



Pretty Fly

Excerpt

Book 5 of the Falcon's Bend Series

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Prologue

"No trait is more justified than revenge in the right time and place."
~Meir Kahane

"Hurry," she urged frantically, when he lay beside her on the sleeping bag inside the tent. "I've been waiting so long. Why did you take so long to get here?"

As she pouted, her hands ran all over him the way they had the first time he'd taken her. She always rushed right to it. But tonight...tonight he planned to savor every minute of his seduction. "Hold on, baby. Slow down."

"Why? For what?"

He let a grin crawl across his face—teasing, tempting, exactly what she could never resist. "Tonight I've got something special."

She gasped in anticipation, her throat sounding dry as she stared up at him. "What?"

Raising an eyebrow, he said softly, "I've been reading about a way to

prolong intense erotic pleasure." He drew his finger along the edge of her blouse, dipping into her bra without hurrying. Careening toward the finish line like an addict—it was the story of her life. He'd always savored the best moments.

She stroked the front of his jeans, hard, groaning as if his pace was killing her. "How? Tell me what to do," she begged.

"They say spider venom, specifically venom from a Brazilian Wandering spider, boosts nitric oxide."

"What's that?" she all but choked out.

"During sex, it increases blood flow."

"Blood flow?" she gasped, understanding finally dawning.

He couldn't resist feathering his fingers against her hardened flesh. She moaned, her eyes rolling up into her head. He forced himself to continue speaking, unhurried, while he teased her. "Yeah. Blood flow. And that sensory nerve stimulation causes the release of neuropeptides." He leaned closer, his lips an inch from hers as he lowered his voice even more. "In men, it causes a four-hour erection. In women..."

She cried out when he whispered the dirty words in her ear. He didn't need to touch her to know how close she was. "But first...the injection."

Her eyes popped open. "Injection?" she asked, sounding and looking breathless—and not in the good way she had an instant ago.

"Of venom. You have to go first. Because, in women, it takes a lot longer for the affect to take hold. Then, after I'm injected, we'll be able to do everything you ever wanted, baby. We can even do it outside, under the stars."

All fear disappeared from her expression. "Yes," she pleaded, licking her lips.

"Yes?" He smiled, an exhilarating rush caused by the pleasure he knew was about to send him over the edge in a moment. *The ultimate pleasure.*

"Yes. Oh, baby, but...how?" she panted.

"First..." He reached beside him to get the roll, lifting himself so he could straddle her beneath his weight. "I have to put tape over your mouth. While we're connected, you can scream all you want, baby, but while you're being injected...well, we don't want the whole damn campground coming here, thinking you're being murdered, do we?"

She frowned, her gaze shifting to the strip of tape he ripped off with his teeth. "What do you mean?"

He leaned down and kissed her, warming her again. Then he sat up again, wiped away the sweat that'd formed over her full lips, then pressed the painter's tape over her mouth. "The injection won't be easy. You might get scared, start screaming bloody murder. Trust me, though, in the end it'll be worth it." The look he gave her was profound. He could see fear in her eyes, but the curiosity behind it overwhelmed even that. *No surprise. There's nothing she won't do to get off.* Despite her initial protest when she

whimpered against the tape and shifted beneath his weight, the promise of the most intense physical pleasure of her life seemed to convince her not to out-and-out fight him.

“Just stay still, baby. I promise it’ll be over in a minute, and then...”

Her eyes went wide, watching him turn and reached back first for the padded gloves, then for the locked plastic case that was slightly smaller than the square-weave torture chamber. Keeping one hand on the chamber to steady it on the ground, he eased the plastic case inside the leather flap of the chamber opening. Working quickly, he flicked open the side lock on the case, then pulled it from the opening as quickly as he could, trapping the Brazilian Wandering spider inside the chamber—always a tricky endeavor. He lifted the chamber, seeing the fear in her eyes had become outright terror. Squelching a smile, he let her see the massive creature moving around inside the woven bars of the cage. Immediately, she started to struggle under him, but he shifted down slightly, grinding himself against the apex of her thighs until she mewled and soon settled down in helpless enjoyment.

“Soon. It’ll be worth it, baby. You’ll see,” he said, using his most calming voice to convince her. She wouldn’t be pliant much longer—and that would be the best part for him. Leaning forward, he lined up the leather flap of the chamber so it was parallel with the top of her head and murmured, “Just let me...”

In one swift moment, he pushed the chamber down over her head, being careful not to shove too hard. *Don’t wanna crush the weapon.* Her entire body reacted violently. As she bucked, she almost threw him over, but, now that the chamber was in place, the monster-spider backed into the corners and on the defense, he could hold her down with his arms and the superior weight of his body. With all her strength, she wrestled, her screams lost against the tape. Her gyrations as she kicked, slamming her hips against him, only intensified his thrill as his response ripped through him with the force of a hurricane.

In the minutes after reaching the peak, he was trying to catch his breath, laughing breathlessly, and she went utterly still beneath him. Smiling in gratification, he reached down to carefully remove the cage from her head. Working quickly now, he transferred the live spider back into the plastic case and flipped the lock down. When he was done, he looked down at her again. Her beautiful face was frozen forever in an expression of shock and pain—her response to the deep injection of venom in multiple places all over her head and neck, the spider’s lethal defense to close-quarter entrapment.

Leaning down again, he drew the painter’s tape off her mouth, then kissed her stiff, mildly sticky, blue lips. “It’s been fun, babe, but I got what I need from you—and trust me, it wasn’t your sex appeal, you whore. Nah. Me getting what I crave...revenge, that’s *all* this was ever about. You were only

a casualty of a nobler purpose.”

Chapter One

A week later...

Shayna Vincent couldn't remember feeling more nervous about a date before—and a date with a man she was madly, insanely, irrevocably in love with, at that. *A man I've known for a decade, trust more than anyone other human being on the planet, a man who's my best friend in every sense of the world. A man I want to be my first lover, my husband, the father of my children. In that order.*

But not tonight.

Forcing herself to sit on the bed between mountains of discarded clothes, she clenched and unclenched her wooden fingers, drawing in breaths she intended to be calming. Instead, she went a little crazier with each little gasp.

She and Gage Keveris had been hired directly out of college at Chicago's prestigious Bethany Advertising Agency and they'd immediately become a creative team there. Their first year, they'd, unbelievably, shortlisted for a Clio Award. In the years since, they'd won bronze and gold. As a team, they were a match made in heaven, according to the top agency they worked for. That was true in more ways than one. Their rapport had been instant—in under a year, Gage had become her closest friend...to the exclusion of having any other real friends. They'd been through every up and down together in the ten years since. But she'd been stringently careful about letting their friendship turn any romantic corners. The thought of this crucial relationship turning bad would affect every area of their lives. She couldn't imagine being without him in such a central role. If they broke up, they could no longer be friends or co-workers. Unwilling to take such a foolish risk, she'd nevertheless been helpless to resist when he'd done the unimaginable and kissed her on New Year's Eve a year and a half ago. *Nothing had ever felt so right before. Absolutely nothing wrong. A dream come true. So easy. So perfect. Destined.*

When did I become such a romantic?

Yet she'd continued to be careful—this time because the goal was no longer to avoid losing everything. Her goal had been to find the optimal path to forever with this amazing man she belonged with as if custom-made for their union. They'd moved at the pace of snail, relegating their dates to public places that kept them in check. Work, cafes, favorite restaurants, bookshops, shopping centers. He'd never been to her nothing-special New East Side high-rise apartment. She'd never been to his River West loft with

the incredible view of the Chicago skyline she'd heard about so often, given Gage's neurotic sleep schedule that allowed him to see both sunrise and sunset frequently. They'd gotten into the habit of taking turns carpooling to work, allowing them more time together. However, as a strict rule, they said their good mornings and good nights in either of their cars.

Torture. But necessary. Because I've done everything in my power to live my life by what started as my parents' moral integrity that became mine. The vow I took says preventative hindsight starts with doing the right thing today so there can be no regrets tomorrow. Once upon a time, I wasn't capable of following that path. I went down the darkest road I've ever been on...and I don't want to go back there. More than ever before, I don't want to make mistakes. Not with Gage.

Shayna's cheeks flushed as she lifted her hand and looked at the gold Purity Ring her father had put there when she was a teenager. She'd agreed to the terms of wearing the ring with the words: "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, those I date, and my future mate to be sexually pure until the day I enter marriage." She'd never been entirely sure whether she'd violated that commitment or not. She told herself technically she hadn't. But her shame for what prompted uncertainty left her forever doubting.

More than once in all the time since the purity ceremony, she'd felt a little silly to be thirty-three years old and wearing this symbolic jewelry, still a virgin. *Technically a virgin.* But she stood by what she'd confessed (without detailed elaboration) to Gage alone when he'd asked about the ring and her unwillingness to get intimately involved with any of the men she'd dated over the course of a decade. "I want to be able to look myself in the eye every day of my life. I don't want to be the one who betrayed myself, ignoring what I believe is right."

Did Gage realize whenever she said that, her mind filled in the phrase "ever again"?

Of all those men, Gage was the only one who hadn't laughed and asked her if she was serious. In this day and age, how *could* she be serious? Those men she'd dated had all assumed eventually they'd break her down. In contrast, Gage hadn't even tried. They'd shared no more than lingering, fairytale perfect kisses that left them both aching for more.

Is that about to change? Why else would Gage invite me to his apartment tonight? Did he want me to assume it was on the pretense of discussing whether he'll come home with me during my vacation? Meet my family? I've never brought a boyfriend home before. Not a single male I called friend or actual boyfriend. They'll read into it. This time, I want them to read into it. Up until Gage called tonight ten minutes after he dropped me off following work, I was prepared to "go public" with our relationship when it came to my family. Now... Why would he ask me over to his apartment just suddenly, if not to pressure me sexually? And I don't have any willpower

with him...not really.

In truth, she couldn't imagine Gage doing anything of the kind. In some ways, he seemed as awkward as she felt in sexual situations. A kiss too arousing embarrassed him and made her feel inadequate and uncertain because she'd crossed lines in the past and she knew it wouldn't take much for her to do it again. With Gage, she'd craved any loophole that would erase the damn line she'd drawn for herself since moving to Chicago.

No, Gage hadn't invited her for nefarious reasons. Believing that was the only reason she'd agreed to visit him at eight. Yet she was beyond nervous. She'd changed her clothes dozens of times, becoming more and more neurotic as she did so, unable to prevent herself from admitting the real reason for her anxiety. If Gage kissed her in his apartment, where, for the first time, they would be completely alone and unaccountable to anyone else anything other than their mutual ardor, how could she refuse him? If the past was any indication, a single heated kiss would be all she'd require to be flat on her back.

I ache for Gage. I ache in ways that should be unknown and forbidden for a virgin, and yet I'm sure each time he kisses me that I belong to him sexually. I'm sure of how badly I want to be with him. All the way. Every way. Forever. I'm afraid of becoming obsessed the way I was in high school—with the wrong guy. Hellishly wrong. Back then, I couldn't see reason, logic, a way out, and I didn't want an escape from the hell. That's how hopelessly immersed I was. I can't let myself go through that again because I was lost, consumed, unrecognizable to myself and those who knew me back then. With Gage, I know exactly who I am. I can hold to my principles and still be myself with him. I don't want anything to change that. But tonight could. Drastically.

Face flushed, Shayna said out loud, "I'll call him. Tell him we have to meet somewhere else..." But the thought of being alone with him, what it would feel like to be in his arms, free to kiss and touch him as she pleased, eager for the same from him...

Wrong. But so right...

Her cell phone went off like a blaring alarm. Hot with mental distress, she pushed her way through the mounds of clothing until she found her phone on the bedspread. On the screen, she saw her younger brother Danny's number. She almost groaned out loud, as if she'd been caught in the very act of falling from grace. Somehow it figured that the one sibling she could tell anything to would be the one to shake her out of her apprehension.

With some effort, she slipped into her usual lighthearted tone. "Impatient are we? I said I'd call you when I figured out what time I'm leaving tomorrow." Her vacation started the next day through July 14th.

"Mel's leaving me."

Startled, Shayna tried to process these frantic words from Danny. She

shouldn't have been surprised by them. Her brother, a reformed playboy, and Melody, who'd escaped a horrific situation with Danny's intervention as a police detective, had been married only a few turbulent years. If possible, since the birth of their first child, their problems had become more pronounced. Melody was an impossibly beautiful woman, quite a few years younger than her husband. She wanted it all—all she'd missed when she'd essentially been the prisoner of a controlling pimp. *And Danny's jealousy is the stuff of legends.*

"What makes you think she's leaving you?" Shayna asked doubtfully, trying to be the voice of reason.

"She's going to New Orleans to visit her dad. She's taking Dee-Dee with her."

"Just because she's visiting her father and taking your daughter with her doesn't mean she's leaving you, Danny. Are you upset because she didn't ask you to join her? She knows you have a hard time getting away from the police department."

Danny snorted impatiently. "This has nothing to do with that."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I am. There's no doubt."

"No doubt?"

He sighed. "When are you coming tomorrow?"

Shayna took a deep breath at the abrupt focus toward her plans. "I'm not sure yet. Gage and I..." She swallowed in renewed anxiety. "...need to talk about it."

"So he is coming home with you?"

Gage and Danny had met when her brother had visited her in Chicago with his daughter for a few days last year. The two men had liked each other instantly and so, totally uncharacteristically of her, she'd told Danny the truth when she and Gage had become romantically involved. Since then, she couldn't decide if she was glad the two liked each other so much or not. The last thing she needed was Danny becoming Gage's ally—if something went wrong and they broke up.

"Speaking of which, I have to get going. I'm meeting Gage so we can make plans for tomorrow. I'll call you when I get back."

"No pressure."

His teasing, before they rang off, ruffled feathers that were already going in every different direction. Danny had been sexually active as a teenager—adamantly forgoing any purity pact with a careless snort of unwillingness. Of their four sisters, none of them had remained true to their chastity vows either. Two had gotten pregnant before marriage—though they had ended up marrying the father of their children. Peyton and Riley had had multiple partners before settling down and starting families in their mid-twenties. *I'm Dad's last chance for a virgin-before-marriage daughter, and a poor one at that. I fit in the category on a technicality alone. Will I be*

the last to fall?

More determined than ever not to disappoint herself tonight, Shayna stood and evaluated herself critically in the full-length mirror. She fought the impulse to change her clothes again. Ultimately, she rushed headlong out of her apartment to prevent that. She would go to Gage's apartment and stand firm on her hard-won values. *Somehow.*

As she got into her nearly new, powder blue Chevy Aveo, she had a gut-punching realization. What if the reason Gage had invited her to his apartment had nothing to do with sex? What if he asked her to marry him?

Shayna choked in shock. Suddenly Gage's abrupt deviation from the norm made sense. Her exhale was tremulous to say the least, and then she laughed uncontrollably in sheer giddiness. In her heart, she'd already said yes to that kind of proposal.

Chapter Two

Oh hell, I'm an idiot. Why did I do this to myself? It's over. I waited too long. I should have been honest from the start...but I couldn't. It would have been over before it could begin if I'd done that.

Gage halted in his rug-wearing, barefoot pacing before the expansive windows in his apartment, his hand combing raggedly through his hair as he looked at the clock. *Almost eight. She'll be here soon. Maybe I should call her. Cancel. Ask to meet her somewhere else. Anywhere but here.*

Desperation bled out of him in a groan encompassing the whole of his impossible situation. *No, anywhere else and I'll hedge. Put this off. Anything in favor of being in her good graces longer.*

The irony didn't escape him. He'd been facing this for the past year and a half since things miraculously turned romantic between him and Shayna. The fact was, he'd been in love with her a hell of a lot longer than he let himself believe. They met the day he got the job at Bethany. As a creative team, they spent a lot of time together. They got along like something out of a carefully constructed fantasy. If he'd handpicked the very traits and assets, even the lovably, annoyingly irresistible foibles he'd want in the person he bonded with most in the world, Shayna Vincent would have been the total package he designed for himself. All his friends from college fell away. He didn't have time to make new ones, beyond the people he worked with and genuinely liked, and he honestly hadn't wanted to be with anyone else but Shayna.

They were besties. She could call it anything she wanted. But he'd been there for her. They'd worked. They'd played. They'd talked. God, had they talked. About everything. Every single last thing. He knew about her penchant for dating bad boys, getting hurt each time because what could she have in common with all those moral-less creeps? He even knew about

her neurosis over some guy in her class in high school: Shawn Fulton, her first, unobtainable bad boy. How many times had Gage held her while she grieved yet another heartbreak? How often had he wanted to say, *"I love you, Shayna Vincent. I would never hurt you, never pressure you. We can be friends and lovers for life. I'm already committed to you. All you have to do is make it official"*?

And therein lays the irony. She knew everything else there was to know about him, too. Everything but the one vital thing she needed to know. The one thing that should have been said the day they met, or pretty close. "Hi. I'm Greg Keveris, your new co-worker, as green as you are. And, oh, I'm married."

Instead, ten years later—deeply in love with her after feverishly working up the nerve to kiss her for *auld lang syne* eight and a half years into the best thing a man could ever ask for with a woman—and now he had to tell her the truth. *Can you say sayonara, stupid? Kiss off? Goodbye and don't ever call me again? You are so dead to me, mister.* There was no way Shayna would understand that he didn't see how he could have done anything else but hide the truth from her. Not without losing her for sure. *Ah, no way does she want to hear that I had no other choice about this concealment.*

Almost without thinking, he started pacing again. He wasn't paying attention to anything but the acuteness of his despair until a sharp, stabbing pain penetrated his immersion. He dropped on a chair and saw a staple lodged in the bottom of his foot. A few drops of blood emerged with the staple. Groaning, he knew his housekeeping skills had made a staple in the foot a foregone conclusion. He'd fired Judy a few weeks ago—the only thing he could do when he'd learned what his wife had been setting up all along.

The intercom buzzed, and he froze in panic. There was no need for him to look around the loft. He knew exactly what Shayna would see once inside, what he'd told himself she *needed* to see—to insure that he wouldn't chicken out this time. The night he kissed Shayna and she let him, he'd come home and started packing up the few wedding photos displayed around his place. Some had made it into boxes. Others had simply been removed from the wall and left propped up on the floor.

She deserves this. Shayna deserves the truth. If I love her—and God as my judge I do—I have to let her see this. I have to tell her the truth. But maybe she'll see reality before I have to confess it. Why do I think that might be easier?

He limped to the intercom and pressed the button to tell the doorman to let Shayna come up, all the while aware that Jose would wonder who she was. *Hell, he'd wonder who Allegra is if she ever showed up. He never sees her. Grand total, he's seen her less than ten times my whole marriage—same as I have.*

Taking a deep breath that made him feel dizzy, Gage opened the front

door in anticipation of seeing Shayna emerge from the elevator. Regret threatened to bore a hole in his gut during the endless minutes he waited. How often had he wanted to ask her here so they could be alone for once? They'd never truly been alone, unless those moments in one of their cars or their office could be considered anything so generous. *I've never wanted to be alone with someone so badly in my life. But I knew she'd perceive that as pressure and she'd back off from me. I worked so hard not to give her a reason to ever do that. Allegra's made it so damn easy to forget I'm a married man...while Shayna makes it so easy for me to believe she's the only woman in the world, the core of all that matters in my life.*

At the far end of the hall, Shayna appeared as the elevator doors slid open. Her gaze was lowered, telling him she was deep in thought. Gage's heart did a mindless somersault in response. He felt like a silly fool every single time he saw this woman, felt weak, giddy, contradictorily strong and single-minded.

His face flushed as he thought something that'd been going through his mind like a lullaby for the last year and half. *I look at her and I see my children. Seeing her with her niece Deidre when her brother visited last year... If it was possible to fall in love with Shayna Vincent more, I did then. I saw her as a mother, the mother of my children. I never wanted to have kids of my own before. Allegra and I decided that right off—neither of us had any interest in being parents. But with Shayna...* Gage sighed. *I want all those sappy, selfless, traditional things couples have dreamed of together since the beginning of time. I don't want to miss a thing.*

Abruptly, she raised her head and Gage's stomach dropped out as her thickly-fringed, sage green eyes met his across the distance. Shayna Vincent could be considered beautiful, pretty, sexy, sweet as homemade apple pie. She was all those things, but once you got to know her she was so much more. Her eyes were so deep, so fathomless, when he looked into them he was lost and found, speechless and stuttering, dizzy and grounded for the first time forever. God only knew how she'd ever gotten past his inability to be anything but a geek around her when she turned her gaze on him.

This has to be different. It's not like every other time we've been together. Intellectually, he knew that, but he forgot everything except love when she approached, looking ten times more nervous than he felt. Just like that he realized what she must have thought when he'd invited her to his apartment. Why hadn't it occurred to him before?

If possible, he grew hotter, embarrassed because he'd never been smooth when it came to sexual matters. If Allegra hadn't been aggression personified, he'd still be a virgin, too, and endlessly he wished that was the case. For certain, he'd known the sure-fire way to lose Shayna was to pressure her sexually. Her previous boyfriends had learned that the hard way, and Gage had been determined to keep his mounting needs in check around her for just that reason.

He shook himself slightly, reaching to draw her inside his apartment. He didn't think before he kissed her the way he always did when they came together after agonizing hours apart. Tearing himself away was the hardest thing he'd ever done. *I might never kiss her again. This could be over with my confession. My life would be over, too. Ah hell, this can't go well.*

He closed the door, willing words to form. His head filled with chaos. He didn't have a clue what to say. His mind went blank when he tried to piece together something coherent.

"Did you want to talk about plans for tomorrow?" she asked softly, a note of desperation in her tone.

Creative teams generally took their vacations at the same time at Bethany. So he had two weeks of vacation stretching out before him, just as Shayna did. She went home to Falcon's Bend, Wisconsin every year. For the past ten years, Gage had considered those two weeks nothing short of torture. No amount of phone calls could satisfy the gaping void in his life without her. This year, she'd asked him to go home with her—and he couldn't escape what a big deal that was for her. She kept her family in the dark about most of her relationships. Only her brother Danny knew the truth, and that'd been an obstacle in itself. All part of her 'no regrets' policy in life though. *And I'm about to become her biggest to date.*

Gage swallowed, realizing that he'd been silent so long, she was looking at him with more trepidation than ever. In the process of thrusting his hands into the pockets of his khakis, he thought better of the motion halfway there and put his hands on his hips. He took a deep breath, lowered his hands again, feeling like a gangly stork. "I... We... Shayna, we need to talk. First. And then you can decide. About...vacation." He swallowed again. "If you still want me to go with you."

Her confused frown shredded the last of his composure.

"Gage, what's going on? Why did you invite me here?"

He let out air like a popped balloon. "You must be wondering that. But...I'm not going to pressure you, Shayna. If that's what you were thinking. For anything. Anything...like...*that*." He willed a hooked cane to steal through the front door to yank him out of his own life, far, far away, where he'd never have to face being the one to change Shayna's mind about him. "Shayna, can you remember...through all this...that I love you? I've loved you for so long. If that's any reason why— Well, I love you permanently. This wasn't just some... It was real! The best thing... All I ever wanted in life and thought— You know you're the most important person on the planet to me. I'm not like all those other guys. I'm really not. I know I never said anything before, but you had to know how long I've been in love with you. All while you were going out with all those creeps that no one can figure out what you saw in—before, during, or after."

Unbelievably, she relaxed, a small smile on her beautiful, full lips. His endless prattle seemed to remind her that he was her old geek, rarely

making sense around her, just talking off the top of his head when all he really wanted to do was kiss her until they both left solid ground. She took a step closer to him, making every nerve in his body tense in extreme anticipation, and she put her fingers on his lips. "You're rambling again, Gage. Take a deep breath. I'll wait."

The easy teasing between them brought obscene tears to his eyes. He whipped off his glasses and tossed them carelessly on the desk nearby. Then he did what he needed to—he loosely pulled her into his arms once more and said the words he would rather have had his tongue cut out than speak. "I met Allegra in college. We had a lot of classes together because we were both focused on the arts. She was leaning toward writing. Art was my mainstay, though you know I write in a journal every day of my life and I enjoy journaling..." He shrugged, recognizing his own inherent need to detract from the focus here. "So she got hired at a national magazine even before she graduated college. Finance. The one thing I hated. Still do. We were different people. Even then. Maybe that was part of the appeal. Because I never knew who I was, never felt comfortable with myself back then. I subscribed to the theory that I could learn something from a person as confident and aggressive as she was. I didn't know her. That whole time. Now? Not really."

Looking at Shayna's growing-suspicious confusion, he suddenly felt heart-attack weak, and his next words came out in a hoarse, hushed voice. "Again, back then, part of the appeal. Almost immediately and ever since, now..." He leaned a little closer, his hold on her a little tighter as he tried to make her see the truth. "It's been over almost from the start, Shayna. My marriage to Allegra was over within months of our wedding eleven years ago. I can't tell you if it's just that she wouldn't let it be or that I didn't want to be a quitter. I don't know. My parents have been married forever, happily. But it was over all this time between me and Allegra, and I'm actively working to make sure it's over soon legally, too."

She couldn't seem to react, but the sentiment "Too little, too late" screamed like an alarm inside him, all around them in the bracing silence. *Beginning of the end. That's what it's been with this woman since the day we met. And I'm nowhere near ready to let that be the case. But what hope do I have of convincing her to hear me out, let alone to stay, stay with me against all reason?*

Chapter Three

Marriage? Gage was talking about marriage. *But not marrying me. "My marriage to Allegra was over within months of our wedding eleven years ago."*

By default, Gage wasn't smooth. He tended toward being nervous,

stuttering, sweating, looking overwhelmed. Now was no exception. *But who the hell is Allegra? His wife? He has a wife? Gage, the good guy. Not the bad boy. The adorably awkward, sweet, genuine...*

Wildly, Shayna looked around the room, at first not seeing anything as his words were drowned out by the confusion that filled her head like expanding foam. She couldn't absorb anything, but suddenly her focus became like laser sighting. Framed photographs were strewn around the wide-open space of the kitchen/dining/living room/office. They'd been taken off the wall, removed from surfaces. Some were piled into boxes. Others were propped between desk and file cabinet, TV and large Philodendron. The oversized one facing her had a ray of lamp-light across the glass, rendering the image below it unrecognizable in the glare. She took a few steps toward the frame, pushing the lamp away. The framed photograph revealed Gage dressed to the nines in a tuxedo. He smiled with the kind of obscene happiness that might make other people uncomfortable. Standing beside him was a very tall, gorgeous blond. A bride. This was the source of his happiness.

Shayna gasped, choking as if someone had sucker-punched her in the stomach. Her thoughts whirled as if she'd been thrust onto a rollercoaster at top speed. "You're...you're married?"

He was suddenly there, his hand on her shoulder. "Shayna, let me explain. Please. I know this looks bad. God, it looks like a nightmare."

"*Explain?* If you're married, Gage, there's nothing to explain—"

When she straightened, intent on leaving, immediately, Gage was blocking her path, his hands up like twin white flags. "I asked her for a divorce, Shayna. A long time ago. And how many times since then. She won't give me one."

Of all the things he could have said, oddly, this reason stopped her despite her rage.

Quickly, he rushed ahead in his explanation. "We've been married eleven years now, and I knew pretty much from the start that it wouldn't be a good marriage. We never saw each other. Literally, a few weeks after our wedding, she went off on assignment and hasn't come back more than a handful of times in the years since. She barely answers her phone or calls me back. I got tired of it, especially when I started to suspect she must be cheating on me, and I asked for a divorce. She refused outright. Since then, she either ignores my requests for a divorce or she laughs me off." He sagged. "Shayna, when you and I got involved, literally the day after that kiss..." He swallowed with obvious pain. "...I did the only thing I could do. I filed for divorce. Then I told her what I was doing the only way I could—leaving a message on her voicemail. She's been contesting it all this time, claiming she's out of the country on assignment, rescheduling. It's been a nightmare."

"How? Why? In this day and age? It makes no sense she would refuse

when you don't really even have a marriage if she's never here."

"You're telling me. I don't know why she's standing in the way, Shayna. I only know that she seems to want to continue using our marriage. As a front. Or something."

"A front?" Shayna barked. "For what?"

Gage shook his head. "I wish I knew. All I can figure is, we got married in our final year of college. She asked me to sign a prenup. What I mean by that is she wanted her assets to always remain her own even while my assets became hers. It's ridiculous, but I couldn't foresee this would turn into a bad thing later. I guess no one ever does. Anyway, I signed. Like an idiot. It's complicated, and my lawyer is trying to get that revoked."

Shayna barely noticed when he took a step closer to her, shaking his head. None of this was rational.

"Her whole life became her job. Traveling. I almost never saw her, Shayna. When I asked her if she was cheating on me, she didn't outright admit it or anything, but I knew. I knew she was when she said I was free, that we both were. She understood how it got when we were apart so why should we suffer? But..." His jaw tensed. "I never saw it that way."

"Can someone refuse a divorce when one part of the couple wants one?" Shayna asked in surprise. "That seems impossible, given the world we live in."

"Oh, it's possible. It's unfortunately too possible, and with someone like Allegra..." He shook his head. "You don't know her. She's the most assertive person on the planet. Immovable. Believe me, I've tried to fight her. I don't know if I can win with her."

Shayna watched his bright blue eyes, for once not covered by his glasses. Gage was so infrequently upset in a personal way. He responded to someone else's situation—usually hers—with passion, but he didn't seem to have problems like other people. He handled everything so easily. She knew why now. Because he'd been hiding a whole life she'd known nothing about all these years.

"If you filed for a divorce a year and a half ago, why has nothing been done?"

"Because Allegra put so many roadblocks up—" He swiped a hand over the sexy fuzz all around his mouth and cheeks.

Shayna frowned, sensing something that he obviously didn't want to say. "What?"

He swallowed, then admitted, "She knows. About you. About us. After that kiss between us, I filed for divorce and I called her, and I told her... Well, I told her I was in love with you and I wanted a divorce."

I'm a roadblock his wife is using to prevent divorce between them. As if two hands were inside her chest, playing tug of war with her heart, Shayna experienced both pleasure and pain at his emotional-overload words. *Gage told his wife he's in love with me. He told his wife!*

"At first, she didn't care."

Shayna gaped at him in disbelief. "Your wife knows you're in love with another woman and she doesn't *care*?"

"I told you, she acted like we could have some kind of open marriage all this time, something I never wanted. But when I said I wanted to divorce her and marry you...that's when she said without mincing words that she wouldn't agree to the divorce."

"You want to marry me?" Shayna asked in barely a whisper.

"Yes! God, yes. I love you, Shayna."

Every last ounce of her willpower went into not throwing her arms around him and kissing him the way she ached to as if it was the last time, the crucial time, the kiss of a lifetime. He looked so adorable, his dark blond hair sticking up at all kinds of irresistible angles, just begging her fingers to smooth it.

Shayna felt physically weak gazing at him. Gage, her Gamma male. He had the body of an Alpha—muscular, tanned, so strong, despite being only 5'6 (perfect for her 5'4). No one could deny he was gorgeous, though there was a quality so like a little boy in his face. In personality, he was a Beta male. Geeky, sensitive, preferring to read and study—science, math, art, literature, poetry and classic fiction—than play some silly sport. Because of his Alpha and Beta qualities, she always called him her Gamma male.

He closed the gap between them, very slowly reaching for her. "It feels like I've waited a lifetime to be with you. It's all I want. I don't know what to do anymore, honey, but I knew I couldn't leave you in the dark anymore. I had to tell you, especially when you asked me to go home with you, meet your whole family. In a perfect world, I would have been thrilled because I know it means you feel the same way about me, Shayna."

Up until tonight, she'd believed she was being unfair to him in that regard. He told her he loved her all the time. She hadn't returned the sentiment, despite knowing she was so in love with him, she was almost sick with it—but nothing like that black addiction that'd plagued her teenage years. Love with Gage was radiating, healing light, purity, goodness. Nevertheless, now she was glad she hadn't said those words.

No regrets... But she couldn't look at this man who made her so soft and needy inside without feeling regrets. A boatload of them. *I wanted the world. I wanted the same things he's saying he does. Normal things, not twisted and dark. Marriage. A shared life, one mind and heart. And that would just be the beginning. But he's already married. It's not an option. Not for us.*

"In ten years, no one knew you were married. Not at Bethany."

"When I first went to work, I mentioned it."

Shayna had a very vague impression of a rumor about that, but she'd forgotten it. Completely forgotten it. Assumed she'd been mistaken at least in hearing what she had. "How could you hide it from me, Gage? From me?"

Descending too deeply into this betraying hurt at the slightest brush,

she shied from the recoiling pain when her mind started asking questions about his marriage she wanted to avoid. *I've protected myself from this situation all my life. I never wanted to be one of those people who ignore what they don't want to face, but I was like that in high school and here I go again. I wasn't given enough information to make an informed choice.*

Gage's hands on her shoulders were warm, caressing, but with a kind of hard grip because she knew he felt desperate. "Please give me the chance to resolve this, Shayna. It's almost over now. I promise you. The deposition is on Monday."

She didn't have the slightest clue what a deposition was and didn't have the heart to ask him. The last thing she felt was hope that his marriage was almost over. If it'd been eleven years since he first started asking and a year and a half after the divorce was set in motion, what hope was there of a quick resolution now?

"I know what I've done, not telling you sooner, is unforgiveable. But you have to admit, Shayna, that if I had told you, you would have run for sure. You wouldn't have waited for an explanation. Getting this far in our relationship has been a miracle. You don't know how careful I've been, treading on eggshells because I know what you've been through in the past. I never wanted to be one of those jerks who used you, led you on, tried to seduce you, lied and weren't who they pretended to be."

Her body suffused hotly with shame and humiliation at his insinuation that she'd made it hard on him this past year and half. Their romance had felt effortless to her. He was saying, to him it'd been closer to navigating a mine field.

Shayna tried to consider logistics to keep the fear at bay. "None of this explains why she's refusing to give you a divorce, Gage. I mean, maybe you didn't fight hard enough. Start the process soon enough. Maybe deep down you didn't *want* to fight or divorce her. Not really. Maybe you're still in love with her, and that's why."

He sighed, conceding. "I know it looks like that. But that's not true. Not even a little. I question now whether I ever really loved her. And I know she can't love me. She wanted the marriage for some reason she's never made clear. But it wasn't about love."

"Are you so sure about that? Why else would she—?"

"I know you won't believe me when I say I haven't thought about her much all this time. She hasn't been a part of my life. Not like you have, Shayna. Not only do I not see her every day, but I literally haven't seen her for years. I don't know that I'd recognize her on the street. That's the God's honest truth. The only person I see every single day of my life is you. You're the one I think about. You've filled my whole life so I don't care about anyone else. Allegra isn't someone I've ever needed to worry about or concern myself with. If you met her, you'd understand that."

"She sounds like an ice cold bitch."

His grin was slight. "Maybe you know her after all. She is. But I don't care about her. Shayna, please...don't give up on me. I have no right to ask that of you, but I'm doing everything in my power to divorce her and get this situation over and done with as quickly as possible. Just wait for me. Don't give up on me. It's almost over. Please."

How could she deny him anything? But what did she know? How could she believe he was being honest when he'd been lying by default from the moment they met? "When will it be over? What is a deposition anyway?"

"Pretrial stuff. Testimonies and questioning witnesses under oath, cross-examining, presenting documents and reports, getting it all down and out so the judge can make a decision about how to proceed. Basically, locking in our sides of the story."

"And then?"

"Either we settle or it goes to trial."

"From what you've told me, she'll want it to go to trial."

Gage nodded. "That's Allegra all right. She has to be in control. I've recognized that about her from the moment we met. She's not going to let me control this. She thinks she'll win, too." He moved around her, reached for his glasses again and, once they were on, he picked up a large manila envelope from the desk. He handed it to her, looking shy and reluctant.

Worried, Shayna had to force herself to open the package. The photographs that slid out into her hand made her gasp. The only places she and Gage had ever been alone outside their office at Bethany were their cars—in the morning, when one picked up the other, and in the evening, sometimes very late evening, when they dropped the other off. They'd only ever kissed in their cars. And there were a lot of photographs of just that. The passion in their expressions was damning and nothing short of scorchingly mortifying in consideration of who was behind the camera. Some of the photos were taken at their favorite restaurants and cafes, the bookstore they spent a good deal of time in. Even without the private intimacy of a kiss, the way she and Gage looked at each other spoke a thousand words of ardor and love.

"That's not all," Gage said, tipping the envelope in her hand so something slithered down and into her palm. She looked at the few small cassette tapes.

"Wait. Who took these pictures of us? Allegra?"

"A private investigator she hired, I'm assuming. She wanted to have evidence I'm cheating on her, though she seemed fine about me cheating on her in one-night stands all these years. Acted like I should be fine about *her* cheating."

Shayna swallowed the lump of bitterness leaking into her throat. Against everything she believed in and the way she lived her life, she'd become the other woman, a role she wouldn't have willingly filled for anything in the world. "What are these?" she asked of the cassettes. She went still and

silent as he took them from her.

"When we got married and Allegra moved in here, she brought with her one of those old-fashioned answering machines that use these cassette tapes. It was her machine and I never used it. No one I know, including her, would have left messages for me on her machine. These cassettes came with the photographs a few weeks ago. I listened to the messages on them. Messages from Allegra to me about why she couldn't come home, the work-related delays. All this fake stuff about how much she loves and misses me. If you knew her..." He shook his head, laughing without amusement. "Allegra would never, ever say things like this to me. Not even in the beginning of our relationship. There was nothing tender or loving between us on her part. She never called my cell phone and left messages in my voicemail like this. Besides, this is her machine. I don't look at the thing, don't listen to any messages that might come in on it. I barely noticed it was here in the loft all these years. But I know she's been planning something like this all these years because the date and time is added to every single message that comes in and one of these cassettes is from 1998, another from 2003, and the other from earlier this year."

"I don't understand," Shayna said, feeling slow and dumb, unable to deduce the meaning of what he was telling her.

"Allegra wanted to fabricate proof that she's been a loving, concerned wife all the years of our marriage. Prove that she's been diligent about keeping in touch with me, her beloved husband. After I got these in the mail recently, I realized she has that so-called proof, but I couldn't figure out how she got it. She hasn't been home. The only person who comes into this apartment other than me is the maid she hired after we got married. So Judy had to be the one who was doing this for her. And I confronted the maid about it recently. She admitted Allegra specifically asked to put a new cassette in once a week when she came in to clean. The old cassettes go in one of the pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelopes Allegra makes sure she has. Judy had no idea why she was doing this. She didn't ask questions, never considered that asking her to do this was anything more than mildly strange. But she agreed to testify for me about all this at the deposition."

The whole situation was beyond odd. Shayna couldn't imagine someone doing something so crazy. "Do you think Allegra wants to ruin you financially? Take you for everything you're worth? Why else would she do this?"

"I signed that prenup just before we got married, entitling her to my assets—all of them. I honestly have no memory of talking to anyone, including her, about the trust fund my grandparents left me."

"Trust fund? It must be considerable for her to do all this to get at it."

"I guess it is."

Gage didn't care about money. He just wasn't that type. If he had what he needed—a place to sleep, food to eat, clothes to wear, books to read, a

workable car to drive, he was content.

"I used the money in that fund for college. I haven't needed it for anything else. I barely remembered it until all this started. Then I called the trustee, who's a relative of mine. Allegra found out about the trust fund before we were married. Alan says she called him and asked about it, said something about us planning our wedding and honeymoon, maybe needing to use some of the money. Once we were married, the money was available to both of us by default. She's been taking money out of the account all this time, regularly. The fact that I never said anything to Alan made him believe I was fine with it. Anyway, long story short, we know now she invested the money she took from it. The residue of profits has been going into an off-shore account of hers that's in her name only. Again, I figure this is why she wouldn't sign a prenup for her own assets."

Shayna sighed, feeling overwhelmed by a situation that seemed complicated beyond imagining. She felt reluctant sympathy for all Gage had been through. "You didn't know her at all, did you?"

Wearily, he agreed, "She presented herself to be a different person in college."

"Do you think she married you for the trust fund?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Lately, I've been more convinced she must have. What was in that account wasn't extravagant, but she's good at playing the market. According to what we learned when Alan started looking into all this, she's damn good at it. She's quadrupled, quintupled, *more*, everything she's taken out of the trust fund with her smart investing." He stopped suddenly, sighing once more. "Shayna, none of this is the point. I'm just saying, my lawyer has built a good case against her. Even all this private investigator stuff...it looks bad for *her*, not as much for me. My lawyer thinks she'll have no choice but to settle after the deposition. I have to tell you honestly, honey, I don't care about the money I could lose from all this. I don't care at all. If I lose everything down to the shirt off my back, I don't care—as long as I know you're with me. That you'll wait for me, that you'll be there when I finally get to the end of this black tunnel. If I have to start all over again, financially, so be it. I'll do whatever it takes. You're all that matters to me."

Gage knows me so well. He knows I make the biggest mistakes when I feel sympathy for a man who probably doesn't deserve it. He knows just what to say now to get me to agree to wait. But how can I know for sure Gage is any different from all those jerks I dated in the past and thought I could fall in love with?

"Believe me, Shayna. Trust me. Give me the chance to prove myself."

She wanted to ask, *"What was this decade, if not your chance to prove yourself? But none of those years count anymore. Because one lie shattered the trust I had."*

She sent an uncertain glance his way and couldn't doubt he was reading her mind. He knew her thoughts and was still asking her not to leave him,

not to run away.

"I don't know, Gage. I can't consider anything. I need to think first. I can't make any decisions right now."

He nodded, his finely arched cheekbones filled with ruddy color. "I understand. You're leaving for Falcon's Bend tomorrow."

You were supposed to come home with me. Meet my family. I planned to introduce you as— But all the time you knew you couldn't go, not with the divorce deposition on Monday.

Her plan was ruined now. The last thing she wanted was for her family to know anything about this. *My involvement with a married man. Ignorantly involved. Ignorantly in love.* But Danny alone knew she was utterly besotted with her creative partner and co-worker. Soon her whole family would know because she had no doubt at all her sisters and mother would be relentless about why Gage wasn't with her when he was supposed to be.

I was so close to having everything I ever wanted. Real love, not something straight out of a horror movie. Love with my best friend, the person I thought I knew as well as he knows me.

Guilt stabbed her with the thought. She hadn't told Gage every last detail—the gory stuff. She couldn't get herself to admit any of that because even now her shame was so excruciating. So much easier to tell herself she'd been possessed back then. She hadn't done any of those desperate, twisted things...

"I'm sorry, Shayna."

Tears burned fiercely behind her eyelids. "I need time," she managed brokenly.

"I know. You have it, as much as you need. I'll go forward with divorcing her. I'll do everything in my power to get this over with quickly. And..."

His tone compelled her to look at him, and she saw tears crowded in his eyes. She'd never felt so shattered, never needed anyone—him, only Gage—to hold her so badly. Until this moment, she hadn't realized how much she'd invested in this, the promise of an entwined life, with him.

"I can't make any promises, Gage. I can't tell you I can go forward...in the direction we were moving in before. I never wanted to be in this position."

Suddenly, he was reaching for her, cradling her face in his hands and she was weeping, unable to turn away from him. "Do you love me, Shayna?"

"Not fair..." she gulped.

"I know, and I'm sorry. I have to ask, honey. I love you too much not to ask."

She couldn't speak as the sobs broke free from her chest, couldn't prevent him from drawing her cheek against his chest, stroking her cheek and hair, murmuring apologies and love—never a good combination. The worst part was knowing he was crying as hard as she was. More than ever before, she wanted to break the pattern, damn her rules and vows. Gage

was different. Gage was her soul-mate, the only man who could make her feel this way—free and happy, normal, *herself*, not some desperate, depraved creature, clawing for some semblance of real love or reciprocation. Gage alone treated her as if she was a treasure beyond price, irreplaceable and perfect. But how much of it was a lie? How could she ever know?

The promises were all there, just below the surface. The promise that she did love him. She would wait for him. And, come what may, they would be together in the end. But she wouldn't let them emerge. She couldn't.

With the dregs of her strength, she tore herself away from him and ran from the loft. She didn't want to know that he would have followed her if he'd had any choice, if he'd thought there was any chance of comforting and convincing her now. Instead of collapsing the way she could have so easily, she went home, loaded up her car with the luggage she'd already packed, and she started the four and half hour drive to the small town in west central Wisconsin she still considered home after fifteen years of living in Chicago. Halfway into her drive, she called her brother to tell him she was on her way and would arrive in a couple hours. "If you're not awake, that's fine—"

"I'm awake. Mel left. For New Orleans. Alone."

"She didn't take Dee-Dee with her?"

"No. You're staying with me, right?" he asked wearily.

"Yes."

"Good. You couldn't have come at a better time."

"I'm glad about that. But...Danny?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you...can you not tell anyone else—Mom and the others—that I'm coming a little early?" Normally, she would arrive late afternoon the Saturday she left Chicago for her annual vacation.

"Anything going on, Shay?"

"We can talk when I get there."

"I'll be up."

Shayna hung up, replaying the conversation in her head and laughing at her ridiculous statement, "We can talk when I get there". She couldn't talk about this. Just thinking about Gage in the most non-romantic sense made her feel insane with devastation. She'd gone to his apartment with a strange hope, after obsessing for hours about why he'd invited her. She'd anticipated the possibility that he was going to ask her to marry him. Not in a million years could she have anticipated he would instead announce he was already married. Not when she and Gage had been together so long—a decade long. Their love had been insular, a fierce friendship that'd settled so amazingly, tenderly, perfectly into romantic love.

Oh, Gage, why did you have to be just like every other guy, wanting to use me for...whatever? How can I believe you love me now? Somehow believing that made the rest she had to deal with somehow harder because,

even now, she couldn't get herself to accept that Gage Keveris didn't love her.