten years ago, on her eighteenth birthday, and they'd hardly seen each other since. "He came home all of a handful of times in a decade."

Kent snorted. "What did you expect? He was in the Special Forces. Some elite unit that he can't even talk about. And you might not have seen him since he's been home, but I have."

"Because you went to that skydiving business of his and jumped out of a plane." A sales rep for a high-end sporting goods

company, her brother didn't get his sun-kissed, athletic good looks by accident. He was all about sports, the more extreme, the better. "You went to him, Kent. He didn't come to you."

"He's trying to get his business rolling," he said. "Cut him some slack. There's nothing more to this. Don't read into it. Ever since you opened that fancy psychology practice of yours, you're always reading too much into things."

"I just don't want Mom and Dad to be disappointed," she said. "Today is special."

"He'll be here," her brother reassured her. The doorbell rang. "That must be the caterers." He glanced at his watch. "And not a minute too soon. We don't need thirty hungry people roaming around our backyard. It might get dangerous." He started to turn away and seemed to think twice. He leaned on the counter. "Stop fretting. He'll be here. And Mom and Dad will have a great day."

She forced an accepting nod she didn't feel. Kent continued to study her with a keen look until the doorbell rang again. Then, with a scrub of his jaw, he departed. She knew he could tell something more was going on with her than simple worry over her parents' party—she'd seen it in his eyes—and there would be questions later she didn't intend to answer.

Shay shoved her long blond hair behind her ears and crossed her arms in front of the modest swimsuit cover-up. Her mother had volunteered her to put her college lifeguard skills to work today with the many kids attending the party. Caleb had been a lifeguard, too, she thought, unable to escape memories of his role

in her past. She squeezed her eyes shut at the vivid image of him in red lifeguard trunks, bare-chested, with a sprinkling of hair over perfectly defined pecs. His light brown hair streaked with blond from the sun. Green eyes glistening with amber flecks. And the lifeguard whistle. The man made that whistle so darn sexy, as silly as it might seem. How many times had she silently vowed to one day blow that whistle?

She shook herself, appalled at how ridiculously capable of recalling his "whistle" she was, despite a full decade since he'd donned said red trunks. Or how easily she remembered the moment she'd pressed her lips to his, how firm and smooth and wonderful they'd been. And the way he'd let out a soft moan that had told her he'd hungered for the kiss as much as she had, even if he'd never have claimed it himself. It had been her turn to moan when his hand had slid to her back and molded her close.

And then, true to form, Kent had shown up. Caleb had bolted so fast you would have thought he'd been struck by lightning. He'd told her the kiss had been a mistake and left.

The next week, after an awkward family farewell, at least for the two of them, he'd been gone. The few times Caleb had made it home in those ten years, the tension between them, the attraction, had been uncomfortably evident. And now that he was home to stay, he was avoiding her. That meant avoiding her family, their family.

She straightened, realizing what she had to do. She couldn't let this continue. My God, she was a therapist. She helped people

deal with the fastballs of life and reveled in being good at it. She had to deal with her own issues. She and Caleb had to talk, to get whatever was between them out in the open, instead of hiding from it. The damage was done.

She reached for the knife to finish the icing and then pressed her hands to her parents' green marble counter. Who was she kidding? Talking wasn't going to solve anything. Talking wasn't going to dissolve the combustible sexual tension between them. It seemed to Shay there was only one answer. Something drastic. Another kiss. Something she would never have considered if the circumstances hadn't become so strained. Okay, the fantasy about the red trunks helped. But they both needed to know once and for all what was between them. Her plan: she was going to kiss Caleb again, and it was quite possible she wouldn't even enjoy the kiss. Wouldn't that be a relief?

THE HOTTEST WOMAN he'd ever seen in his life was poised on the diving board, in a red-and-white, polka-dot bikini. She was also his best friend's twenty-eight-year-old "baby" sister. And considering said best friend was standing next to him, Caleb Martin tried not to drool. It wasn't easy. Shay White had been winding him into a tight ball of lusty need for as long as he could remember.

In fact, if not for the way Shay had rattled his cage, and the secret—albeit ancient—history the two of them shared, Caleb might not have followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Army. Shay had been the ink on the dotted line, the final nudge.

Caleb watched as she bounced on the board, as if intentionally drawing him under a spell where nothing else mattered. There was only the moment, and her on the diving board and in a bikini that, while certainly appropriate for her parents' backyard anniversary party, showed enough skin to entice his imagination to fill in the blanks.

Another graceful bounce and her long, lithe body curved into a delicate arch. Caleb's hungry eyes followed every last glimpse of skin, from fingertips to her shoulder-length blond hair, down to those gorgeous, fantasy-inspiring legs and all the way to her toes, as she slipped into the blue depths of her parents' pool. His heart thundered in his chest. Shay damn near made the water boil. She damn sure made his blood boil. The woman was hotter than the late-July, Austin, Texas, sun beaming through clusters of smoky clouds.

"Always liked to be the center of attention, didn't she?"

Caleb blinked, bringing Shay's brother, Kent, back into focus, along with the twenty-five or so guests mingling in various poolside areas.

"Yes," Caleb agreed, turning the iced bottle of beer cooling his hand to his lips and savoring the much-needed chill as liquid slid down his throat. "Shay was always the center of attention." And Kent had no idea how true that statement really was for him.

"Caleb!" The warm, friendly voice of Sharon White spun Caleb on his heels and into her hug.

"Happy anniversary, Sharon," he said. "Forty is something to

be proud of."

"Thank you, son," she said, still hugging him, holding on to him, before leaning back to give him a thorough inspection. "And now that we've both retired from our teaching jobs, we plan to enjoy ourselves a bit."

"You deserve it," he said, thinking of how dedicated they both had been to their high school students. He'd been fifteen, Kent's best friend, and one of Sharon's students, when his mother—who'd been struggling to raise him alone—had died of a heart attack. Years before, Caleb's father had been lost in a military operation overseas.

A familiar scent brought back memories of those years, of when Sharon had become his second mom. "Do you smell like sugar cookies?" he asked. "Or am I having flashbacks of you baking on the weekends?"

"You were always begging me to bake sugar cookies," Sharon said, smiling. "Which is exactly why I baked a batch and hid them in the pantry for you. I have to do something to get you to come around to see me." She pursed her lips at him, her sleek silver hair coiled at her neck. "You've been out of the Army two full months, and I've seen you two times if you count today. Shame on you, Caleb Martin. That's once a month."

Caleb hung his head, shamed indeed. "I'm sorry," he said, regretting that his fear of running into Shay had made him avoid both Sharon and her husband, Bob. Sharon, in particular. The woman had been his rock—seen him through some secret tears

and a struggle for identity. He added, “You absolutely will see me more often.”

The delicate lines around Sharon’s too-keen light blue eyes crinkled in scrutiny. In a motherly gesture, she stretched her arm and touched his light brown hair, then his jaw, her brows dipping. “You look tired.” She let out a breath, and concern kicked into a parental lecture. “You and those friends of yours are working too much. I know you want to get that skydiving business of yours off the ground, but you can’t go jumping out of planes with no rest.”

Caleb figured she didn’t want to hear that as recently as two months earlier, sleep had been a luxury, and skydiving into the bowels of hell in some dangerous country was the norm. Instead he promised, “I’m careful. But I have to work hard and get the Hotzone making a profit if I plan to stay a civilian.” And he did plan to stay a civilian, a vow—silent or not—he would never have thought possible a year before.

“Plan to stay a civilian,” came a soft, silky voice from behind him.

Shay.

“Well,” she continued, “you haven’t bothered to come see me since you got back into town—two months ago.”

Tension rippled through Caleb’s body in tidal-wave proportions, pulling him under with such force he would have sworn he was drowning in those brief seconds before he turned.

Caleb brought her into focus. Shay—gorgeous, petite, feisty little Shay, with one towel wrapped around her slender figure,

tucked under her arms. With a smaller towel, she dried her light blond hair spun with the color of snow-streaked wheat that accented equally light blue eyes brimming with mischief and challenge.

"Now, Shay," Sharon scolded, "don't be giving Caleb a hard time." Sharon chuckled and elbowed Caleb. "Better yet. Please. Feel free. Does my heart good to see you three kids together, stirring up harmless trouble."

Kids? Kent and Caleb were thirty-one. Shay was a mere three years younger. Hardly kids. And any jest between Shay and him was hardly harmless.

"Both you women need to behave." The playful reprimand came compliments of Bob White as he joined them, proudly sporting khaki shorts and a T-shirt that read Forty is the New Thirty. With his blond hair now silvery gray, he remained tall and athletic—an older, wiser version of his son.

"Cut Caleb some slack," Bob ordered. "He's been getting a business started." He kissed Sharon's cheek and then raised a hand to Caleb. "Come 'ere, boy! Give the ol' man a hug."

Another bear hug ensued—in a manly kind of way, of course—before Shay asked, "Where's my hug?"

Caleb's gut clenched, thinking of how she felt in his arms…as she had the night of her eighteenth birthday. The night everything had changed. The night he'd forgotten himself and kissed her. And if not for an interruption, he might have done a whole lot more. No. No "might." He would have. His attraction to Shay

was that strong, an attraction that only seemed to age like fine wine—get richer and more irresistible. It was a hard lesson he'd learned on the few visits home that he'd dared while enlisted.

She was in front of him now, driving him insane with her nearness. "Unless you're afraid I'll get you wet?" she taunted softly, her gaze sliding over his jeans and T-shirt, a contrast to everyone else's swim trunks, shorts and various summer attire. "You aren't exactly dressed for the pool." She leveled him with a stare. "You do know the meaning of pool party?"

He wanted nothing more than to dive into that pool with Shay, with nothing but swimsuits between them. Exactly why he'd dressed to avoid temptation.

Bracing himself for the impact, he decided to take charge of this unavoidable hug and then make a run for the other side of the pool. Caleb attempted a short, one-armed hug, his beer a great excuse to avoid anything more intimate. "How've you been, Shay?" he asked.

Instantly, her arms wrapped around his neck, preventing his escape. She clung to him, her soft, warm curves melting into him—a friendly embrace to anyone watching, but they both knew it was more. And damn it, it wasn't enough. He'd longed to hold her again for so very long. He wanted to mold her closer, to inhale her, to absorb her.

Among all the women a decade of traveling the world delivered to a Special Ops soldier like himself, none of the fast exits had left him with regret. But leaving Shay had, and often

he had wondered if she were the reason why no one else had mattered. Because there was no question—she had long ago reached inside him and refused to let go.

"I missed you, Caleb," she said softly, near his ear.

I missed you, too, he thought, fearing the words would sound as those spoken by a man, not a brother. And he was her brother. Brothers were forever. The minute they became more, they were like every other couple—they could crash and burn, lose what they had. And he'd lose more than her. He'd lose the only family he'd known for the past fifteen years.

He snatched the wet towel she'd draped over his shoulder and tugged it out of her grip, stepped backward and handed it to her. "Thanks for the soggy shoulder, Shay-Shay," he teased, reminding her of their youthful play and putting their relationship where it was meant to be—laden with sibling jest.

"Oh, God," she said, rolling her eyes and wringing the towel in her hands. "Don't call me that. You know I hate it."

Kent chuckled. "You loved it when you were thirteen."

"Thirteen," she repeated, grinding the age through her teeth. "When I played dress-up in Mom's work clothes."

"And transformed yourself into 'Shay-Shay Va-voom,'" Kent added, needling her.

"I hate you, Kent," she said, her teeth still clenched. "Really, really hate you."

Kent snorted his approval. "To a brother, that's the ultimate vow of love. Right, Caleb?"

“Right,” Caleb agreed. This was going exactly where Caleb had planned. He tipped his beer, but before the bottle made it to his mouth, Shay snatched it, their fingers brushing, electricity darting between them.

“I’m the youngest,” she said, turning up the bottle. “I get what I want.” The comment, while innocent enough to everyone else, wasn’t innocent at all.

Caleb took back his beer, the intimacy of sharing with her setting him on edge. “Funny thing about this beer,” he said. “I got it from the kitchen on the way out here. Every time I go into that kitchen, I think about a certain pair of jeans you used to love.”

Shock slid over her face. “Don’t even go there, Caleb,” she warned fiercely.

Kent snorted. “Oh, yeah. Those damn jeans.”

“Don’t you go there either, Kent,” Shay warned. “Or I won’t set you up on that blind date with Anna you’ve been begging for.”

Bob chuckled. “Then I guess I’ll have to go there for all of us. Why in the world, my little Shay, did you put the jeans in the oven in the first place? Just make me understand. I’ve always wanted to understand.”

“I’ve answered this question a million times,” she said, her pretty, naturally pink lips pursed in frustration. “I was sixteen when I did that. Sixteen! I’m twenty-eight years old and, I might add, a licensed psychologist who counsels people about the trauma of bad memories. In case you didn’t know, Daddy, this is a bad memory.”

“The dryer was broken,” Caleb answered, when unnecessary guilt flashed on Bob’s face. No matter how upset Shay acted, she ate up the teasing. And he loved watching her cheeks flush, her eyes light up. “She needed her best jeans for a party.” He’d liked those jeans. Liked them too much, considering she’d been sixteen and he’d been nineteen, about to move into campus housing at the University of Texas. Too old for her. Not that he’d ever be the right age for her. But at the time, he’d been damn glad she wasn’t prancing around in those damn tight jeans anymore, inviting hound-dog teen boys to salivate.

Shay shot him a scorching look that wiped the smile from his face. He was pretty sure she would have smacked him otherwise.

Sharon sighed. “Men just don’t understand how important the perfect jeans are to a female,” she said, defending her daughter. “It really was a smart idea, using the oven. It was like a sauna drying room. I think it showed initiative and innovation.”

Exasperated, Bob’s eyes went wide. “Since when is burning down the kitchen called innovation?”

“How many experiments do you think Thomas Edison tried that went wrong?” Sharon countered protectively.

“What was she trying to create?” Bob replied. “The fastest way to destroy her parents’ house?”

“Maybe if you would have put them on warm, not broil, Shay-Shay,” Kent offered, sipping a beer. “Your va-voom might not have gone ka-boom.” He eyed Caleb. “What do you think, Caleb?”

“I didn’t put them on broil!” Shay spat, before Caleb could reply, as she shoved her hands on her hips. The towel fell to her waist, and Caleb gulped at the sight of her high, ample breasts, covered by nothing but thin slices of cloth. “I left them on warm when I went to shower. How was I to know they’d go up in flames?” She clutched the towel and waved a hand between Kent and Caleb. “And how is it that every time you two get together, I’m reduced from grown adult to defensive teenager?”

Kent grinned. “It’s a gift.”

She huffed. “I’ve got a gift for you, Kent,” she said. “And her name isn’t Anna.” Her gaze cut back to Caleb. “I know what you just did, and it won’t work. Two can play your game, Caleb Martin. You remember that.”

She turned on her heel, strutted back to the pool and then let go of the towel. It slid to the pavement, her pert, heart-shaped backside displayed for Caleb’s admiration. Caleb silently groaned. The only game he was going to play was the one called “cold shower.” Correction, by the time this party was over, the game would be called “long cold shower.”

2

CALEB HAD BEEN AWAY a long time, but the game of horseshoes as a family had endured. Caleb tipped back a beer as he watched Kent make a toss. There were a good seven or eight guys standing around playing. All family and friends. Some Caleb knew. Some…well, he'd been away a long time.

Bob let out a loud bark of laughter as Kent's shot landed about as close to the target as Caleb was to pretending he didn't know every move Shay made today. Until a few minutes ago, she'd been in the pool, supervising the kids and entertaining them. Sweet, adorable Shay, always generous with her time helping others.

He hadn't been surprised on a visit home years before to discover Shay had started volunteering at her college counseling center, or that the work at the center had led to her changing her major from business to psychology. She'd always had a thing for taking in every stray animal in her path. Kind of like her family had been with him. They had done everything in their power to make him feel he was whole again after losing his parents, as if he belonged. The Army had given him a sense of belonging, but not a sense of family…the way the Whites had.

"Were you aiming for the driveway out front or what, Kent?" Bob asked, and Kent buried his face in his hands, cursing at his truly horrific shot. Kent never handled his beer well. And having been away, Caleb had missed just how true, and entertaining,

that fact was. He'd missed a lot of things he'd pretended he didn't miss, that he thought he could do without.

Bob's comment snapped Caleb back to the moment.

Kent glowered and held his hands to his sides in challenge. "You gonna rag on me, too?"

"Nah, man," Caleb said innocently. "I think you know how bad that shot was without me pointing it out."

Rick Jensen, Kent's buddy who'd joined them for the day, added, "You do give new meaning to the saying 'Just Do It.'" As doctor for the University of Texas baseball team, Rick apparently subscribed to Kent's habit of Nike phrase dropping.

"Don't even go there, Rickster," Kent said, grabbing his beer from the ground where he'd left it. "We both know you don't know the meaning of 'Just Do It,' or you would have at least asked Shay out by now. We'd all like her to find a nice guy like you to take care of her, rather than some hound dog."

Caleb wasn't sure whose jaw dropped closest to the ground—Rick's, Bob's or his own. It was a pretty close race. "Damn it, Kent," Rick muttered, looking pale despite his tanned skin and blond hair. "Why can't you ever keep your mouth shut?"

"Shutting his mouth isn't something he excels at," Bob said dryly. "They didn't even have to smack that boy's ass when he was born to get him squealing."

Shay and her love life shouldn't matter to Caleb, so why was every nerve he owned standing on end? Hell, he could almost feel the hair on his arms lifting, his skin tingling.

“You keep waiting for a sign,” Kent continued to Rick, as if his father’s explanation were a license to continue. “There won’t be a sign. Shay’s a traditional kind of woman. She doesn’t flirt. She doesn’t come to you. You go to her. You have to get over these nerves.”

Rick didn’t look convinced, as he opened his mouth and then shut it.

Bob studied him and asked, “What seems to be bothering you, son?”

His question stiffened Caleb’s spine. Bob liked this guy Rick. Hell, Caleb liked Rick. No. Caleb hated Rick.

“She’s friendly,” Rick said after another moment of hesitation. “But not overly so. I don’t want everyone to feel uncomfortable if I’m around after she’s turned me down.” He laughed. “Or have Kent beat up my ass because I make her mad or something.”

There it was. Everything Caleb felt. Everything. So completely, so near exactness, that Caleb about fell over. And Rick didn’t call these people family. He had his own. The validation twisted inside him.

“For the record,” Kent said, “my sister’s a lady, but she don’t take no junk. She’ll beat your ass if you screw up. She doesn’t need me to do it. But you have to actually ask her out to ever get the chance for anyone to beat your ass.”

“And I so want that opportunity,” Rick quipped back sardonically. “You aren’t helping.”

A sound of frustration slid from Kent’s lips, and he motioned

to Caleb for help. “Tell ’em, Caleb. Tell Rick if he wants Shay, he has to go after her.” He motioned toward the tables of food set up on the opposite side of the yard where Shay stood.

Thankfully, she’d covered her swimsuit with a crocheted shirt of some sort that touched her knees, which at least allowed Caleb to look at her without getting an instant hard-on. Man, he was pathetic.

“Do it. Now. Today. Ask her out,” Kent insisted.

Suddenly, Kent’s words from moments before radiated through Caleb, like a light being slowly turned from dim to bright. She doesn’t come to you. Shay didn’t approach men. Kent was right. But she had approached him. In the past. And even today, she’d openly flirted, hugged him, held on to him, molding those sweet curves against his body, intentionally teasing him. Maybe that meant she really wanted him. Or maybe it meant she had an evil side he didn’t recognize—that she enjoyed taunting him, knowing he’d never dare act on his desire. Believing her capable of such a thing would make it easy to walk away, easy to turn away. But deep down, he knew there was no evil to Shay. He knew they shared a bond, a friendship and attraction.

“…like the present. Right, Caleb?”

“Right what?”

“There’s no time like the present,” Kent repeated and made a fist. “Just do it, Rick.”

Caleb inhaled a discreet breath and lifted his beer. “No time like the present. If you are going to do it, do it.” Right here, right

now, where Caleb could kick Rick's Doctor-Do-Gooder, nice-guy ass if he stepped out of line. Which he wouldn't. He was, after all, a nice guy, but Caleb could hope.

A flickering memory played in his mind. Of Shay pushing to her toes and pressing those soft lips to his. Of her tentative, inexperienced little tongue caressing his. He all but moaned.

"You heard the man," Kent said, waving at Rick. "Just do it, man."

Rick drew a breath and handed Caleb his beer. "Save that for me. I might be needing it."

Rick could kiss Caleb's ass if he thought he was getting his beer back. He wasn't giving Rick anything. Well, nothing but the woman he wanted and couldn't have. No. Rick was not getting his beer.

SHAY STOOD AT the food tables snacking on a plate of cucumbers and ranch dressing, a comfort food since she was a small child. She didn't dare look over at the horseshoe area again. She'd seen enough there to know she didn't need to see any more. Her plan to kiss Caleb again was hereby over. Watching him interact with Kent and her father, along with the rest of their family and friends, had been a reality check. Every second he was here, Caleb relaxed more, fell into the old traditions and inside jokes.

He belonged here, yet he'd stayed away. And she knew why. Because of her. Because she'd kissed him and made him feel uncomfortable. Because he didn't believe they could share an

attraction and a family. Which meant her plan to kiss him again, while tempting and all too appealing, was selfish. Wrong.

"Hi, Shay."

Shay jumped and somehow managed to turn the paper plate over and onto Rick's shirt. In the process, one of the cucumber slices flew in the air and landed on his head. She'd just turned one of Kent's work friends into a kitchen sink.

"Oh, my God! Rick. I'm so sorry!" Cringing, she grabbed the cucumber from his head and flung it away, then tossed the paper plate into a trash can. Ranch dip clung to his shirt. "I can't believe I just did that. I was thinking about… I…I'm sorry." Shay grabbed several napkins and offered them to him.

"It's okay," he said, smiling as he wiped the mess on the front of him. "Though it kind of blows the cool-guy image I was going for."

She laughed and said, "You can always judge a guy's coolness by how he handles a plate of cucumbers and ranch dip spilled on his shirt. And considering you don't seem mad at me, you passed with absolute coolness."

He drew a breath. "Then I'm hoping this is a cool enough moment to ask you out to dinner and a movie."

"A…a…?" Yowza, she had not seen that coming. She'd never really had a conversation with him. "Dinner and a movie? I…I don't know what to say."

"How about yes?" he asked hopefully, looking remarkably awkward for a guy who seemed to have plenty of reasons to be

confident. He was a good-looking guy, with dark hair and dark eyes and a shy smile. He was a doctor, for a professional sports team to boot. They'd have stuff to talk about. Stuff. Patients. The physical manifestations of stress.

So why didn't she just say yes? Caleb. Caleb was why. Caleb. Caleb. Caleb. Caleb, who was off-limits. Caleb, whom she had no business pining over. Say yes, she told herself.

Instead she said, "I don't want to risk coming between you and Kent. He's very protective."

"Oh, he knows," Rick said quickly. "So do your father and Caleb. I would never dream of approaching you without talking to your family, considering the friendship."

Her heart thundered in her ears. For a moment, she was that teen girl with a crush on the boy who didn't want her, on the boy who'd say she was too young. She was so tired of being that girl with Caleb. She'd pined for this man for a ridiculous lifetime only to have him handing her off like a hot potato, once again.

"Caleb?" she asked. "Caleb knew you were asking me out?" She didn't wait for an answer, and she didn't have to for the truth to find her.

She whirled to face the horseshoe area, to zoom in on Caleb, who lazily lounged against the old oak tree. His gaze locked on her with Rick, yet he was too far away for Shay to read him. But she didn't have to. She felt him in every pore of her body, and she didn't want to. Not anymore. She wanted to get him out of her mind, out of her life, out of her head. And damn it, he seemed

to think Rick was a good match for her. Maybe she should think so, too. Her chin lifted in defiance, ignoring the pinch of hurt in the center of her chest threatening to expand.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Rick said. "I thought Caleb was like your other brother. Kent said…"

"He is," Shay said, turning her attention back to Rick. "Caleb is my other brother. I'm just not used to him being around anymore." She studied Rick. Damn it, he was good-looking and a nice guy. She was crazy to ignore him. Besides, she needed someone to kiss. Someone who wasn't Caleb. Someone who could knock some sense into her head.

She cast Rick a beaming smile, praying it looked at least a little sincere, and wrapped her arm around his. "Why don't we go inside and see if I can dig you up a shirt to wear that isn't smeared with ranch dip."

His eyes lit up, his hand sliding over hers where it rested on his arm. The small talk started on the walk to the house and she tried to listen. But all she could think about was the tingling sensation of being watched. By him. By Caleb. Probably all too happy right about now. He'd gotten his way. She was walking away with another man.

THE INSTANT SHE SLIPPED her arm around Rick's and started marching toward the house, betrayal ripped through Caleb. As if she were one of his fellow Aces, a trusted friend who'd reached over and pulled his weapon from the holster and shot him with it. That was how personal the blow; how bitter the

bite. Which was insanity. Shay owed him nothing. He had no rights to her, no claim.

Caleb tipped up his beer and drank. Then he did the same with Rick's. Maybe for the first time in years, he'd get wasted. Completely flipping wasted. He glanced at Sharon, who was now standing with Bob, smiling up at him…oh, so happy. Okay. "Wasted" wasn't an option. At least not here. Not now.

He watched one of Bob's brothers toss a horseshoe. He was a good guy named Mickey, who had always made Caleb feel like genuine, blood-related family. This was his family. Shay was his family. He took another drink. This time the beer was hot and bitter, like the feeling welling inside him.

Kent took another shot and missed. Mickey and Bob cracked jokes. Kent headed toward Caleb. "Go ahead and crack your joke. Get it over with now."

Caleb barely heard Kent, despite Kent getting up close and personal. He was thinking about Shay. About the look on Shay's face just before she'd turned away from him. The defiance etched in her delicate features flashed in Caleb's mind, followed by the image of her walking arm-in-arm with Rick. She was trying to make him jealous. Or trying to spite him.

Caleb glanced at Kent and shoved the beers in his hands. "You've never been a good shot when you're sober. Drink up. I'll go for more."

Before Kent could respond, Caleb started walking, his fingers curling into his palms by his sides. He'd played this cat-and-

mouse game with Shay for too long. She could have whatever man she wanted, but not like this, not because of him, to get to him. At least, that's what he told himself so he could ignore the twist of jealousy inside him.

He cut into the house, through the patio door and then ground his teeth when Shay and Rick were nowhere to be seen—and neither was anyone else, for that matter. Everyone was outside, socializing, having fun, allowing Shay the empty house to be with Rick. He crossed the room, possessiveness just beneath the surface, though he preferred to call it protectiveness.

The sound of Shay's laughter fluttered down a hallway—that damn angelic laugh that had driven him wild a good half of his life, now velvety with a distinct hint of flirtation. A few more steps, and a lot more of that protectiveness ground a path along his nerve endings.

The laughter floated closer, along with the soft muffled sound of Shay's voice. Caleb stopped dead in his tracks. The sound was coming from Shay's old bedroom. Oh, hell, no. This wasn't happening. Caleb charged forward, on edge and ready for war. He rounded the corner to the room, door open, to find Rick sitting on Shay's bed.

"Almost ready," Shay called out softly from the closet.

Caleb didn't want to know what she was ready for. Anger spiked inside him. His years of combat were the only thing that kept him outwardly in check when inside he was raging, a distinct tick in his jaw pulsing.

Rick's gaze was riveted to the doorway as if he sensed the crackle suddenly in the air. And apparently he didn't like what he saw in Caleb's face. He paled and jumped to his feet.

"Leave now," Caleb said before Rick could speak, his voice low and even.

Rick was already headed to the door.

"Okay, I found a shirt," Shay said, walking out of the closet. She was still dressed in the cover-up that seemed far more skimpy up close than it had across the lawn.

"Caleb?" she said, surprised. "What's going on? Rick! Wait. You need the shirt."

"Rick was just leaving," Caleb said, ignoring the T-shirt in her hand. "He has his own shirt."

Rick stopped in front of Caleb out of necessity. Caleb was blocking his way. "It's best you call it a day," Caleb said thickly.

"This isn't what it looks like," Rick said. "I—"

"I don't care," Caleb said shortly. "Don't want to know."

"Caleb!" Shay objected. "Stop acting like a brute. Rick, don't go." Rick didn't look at her.

Caleb stepped aside. "Goodbye, Rick."

And just like that, Rick was gone. Shay shoved her hands onto her hips and glared. "What the heck do you think you are doing, Caleb?"

He shut the door, the scent of citrus and honey flaring in his nostrils. Shay's scent, for as long as he could remember. It breathed in the room like a living thing. Just as the lust and

tension between them had for far too long now. It was time to deal with it, once and for all.

Caleb leaned against the door, arms in front of his chest, one booted foot over the next. “We need to talk.”

3

CALEB COULD SEE the firestorm coming. Shay's eyes darkened and pink rushed across the delicate ivory of her skin—both sure signs she was in fighting mode. He had a knack for bringing it out in her. Had intentionally drawn her right to this hot little spot of temper as he had so many times in the past. As a defense, a distraction. Anything to fight the forbidden, sizzling-hot attraction that had always existed between them.

"Talk," Shay repeated, starting to walk toward him. "I've not heard a word from you in the two months you've been home, and now you want to talk. Because you're ready. All the times I was ready, you tucked tail and ran."

"I'm not running now, Shay," he said, not denying the truth. He had run. Run and hoped they'd outgrown the adolescent infatuation they'd shared. But it had matured as they had, turned dangerous in its demand. "I'm here. I'm ready. Let's talk." It was long overdue and he knew it.

"Well, I'm not ready." She stopped in front of him, impatiently waving him aside. "You might as well move away from in front of the door, Caleb. The only person I'm going to talk to right now is Rick. You scared the man half to death with that 'lethal soldier' act of yours. That was rude and it was wrong."

"Rude was visiting the daughter of the party's host in her bedroom," he said. "Rick deserves to be scared."

“You’re in my room,” she pointed out. “What does that say about you?”

“I belong here. Rick doesn’t.”

“I decide who belongs in my room,” she said and held up a finger to stop his objections. “It’s still my room, whether I live here or not. And unlike you, Rick was invited.” She slapped the shirt in her hand against Caleb’s chest, and he reached up and caught it as she added, “He needed a shirt. Too bad I didn’t spill my plate on you instead of him.”

He started to toss the shirt, and his gaze caught on the University of Texas championship logo. “Wait one damn minute.” His eyes jerked to hers. “This is my shirt,” he said, then added, incredulously, “You were giving him my shirt.”

“My shirt,” she declared, hands on her scantily clad hips.

“That you stole from me the year I moved into this house to sleep in and never gave back. You know damn well you were giving him that shirt to piss me off.”

She snatched the shirt right back from him and tossed it over her shoulder. “It was convenient. Like you shoving Rick in my direction because you couldn’t handle being in close quarters with me.”

“I’d say I’m pretty damn close right now.” Close enough to see the sprinkle of light brown freckles on her nose that she hated and he loved. Close enough to touch her. “And I had nothing to do with Rick, besides kicking him out of here. The date thing came from Kent and your father.”

She didn't look convinced. "Rick sure didn't see it that way."

"I didn't say I wasn't there when Rick was pining over you," he agreed. "But you know damn well I couldn't say anything without drawing questions."

"Right," she said smartly. "We wouldn't want to draw any questions. Better everyone think we've decided we don't like each other than dare believe we want to jump each other's bones."

"Touchy, touchy," he chided. "See. I knew you were pissed at me. Exactly why I wasn't going to risk you using Rick to get back at me."

"You sure are full of yourself, Caleb Martin," she roared back. "It takes a lot of arrogance to assume I only wanted Rick to get back at you."

"You did just say you wanted to jump my bones," he pointed out, teasing her despite himself. It was second nature, a part of what he'd always done to her, with her. It was also going to get him in deeper water, but then, with Shay, he was damn near always drowning anyway. "I said we, not I, and I was only making a point and you know it."

"Anger works like alcohol on you," he said. "It makes you say what you really feel. And anger, directed at me, makes you do things you normally wouldn't do. Not only were you giving Rick my shirt, you were alone with him in a bedroom at your conservative parents' house. That's not you and you know it."

Her eyes flashed. "How would you know what is or isn't me, Caleb?" She poked his chest, her body barely a hairbreadth from

his. “The few times you came into town over the past ten years, we both hoped we’d have outgrown the past. When we hadn’t, instead of dealing with it and talking to me, you avoided me like the plague. Like that somehow made it all go away, but really it was just you that went away. Well, it’s not going to work now that you’re home, Caleb. Kent, Mom and Dad are going to start asking questions about the tension between us.”

Her eyes pierced his, her glare packed with challenge. “And you know what else isn’t working? You pretending that dumb ten-year-old kiss didn’t happen, and then looking at me like you want to kiss me again. It’s ticking me off.” She poked his chest again. “Bad.”

He wanted to drag her into his arms, every nerve ending in his body aware of her, aware of how long they’d wanted each other, how long they’d denied that need. “I’m not trying to piss you off, Shay.”

“Too late,” she declared, a tiny lift to her pointed chin, which indicated confrontation, but her hand uncurled beneath his hold and flattened against his. Her voice softened. “Sometimes I just think…maybe…we’re like the apple to Adam and Eve. It was just an apple, but the forbidden aspect made it tantalizing. Maybe if we kiss again, we’ll find that the first kiss has been blown into something bigger and better than it really was. Maybe then we can just move on.”

Whoa. She thought that kiss—the one that had kept him fantasizing for ten flipping years—wasn’t as good as they

remembered? He must be insane, because the idea wasn't half-bad. He wanted the kiss to be nothing. He wanted the torment of wanting the forbidden fruit to be gone. Then again, a part of him didn't want it gone. It simply wanted her without recourse. Which was impossible.

"It won't work," he said, slipping away from her as if burned. Shay was leaning slightly in his direction, and the action caught her off guard. She swayed into him, her slender body melting against his. She gasped and caught herself with her hands, no doubt a result of her hips pressed against his. He was hard, thick and pulsing with ache. He had been from the moment he'd drawn that first breath of her scent.

His hands went to her shoulders, and Caleb's eyes locked with hers. She wet her lips—nervously, not seductively—but the impact was no less alluring. No less tempting. Suddenly, the kiss held new appeal.

Caleb slid his hands over her shoulders toward her neck, and she shivered beneath his touch. It was the first time he'd ever allowed himself to touch her like a man touches a woman.

"Shay," he said softly, lacing his fingers into the wild mane of blond, pool-tangled locks that framed her heart-shaped face.

She lifted on her toes, closing the distance between her petite five foot two inches and his six-foot frame, bringing their lips close, a breath apart. He could all but taste her. He was going to taste her. Again. Finally.

Until abruptly, a fist pounded on the door behind Caleb.

“Shay?” Kent’s voice called. “Caleb? You in there? What happened to Rick?”

Caleb reined himself into control instantly, Kent’s voice a much-needed cold dose of reality.

Shay’s hands went to Caleb’s wrists. “No,” she whispered. “Not again.” She raised her voice. “Go away, Kent!”

“Not until I find out why Rick peeled out of the driveway and won’t answer his cell phone.”

“No,” she said to Caleb. “Not this time. Not until we finish this once and for all.”

“Finish what?” Kent demanded through the door.

Shay growled low in her throat, like only a sister can at her brother. “Fighting! We’re fighting.”

“If you don’t open the door,” Kent warned, “you can add me to the battleground.”

Any minute now, Kent was going to get impatient and reach for the doorknob, which wasn’t locked. Caleb reached for Shay and pressed his lips to her ear, trying not to think about her body next to his. “You aren’t going to wake up and find out I left tomorrow,” he promised. “I’m staying.” What that meant for Shay and him, he didn’t know, but whatever it was, they had to deal with it, once and for all. Just not now.

He set her back from him before she knew what he was doing and turned the doorknob, allowing Kent’s entry. Kent was inside in a heartbeat, and like the previous time ten years ago, Kent’s timing had been perfect. He’d once again saved Caleb from a

grave mistake. Had Caleb kissed Shay again, he had no doubt it wouldn't have stopped there. Not this time. He wanted her too badly, and Caleb was smart enough to know the line between lovers and enemies was too fine to walk with Shay.

No matter how good she felt, no matter how good she smelled, Shay wasn't the woman for him…no matter how much she always seemed to be that and more.

4

"LET THE TALKING BEGIN," Kent declared, taking up way too much space in Shay's bedroom as far as she was concerned. "What the heck happened to Rick?" he demanded.

With her breath lodged in her throat, Shay's eyes locked on Caleb's face. Her skin was still hot from his touch. But he wasn't looking at her. He was leaning against the wall, arms in front of his chest, focused on Kent.

"Rick had not only found his way into Shay's bedroom," Caleb said, "he was on her bed."

"Caleb, damn it!" she exclaimed. He was trying to draw attention away from the two of them by turning the heat on Rick.

"What?" Kent said, whipping around to Shay. "I thought Rick had more class than that. I might have to kill Rick. And you, Shay. Do you know how upset Mom and Dad would have been if they'd found you in here with him?"

"Oh, good grief," she said, cutting Caleb a hard look. "You two talk this out. I'm going to gather everyone for gifts and cake."

"You come back here!" Kent yelled.

Shay kept walking, but she still heard Kent mumble, "When I told Rick there was no time like the present, I didn't know he was going to try right here and now."

That drew Shay to a halt. She wasn't going to let Rick's friendship with Kent suffer because of her and Caleb. She started

to turn, when she heard Caleb say, “It wasn’t like that. Shay was just getting Rick a shirt, but I sent him home before I knew what was going on.”

Despite her frustration, which was part emotional, part sexual, Shay felt her lips lift ever so slightly. There was a reason her family had taken Caleb in. He was a man of honor, a born gentleman. She sighed heavily, her breath shuddering from her lungs. Being with her would defy everything he believed in, everything he felt was right. To him, she really was that damned forbidden apple. She didn’t want to lose the garden for the fruit any more than he did, but just when he was back—to stay this time—it seemed so was the temptation to see if they could have both.

AN HOUR LATER, filled with cake and cheer, a good twenty-five guests—family, friends and neighbors—gathered poolside as Sharon and Bob opened gifts.

All too aware of Caleb sitting not far away in an outdoor chair with a beer in hand he’d hardly touched, Shay stood behind her parents, gathering wrapping paper as it was ripped away and organizing packages.

Shay chuckled as her father, a UT Longhorns season-ticket holder, unwrapped his-and-hers Texas Aggie shirts from a former coworker. The principal of the school where her mother had taught for twenty years gave Shay’s father a huge supply of coffee. Knowing how cranky Sharon was without her morning caffeine, it was a gift meant to ensure another happy forty years.

One of the final packages was a large envelope from Caleb. Shay stared at it curiously and, unable to stop herself, cast him a questioning look. He simply smiled and sipped his beer.

"From Caleb," Shay said, handing it to her parents, and looked over her mother's shoulder as the envelope was unsealed. Shay gasped at the same moment her mother did…at the airline tickets and hotel vouchers for a second honeymoon.

"Italy?" Shay silently mouthed to Caleb.

"It's a trip to Italy!" Sharon said to the crowd, who gasped, oohed and aahed. "I've always wanted to go to Italy."

"I remember you saying that every time we went to Olive Garden," Caleb teased.

Everyone laughed. Sharon blushed. "It's because they send their chefs to Italy to train. It's so exciting. The idea of being sent to school in Italy. It makes me want a second career as a chef."

"You can take a class while you're there," Caleb suggested.

Sharon's eyes lit up before she shook her head. "We can't accept this, Caleb. No. It's too extravagant. What about that business you started, the Hotzone?"

"I took several lump-sum, reenlistment bonuses and bought some lucky stock. Enough to leave the Army when the time was right to open the Hotzone. And I set the money aside for your fortieth anniversary years ago."

Kent eyed a brochure for the villa Caleb had rented for his parents. "What the heck kind of stock did you buy, man, and can I get some?"

Caleb leaned back in his chair and set his beer on the ground. “Apple before the Mac craze,” he said nonchalantly, as if it weren’t a big deal. “I bought in at the right time and stayed in.”

“No way,” Kent and Bob said in unison. Kent quickly added, “That kind of stuff never happens to me. How much did you net?”

“Kent,” Sharon reprimanded sharply, “that’s rude. We have company.”

“Right,” Kent said, elbowing Caleb. “Tell me later.”

Caleb laughed and slipped one arm up on the back of his chair, his focus on Sharon and Bob. “This trip is the least I can do to thank you guys, considering you put up with me for so many years.”

Shay’s heart squeezed at the sweetness of the words that she knew reached deep beyond the gift, into Caleb’s soul. She’d never wanted him more than in that moment. And she’d never known just how wrong it was to pursue her interest in him, either. The idea that she’d kept Caleb away from all of this was hard to swallow. But when they were together, things like what happened in that bedroom always happened. The crackling intensity between them had gradually become more like firecrackers than sparklers.

“Son,” Bob said, “that’s what families do. It’s our honor to kick, beat and harass each other, and in turn, to kick anyone to the curb that tries any of the above outside our little unit. The only thing I or Sharon want is more of your time. You need to

come out to the house more often."

"When you get back from Italy," Caleb agreed, "I'll eagerly come by to be kicked, beaten and happily harassed."

Kent offered to be lead harasser, and though Shay normally would have volunteered her services as well, she held back. History said the more she teased and played with Caleb, the more their attraction bubbled into demand.

Distracted, she barely registered the final gift—a bottle of wine from their neighbor—until her mother handed it to her.

"That's it," Shay called out and glanced at the sun's rapid decline.

"Poker game starts at seven o'clock," Kent added, rubbing his hands together and elbowing Caleb. "Time to hand over some of that Mac money."

Shay sent Kent a warning look. "Poker is hardly the romantic way to end this day."

"That's what Italy is for," Kent replied. "The way Dad plays poker, he'll have won big, and Mom can spend more on the trip."

"You leave tomorrow," Caleb offered, "so you need to start packing."

Sharon jumped to her feet. "Tomorrow? I can't leave tomorrow. The house is a mess and—"

"I'll clean up," Shay promised. "And you can pack. A little party mess is no reason to miss Italy."

"You're retired," Caleb said. "You can make the short notice. The whole idea is to get whisked away from your party like you

would from your wedding."

"I'm game," her father said. "In the meantime, I'll play poker." He kissed Sharon's hand and held it in his. "While you do that packing."

"Bob!" Sharon objected.

"Kent's right," Bob said quickly. "I win on poker night. That means you get to shop more."

"And if you lose?" Sharon asked, propping her free hand on her hip.

Bob winked. "After forty years, you should know I never lose."

Sharon harrumphed. "You always seem to forget that when there's bad luck."

Bob pulled her into his lap. "Because I have a forty-year-old lucky charm."

Shay smiled at the two of them, her gaze lifting and brushing Caleb's—a brush she felt to her toes. They had to talk. But not here, not today. On the phone, where they were a safe distance apart, and she wouldn't become weak. They'd figure out a way to deal with all this tension between them once and for all—and not by kissing. Talking. Yes, she silently vowed. Talking.

It was her mother that broke the connection, darting to Caleb for a big hug. Her father followed.

When the sentimental interlude ended, Caleb said, "When you get back from Italy, why don't we plan a family outing at the Hotzone? Kent's the only one who's been out to jump. We have

a huge grill out there. We can barbecue and make a day of it."

"Oh, yeah," Kent said. "It's a rush you gotta experience to believe."

"Sounds lovely," Sharon said. "As long as I can watch from the ground. That's as close to jumping out of a plane as I'm getting."

"I might just want to try it," Bob said, his eyes lighting up with the idea.

"What about you, Shay?" Caleb asked, surprising her.

"Shay's been taking flying lessons," her father bragged, before she could reply. "She made a list of a hundred things she wanted to do before turning fifty, and her pilot's license is one of her top five to-do items."

"Really," Caleb said. "So flying lessons and what else?"

"It's a hundred items," Shay said, not about to reveal the list that had "finally make love to Caleb" in a high-ranking position. "Too long to detail. But I can assure you that skydiving is not on it. Flying a plane isn't the same as jumping out of a plane. Somehow the two just don't mix." She hesitated a second. "Some things," she added meaningfully, "are just better left alone."

His eyes narrowed. "And sometimes, you just have to jump."

"See now," her father said, "that's the right attitude. Sometimes you just have to jump, Shay. You're always so structured."

"Hush, Bob," Sharon said. "I'm scared enough with her taking flying lessons. That's daring enough for our little girl."

Shay heard her parents, even the outdated "little girl"

comment—she was twenty-eight years old, after all. But it was Caleb's words that had her mentally shaking cobwebs from her brain. Sometimes you just have to jump, he'd said. The past fluttered through her mind, the times Caleb had been home. When she'd pulled away, he'd pulled her back. When he'd pulled away, as he had today, she'd pulled him back. This was a tug-of-war cycle, and until now, she had never recognized it. She doubted he did because only an hour before, she knew he'd been thankful for Kent's interruption. Now he was pursuing, and he melted her resolve all too easily.

She straightened her spine, trying to get them to the same place at the same time for once. "When you have to push the person out the door, it's better to leave them on the ground."

"You can jump tandem with me," Caleb suggested. "We attach a harness and jump together."

Kent snorted. "She's accident-prone. She might drag you down with her, Caleb."

"I am not accident-prone," she scoffed.

"Think jeans in the oven," Kent teased.

With a growl, Shay grabbed the bottle of wine and moved it to the pile of presents, needing something to do with her hands besides punch her brother. And despite swearing she wouldn't respond to his childish teasing, she couldn't resist an opening when he gave it to her. "That's me. Accident-prone. I can see it now. I'll be attached to Caleb with some fancy harness and the chute won't open. Then we both crash onto the hard ground and

die horrific deaths."

"Oh, goodness," Sharon said. "Can we not talk about this? I finally have Caleb home, out of a war zone. I don't want to start thinking about the dangers of any of you crashing to the ground and dying."

"No one is crashing to the ground and dying," Shay assured her. "Caleb knows what he's doing, with the exception of his suggestion that I jump with him. Fortunately, I have enough sanity for both of us. I'm not even considering it." She held the wine up. "I'll go chill this wine in case you want some later." She wiggled a brow. "When you and Dad are alone." She needed a breather away from Caleb, away from watchful eyes.

Shay headed for the house, deeming it time to change clothes now that pool-time was over. Maybe take a quick shower. Walking around half-dressed wasn't helping her avoid Caleb.

Almost instantly though, her nerves tingled, and she knew, even before he spoke, that Caleb had followed. She could feel him. She could always feel him.

"Hold up," he said. "I'll help you." He fell into step beside her as they approached the patio leading to the kitchen.

"What are you doing, Caleb?" she asked softly. "I don't need help chilling a bottle of wine. I thought the idea was to stay away from each other?"

"Funny," he said. "I remember you saying something about Adam and Eve and the forbidden kiss, which I've spent the past hour considering." He reached in front of her and opened the

sliding glass door, mischief in his eyes as he waved her forward. "Ladies first."

"There's nothing to consider, Caleb," she said. "You do remember the part of my comparison that made it as insane as me tandem-jumping out of a plane with you? The part where Adam ate the apple and doomed mankind?"

"Fortunately, I doubt we wield power over mankind," he said. "Let's go inside."

She opened her mouth to argue, but realized this was, indeed, a conversation best had inside—away from prying eyes. Shay shoved aside the heavy beige curtain that had been left in place to keep the house cool. A blast of air-conditioning washed over her hot skin and she welcomed it—and not because of the sun. Because Caleb was on her heels, the door already shut behind him. The house was silent but for Caleb's boots clicking on the ceramic tile, warning her there was no escape.

Shay yanked open the fridge and shoved the wine inside. She turned to find Caleb leaning on the kitchen island, a step away. "You're in my personal space," she said. "A good way to get some of that attention you claim you don't want."

"Maybe I want you in my personal space."

"Until someone shows up."

His lips—those full sensual lips—offered a hint of a smile… the "hint" being oh, so sexy. "I know a way around that," he promised.

"Do I dare ask?"

“Better I demonstrated,” he assured her. And then, in a flash, he tugged her into the pantry and shut the door. A second later, the impossible happened. Caleb kissed her.

5

HE'D BEEN SEDUCED by watching her beside the pool, eating cake, laughing with family. Being her. That's all Shay had to do to tear down his resolve to stay hands-off, and she'd done it in a mere hour. A pretty quick turnaround unless one considered it had been ten years in the making. And he wasn't giving either of them time to think. They'd done enough of that. Done enough stalling and lusting, and as for himself, he'd had enough time to change his mind—or hers.

She tasted like chocolate icing with a hint of salt and sunshine. Addictive. Perfect. Her tongue was tentative at first, her body stiff. Until she melted—melted like that icing had in the hot Texas sun by the pool. And there was no doubt—this kiss was everything he'd expected and more. This kiss was a kiss that demanded more, because it wasn't just a kiss. It was a doorway to long-suppressed passion. It was the beginning.

Shay knew it, too—he sensed it in her increasing response. The way she lifted to her toes, the way her tongue softly caressed and then reached deeper, seeking more. He slanted his mouth over hers, giving her what she requested. Her reply was a delicate purring sound deep in her throat, barely audible, but so seductive. Her fingers walked up his chest and twined behind his neck, her chest hugging his. Their hips aligned and, yes, he was hard again. A half-naked Shay, kissing him like there was no

tomorrow, could have gotten him hard behind enemy lines, under fire. Instead, they were isolated, in a dark pantry, which was enhancing the sense of taste and touch. He told himself to pull away, to drag her out of the pantry before they were discovered. This was meant to be a quick kiss, the kiss that tore down barriers and took them beyond the "what if?" to "what next?"

She had him vibrating with need. He hesitated. Actually, it was one of his hips vibrating. Like… Shay tore her mouth from his. "Phone," she whispered and reached for her hip, the one resting against his vibrating one.

Okay. Maybe the kiss wasn't as good for her as it was for him, because she was actually planning to answer the call.

Her hand flattened on his chest, and she answered his unspoken worries, as if she sensed his thoughts. "I have my service on a special vibrate alarm. I'm not on call. They wouldn't call unless it's urgent."

Understanding inked into his mind about the same moment she reached for the door. She was about to exit when she leaned back toward him and pointed. "We…we…" Exasperation laced her voice, the darkness shrouding her features. "I don't know what to say."

She opened the door and darted out. Caleb was about to follow when it slammed on him. He grimaced about the time Kent's voice filtered through the air. "We decided to start the poker game early. Where's Caleb? We want his dime involved."

Oh, crap. The poker game was at the kitchen table, the eat-

in table by the patio door overlooking the kitchen. Shay wasn't trapped, but he was.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.