

CHAPTER 1



C. 1919

She couldn't remember a time when she didn't feel as if she belonged to him, and as she swept the floor one more time, she let the enormity of that feeling wash over her once again in anticipation of seeing him for the first time in nearly three years.

That feeling—one of deep love and commitment to him—had been a part of her for all her life, it seemed.

Oh, it had definitely begun as a crush. He was three years older than she was—which, when you're young, might as well be twenty—and from the time that she was very little, she had tagged along after him, trying to follow in his—even then—big, booted footsteps. So much so that she pretty much exhausted herself every day trying to do so. They were an odd couple, with him being so much larger than she was, from the start, and she being a fey little thing, following him as consistently and dedicatedly as his shadow, even when she could barely go on.

Luckily, despite the teasing he always got from his buddies about it, he almost always took pity on her when she began to drag

like that—either picking her up and carrying her himself so that they could continue their adventures through the expansive woods that connected his house to hers, or he'd escort her home and hand her into her mother's waiting arms, patting her back as he left to return to his cohorts and cook up other—less tame—missions than they could have when she was around.

He was just that kind of person, even when he was a kid—almost hyper responsible, automatically looking out for her as well as everyone else he cared for. He was an only child, and his father'd had an accident on the farm—a tractor had fallen over on him—which left Lawson, then about ten or so, feeling the need to fill his shoes, although both of his parents forbade him to get a job, wanting him to have both the childhood and the education that neither of them had been afforded when they had grown up.

Being the stubborn sort, he defied them—in a good way—and got a job delivering papers before school that brought in some money—that he immediately turned over to his doting mother the first week and stood bravely before her, both proud and a little concerned that he might be punished for having gone against her—but his job still left him time to be a boy when he got out every afternoon. His parents reluctantly agreed that he could continue, as long as his grades didn't drop.

It was one of the few times he couldn't hear those determined little feet running after him. She had wanted to help him as soon as she'd found out what he was doing, of course, but Fleur's mother wouldn't allow her to get up that early before school.

He had to chuckle as he threw another paper onto someone's porch—his aim quite accurate, even early on—about the fact that he wasn't sure whether he was glad for the time away from the cute little pest or whether he missed the presence of that persistent little thorn in his side.

Law decided that it was mostly the latter. She was a good kid, overall, smart for her age, very verbal, funny, and quite brave. She'd never balked, at least trying to do what he and his friends were

doing, even if she really wasn't physically capable of it yet and might well never be.

And she was very good about obeying him when he told her that she couldn't come along or simply asked her to go home and leave him alone. It didn't seem to faze her in the least, and she'd be right on his heels again the next day with no hard feelings.

The older they got, though, the more often he asked her to let him be, and although he knew that it hurt her a bit each time he did so, he was steadfast, and even if he could see that she was a little bit crushed by it, she wasn't a bratty type of kid. He would never have put up with that in the first place.

She acquiesced with more grace than most children of her age would have, lisping lightly, "Yes, Lawson," then turning and heading home from wherever they were, be it far afield or just outside his house.

By the time she was thirteen and he was fifteen or so, she had largely stopped hanging around him altogether, not because he had forbidden her from doing so, but because she could somehow sense that her presence was more of a bother to him than it had ever been, and that was the last thing she ever wanted to be to him, even then.

They still saw each other occasionally. The town they'd grown up in was small enough that it was pretty hard not to, especially considering how close they lived to each other, and the fact that their parents were good friends. But the separation was pretty complete—they said rather awkward hellos, with Fleur remaining with her little cluster of girlfriends and Lawson staying with his group of rowdy boys.

So clean was the break that, once she had joined him in high school, she didn't even notice how his eyes tended to remain on her, watching her covertly whenever he got the chance. She had become so oblivious to him by that time—having successfully cultivated that attitude, despite how she still felt about him—she had been amazed when he had stopped her in the hallway at school

to ask her, a freshman, if she would accompany him to the senior prom, so much so that Fleur had been rendered speechless, staring up at him with her mouth hanging open like a complete dolt.

And his broad grin didn't help her situation in the least, either. It just made her more nervous than she'd ever been around him before. This was Law, for crying out loud! He knew her better than her parents did—or any of her current friends. Or, at least, he used to. Why was it suddenly so horribly unnerving and hard to be around him, especially like this?

Perhaps it was the fact that he was already bigger than both his own father and hers—taller, wider, more muscular than either of those men had ever been. He was clean shaven, but she could see that he would have a heavy beard, his face tanned, hair neatly combed, clothes worn—like everyone else's—but clean, and he made her feel as if she was talking to a man of twenty-five rather than someone who had just barely turned eighteen.

Or was it because every girl in school wished she was the one he was asking? All of her friends gushed over him until she was sick of hearing about it, most of them agog when she told them that they had been close when they were young, wondering why she wasn't going after him herself. But she wasn't about to do that.

But, despite the diffident manner she affected whenever anyone asked her about him, wasn't this what she'd always wanted—even now, when she didn't see him much? Her crush had never died out in the least but had, rather, been ruthlessly shoved down inside her, knowing he didn't feel the same way about her, feeling the need to protect herself and thus withdrawing from his presence as an act of self-preservation as she sensed he was pulling away from her those years ago.

"Cat got your tongue?"

She had blushed furiously, cursing her fair skin and how it always gave her thoughts and feelings away—not that he didn't know her well enough to intuit most of them, anyway, but it didn't help that she broadcast them for all to see, either.

"N-no, I just...well, I'm surprised."

He looked a bit abashed but not for long. "I know, and I'm sorry. I just needed—some distance."

Fleur nodded, feeling herself being tugged inexorably towards him, as always, but trying—unsuccessfully—to fight against it. "I understand."

He stepped closer to her, making her crane her head back just that much further in order to maintain eye contact with him, making her feel just that much smaller, as she always had with him, but not in a bad way. She'd never felt intimidated by him—just the opposite. He'd only ever made her feel safe and protected by his size.

His voice having lowered to a tone that caused both chill bumps—and her nipples—to rise embarrassingly, he answered, "No, I don't think you do, but I *am* sorry, Petal." He used his personal nickname for her. He'd told her when she was so much younger, probably when she was crying or hurt, that, despite her name, she was much too young and tiny to be a full-fledged flower. "But do you think you could forgive me enough to come to the dance with me anyway?"

Fleur didn't have it in her to deny him, especially not when he asked so prettily and sincerely, and she was glad she didn't.

He'd let her know from the outset, the night of that fateful dance, that he wanted her—and not just as a friend—but also that he wasn't about to have her—all of her, anyway—until they were married. He insisted that she graduate high school beforehand, too. But he asked for her to pledge herself to him that very night—as he was willing to do to her—and she had done so without a second's hesitation and had never regretted her decision in the least.

She'd barely left his side from that point on, and it was nearly as if those few years without him had never happened, although their relationship was nowhere near as innocent as it had been. He set and maintained the parameters of just how far they would go, physically, even after they became engaged in her junior year.

Fleur's parents had never been very strict with her—hence her ability to traipse around behind him all day, every day, without them really knowing where she'd gone or what she was up to. But Lawson certainly was; he was very loving and affectionate, too, but also made her toe the line much more so than she had ever been expected to in her life. He'd told her once that, if she had been his child, he would never have allowed her to spend so much time wandering around with him, getting into all sorts of trouble that their parents would never find out about, and that she would have been spanked soundly for doing so.

Now that she *was* his, for all intents and purposes, he was even more watchful of her than he had been. And when she did something he didn't approve of—especially since it was inevitably something he had *told* her he didn't want her to do, like skinny dipping at the old quarry until late at night with her girlfriends, he didn't hesitate to remind her—in the most embarrassingly old fashioned manner—that he expected her to obey him.

The first time it had happened—for exactly that reason—she had been absolutely furious at him, standing up off his lap, tugging her skirt down while her cheeks—both sets—blushed brightly, and demanding that he take her home immediately, which he did.

He didn't have a car yet—any money he made went to school bills first, home, second, her, third, and flying last—so he walked her home, not even bothering to try to take her hand, even though they had almost never walked side by side without touching each other in some way. Law could feel just how angry she was, and although he certainly understood how she felt, he was not about to apologize for what he'd done. She had no idea how stupid it was for four teen-aged girls to be swimming nude in a very remote part of the woods at night where anyone could have stumbled upon them—just as he had.

He'd been the perfect—if autocratic—gentleman as soon as he'd realized they were all naked and had turned his back, ordering them to get out of the water and dress themselves, sounding

enough like a scolding parent that they had all done exactly as he'd told them to do.

Then he'd given them a lecture about being aware of their own safety—or the lack thereof—brought the other girls home and her back to his parents' house, where he'd taken her over his knee right there in the den, the element of surprise working in his favor.

And now, even though she was right next to him, he knew she wanted to be a thousand miles away and with anyone but him.

But he wasn't necessarily right about that, and that was part of what Fleur was struggling with about what he'd done to her. She knew she had every right to be furious at him for being so high-handed and familiar with her. But it was the strange feelings that the spanking had stirred to the surface within her that almost—almost—bothered her more than his actions—not that she was about to tell him that.

It wasn't just her bottom that was suffused with a terrible heat in the wake of her punishment, but that entire area, to the front of her, too, that felt hot and swollen and—she was embarrassed to admit even to herself—wet, somehow.

When they had made it to her door, she reached for the knob as if to go in without having said anything to him since she'd ordered him to take her home. Not even a terse "goodbye" but he tugged her away and into his arms before she could get a good grip, holding her tightly—completely—against him in the potent combination of porch and moonlight.

"I'm sorry I had to spank you," he whispered against her ear.

Fleur, who had been beginning to melt against him, as she always did, snapped her head up at his words, pointing out, "You're not sorry you spanked me, you're just sorry you felt you *had* to."

She tried to push herself away from him, but he was too strong for her. One big hand was splayed at the middle of her upper back, the other just above her still throbbing behind, not hurting her in the least, but holding her firmly in place, right where he wanted her.

She could see the way the corners of his mouth turned up a bit as he looked down at her, and it made her even angrier, as did his response. "Well, lovely, I did tell you that I didn't want you to do that—even just the swimming up there by yourselves, much less naked. I even offered to come with you anytime you did want to, so that you'd be safe."

"But you were working tonight, and we got bored after the movie, and the girls wanted to go!" she whined, knowing she sounded petulant, hating it herself, but unable to stop herself from doing so.

Lawson brought a hand up to cup the back of her head, giving her no choice but to look up at him, while the other drifted to her waist to hold her still. "I can't control how you decide to behave, Fleur. You have free will, and you made the choice to deliberately disobey me. The only thing I can control is my response to your misbehavior, and I can promise you that your beautiful bottom will always pay the price when you make what I consider to be the wrong decision."

That one hand moved slowly down, over the back of her light summer dress, to firmly cup the well-rounded, still well warmed cheeks he found there, adoring the way she gasped as he gripped her punished flesh, recalling how it had bounced delightfully under the crisp swats he'd delivered with the flat of his palm as his desire grew to almost uncontrollable proportions.

"Stop it, Law! That hurts!"

"Good. I would hate to hear that my efforts at disciplining you had dissipated so quickly."

She hit his shoulder, hard, succeeding only in hurting her hand in doing so. Lawson patted her bottom not quite lightly, then hugged her even closer to him, the hand that was still in her hair encouraging her to lay her cheek on his chest. Fleur resisted as much as she could, but even though her behind was still stinging, his big body was still a source of great comfort to her, and he

waited patiently, applying only the slightest pressure until she relented and laid her cheek against him.

"Poor baby," he soothed in a hoarse whisper. "It must be awful to have someone who loves you enough to discipline you when you do something foolish."

"It is!" she agreed vehemently.

He began to rock them slightly back and forth. "And I *am* sorry to have hurt you—I always will be, my dearest Fleur, but I can also promise you that I will never let that stand in the way of me correcting you, even if it has to be a much worse punishment than you just got."

She squirmed and wiggled in his arms at that worrisome declaration, trying to get away, but he wouldn't allow it, preferring instead to tip his head down and hers up, so that he could kiss her thoroughly, smiling slightly when she refused to join in at first, but confident that he could turn her around.

And he did—within seconds of their lips meeting, she had lost the will to fight him and surrendered herself to him completely within the safety of his arms.

When he finally let her go, before her father met them at the door with his shotgun, she turned at the door and, her lips pursed, commanded boldly, "I do *not* want you to spank me again."

He touched the tip of his hat to her, shooting back, with a firm pat to her bottom in passing as he headed down the porch steps, "Well, then, I guess I can look forward to a future of you obeying me unquestioningly."

Her loud snort made him smile. "Don't count on it, buddy."

His warm chuckle drifted to her ears. "I know you, Petal, and I surely won't."

Then he stopped and turned around, just as she was going to close the door behind her.

"I love you to distraction, you know."

It was a long second, during which his heart lodged painfully in his throat, before he heard her soft answer, "I love you, too, to

distraction." Then he heard, as the door closed, "But sometimes I don't *like* you very much."

Despite the fact that that incident seemed to open the flood gates, and she began to be spanked by him much more often than she preferred, which was not at all, they would both have agreed that they loved each other more and more each day.

That was until later on, when he began to talk about the inevitability of America becoming involved in the horrible conflict that was unfolding in Europe and how he might as well join up, since he was bound to be drafted anyway at some point, hoping that going in early might give him a leg up on getting where he wanted to go, rather than merely being sent to become cannon fodder, as most of the European soldiers seemed to be. He even went so far as to take enough course credits at college that he could graduate a year early, with his degree, in order to enter as an officer, rather than a noncom.

He'd discovered a passion for flying, one that few but Fleur supported him in, considering it a waste of time—and worse than that, money. But he intended to lend what little expertise and experience he'd been able to garner to the military, hoping to end up as a pilot or at least doing something involved with flight.

But if he thought she was going to be happy about his idea of voluntarily entering the military when there was no real need to that she could see, he was sorely mistaken, and she let him know it from the first time he mentioned his intentions to her.

Their plan had always been to get married during the summer after she'd graduated from high school, but what he intended to do would put those plans off indefinitely, possibly—and most frighteningly—forever.

"So you don't want to get married?" she'd asked—trying not to sound accusing, but knowing she was failing miserably.

The look she got for her efforts made her reflexively reach her hands behind her to protect her backside.

"You'd better cover your bottom, little girl," he growled in

warning as he literally stalked over to her, backing her up against the living room wall without ever having to touch her. Fleur found herself neatly trapped there when Lawson planted his palms on the wall behind her. "I ought to put you over my knee for even thinking that, much less saying it out loud to me in that bratty tone of voice."

And he might have, if it hadn't been for the tears that he could clearly see were leaking out of the corners of her eyes.

"N -no, Law, p-please don't s-spank me for missing you h-horribly—I will, if you go in!"

Her tears and the sweet, pitiful plea that he knew came directly from her heart had him folding her into him and hugging her hard. "Shh-shh-shh, baby. I know you understand all the reasons why volunteering early might help me do what I want to do, rather than what they decide I should do."

"I do, but I don't want you to fly planes for them! You'll get shot down and die and I'll die, too, for want of you!" she wailed against his chest, claiming fistfuls of his shirt and holding onto him for dear life.

It was a stark reality and a hard pill to swallow, but he said it anyway. "I could just as easily be killed on the ground, honey. I'm sorry to say it, but it's the truth. War is coming—I know you realize that, too. I want to do this in the way that's best for the both of us. If I can get in before everyone else, even with what little flight time and know-how I have, I'm ahead of most. And just flying for them, I'll have experience doing so when I get back—I could fly planes for a living or at least work on them. We've talked about how it's the coming mode of transportation—I'd never be without a good paying job—we'd never have to worry about money, and I'd be working at my dream job."

"If you come back."

Lawson kissed the top of her head as he hugged her. *"When. We must always think about when, not if."*

In the end, of course, he did what he said he was going to,

entering the Army even before war was formally declared against Germany.

He spent his last free day with her, and they came as close as they ever had to giving free reign to their passions. He was the stronger of the two of them, putting his foot down when she would have given in to him without a care.

"No, my precious Petal," he had said that evening, lifting her away from him and turning with her to lay her gently down on her back on the blanket they had stretched out under the stars in a field that had a beautiful view of the night sky. "Since we're not getting married until I get back, I don't want to leave you with the worry about a possible pregnancy."

"There are things we could do to prevent that," she suggested, giving him a bold look, a little concerned that he might consider her suggestion a bit forward.

But he had merely smiled broadly. "Why, you little minx! What do you know about such things? And here I thought you were such an innocent!"

"I don't have to be impure to know that there have always been ways to avoid unwanted consequences, Lawson," she answered primly.

"Well, since those methods have been known to fail, I will consign us to the horrors of having to wait."

Fleur batted her eyelashes at him outrageously. "We could still get married. I know my father wouldn't hesitate to roust a judge or two—even at this hour—in order for us to do so, if you wanted to before you go."

It was everything he wanted. He had long since come to grips with the idea that he would brand her as his, if he could. But he also knew that, if he didn't come back, she would be despoiled and might well find it hard to get married again, and he firmly believed she needed the guidance of a strong, loving man to keep her out of trouble.

He knew he was denying her of a widow's benefits if things

went badly for him, and that weighed heavily on his mind, too, although he'd made arrangements with his family for her to receive anything that he might inherit in his stead, even though she wasn't his wife.

But he also didn't want the possibility of a child of his growing up without a father, so, although he showered her with kisses, he brought her to her door intact that night and—mostly—unsullied, his heart both full to bursting and heavy with grief at the idea of having to leave her, although he was quite excited to have this adventure, though, too, however it turned out.

It was almost impossible to leave her, especially since she couldn't seem to stop crying. He hated leaving her in that state and ended up sitting on their porch swing with her curled up on his lap. It was torture for him, but his presence comforted her. He waited until she was asleep and snuck her upstairs and into her bedroom as stealthily as he could, managing to do so without waking her or anyone else in the house, luckily.

He stood beside her bed, looking down at her for a very long time, carving the memory of how gorgeous she was indelibly into his memory before he forced himself to turn and leave.

She surprised him the next morning by being at the train station, even though his train departed at five AM. Even his parents weren't there. Having chores to do around the farm, they'd said their goodbyes before he left, his mom having packed him a knapsack full of goodies to eat, give out to friends or barter with, whatever worked best for him.

They hugged and kissed and she cried all over him. He told her all the things he could think of to help comfort her—how beautiful she was, that he expected to receive a letter a day from her, and how much he loved her, cautioning her to behave as if he was there with her, and that he'd be home before she knew it.

Lawson had to physically remove Fleur's surprisingly strong arms from around his neck when he needed to board the train, but he held onto her hand as long as he could, with her running

alongside the train until the very last minute, until her next step would throw her off the platform, hanging off the side of the train and waving at her, catching and blowing the kisses she'd sent him back to her until she was no longer visible even as a speck by the tracks.

Even then, it was another twenty minutes before he could force himself to go in and actually find a seat on the train, after which he discovered, while digging in his pockets, that she had pressed a note into one of them that simply said, "I love you. Please come back to me." It wasn't signed formally, but rather with a plainly drawn flower, each petal of which was labeled "Yours".

Fleur remained on the platform even longer than he had hung out off the train, brought to her knees by the stress and sorrow of it all, remaining there until someone who recognized her helped her all the way back home, where she—eventually—managed to steel herself to spend at least a year—*please, God, no longer than that*—without him.