



The LONER

USA Today Bestselling Author

NICOLE FLOCKTON

The Loner

The Billionaire Freemasons

Nicole Flockton

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2nd Edition

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Previously published as Bound by His Desire

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About the Book

His number one rule - don't get involved with his assistant.

Nick Rhodes has seen the darker side of love. Had his youth ripped away from him. His focus now is on business and he needs an assistant who isn't going to see him as a meal ticket to easy street. Pamela Bishop is everything he needs in a professional colleague, and comes with an ironclad guarantee – she absolutely will not fall in love with him.

Love is not her top priority.

Pamela has one goal — get on top of the mountain of debts incurred through her mother's medical expenses. Her job as Nick's assistant is going to let her achieve that. Jeopardizing this opportunity by falling in love with her arrogant, if handsome, boss is the last thing she's going to do.

Sometimes breaking the rules is necessary.

As the romance of New York City surrounds them, Pamela and Nick find themselves spending more and more time together. They can no longer ignore the attraction flaring between them. Nick has always lived by his own rules, but breaking them may lead to forever.

*Previously published as Bound By His Desire

To Mum and Dad: thank you for always believing in me.

Chapter One



NICK RHODES'S BODY STIRRED TO LIFE WHEN HE SPIED THE woman standing in the doorway of the church. Her green dress accentuated and enhanced her curves. Her hair fell softly in curls over one shoulder in a waterfall of caramel. She held a small posy of flowers and he figured she must be a bridesmaid he hadn't met at the rehearsal dinner the previous evening. Although that seemed strange, seeing as Luc only had him as his best man. There appeared to be no one standing behind her. He knew Jasmine's assistant was to be a bridesmaid too. Whoever this girl was, he would remedy the lack of introduction as soon as the ceremony had finished. Maybe a quick fling would take the edge off his anxiety about what was happening in New York and the disaster that awaited him when he returned.

The music started and the woman walked with slow measured steps down the aisle. As she got closer to him he had to stop his jaw from dropping. He knew the woman. It was Pamela Bishop. The same woman who had been two seats down from him at the dinner, who had worn an outfit that had ensured she blended in with the background of the room. The same woman who hadn't said "boo" to him, but had managed to change the rehearsal dinner from chaos to calm in a matter of minutes. The same woman who Luc assured him would make a perfect new assistant.

It didn't seem possible.

His body didn't care what Nick's mind thought, all it cared about was the stunning woman walking toward him, and he wanted to get to know her in the most primal of ways.

The closer she got to him, the more he could see and feel her nerves radiating out toward him. Her eyes darted all around the church, looking to see if she could find a quick exit. Everything shouted out to him she wasn't accustomed to everyone looking at her. When her gaze caught his, he sent her a smile. Nick hoped it was reassuring. He felt his lips widen when he noticed a soft pink glow bloom in her cheeks. He shifted slightly to relieve the unexpected pressure in his pants, hoping no one noticed his discomfort.

Once Pamela reached where he and Luc were standing and took her place opposite them, the music changed and the *Wedding March* swelled loudly in the church. He watched in amazement as his friend, the hardest, most ruthless businessman he knew, almost melt at the sight of his wife walking toward him. He couldn't blame Luc, Jasmine looked beautiful in the soft pink dress that emphasised the evidence of Luc's impending fatherhood. He was excited and happy for his friend and, for today only, he gave himself permission to push business aside and enjoy the ceremony and evening ahead. Tomorrow he could find a new assistant and fix the deal before it completely fell apart.

He may have to reconsider his thought about approaching Pamela to be his assistant, though. If she turned up to the office each day looking like she did right at that moment, he might find himself throwing his own rule about getting involved with his assistant out the window.

The thought pulled him up short and the murmuring of the priest, reciting the wedding vows, faded to the far recesses of his mind.

How could he even think about pushing aside his rule to never get involved with an assistant? He knew how destructive an office affair could be. He'd lived it once, he wasn't going to live it again. He'd had to let go too many assistants recently who'd started looking at him as a meal ticket to a life of luxury. He would never go down that route and, if he did end

up offering Pamela the job, he'd make it abundantly clear to her that if she was harboring any ideas of holy matrimony, to cast her line well away from him.

The clapping of the congregation pulled him out of his thoughts. He looked across as Luc swept Jasmine up into his arms and kissed her soundly. He saw Pamela discreetly wiping her eyes. He never understood the emotions weddings raised in people. While he wished his friend well, he knew he'd never get married.

Marriage and love could be devastating. Even Luc had almost been destroyed by the emotion. Perhaps there were exceptions to the rule, but it didn't mean he had to explore the institution of marriage. The loss of freedom to come and go as he pleased was something he couldn't imagine relinquishing for the sake of a woman. No matter how attractive he found her. He was thirty-three and free and wasn't planning on changing his single status soon. Marriage definitely wasn't a feature on his life to-do list.

The next few minutes passed in a blur as he and Pamela joined Jasmine and Luc as they signed the wedding register. Before he knew it, he found himself walking toward Pamela and holding his arm out to her to walk out of the church together.

His body flared to life again when they linked arms.

"Wasn't it a beautiful ceremony? I'm so glad it went off without a hitch. I planned it so carefully."

"Yes, a beautiful ceremony. Did you liaise with the wedding planner?" Nick asked hoping the mundane conversation would have the same affect as a cold shower on his body. It had been a while since he'd last been with a woman. What other reason could explain his body reacting like a teenager's the first time he found himself standing next to his crush?

"Oh no, I organized everything. Jasmine was looking at planners but I told her I'd do it and she wouldn't have to pay me. I'm her assistant after all. Oh, well, I was," her voice trailed away.

Nick felt the sigh ripple through her. He recalled his conversation with Luc from the previous evening, about how Pamela was considering resigning now Jasmine had stopped working. “What do you think you’ll do now?”

They were outside the church while everyone congregated around the happy couple, standing off to the side.

“I’m not sure,” Pamela replied, as she pulled a piece of paper out of her purse and looked at the words written on it. “I’ll have to make a decision soon. I’ve got some savings but it won’t pay — “

She broke off as if she’d recognized she’d said more than she wanted to. “Won’t pay what?”

“It doesn’t matter. If you’ll excuse me for a minute, Nick, I need to speak with the photographer about where the photos are taking place.”

Nick watched her rush away. According to Luc, Pamela was an extremely efficient and well-organized assistant. Luc had urged Nick to consider taking her to New York with him. She may not be familiar with the details of the current deal Nick was working on, but Luc assured him it wouldn’t take Pamela long to get up to speed on the intimate details. Nick wasn’t totally convinced, although if she took him up on his offer, they would have a long flight he could use to brief her.

He had been seriously considering everything Luc had said, until he’d seen her all dressed up. Then again, they were at a wedding and everyone dressed differently attending special occasions. No one glammed up to the same extreme in their day-to-day life. He may wear a suit every day, but he only ever wore a tux at formal events and Lodge . Although he hadn’t been to many meetings in the last few years—business had been his priority. Perhaps it was time to get back into it. Luc seemed to be happy attending meetings again and being with Cole and the others.

He let thoughts of talking to Pamela about seeing if she was interested in becoming his assistant flow through his mind while he stood beside her for the photos. With every passing minute of their bodies being in close proximity to each other,

his vibrated incessantly with the need to claim her and make her his. To own her and never let anyone near her again.

He would fight the urge, though. Fight it with everything he possessed. His mind would be stronger than the urges of his body.



PAM WATCHED as Luciano and Jasmine swayed to a romantic ballad. She knew when the song finished she and Nick would be invited to join the happy couple on the dance floor. She couldn't avoid the custom of the bridal party joining the bride and groom, no matter how much she wanted to. She'd managed to keep her distance from Nick ever since the photo session ended. Her body pulsed with electricity whenever he'd touched her. Sitting next to him through dinner had been torture. The man was seriously gorgeous and he wore his tux as if he had been born in it. He exuded confidence and wealth, and was so far out of her stratosphere it wasn't funny. Nice to have a dream, though, that maybe one day someone like Nick might be interested in her.

“Are you ready?”

The words were whispered close to her ear and her senses fired to life like fireworks going off on New Year's Eve. She was twenty-eight and she'd never felt like this. Even when she'd been seeing Wayne, and he had been the man she'd almost given her virginity to. Wayne had dumped her when he'd finally grasped that instead of being a wealthy woman on her mother's death, in all likelihood Pam would be struggling to make ends meet, which was how it had turned out. After the hurt had subsided, she'd been glad she hadn't slept with him. Especially when she'd heard, through friends, he'd been sleeping around on her and bragging that she was going to be his meal ticket and he'd put up with her boring personality and plain looks.

It wasn't like she'd been saving her virginity for any special reason. Life had happened and she'd decided she

needed to lose it before she turned thirty. Nothing worse than being thirty and still a virgin. She thought Wayne could be the one, because when he kissed her she'd felt more excited than she had with any of the other men who had kissed her. Not that she could call being kissed by five guys a lot of experience. She hadn't had too many opportunities to date through school because her mother had disapproved of it, had threatened to kick her out if she let a boy influence her. She hadn't wanted Pam getting distracted from her studies by boys who were after only one thing. Her mother kept drumming it into her until the thought of dating, and the consequences she could face, scared her more than it did her mother. When she'd started working she'd gone on the occasional date, but they'd never developed into anything serious. Always, in the back of her mind, she remembered her mother's bitterness toward men and her warnings to never become a slave to a man's needs. Her mother tarred all men with the same brush as her father, who'd run off with a waitress from a gentlemen's club when Pam had only been thirteen.

She thought she could move out and start her own life when she'd turned twenty-three. Still her mum seemed to control Pam's life. Mum had gotten sick, and life had become all about work and taking care of her ailing mother. Now her mum had gone and she potentially had no job, because with Jasmine leaving she felt she had no other option but to resign.

Did she really fit into the glamour of Morelli Corporation? The only reason she'd been accepted was because of Jasmine. She really shouldn't resign, not when she had debt collectors banging on her door every week chasing payment for her mum's medical expenses. Did they have no sympathy? Why couldn't they give her a little time to sort out all her finances? She had plans to pay them — eventually. But what choice did she have?

Yes, she really was doing a great job with her life right now.

“Pam?”

Nick's voice again pulled her from her thoughts. She'd been sitting there pondering the mess her life was, and Nick

had been standing beside her waiting for a response. He must think her so vague.

She summoned up a smile and took the hand he held out. “Yep, let’s do this.”

Pam couldn’t describe what it felt like to be held in Nick’s arms. It was like Christmas and her birthday all wrapped into one. His hand warmed the bare flesh of her back. His other hand held hers loosely, and all she wanted to do was lay her head on the solid strength of his chest. She wanted his arms to pull her close so his heat and strength enveloped her. She wanted Nick to kiss her.

The thought of his lips taking possession of hers had her heart rate increasing and she stumbled. Nick tightened his hold and pulled her closer, just as she’d wished only seconds ago.

“Are you okay?” he murmured against her hair.

Words were impossible so she just nodded. All too soon the music merged into another song; instead of letting her go, Nick still held her. They danced a couple more songs together. Words weren’t spoken between them. A silence enveloped them in its sweet embrace. To Pam it didn’t feel awkward at all — it felt nice.

‘do you want to get some fresh air?’

The question came out of the blue, and Pam leaned back to look up into Nick’s eyes. They were like pools of melted chocolate, a chocolate so tempting she felt she could dip into it and taste the sweetness.

‘sure.’

Nick fingers entwined with hers and together they made their way through the crowd, toward a side door. He held the door open and she walked out ahead of him. The night had cooled; she shivered, wishing she’d thought to swing by the table and pick up her wrap. She heard the soft rustle of fabric, and in the next instant warmth cloaked her as Nick wrapped his jacket around her shoulders. She snuggled into the satin lining. The spicy scent of his aftershave floated up and

surrounded her. She could stand shrouded in his jacket all night.

‘thank you.’

He inclined his head and gripped the top railing of the decorative wrought-iron fence surrounding the balcony.

They stood like that for a few minutes; this silence wasn't as comfortable as the silence that had encased them when they'd been dancing. Pam opened her mouth to say she needed to get inside, when Nick spoke.

“I've got a proposition for you.”

It was the last thing she expected to hear from him and she didn't know what he meant. Did he want to see her again? Did he want to sleep with her? She almost laughed out loud at the thought. No way he would ever want that to happen. She was pretty sure she wasn't his type at all. “What sort of proposition?”

She could hear the uncertainty in her own voice. She hated sounding like a naïve idiot. Why couldn't she be confident and coquettish and bat her eyelids at him? Say something flirtatious like, *Whatever you're proposing, the answer is yes.* But she wasn't like that. She didn't have the confidence to carry off something so forward.

“I know you're looking for a job. You alluded to that earlier, after the ceremony.”

A little part of her started to cry on the inside. It shouldn't have come as a surprise he wouldn't want to see her after the wedding, or even kiss her or take her to bed. No doubt he knew beneath the gloss of the hair and make-up and beautiful dress lurked ordinary, reliable Pamela, called on by everyone when they had a problem to be solved.

“Yes, that's true. What's it to you?”

Wow, she shocked herself with her bitchy comeback. She put it down to the disappointment slowly building inside of her. In the muted glow of the balcony, she couldn't tell whether her response surprised him or not.

“Well, I happen to be in need of an assistant and wondered if you may be interested, but now I’m not so sure.”

He wanted her to be his assistant? The man who was Luciano’s business partner wanted her to work for him. She so didn’t see that one coming. And she knew the reason for his reluctance in offering her the job was because of what she’d said to him. It was probably just a pity offer anyway, but it wouldn’t hurt to find out a little more about it. She knew he’d flown in from overseas just for the wedding; perhaps there could be travel involved, that would definitely enable her to tick off one of the boxes on her new life to-do list.

Pam knew before she could ask about the specifics of the job, she needed to apologize for her outburst.

“I’m sorry, Nick, I shouldn’t have spoken to you the way I did. Put it down to still being stressed about organizing the wedding and making sure it all runs smoothly. But if I can go back and answer your original question again, the answer would be — yes I am going to be in the market for a new job. Do you know of one that’s available?”

Pleasure quickly replaced her disappointment when Nick laughed and lightly touched her arm. “Now, that is a better response, and I accept your apology.”

‘thank you. So you need an assistant, what will the job entail?’

Pam wasn’t sure she was suitably qualified for the position. Yes, she’d been Jasmine’s assistant, but Jasmine had been the Director of Marketing. Nick’s assistant would be required to do a hell of a lot more than her previous job had involved.

“You’ll be required to do the usual things like vet emails and calls, deal with responses to invites, organize my day so that it runs smoothly, attend meetings, take notes, etc. But what I’m really after is someone who can keep her focus entirely on the job and not get distracted by me.”

She took a step back. What the heck did he mean by that comment? Had he just insulted her, subtly? Or was it a

warning of some sort?

“I’m sorry, but what do you mean by “get distracted by me”?”

Pam watched in amazement as Nick seemed to squirm, almost embarrassed by her question and what he’d said to her. She had to be imagining it. No way could this man, who had confidence oozing out of him, be embarrassed.

“I’ve had to fire the last two assistants I’ve had because they had grand ideas about falling in love with me. The last one used her position to try and entice me to fall for her, and when I wouldn’t take the bait, she gave highly confidential information to a person who used it to their advantage. Her desire to ‘make me pay’ for not seducing her has led to the untenable situation I’m currently in with our latest deal. I feel confident you won’t get any ideas of trying to lure me into the marriage trap. A trap I have no intention of falling into anyway, which is why I think you’d be perfect for the job. You dress the part of an assistant and have a quiet efficiency about you, which suggests your focus is definitely on the job and not on your love-life.”

Yep, definitely an insult.

Right on the heels of remembering her failed relationship with Wayne. Nick’s words stung, and they weren’t meant as a boost to her self-confidence. He made her sound like the most boring person on earth, and she’d had enough of their conversation. Not on her life would she work for a man who had such a big ego.

She slipped off the coat he’d given her and held it out toward him. ‘thanks, but I don’t think I want to work for someone who thinks all I can bring to a job is efficiency because I’m a plain Jane and dress conservatively. Tell me, Mr. Nick Rhodes, did all your other assistants dress the part and look efficient, or did they all wear designer clothes with designer haircuts that cost more than a week’s pay?’ She paused a moment to catch her breath. She was on a roll and she wasn’t planning on stopping, even if it meant she’d just killed her hopes of ever getting a job again. At this moment in

time she didn't care if she had to be a shelf stuffer at the local supermarket. "I don't imagine a person in your position wants an unattractive, boring assistant, but you've just basically told me that's what I am and that's the only reason you're offering me the job."

Mortification swept over her, her vision blurred by the tears welling up in her eyes. She wasn't going to let Nick see them, so she whirled around and all but ran through the doors. Once she got inside the ballroom, she stopped and took a moment to catch her breath, willing the tears not to fall. She needed to get to a bathroom quickly.

Pam headed in the direction she needed to go with her head down, not wanting anyone to see her. One tear slid down her cheek and she swiped at it, as if it was an annoying fly. If only she could swipe away the hurt that easily. She'd known she wasn't attractive, but today she'd felt beautiful and Nick had crushed it with a few simple words.

Pam was reaching out to open the door when someone grabbed her arm and turned her around so quickly she gave a little yelp in surprise. She found herself wrapped up against a warm, hard chest. A chest she recognized because she'd wanted to lay her head on it earlier.

"Wha — "

"I'm sorry."

Pam pulled back a bit so she could lift her head and look into Nick's face. "Pardon?"

"What I said to you was unforgiveable. I don't think you're plain at all. You look absolutely stunning today."

For a moment there she thought Nick was on the right track, and then he had to say she looked stunning — today. Of course she looked stunning today, she'd had professionals work on her hair and make-up and had on a designer dress. Anyone would look stunning after that treatment. If he'd just told her he thought she was beautiful then she'd probably believe he truly meant his apology.

“Yes, today I look stunning. I had help, but you know what? It doesn’t matter what you think. I won’t work for you, Nick.”

She made a move to step out of his embrace, but instead of loosening his hold, Nick tightened it.

Pam’s breath caught in her throat as he reached out and caught the tear that had fallen from her eye.

‘don’t cry,’ he said on a whisper, as he leaned forward and kissed the spot where he caught the tear. Her skin tingled and the hair on her arms stood to attention. “I don’t usually make women cry.” He peppered each word with a kiss down her cheek until the last one landed on the side of her mouth.

She froze, unsure what was going to happen next. She could turn her head a fraction and their lips would collide. She’d already decided she wasn’t going to work for him. What would it matter if she gave into the little part of her that wanted to know what he tasted like? The little part of her that wanted to know what it would be like to be kissed by a wealthy, gorgeous man. The little part of her that wanted to know what it felt like to be desired.

“Nick?” She whispered his name and he knew exactly what she was asking for. He moved the millimeters needed and melded her lips with his.

His touch was gentle, testing the waters to see if she would pull back and slap him for being forward. She wasn’t going to do that. She wanted this kiss. She’d asked him for it. She pushed her breasts against his chest and his arms tightened their hold on her. His lips moved over hers, enticing hers to open beneath his. She did. As his tongue slipped between her teeth, Pam wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers entwining into his hair to keep him from moving away from her.

Her nipples peaked against her dress and she wanted Nick’s hand to move from her back and cup them. Feel the fullness of her breast and tease her nipple until she was crying out in desire. His body stirring to life against her belly gave her the power to get up on her tiptoes to deepen the kiss even

further. Everything she did, every action, was purely on instinct, not experience. Feelings were overtaking her sensibilities.

“Oh, get a room, you two.”

The words were spoken behind them but it was enough for Pam to remember where they were and what a spectacle they were making of themselves.

“I’m sorry, that shouldn’t have happened.” Nick’s muttered words had the effect of a bucket of water being thrown over her. Pam pulled out of his arms and smoothed down her dress. She heard a muffled groan coming from him. She looked up and found his eyes focused on her chest. She looked down and her nipples were standing proudly against the silky fabric. Pam cursed the soft material and the fact she couldn’t wear a bra underneath the halter gown.

“You don’t have to apologize, Nick. I was with you every step of the way.”

‘still, if I want you to work for me, I shouldn’t be kissing you.’”

He still wanted her to work for him? After everything she’d said and done? It didn’t seem possible.

“You’re still offering me the job, even though I said wouldn’t work for you?”

“Yes,” he ran his fingers through his hair. She knew how soft it was to touch. “I’ve spoken to both Luc and Jasmine, they both say you’re a fantastic assistant. Neither wants you to resign. I need someone I can trust to help me get this deal, which is falling apart as we speak, back on track. I think you’re the person who can help me achieve that.”

Pam should feel honoured that both Luc and Jasmine thought so highly of her. But part of her still held back, and she didn’t know why.”

“You don’t even know me. Why are you so sure I can be the one to help you?”

“I saw what you achieved last night. I walked into the rehearsal dinner and all I saw was chaos. There seemed to be something going on, I don’t know what, but there was anxiety in the air. When we sat down for dinner, not ten minutes after I arrived, the room was calm and peaceful. And today this wedding has gone off without a hiccup, which, from my understanding of weddings, is amazing. Jasmine is so calm and serene, enjoying her day the way a bride should. All because of you and your organizational skills. You’ve managed to keep this wedding on track without even getting a hair out of place, and you’ve managed to keep up with your maid of honour duties too. I’m seriously impressed.”

So was Pam, that Nick had noticed everything he’d mentioned. She also felt pride swell up inside her. It’d been her goal to make sure that happened for Jasmine. If he’d told her all of those things outside on the balcony, then she would’ve jumped on the job straight away.

But you wouldn’t have experienced his kiss if he had, a little voice inside of her insisted. It didn’t matter what that voice said, there was no way they were going to kiss again.

‘thank you, Nick, that means a lot. I’m blown over you think me competent enough to do the job. But there’s still so much going on here. Can I think about it, overnight?’

‘sure, that would be fine. Do you want to meet for breakfast here tomorrow morning?’

Seeing as she was staying at the hotel, courtesy of Jasmine, it seemed like a good idea.

“Yep, that will be fine. What time do you want to meet?”

‘say about eight thirty? I’m flying back to New York the day after tomorrow, so I would like this sorted out before I go.’

“New York? Does that mean if I took the job I’d be going to New York?” The prospect of seeing a place she’d heard so many people rave about was too good to be true.

“Will it sway your decision if I said yes?” Nick asked a teasing glint shining in his eyes.

“It may.” Pam surreptitiously pinched herself. She couldn’t believe they were having this conversation in front of the ladies room.

‘then, yes it is. The job with me is in New York, currently. After this deal is completed, who knows where I’ll be headed. I could be headed back to Sydney or back here in Perth and the head office, or I may have to go to Europe. Depends what deal Luc wants me to work on next.’”

The job was becoming more and more tempting with every word Nick uttered. She’d wanted to travel the world, experience new places, but had lacked the freedom and the funds to do so. Now she had one, and the other looked like being a perk of the job. It really was too good to be true. Plus being on the other side of the world would give her the necessary breathing space she needed to sort her finances out, and hopefully keep the debt collectors at bay.

However, she didn’t want to get too ahead of herself. They still had a lot of things to work out. Come tomorrow morning, Nick might have had a change of heart and not want to proceed with the offer. It would probably be best if she finished up the conversation before she blurted out she’d take the job and forget the consequences.

“Okay, as I said, let me sleep on it and we can talk about things in the morning. I still have a lot of things to think about.”

Nick nodded. ‘sounds good. Oh, one more thing,’ he paused and she wondered what he had to say next. “It’s about the kiss we shared.”

She wanted to say, *what about the most amazing kiss I’ve ever experienced in my life*, but somehow knew that wasn’t the direction he was heading. “Yes, what about it?”

She hoped she sounded casual.

“It can’t happen again. If you’re going to be my assistant, we draw a line in the sand, forget everything that has happened before and start fresh.”

Was he saying that he regretted the kiss? She had too much pride to ask. He couldn't take the kiss back. He may think by drawing a metaphorical line the kiss could be forgotten, but she knew it had happened. It would always be there between them. But she also knew if she wanted the job, and quite frankly she did, then she would have to agree with him.

“Yes. I can work with that.”

“Good. Well, I'll see you back in the ballroom. I think there's still cake to be cut?”

She laughed and nodded. “Yes, I'll see you back there.”

As he turned and walked away, Pamela wondered if he would look back and if he did, would it mean something, like everyone talked about in the movies. How if a guy looked back as he walked away, it meant he wanted her.

Her breath caught when Nick looked back over his shoulder and winked.

Chapter Two



PAMELA LOOKED AT HERSELF IN THE MIRROR WEARING HER plain black trousers and sensible white blouse. They were perfectly suitable clothes for the office; understated, efficient and boring. They would work for the breakfast meeting she had with Nick, but she wished she had a sexy little dress. The type of dress some of the girls in the office wore. Wraparound dresses which accentuated the body, but were still demure enough to be worn in a professional capacity.

She sighed and pinned her hair back with a boring black clip. She recognized the girl in the mirror. It was the girl she'd always seen. But after yesterday, experiencing what it felt like to be all dressed up and looking beautiful, she wanted to be that girl again.

The room phone ringing pulled her attention from the mirror and walked over to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Good morning, Pam, I hope you slept well?”

Pam gripped the phone a bit tighter, her heart beating a little faster as it recognized the voice on the other end of the phone.

“Hi Nick, I slept well, how about you?”

Such a mundane conversation they were sharing, so domesticated and a little surreal.

“I slept fine. I wanted to let you know I’ve got to make a quick call before I can meet you. I didn’t want to let you get down there and think I’d forgotten we had arranged to meet up.”

“Oh, okay, no problems. Do you want to change the time?”

Pam was crossing her fingers in hope he would agree and she’d have time to run down to the hotel boutique, to see if they had something a little more fashionable for her to wear.

“No, it’s fine, you go down and order and I’ll get there as quickly as I can.”

“Right, I’ll see you then. Bye.”

She hung up the phone on the sound of Nick saying goodbye to her. She shouldn’t feel disappointed there was no time to go down to the hotel boutique. What was she trying to prove anyway? The way she was dressed today was who she was. She was discreet, reliable Pamela Bishop. The girl no one ever saw in the office. The girl who went about her duties, each day, in a quiet and efficient manner. The girl who caused no ripples or disruption to the mechanics of how the office operated.

She laughed when she realized she’d pretty much echoed the same words Nick had said about her last night. They were true and, up until yesterday, she had always been proud of her achievements and how she conducted herself in her professional life. Why, all of a sudden, was she finding herself lacking? Why was she feeling so out of place in the corporate world?

Pam pulled herself out of her funk. It was probably the let-down from the buzz of organizing the wedding. It had been exciting to go over the plans with Jasmine. To hear the way she spoke about Luciano, love infusing each and every word. She wanted that type of love in her life, and maybe taking off to the other side of the world could be one way to achieve the dream. Perhaps her knight in shining armour was waiting for her in New York right now. Biding his time until they met. Perhaps her new and exciting future was about to begin.



NICK FINISHED up his call and put some papers into a folder. He was anxious to get back to New York and sort out the mess he'd left behind. He was picking up some of the pieces here and sorting them out. Once he got back on the ground in his office, everything would go back to normal.

As he made his way down to meet Pam, he tried not to let his mind wander to how it had felt to hold her in his arms. The way her lips had tasted sweet under his, a combination of champagne and strawberries from the dessert.

He felt his body stir to life again and he forced himself to remember what had happened to his family when his father had gotten involved with his assistant. He wouldn't let that happen again. Last night was one of those odd nights. When the romance of the evening had somehow gotten under his skin. He wasn't romantic. He wasn't the type to let his emotions get the better of him.

Nick paused at the entry to the hotel's restaurant, trying to locate Pam. He felt calmer when he spotted her sitting at a table next to the window, which looked out over the hotel's indoor garden.

He breathed easier and a little portion of the tension taking up residence in his shoulders eased when he saw Pam wearing her no-nonsense clothes. He'd been stunned yesterday by how beautiful she'd looked in comparison to the rehearsal dinner. Today she still looked lovely, but efficient and capable. The traits he was looking for in an assistant. Seeing her sitting at the table waiting, he knew Luc had been right. Pam was going to be the perfect assistant for him, and he wouldn't have to worry about her falling for him. Nor would he be reminded of the kiss they'd shared. Or how good it had felt to hold her in his arms. The way his body responded to the scent of her. His reaction to her yesterday had been an aberration. If she maintained the look she was sporting today, there was no way he'd compromise his beliefs. As his assistant, she would be untouchable.

He weaved through the tables and put a smile on his face as he approached her.

‘sorry to keep you waiting.’

His smile widened a little bit when he saw her jump a little. He wondered what she’d been thinking so deeply about.

“No, it’s fine, I haven’t been here long. Did you sort everything out with your call?”

Straight to business, he liked that. Nick placed the folder on the corner of the table and took the seat opposite her. As he spread the napkin out over his lap, he scrutinised Pam. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. At the rehearsal dinner, there had not been a strand out of place, now some wisps fell softly around her cheeks. and over her forehead. She’d definitely had a style change for the wedding. But a haircut was only a haircut. He knew it wouldn’t change how she worked in the office.

‘do I pass your inspection, and is this something I’ll have to deal with every day if I do decide to take you up on your offer?’

“You’ve had a haircut.”

He could see he’d surprised her; he had surprised himself. What the hell was the matter with him? He was always all about business and he needed to get his focus back on why he was sitting at a table opposite Pam.

He needed someone who wouldn’t cause any problems. Or do something stupid like fall in love with him.

Nick cleared his throat and straightened in his chair. “Let’s order. While we’re waiting for the food to arrive, I’ll tell you exactly what I need, want and expect from my assistant.”

‘sure.’

Once he had her agreement, he picked his menu up and looked over the contents. Whatever had come over him in the last day and half could only be put down to stress. There was no other explanation. When he was back in New York everything would make sense again.

The waiter arrived and they placed their order for food and coffee. As he left, Nick picked up the folder beside him. He handed it over to Pam.

“Here is a preliminary work contract. It outlines the position, your salary and what my expectations are. There’s the standard three-month probationary period clause in it. In addition, I’ve added another clause that states if, for some reason, either one of us feels this arrangement is not working out, either party can give one week’s notice. I think you’ll find all the benefits to be quite generous.”

“If I take this position, how long will I be away for?”

“As I said last night, how long I need to be in New York for is up in the air; it could be two months, it could be two weeks. The length of time we’re there is determined by how quickly we get the deal sorted out. Then it depends on what else we have in the pipeline. The longest I’m in one place is usually three months. Will this be an issue?”

Her throat moved up and down, like she had something stuck. Was going to decline? He hoped not. The more time he spent with her, the more he thought she would be a perfect assistant.

“I’m not sure,” she said finally.

That he could work with. He negotiated million dollar deals. He could get rid of any worries she had.

“Look, check out the contents of the contract and we can discuss any concerns you may have.”

He gave her some time to look over the papers he’d handed her. He tried not to drum his fingers on the table. He wanted her to agree so he could make arrangements to see if he could get the pilot of the company jet to submit a flight plan so they could start their journey that evening, instead of the next day.

“When were you thinking of leaving?” Pam asked, and he wondered if she had been able to read his mind.

The waiter arrived with their food, halting conversation. After they’d both started their meals, Nick answered her

question.

“If you agree with what’s in the contract, and seeing as you don’t have to give any notice, as this will be a straight reassignment, my plan is to leave this evening.”

Her eyes widened at his response. ‘that’s impossible.’”

“What do you mean it’s impossible? I have a deal I need to salvage. I took valuable negotiating time out to come to the wedding and I — “

‘the wedding of your best friend, from what I understand. I wouldn’t have thought it would’ve been a hardship,’” she interrupted him coolly.

Nick sighed. “No, it wasn’t, and I’m really happy for Luc and wish him a long and happy marriage. I hope he has better luck than my parents. But business is business and if this deal falls through then it will cost the corporation a lot of money, and I for one don’t want that to happen.”

“As much as I would love to take you up on the job, I’m afraid I’m going to have to decline. It’s impossible for me to get everything sorted out with my house to leave by this afternoon.”

‘so you want the job?’”

“Well, yes, it sounds like a wonderful challenge and the opportunity to travel is something I would love to experience,” she paused and he saw the hesitation again. “But if I could have a week to get things sorted then I would accept right this minute.”

“I don’t have a week to give you.

‘then I guess this is over. I’m sorry, Nick. It would’ve been great to work with you.’”

She went to stand, but Nick wasn’t one to give up easily. He reached across and placed his hand on hers, ignoring the heat shooting up his arm. ‘do you have a passport?’”

Pam nodded. Her eyes clouded in confusion. “Yes, I got one last year. But what has that got to do with anything? I still can’t accept the job.”

‘the main issue with you not taking the job has to do with your house, am I correct?’

“Yes, I have a mortgage to pay, I have things to see to.”

“Rent it out.”

“Renting out my house would be great, but I can’t sort it out in a few hours. I have to interview real estate agents. Not to mention pack up my house. I’m sorry, Nick, but I really am going to have to decline.”

It didn’t matter how much she argued. He wanted Pam as his assistant, and he was going to have her. He knew, without a doubt, that with Pam by his side the deal would be completed and he would have his office running more efficiently than it ever had. He would be the envy of everyone he came in contact with. He would do whatever it took to get her agreement. He had contacts in real estate and he knew every single one of them would bend over backwards to give him what he wanted.

“I’m not taking no for answer.”

“I’m sorry?” Pam questioned. “I don’t believe you have any say in how I run my life.”

“I know you want this job and I know you’ll be good at it. That’s the end of the conversation. I’ll have a car come and pick you up at four this afternoon. I’m pretty sure we can get a departure time around five or six to start our trip to New York.”

“I don’t think you’ve heard a word of what I’ve been saying. *If*, and at this moment it’s a huge if, I do take this job, I have a house to pack up, things to move into storage, a real estate agent to contact to make the necessary arrangements to rent my house out. I can’t do all of that in a few hours. I’m not even sure I could accomplish it all in a week.”

“Let me take care of everything,” Nick said, as he stood and flicked back the cuff of his jacket so he could look at his watch. “I have to make another call, but before I do let’s sign this contract.”

Nick pulled the folder toward him and signed his name at the bottom of the last page. He turned it around and held the pen out to Pam. She crossed her arms, refusing to take it from him.

“I don’t have all day. You know you want to sign. I promise you everything will be taken care of. You just need to go home and pack up everything you want to bring. Don’t forget you’re going to the mecca of shopping. You can buy anything you need there.”

Still she refused to take the pen from him. His patience was wearing thin. He was going to bend over backwards to get everything sorted out for her. The least she could do was sign on the dotted line.

“Am I going to have any say at all in what happens to my house, or are you going to bulldoze me into agreeing with you?”

“No, I will speak to the necessary people and then you can leave detailed instructions with them.” He looked at his watch again, hoping Pam would take the hint time was being wasted. “I’m trying to help you. Make things easier as I know this is a big move for you.”

“Fine, but don’t think you can walk all over me all the time in New York, Nick. Or I will catch the first flight back, without giving you any notice. I will be your assistant and I deserve to be respected as such.”

He almost smiled at her outburst. Satisfaction filled him when she took the pen from him and signed her name.

Once she handed the pen back to him, he capped it and put it in his pocket. He collected the folder and pulled out her chair for her.

“I’ll see you this afternoon. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got calls to make.”

With a nod, he slipped the folder under his arm and walked out of the restaurant. Like all negotiations he’d handled in the past, this one with Pam was no different. At the end of the day

he always got what he wanted. He'd wanted Pam and now he had her.



PAM SNAPPED the lid shut on her second suitcase and glanced around her bedroom. The top of her chest of drawers was bare, as were the shelves where she'd had some photos and other knick-knacks on display. She'd packed them up in the boxes herself, even taking a few wrapped in clothes so she had a little piece of home with her on the other side of the world.

A knock sounded at her door.

“Yes?”

The door opened a crack and one of the movers poked his head around the door. ‘miss Bishop, there’s a car here for you.’”

“Right, thank you. Tell the driver I’ll be right out.” She was surprised her voice didn’t break with the nerves assailing her. Butterflies sped to life in her belly. The moment had arrived. She’d been hoping Nick would call and tell her he hadn’t been able to get a departure time for the evening and they would be leaving the next day. Her phone rang, but it wasn’t Nick. The only calls she had received were from the people Nick had contacted to pack up her house and the real estate agent who was going to find tenants for her.

‘sure, Miss Bishop.’”

She glanced around her room once more, making sure she hadn’t missed anything, had packed all she wanted and needed. She’d left instructions with the packers that the clothes left in her wardrobe were to go to goodwill. Nick had a point, the shopping would be amazing in New York and she could buy some clothes there.

Pam opened her handbag and confirmed her passport was safely tucked inside. It was. There was nothing else left to do but pick up her cases and leave. But her feet seemed to be

glued to the ground. Afraid to move because she had no idea what was going to be waiting for her beyond her closed door.

At that moment, it was flung open. She whirled in surprise. Nick stood in the doorway, and he looked far from impressed.

“Are you coming? I don’t want to miss our scheduled departure slot.”

His words were clipped and annoyance radiated out toward her. Second thoughts about working with him filled her. She wasn’t sure she wanted to work with a man who bit her head off at every opportunity. Not to mention the attitude changes he seemed to have every time she saw him.

Pam straightened her spine and met his thunderous glare head on. Yesterday his eyes had looked like melted chocolate; today they looked hard and impenetrable, like slabs of dark granite.

“I was making sure I had everything. I didn’t want to get to the airport and find that I’d left my passport here.” She picked up her backpack and slung the strap over her shoulder, and grabbed the handle of the small duffel she was using as her carry-on.

She headed toward the door. Once she got there, she paused. “Be a darling and carry my bags out to the car.”

She didn’t wait for an answer, just headed down the hallway toward her front door. She passed her living room and glanced in. All her furniture was covered in plastic, ready to be moved out and put in storage. It was really happening. She’d made a huge life-changing decision only hours ago. The day had a dreamlike quality to it.

As she walked out of the house, she didn’t look back; if she looked back she knew she’d probably cry. She kept her eyes forward, trained on the black car purring on the side of the road. A new future awaited her the moment she stepped into it. A new future full of a million possibilities. A new future, where she had the opportunity to change her destiny.

Chapter Three



PAM CHECKED HER SEATBELT WAS FASTENED AND SAT BACK against the soft leather of her seat. When Nick had mentioned a departure time, she'd naïvely assumed that was executive talk for a normal flight on a commercial airliner. She had been so wrong. She looked around the private jet and wondered if she'd stepped into an alternate reality.

Two days ago she'd been running around making last minute arrangements for a rehearsal dinner, all the while thinking about maybe having to find a new job. Never in her wildest imaginings would she have thought two days later she'd be sitting in a private jet waiting to go to New York.

"We'll be taking off soon, do you want a drink before we leave?" Nick asked as he took the seat beside her. She hoped he wasn't going to sit there the whole flight. She wasn't sure she would be able to deal with his close proximity.

"No, I'm good. You don't have to sit next to me. I'll be fine. I mean who wouldn't be? These seats are amazing. More like lounge chairs than the upright, sparsely padded, uncomfortable chairs you find on most standard planes."

Pam shut her mouth quickly. She was rambling like a girl who'd just come off the farm.

"Luc always likes to feel comfortable when he flies. Although he won't be doing much now he's about to become a father. He'll be leaving that up to me." He pointed to the door at the end of the cabin. "there is a bathroom and bedroom if

you want to sleep. We have a long flight and we'll have to make a couple of stops to refuel.”

“How safe is it sleeping on a bed? What if the plane hits a patch of turbulence?” As much as the thought of spreading out and getting some decent sleep on a long flight appealed to Pam, the thought of being tossed around, like a leaf on a strong breeze, getting injured, had her disregarding the idea of using the bed.

Nick laughed. “I’ve done it many times and haven’t had any issues.”

‘there’s always a first time, and knowing my luck it will happen to me.’”

Pam tried not to imagine Nick sleeping naked between the sheets. If things were different and she had a chance with the guy, she could achieve two milestones. Join the mile-high club and lose her virginity. That fantasy was never going to happen. Not with Nick anyway.

She sighed and reached for her tablet she’d stuffed in her purse. It could keep her occupied for an over twenty-four-hour flight, but she didn’t want to read or play games the whole time. A slick jet like the one they were in was bound to have movies she could watch and inevitably she’d sleep.

She stopped herself from squirming at the thought of Nick watching her sleep. It was unnerving to think he may watch her. She could always return the favor, she supposed. Would he even sleep? He’d have to. There would be no possible way he could go the whole flight without sleeping. Would he go into the bedroom?

The engines whirring up to full speed stole her attention from the thoughts of Nick and bed. She pulled on her seatbelt again to make sure it was tight and secure. She closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. She wasn’t normally a nervous flyer, then again, she’d only ever been on two planes and they were your normal, domestic-sized carrier, not on a plane one third of the size.

“You’re not afraid of flying, are you?” Nick asked, as his warm hand engulfed the one that was gripping her armrests.

“Not normally, but this is the first time I’ve been on a jet this size, so it is a little nerve-racking. I’m sure I’ll be fine once we get in the air.”

“I can assure you Luc prides himself on having the best of everything, including the maintenance of this plane. The pilot is one of the best. You’re extremely safe. You have heard it’s more dangerous to cross the street than it is to fly?”

Pam laughed, like she was supposed to, and a little of the tension that had taken up residence in her shoulders eased slightly. “I had heard that.”

She didn’t say anything else, just gazed out the window as they made their way down the runway in preparation for lift-off.

Nerves of a different kind assailed her. She was about to embark on a job where she was expected to look and dress the part. She cringed when she thought about the serviceable clothes she had in her suitcase. When she had been working for Jasmine they’d seemed fine. But now she was working for a high-powered executive. A billionaire, and her off-the-rack suits would make her stick out like a sore thumb. She wondered if there might be time before their first appointment for her to visit a shop and buy something. Maybe the hotel they were staying at had a boutique.

The plane taxied down the runway, gathering speed as if running from demons. Pam tried to let her concerns stay behind. It didn’t matter what she looked like or how she dressed, she was there to help Nick. She would push aside the secret part of her that wanted him to find her attractive. She couldn’t let that thought take root and spread through her. If she did, she’d be like every other assistant he’d had, thinking herself in love with him and ending up being fired. She wasn’t going to waste this opportunity. Besides, the chances of Nick finding her sexy enough to take her to bed were slim to none. He had probably already forgotten about the kiss they’d shared at the wedding. If only she could. His kiss had been amazing.

It was highly unlikely that he had been affected by it as much as she had. To him it would've been just another embrace.

As the plane rose in the air, Pam let her eyes close and she made one wish — that while on this adventure she would finally experience what it was like to lose herself in a man's arms.



NICK RUBBED his eyes as the figures on the sheet of paper in front of him started to blur. He moved his head from side to side, then up and down, feeling the neck muscles crack as they loosened themselves after being locked in one position for so long.

Out the corner of his eye, he noticed Pam curled up in her seat; she looked as uncomfortable as he felt.

Nick collected up the papers and stuffed them back into his briefcase. Undoing his seatbelt, he stood and placed the case on the chair opposite his seat. He made his way to the front of the plane where the pilots were.

“Hi Darryl, how much longer before we have to stop to refuel?”

“About another six hours, Mr. Rhodes.”

That was enough time for him to get some sleep and then to get back into work. “Will we be flying into some bad weather or does everything look smooth?”

“the radar shows that everything looks pretty clear, but you can never tell. Are you thinking of sleeping?”

This was the reason he'd never been jolted out of the bed by bad weather — he always informed the pilot, and if they knew they were flying into any bad weather they would wake him.

“Yes.”

The pilot nodded. “If we see anything we'll let you know.”

‘thanks.’

Nick turned and walked back to the main cabin, stopping beside Pam as she slept. He couldn't let her continue to sleep the way she was. She would only wake up even more tired than if she had no sleep at all. He needed her ready to go when they arrived. It wouldn't be helpful to have an assistant who fell asleep at their first meeting.

He reached over and gently undid her seatbelt. She stirred but didn't wake. He removed her shoes, tucking them into a side pocket, before gently scooping her up in his arms. She was soft and pliant from sleeping. His body automatically responded to having Pam in his arms again. Strands of her hair tickled his nose; sniffing, he caught the light scent of oranges. The desire to keep her in his arms took him by surprise.

This was no good. He needed to move. Nick made himself think of the frigid air on the outside of the plane, instead of Pam and what his body wanted to do with her. It didn't do anything to cool him down.

He strode down the small aisle and, with his fingertips, flicked the door handle down. He shouldered through the small gap he'd made and walked over to the bed.

He'd used the bed on numerous occasions and each time he'd been alone. This time he was going to be sharing it with his someone — his new assistant. He had to keep pounding that into his mind. She was his assistant and that was all she could ever be. No matter how sexy she looked sleeping. He'd never been tempted to do anything but deal with his work issues with any of his other assistants. He had to remember what he'd walked into that fateful afternoon, a sight no teenage boy should ever see. He shuddered as he recalled the look on his mother's face. Her eyes so empty and dull.

Nick pushed the thoughts aside. He couldn't let himself go there. It hurt too much and he was done being hurt by his past.

He placed her gently on one side of the bed. He pulled the covers back and then gently moved her so that she lay on the bottom sheet and not the covers. Once he had her settled, he unbuttoned his shirt and trousers. He hung them in the small

wardrobe and returned to the bed. Pam had curled up on her side. Though she was still fully dressed, she was looking infinitely more comfortable than she had in the chair.

Nick slipped in beside her, lying on top of the sheet that covered her and under the bed's comforter. In his mind, the barrier of the sheet was the same as a thick layer of concrete: no matter how badly he wanted to, he couldn't penetrate it to get to the treasure that lay beneath.

A yawn shook his body and the weariness he'd tried to keep at bay overcame him. He settled himself on his back and closed his eyes. His last thought was a mental reminder to wake up in a couple of hours.



PAM STIRRED and tried to work out what had woken her from her sleep. The bed beneath her was soft and didn't feel like her normal bed. There was a heat behind her and something heavy lay over her stomach. She didn't know if she was dreaming, but she felt so safe and secure that she snuggled back against the warmth. In response, the weight over her stomach tightened its hold.

It didn't feel right, yet it did. She was missing something. Something significant about the whole situation.

She pulled a hand from under the blanket and touched whatever was laying over her. When she came in contact with flesh, covered in soft hair, she pulled her hand back as if it had been burned. She opened her eyes fully and tried to take in the strange surroundings. She wasn't in her bedroom.

A knock sounded at the door.

'mr. Rhodes, we're preparing our descent so we can refuel. You need to move back to your seats.'

The body beside her, which only seconds ago had been soft and relaxed, now became tense, like a piece of unbreakable steel.

“Nick?” she whispered, as she rolled over and bit back a gasp at the sight of a bare-chested Nick. She’d known from dancing with him he was well-muscled, but seeing him without his shirt had her mouth drying out in seconds.

In a blur of movement, he flung the cover back and was up and at the small closet in the room. Her view now was of an impressive back and an even more impressive butt, clad in black boxer briefs.

“You’ll need to get up, too.” His words were clipped and cold. The warmth she’d felt while she’d been lying beside him gone.

As she moved out of bed, she saw she was still fully clothed. She looked like a rumpled mess.

Great, just great, she thought. He’s going to look as fresh as a daisy and I’m going to look like that final dandelion before it’s ripped to shreds by the first winter squall.

It was then she also remembered she had fallen asleep in her chair and now she was in the bedroom and had slept in the same bed as Nick.

“How did I get here?”

“I carried you. Let’s continue this conversation in our seats. We’ll be landing to refuel soon and then we’ll be taking off again. We should be in New York in another few hours.”

He walked out the bedroom and left her staring at the closed door. A little jolt as the plane hit a patch of rough air had her moving into action quickly. She hurried from the room and made her way back to the seat she had occupied earlier.

She noticed that Nick had taken one of the seats on the opposite side of the plane. If that wasn’t a glaring, I’m-avoiding-you gesture, she didn’t know what was.

Pam shivered as she sat back down. The seat had cooled in her absence and she missed the warmth of the bed.

‘there’s a blanket under your seat if you want it.’”

She stole a look over in Nick’s direction; he was busy reading through some papers, blatantly ignoring her.

Fine, let him be a jerk. It wasn't like she'd asked him to take her to bed. She'd been asleep when he'd carried her. She stopped her thoughts right there. She'd been carried to bed by Nick Rhodes. He had held her in his arms and she'd slept through the whole thing.

It was probably going to be the one and only time he would ever carry her and she'd missed out on the whole experience. Pam sighed and slammed the door on the thoughts. There was no point going there, nothing was ever going to come of it.

Another shiver swept over her, so she reached under her seat and pulled the blanket out. She huddled beneath it and lifted up the window shade. She had no idea where they were but the sun appeared to be setting over the horizon. The sky was a beautiful combination of reds and pinks and purples. The clouds beneath the plane were like fluffy beds of cotton wool. The scene so beautiful and tranquil. It made her aware she was such a small part of an amazing world and she was seeing something so few people got the opportunity to see, much less appreciate. Everyone was always so busy these days, they never took the time to appreciate the beauty surrounding them.

Keeping her look firmly fixed out the window, the plane slowly descended. Trees and buildings became larger the lower the plane got. Only when they'd touched down did she risk a glance at the man sitting opposite her. His eyes were locked on her and she couldn't quite read what was in their chocolaty depths. For long seconds they contemplated each other. She thought she saw something akin to longing, but with a quick lowering of his eyelids the moment was gone. When his lashes flicked back up, his eyes had returned to chips of granite.

Even with the blanket covering her, coldness seeped its way into her bones. She turned back to the window as the plane taxied to a halt. Gone was the beautiful sunset she had watched and now all she saw was blackness. She hoped it wasn't an omen of what was going to happen on the rest of the

trip. Had she made the right decision to take this job with Nick? Or had she made the biggest mistake of her life?

Chapter Four



EVEN IN HER JET-LAGGED STATE, THE BUZZ AND EXCITEMENT of actually being in New York was something Pam couldn't ignore. They were travelling in a large black SUV, but all around her were the yellow cabs synonymous with the city.

She tamped down the strong desire to press her nose against the window to take in everything. Imprint it on her brain, so when she was back in a boring job she would remember the small time in her life when she'd taken a leap of faith and worked in one of the most vibrant cities in the world.

She had to contain her excitement. She didn't want to seem gauche to the cool and sophisticated Nick Rhodes.

"Even though it's only been a few days since I was last here, the excitement of this city gets right into your soul."

Words spoken so softly, but they surprised her. She'd thought for sure this would be normal for Nick. She looked at him to see if she could decipher the meaning behind his words.

Was he mocking her because he could feel her excitement? Or was he indulging her and her fascination with being in the city?

"I'm surprised you say that."

"Really, why is that?"

Pam dragged her eyes from Nick and back out the window. They were stuck in traffic, but she hadn't expected anything less. "I would've thought after all this time and countless

visits,” she waved her hand around. “All these people and this traffic would become second nature and nothing could surprise you anymore.”

“Clearly, you don’t know me,” he replied in a clipped tone.

She almost recoiled at his words. No, she didn’t know him and the deep-freeze he’d been sending her way since they’d gotten into the car only reinforced her thoughts. He was never going to be interested in her.

There was no more conversation as the traffic started moving again. Before long, they were pulling up toward a large building. The bottom of the building held shopfronts, and she was pleased to see that some were clothing boutiques and were still open. Perhaps she would have time to get something new to wear for tomorrow. She recalled the old song about New York being the city that never slept. Hopefully that song was right and the shops would stay open long enough for her to visit.

Pam let her gaze travel up and saw that it was a mid-rise building, there was no neon light blazing with a hotel name.

“Where are we?”

‘my apartment.’”

Her hand had been on the door handle, ready to open it, but she pulled it away. What was happening here? Was he being dropped off first and then she would be taken to a hotel? If that was the case, how was she going to find her way around? Where was the office they were going to be working from?

“Your apartment? Where am I staying?” She thought she’d done a good job at leaving her panic out of her tone, but even she heard it.

“You’re staying with me.”

That didn’t alleviate her panic. It only increased it. She was going to be living with Nick? How professional was that?

“I’m staying with you?”

Her door was pulled open and she jumped slightly in surprise. It was the last thing she'd been expecting.

Nick's hand touched hers briefly, the first contact they'd had since she'd woken up beside him on the plane. He had kept his distance from her after the plane had taken off from their refuelling stop. She'd fallen asleep again in her chair and the hostess had woken her when they were approaching New York. It had been abundantly clear that Nick regretted taking her to the bedroom. But she hadn't asked him to do it, so his attitude grated.

"It will be fine, Pamela. We'll discuss everything inside. I'm sure you want to take a shower after the long flight."

He was right. They couldn't have this conversation while they were seated in the car. She stepped out and immediately noise engulfed her: horns beeping, the muted sound of people talking as they walked past and music playing from a street vendor's cart. Her first experience of New York, and it was everything and more than she had expected.

Nick's hand landed on the small of her back. Her skin hummed to life under the lightest of touches. He guided her toward the entrance of the building. The door immediately opened and a distinguished looking, uniformed doorman smiled in welcome.

"Good evening, Mr. Rhodes, and welcome back." The doorman paused and inclined his head in her direction. "miss."

His expression held no hint of surprise at seeing her standing beside Nick. She had no idea whether this was a normal occurrence — Nick bringing strange women to his home. She imagined discretion to be part of the doorman's job.

Pam nodded in return, not sure what else to do. Would Nick introduce her or not?

"Evening Rob, can you see that our bags are taken up to my apartment?"

"Certainly, sir."

No, he would not, but that didn't mean she couldn't. "Hi Rob, seeing as Mr. Rhodes here has forgotten his manners, my

name's Pamela Bishop."

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss. Bishop."

Nick nodded toward Pam with a wry smile. "Forgive me my bad manners. Thanks, Rob."

He slipped some money into the man's hands and again placed his hand on her back, guiding her through the foyer. That was one thing she'd have to ask him about. Who did she tip and how much did she tip them? It was something she wasn't used to, but Nick handled it with the ease of a man well used to the protocols.

They made their way to the elevators, past the glass shopfronts. In one of them she spied a beautiful dress. She slowed and let her eyes linger on it before following Nick to the elevators.

"How long do the shops stay open?" she asked once they entered the empty car. When she saw the disc lit up had the letter "P" on it, she bit her lip. "P" stood for penthouse. With every passing moment she spent in Nick's company, the more aware she became of the sheer wealth of the man standing behind her. It intimidated her a little.

"I'm not sure, but I think most shops stay open to around eight or nine in the evening. Why?"

"Oh, no reason." No way did she plan on letting Nick know she wanted to go shopping for clothes so she wouldn't look out of place. No way at all.

The elevator ride was over far too quickly for Pam's comfort. The doors slid open; instead of opening into a hallway, they opened into an impressive foyer, bigger than her bedroom and bathroom put together. She hesitated taking the step that would put her into an environment she'd never been in before. Nick's hand was on her back again, encouraging her to enter his home.

"do you rent this place or own it?" Somehow she knew the answer, but she wanted to hear it from him.

"It's mine. It was one of my first purchases when I made my first million. It was an absolute dump so I got it cheap. It

stayed empty until the building was remodelled. I then sunk money into it to renovate it. By then the company was doing well. I could afford to get the best of everything for it.”

His explanation should've sounded arrogant, but he was so matter-of-fact. She wondered if he had an emotional tie to the place at all or whether it was strictly an investment property.

As she looked around, Pam's mind boggled at the thought of all that money being sunk into this place. It must have cost him a fortune. Her mortgage debt was huge to her but to the likes of Nick, it would be pocket change. It reminded her, again, how far out of her league he was. In normal circumstances, no way would he possibly be interested in her. He wouldn't even give her a second glance. Even if she had a decent social life, their paths wouldn't have crossed at any social event.

What was she doing here?

The deeper she walked into the apartment the more she had to clench her jaw to stop it from dropping open. She'd never seen such luxury in her whole life. The décor had pure bachelor written all over it. There were black leather sofas placed strategically to take in the view of the city lights. The splash of color from the bright cushions in the corner of each sofa surprised her. She thought he would go for a traditional black and white feel, but as she looked around she saw more splashes of color. It gave the whole apartment a modern yet chic vibe, while still stating a bachelor lived there.

Pam mused that if she lived here she'd never want to leave. She turned and found Nick studying her with a hooded expression. She couldn't tell what was going on in his mind. It unnerved her slightly.

“Is this your permanent place of residence?” It didn't look lived in but it also didn't feel abandoned.

“Whenever I'm in New York I stay here. When I'm off travelling or know I'm going to be in Australia for a certain period of time, I do short-term executive leases. It works out well and the place gets used.” Nick strode over to the bar,

which was located in the corner of the room, and set two glasses on the gleaming wood. ‘do you want a drink?’

Somehow the thought of sharing a drink seemed too intimate, which was ridiculous since they’d slept together on the plane. What she really wanted to do was have a shower and go downstairs and see if she could have a look at the dress she’d spied. It probably wouldn’t look any good on her, but part of her wanted to try, to step out of the comfortable, boring clothes she wore. She was starting a new job in a new city, so why not start it off with a new wardrobe. She wouldn’t have to go over the top, just a couple of new pieces.

“Actually, what I’d like to do is take a shower and — “ She broke off. She shouldn’t feel so embarrassed about saying she wanted to look at the shops. “I want to check out the shop downstairs, I don’t, umm, I didn’t pack some accessories so I wanted to see if they have something.”

It sounded lame and she thought Nick would see right through her flimsy reason. Instead he raised an eyebrow, as if he didn’t expect her to be the type of girl who would be even remotely interested in shopping.

“Okay, I’ll show you to your room then.” He stepped out from behind the bar and walked toward her. ‘the doorman should be here soon with our bags. When he does, I’ll leave them in your room while you shower. You have your own bathroom.’”

As she walked down the hallway she became aware of how huge the apartment was. It was probably twice the size of her house. It seemed so big for one person, but then again, it fit the image she had of how the very rich lived.

Nick opened a door and the first thing that caught her eye were the ceiling to floor windows. There seemed to be no window coverings on them. How was she supposed to sleep with the evening lights and then the sun shining through?

“Are there no curtains or blinds on the windows?”

Nick laughed and she cringed at how naïve she sounded. What did it matter if there were no window treatments? The

view was of the city, not of another building; no one could look in and see her.

Nick pressed a button next to the door and a small whirring sound filled the room. Pam watched as sleek blinds slowly unfurled down, covering the windows. They muted the city lights immediately.

“Oh,” she said.

“I like my privacy, and although the designer tried to tell me that with the double-glazed tinted windows no one could see in, even with the lights on, I told her I wanted some coverings. She came up with these electric blinds and I have to say I’m really happy with how well they work.”

‘they certainly beat the heavy brocade curtains in my house.’”

Pam walked over to the huge bed; it had to be a king-size. She imagined she’d only use one quarter of the bed. She was so used to sleeping on a double. She would bet her first week’s wages that the sheets were of the finest cotton. The bed looked inviting with its silky purple and pink bedspread.

“It’s a beautiful room, Nick, and your apartment is amazing. I don’t know how you can leave it. If it were my place I would never want to go anywhere else.”

‘thank you. At this point in my life it’s more an investment. I can’t afford to get too attached to things. I’ve got a business to run.’”

Pam looked at him, not totally surprised by his non-sense tone, but it was sad somehow. Sure, he was a partner in an international company and a billionaire. Didn’t he know there was more to life than work? Even Luciano had built a home for him and Jasmine to share. Surely one day Nick would marry and settle down and have a home base. Maybe here in New York — he might find a beautiful socialite on this trip.

A stab in the region of her chest surprised her. She’d known the man for less than a week, she had no claim on him and if he found his future wife this trip, what did it matter to

her? She, herself, had a plan to find someone to have a fling with. To take that walk on the wild side and have a no-strings-attached affair to finally rid herself of her virginity.

“Here’s your bathroom.” Nick’s statement pulled her from her thoughts of affairs and weddings.

Pam peeked through door and, by now, wasn’t shocked by the luxury of the room. It wouldn’t take long to get used to the amenities living here would provide.

The soft ding of the elevator arriving reached through the apartment to where they were. ‘that will be our bags. I’ll leave you to it.’”

In a matter of seconds he was gone and she was left standing in the middle of the room. She was beginning to see that Nick Rhodes was a complex man. A man who focused on his work and his work only.

What a lonely existence. Travelling the world to glamorous places, living in apartments you couldn’t make your own because you were never there long enough to leave a personal imprint. Suddenly the life of the wealthy businessman didn’t seem so impressive. Perhaps being a struggling assistant was a much better way to live.

Pam gave herself a mental shake. It didn’t matter how Nick chose to live his life, she was there to do a job and she’d do it well. She was going to have a shower and go check the store downstairs.

She was going to make the most of her time in this fabulous city, and for the first time in her life she wasn’t going to worry about the fact that she had her mother’s outstanding medical bills and a mortgage hanging over her head. At least here the debt collectors couldn’t hassle her. She should look at selling the house. It would wipe out all her debt and then she could start making positive moves in her life. But her heart didn’t really want to sell. The house had been her grandmother’s and her mother had made her promise not to sell, no matter how bad things got. But surely her mum would forgive her if she knew her only daughter was sinking under a mountain of bills. Her mother had had no idea how expensive

her alternative medical treatments were in addition to the traditional ones. Pam hadn't wanted to worry her so she'd told her their medical insurance was covering it. She'd hated lying to her mum but it was worth it as it gave her mum a semblance of peace in her final days. Now the inability to pay those expenses was weighing her down. How much of her life was going to be spent in debt?



NICK KNEW he should be making sure Pam didn't need anything or any help. He'd seen her briefly in the kitchen, after she'd had a shower. She had been wearing jeans and a sweater that accentuated her breasts. He had wanted to walk over there and sample her lips again; he'd been thinking about her taste since he woken up on the plane with her in his arms. It had been a bad idea to lie down next to her. But he hadn't been able to help himself.

When she'd been unconsciously nibbling on her bottom lip as he showed her her room, he'd wanted to stride over there and replace her teeth with his and tumble them both on to the bed.

Then he forced himself to remember the wild-eyed maniacal look on his mother's face and the look of horror on his father's when his mother had found out what her husband had been up to. The affair he'd been having with his assistant. Nick hadn't wanted to stick around for yet another argument so he'd taken off down the street to the park. What would've happened if he'd stayed at the house? Would the outcome have been any different? Would his mother have hurt him too?

"Nick, I'm going downstairs. I won't be long."

Pam's soft voice shoved the thoughts of the day that changed his life, made him grow up quicker than he should, away. Back to the recesses of his mind, where the sordid memories belonged. Nothing good would come of remembering and wondering. He thrust away from his desk,

knowing he wouldn't be able to get any work done. "Give me a couple of minutes to change and I'll join you."

"No." The word burst out of her and he was surprised when she blushed. What was she hiding? It's not like she'd had the opportunity to meet anyone, they'd only been in the city for a couple of hours.

"I mean, look, I know you're busy and I'll only be a few minutes. I'm just going to get some earrings."

She was avoiding him? Why?

"Can't do that I'm sorry, it's your first night here and it wouldn't be right of me to leave you alone. Besides, you don't know New York, it can be dangerous out there. It would irresponsible of me not to do everything I can to keep you safe."

"Oh please, aren't you taking this boss/employee relationship a bit far? I'm only going downstairs, Nick, not trawling the streets. I'm not that stupid. Besides," she shrugged her shoulders, causing the sweater to tighten across her breasts. "If you're that worried about me, ask the doorman to stop me from leaving."

Nick couldn't help it, he laughed out loud at the thought of Rob stopping Pam. But she had a point, she wasn't going far and he could ask Rob to keep an eye on her. Not that he didn't trust her, he did. But he couldn't help the way he felt. He knew this was Pam's first trip out of Australia. New York could be crazy for a first-time visitor. He had to believe her when she said she wouldn't go far. Letting her go by herself went against everything he believed in to keep her safe, but he couldn't shadow her every move.

"Fine, why don't I call up for some food to be delivered, and then when you're done shopping we can eat."

Nick could see Pam's shoulders visibly relax, and again he was puzzled as to why she seemed so reluctant for him to go with her.

'sounds great. I'm pretty easy so you can choose whatever for dinner. I'll see you later.'

She walked out of the room, when another thought hit him. He followed her out and down the hallway. “Pam, wait.”

When he reached her side, he stretched a hand out and brushed a piece of her silky hair behind her ear. He didn’t know why he did it. He just wanted to feel a little closer to her before she left his apartment. He knew he’d overstepped his mark when she stepped away from him.

“Yes?”

“I’m thinking you probably don’t have any US dollars. Let me give you some so you can buy whatever you need. We’ll arrange for a bank account to be opened tomorrow.”

“It’s fine, Nick. I don’t need a bank account, I’m not going to be here that long. Besides I have a credit card. I’ll be fine.”

Nick was surprised at the stubborn streak Pam was showing. It was clear she was making it known she didn’t need or want him spending too much time with her. But he knew while they were in New York there’d be functions they’d have to attend, so they would be spending time together whether she liked it or not.

“Fine. But just be careful, and if you need anything at all go to Rob and he will call me.”

She nodded and walked out the door. As the door clicked shut, silence descended around him. Frustrated with himself and the way he was feeling out of sorts, he turned and headed for his room. He’d take a quick shower and then he’d order dinner. He should thank Pam for keeping things neutral between them. He’d picked Pam as his assistant because he needed someone focused to get the deal back on track. He didn’t need someone who leaned on him to keep them entertained. He should be pleased Pam wanted to be independent, but somehow he wasn’t. Part of him wanted her to need him. The part of him that was too much like his father. He had to remember the danger of getting involved with an assistant. He had to remember what he’d seen when he’d walked back into the house that day. If he didn’t remember, he could see the order he had in his life unravelling. And that was the last thing he wanted.

Chapter Five



PAM SMOOTHED DOWN THE DRESS SHE'D PURCHASED THE previous evening. Her hand hovered above the side tie of the crossover design. She should change. She should put her normal work uniform on. But the dress was gorgeous and it hugged her in all the right places. The sales assistant had been insistent the size she was wearing was perfect for her. She had pushed Pam's concerns aside when she'd asked for the next size up. Now Pam wished she'd put her foot down.

The more she looked at herself, the more the doubts crept in. What if Nick laughed at her attempt to change her style?

No, she couldn't do it. She couldn't wear the dress. She would change into her plain black skirt, adding her serviceable yellow blouse to it. With the matching black jacket, she'd fade into the background like a good assistant was supposed to do. The striped pattern of the dress she wore would make her stand out, and she was sure that was the last thing Nick wanted her to do.

Thinking about Nick, she let her mind drift back to last night. He'd been in the kitchen when she'd made it back up to the apartment, so he hadn't seen the multitude of bags she'd returned with. She had never spent so much money on clothes in her life. She hadn't had the means, but the salary in her contract was three times more than what she'd previously was paid, so she decided to spoil herself for a change. She had to admit, it was a lot of fun. Now she had three outfits, with

matching shoes and accessories. Feeling as uncomfortable as she did in this one, she should probably take the others back.

Her hand lowered to the tie, ready to undo it and get changed. If she didn't change, she'd spend the whole day fidgeting and feeling uncomfortable. Not the sort of impression she wanted to give to her new boss.

"Pamela, we need to leave." Nick's demanding voice sounded through the closed door.

'damn,' she whispered in frustration. She couldn't change now; she had spent so much time dithering about what to do, the opportunity to change had passed. She'd just have to suck it up and face the music. She was pretty sure Nick wouldn't notice her much anyway. "Coming," she called out, and gave herself one final look. She would have to do.

Walking with a confidence she didn't feel, Pam opened the door. Nick was busy looking at his phone, his thumb moving in an upward movement as he scrolled through what she imagined would be a ton of emails.

'morning, sorry to keep you waiting." Pam held her breath, waiting to see if Nick would notice the way she was dressed and if so, what he would say.

He looked up briefly and then flicked his attention back to his phone. "It's fi — "

Nick turned back to her and stared. His eyes narrowed, almost like thinking the view would look better through squinty eyes. He took a step back and the relaxed stance of only seconds ago was gone. Before her eyes, Nick appeared to have turned to stone. His shoulders were tense and his hand visibly tightened around his phone.

Her heart sank. She looked stupid. Why oh why had she even considered she could look attractive and efficient at the same time? She should tell him to book her on the next flight back to Australia.

Silence stretched between them.

"I'll, umm, I'll go change. I won't be long."

Pam turned quickly so Nick couldn't see the tears that had started to form in the corners of her eyes. She hadn't taken a step when a hand landed on her shoulder.

"We don't have time," his tone clipped, solidifying Pam's thoughts of how Nick looked at her — as someone trying to be something they were not. "You look fine."

His removed his hand and she heard him retreating down the hallway to the main part of the apartment.

She sighed, her hand reaching out for the door. It would only take her a moment to change. She could do it.

"Pamela, I don't have all day."

Nope, the bell signaling the arrival of the elevator had sounded and come what may, she was going to be going into meetings dressed like a ridiculous clown. But she might as well make the most of the experience of working with Nick. She was pretty sure that after today, Nick would put her on the first flight back and her opportunity to prove herself would be gone.



NICK DRUMMED his fingers of one hand on the table while he lifted his glass of water with the other. He was hoping the cold water would temper the heat and longing coursing through him. He'd been in this state of arousal since he'd looked up from his phone and seen Pam standing in front of him in a dress, looking like a million dollars.

He was angry with his body for reacting in the most primal of ways and he was angry with Pam for changing her appearance. Was she trying to tempt him like his other assistants? Had her thoughts about him changed upon seeing his apartment? Was she now looking at him as if he were only made of money? Would anyone ever see past the dollar signs to the real man? Did he even want that?

No, he didn't. He was perfectly happy with his life the way it was. He traveled the world. Had affairs with beautiful

women whenever he wanted, and he had fabulous homes in many cities. His life was full and he didn't need anyone to complete it. He especially didn't need another assistant who was trying to dress to impress. He was immune to that type of behaviour now. He wouldn't let her get under his skin.

He observed Pam moving around the room with the quiet efficiency she had displayed at the rehearsal dinner and the wedding. This was the reason he'd listened to Luc and hired her. At least she was doing that part of her job. She stopped and chatted briefly to a couple of the older gentlemen, laying a hand on one man's arm. Her action surprised and increased his anger. Was she now trying to see if she could hook her teeth into an older man? Had he been completely wrong about her? Had Luc and Jasmine been fooled by her as well?

Nick stopped those thoughts immediately. He was starting to let the paranoia of what happened between his father and his father's assistant cloud his thought processes. Pam was only doing her job. Easing the clients' concerns, as he'd asked her to do when they'd traveled to the meeting.

He went to stand when he saw another, younger man approach her. Nick could see the look of admiration and desire in his eyes.

Ethan Webster.

Ethan was the leading lawyer for the company they were negotiating to purchase, and he was a player. Not to mention a cutthroat lawyer looking for a weakness. Ethan had found that weakness in his former assistant, flirting with her and enticing information out of her.

At the time, Nick had been considering relieving her of her duties because of her forward action toward him, but giving the enemy information just because Nick wouldn't fall for her seductions had been the last straw. Her actions had come close to destroying the deal, and now Nick was working furiously to get it back in their favor.

Somehow, Nick knew Ethan's attention toward Pam was completely different this time. He wasn't treating Pam in the same way he had his previous assistant. He wasn't going to

flirt with Pam to use her. Ethan wasn't stupid enough to try the same trick again. Nick suspected this time Ethan's motives were purely desire-based and for his own personal gain, not for the betterment of the deal.

Nick gripped his glass a little tighter as he watched Ethan slip an arm around Pam's waist. It was a forward move and he allowed himself a small smile when Pam discreetly moved a step so Ethan wasn't touching her so intimately.

He couldn't hear what the other man said, but the blush and laughter coming from Pam told him Ethan hadn't asked about the weather.

Nick moved, allowing instinct and emotion to take over when Pam relaxed and leaned slightly toward Ethan. He'd studied body language to give him the upper hand in his negotiating skills. Now his knowledge was coming into play. Pam was getting interested and he wasn't going to allow it. Ethan Webster would chew her up and spit her out. Nick had brought her to New York, a city full of sharks. He wanted to protect her. He would make Ethan regret making a move on Pamela.

As he strode toward them, a small, rational part of him yelled at him, telling him he wasn't thinking, he was reacting in a manner that was out of character. Nick squashed the voice down. He didn't care what his mind was telling him. All he knew and felt was — no one touched his Pam.

To anyone watching, his approach toward them appeared to be relaxed and casual. Those who knew Nick would know he was anything but relaxed. Pam's laughter touched his ears again. His jaw tensed when he saw Pam had closed the distance between her and Ethan. She was getting more and more interested in the smooth-talking lawyer and he was having none of it.

He laid a proprietary hand on her arm and stood next to her. Their shoulders brushed and he was very much in her personal space. "Everything okay here, Pam?"

"Everything is fine, Mr. Rhodes." With the same sort of discreet movement he'd admired from her previously, Pam

took a little step away from him. This time he wasn't pleased. He was annoyed because the movement put her even closer to Ethan.

Nick nodded toward the other man, sending him a *back off* look. Ethan raised his eyebrow, but didn't back down as Nick had expected. Instead, he inclined his head toward Pam.

"I was just getting acquainted with your lovely, new assistant. She's different from your other ones. I like her and find myself quite taken by her lyrical accent. In fact," Ethan winked at Pam; the flirtatious move ignited the already simmering anger in Nick into a full-on five-alarm fire. "I was trying to entice her to come out with me tonight. Introduce her to the exciting sights and sounds of New York."

"Oh, Ethan, that would be wonderful. I only got a glimpse of the city yesterday when we arrived, but I'd love to walk around and experience it all. I can't wait to visit Times Square."

"I'm afraid that's impossible." Nick cut in. He wasn't going to let the arrogant lawyer get his hands on Pam. No way in the world. Pam was here to do a job and that job wasn't going on dates with the first man she spoke to. "tonight I have a function which I require Pamela to attend with me."

He glimpsed the look of confusion on Pam's face. He'd gone over the day's schedule with her and he hadn't mentioned this evening's function. He had received an invitation to attend a charity event being held at the Empire State Building. He'd planned on not attending. Now he would, if it meant he could prevent Pam and Ethan from going out on a date."

"Are you sure, I don't rec — "

"Yes," he interrupted her before she could say anything else. He glanced over at Ethan, who was looking at the two of them, watching the exchange with interest. He could see the speculation going through the other man's mind. Nick needed to get the situation under control and the meeting back on track. "Our break is over. Webster, let's get back to sorting

through the list of requirements your client is asking for and deleting most of them.”

“You can try, but my client is pretty firm on what they want,” Ethan paused and directed his regard to Pam, infuriating Nick even further. “And I usually get what I want.”

Nick recognized a challenge when he heard one. Ethan Webster had just crossed a line and Nick would make sure he and his client paid for it.

‘so do I,’ Nick returned accepting the unspoken challenge Ethan had issued. “Now if you will excuse me, I have to speak to my assistant.”

Nick waited until Ethan had walked away and then he looked at Pam. “I trust you know the duties I require of you, Pamela?”

Hurt flared in Pam’s eyes. He steeled himself from feeling any remorse. It was bad enough his previous assistants had decided to fall for him. He didn’t want Pam falling for the first New Yorker who showed some interest in her. She had an air of innocence surrounding her. He put it down to her not having traveled the world.

“Yes, sir, I know *exactly* what is required of me.” Pam’s tone could’ve frozen the lake in Central Park. “And I know what is in your schedule. I studied it this morning—there is no function you have to attend this evening.”

‘that’s where you’re wrong. I’m always making last minute additions to it. Don’t assume what you review first thing in the morning will be the same a couple of hours later. I suggest we discuss this later. We have a roomful of people and I don’t appreciate having my assistant question me in front of them. May I remind you that you are here to work and not to flirt with the opposition.’”

Nick turned and walked back toward his seat. He hadn’t really handled that well, but being reasonable had died the moment he’d seen Ethan’s hand on Pam. If anyone was going to touch her it was going to be him.

And only him.



PAM SAT BACK DOWN at her desk and flicked through the notes she'd made on her tablet. She had no idea how she achieved it, but she'd made it through the rest of the meeting without falling apart and crying a bucket load of tears.

In the quiet of the office she examined what happened, trying to understand the way Nick had acted. A couple of days ago he'd been determined to get her to work for him. She should've recognized his determination as arrogance. She could leave and go back to Perth. But after half a day on the new job she was enjoying the challenge of her new position. Plus the money would help her a lot.

Still, Nick's words had cut deeply. He'd embarrassed her in front of Ethan. She had been flattered by Ethan's advances. She'd never had an attractive man seek her out to talk to; it had felt strange but exhilarating at the same time. She'd found Ethan interesting and thought he might fit the bill for a brief no-strings-attached fling during her stay in New York. She may be a virgin but even she could tell Ethan had *player* written all over him and wouldn't be looking for something long-term. He could educate her and then she'd move on. She had tried flexing her flirting muscles and, until Nick arrived with a thundercloud surrounding him, was feeling pretty confident she had been succeeding. Part of her was at first flattered she had two men seeming to want her, but then she worked out Nick wasn't angry at Ethan for flirting with her. Oh no, Nick was angry with her for flirting with Ethan. How ironic was that? If only he knew just how inexperienced she really was in the art of dealing with men.

"I need you to make sure all the points we discussed today are covered in the contract." Nick's brusque tone brought her back to the present. He'd still been talking to a couple of people when she'd slipped past him. She had hoped he'd be a little longer so she could get her emotions back under control.

With him standing in front of her, she had no plans to let him see how much his words had hurt.

“I’m reviewing my notes now. I’ll list them out and run them past you and if you need to add anything more to them you can.”

“Come into my office and we’ll review them together. I want that contract to the lawyers this afternoon. I know it will come back. That’s the way Webster works and it’s why this deal is taking longer than it should. He’s nitpicking when there’s no need, using confidential information he shouldn’t have, thanks to my last assistant, to draw out contract negotiations. I’m tired of it. I want this deal done.”

He didn’t give her a chance to respond to his outburst. He walked into his office, the expectation that she follow him clear. She knew she should, but she needed a few minutes to get herself composed. A yawn wracked her body. Exhaustion pummelled her tired bones. What she wouldn’t give to lie down for a few minutes. Not only was she physically tired; she was emotionally raw from what Nick had said to her. Perhaps her tiredness was making her super sensitive to what had happened between them in the meeting.

Pam closed her eyes for a few seconds, wishing she could lay her head on the desk and have a power nap. That wasn’t an option. If she didn’t get her butt into his office he’d probably come thundering out and bodily lift her up and deposit her on a chair in front of him. At least she’d remember what it felt like to be held in his arms.

With a sigh, she collected up her notepad and pen. She reached out to open the door when it was opened for her. With her forward momentum she lost her balance and stumbled, immediately captured by a pair of strong arms.

Her skin burned from his touch, the thin silky fabric of her dress no barrier against the heat emanating from Nick. Pam took a deep breath and was immediately transported back to the wedding and being wrapped up in Nick’s jacket. Her mind quickly drifted to the kiss they’d shared. She chanced a look up at him and immediately wished she hadn’t. Fire burned within the depths of Nick’s eyes and she didn’t know whether it was from anger or something else.

Dare she hope he found their embrace as disturbing to his equilibrium as it was to hers? His fingers tightened their hold, before loosening and his thumbs moved in a circular motion, hypnotising her.

She should step back, push her hands against his chest. If she followed through on her actions, she wasn't sure she wouldn't clutch the lapels of his jacket to keep him close instead.

The decision was taken from her when Nick dropped his arms and abruptly turned and walked back to his desk. This running hot and cold with how he spoke and treated her, was confusing.

“Are you planning on standing there all day?”

Pam had had enough. “Are you planning on being a jerk to me the whole time I'm working for you?”

The look of surprise on Nick's face was priceless; if she wasn't so annoyed with him, she'd almost laugh at it. Clearly he hadn't expected her to talk like that to him. He probably wasn't used to an assistant speaking to him that way. He was probably used to them sending him a sexy smile and asking if they could massage the tension out of his shoulders. Well, not her.

Nick took two steps toward her, his voice deadly quiet when he spoke. “I don't think I heard you correctly there, Pamela. I didn't just hear you calling me a jerk, did I?”

Pam knew she should back down. It was the sensible thing to do. But, for once, she was going to stand her ground.

“You heard what I said, Nick. Yes, I called you a jerk because that's what you're being. I don't deserve to be treated or spoken to the way you have. You may be used to assistants falling at your feet but you're not going to get that from me. Wasn't that the main reason for employing me? I'm not your usual type of assistant. If you don't want me to speak my mind then you shouldn't have asked me to join you here.”

A small smile broke out over his face. Pam ignored the warmth building in her belly. She'd said her piece. Shown him

she was more than willing to stand up to him. Now it was her turn to get them back to the reason she'd walked into his office. To sort through the notes from the meeting and get this deal finalised.

‘shall we go over these notes?’ Without waiting for an answer, she brushed passed Nick and took a seat in a chair on the opposite side of his desk. It was a welcome relief as her legs were shaking with adrenaline from her outburst. She'd never spoken to Jasmine the way she'd just spoken to Nick. Then again, Jasmine had been so easy to work for.

“I think I'm going to enjoy working beside you.” Pam jumped at the sound of Nick's voice. The words whispered so closely to her ear, that if she turned her head, she would connect with either Nick's cheek or lips.

Do it. Turn your head and take what you want for a change. Don't be a mouse. You asserted yourself once, keep doing it, a little voice inside of her head taunted her.

She started to move but was too slow, Nick was already behind his desk. The moment was lost. It was probably just as well, she could imagine what Nick would've done if she had turned her head. He'd have probably moved back quicker than a jackrabbit.

“Right, let's get started.” The impatient Nick had returned. She must remember she was here to do a job and her job didn't include her flirting with the man. No matter how tempting or sexy she found him.

Chapter Six



THE NEXT COUPLE OF HOURS PASSED IN A BLUR FOR PAM. She'd been impressed with the way Nick handled the meeting. As they went through the process of deciphering her notes and what he wanted to add to the contract, her respect for him grew. The man was dynamic. She could understand why his other assistants focused on him and not on their work. She found her attention straying to his fingers as they moved over the keyboard and she had to give herself a mental shake when her thoughts drifted to him moving his fingers over her body. Stroking down her side and then cupping her breasts. It was never going to happen so she shouldn't even let the thoughts take hold.

Now she sat at her desk, finalising the document and wondering if Nick would mention anything to her about the so-called function they were attending that evening. She clicked save and printed out the document for Nick to go over again.

“Are you done yet?”

It took everything in her not to roll her eyes at Nick. Really, she'd walked out of his office a half hour ago. Yes, it was done and she would take great pleasure in handing the document to him, passing the test she suspected he was giving her.

Pam stretched across to the printer and pulled the papers off the machine. She gave it a quick snap on the desk to get it

in line and, with an efficient click of the stapler, handed it to him.

“Yes, it’s right here.”

She had the pleasure of seeing the shock on Nick’s face.

‘this is,’ Nick paused as he flicked through the papers and hitched a hip on her desk, “impressive.”

“Of course, it is. Now about tonight.”

“What about tonight?” So engrossed in reading through the document, he wasn’t fully paying attention to her.

‘the function you’re, I mean, *we’re* supposed to be attending?’ She waited a few moments and when he still hadn’t answered her, she reached over and pulled the papers down, out of his line of vision.

‘do you mind?’ Irritation laced his voice and he pulled them away from her hold.

“Yes, Nick, I do mind. I asked you about this evening’s function. You know, the one that’s not in your diary, but the one you assured me exists. Are we still attending and what sort of function is it?”

“A charity event at the Empire State Building. It’s a formal affair and a car will come and get us around seven. If that will be all, I’d like to finalise this contract.”

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked back into his office. Pam wanted to scream in frustration. The man may be an excellent businessman, but when it came to giving details that would help her, he royally sucked.

She hadn’t brought anything formal with her because she certainly hadn’t expected to be attending any events. The clothes she’d purchased the previous evening weren’t suitable either. They were more geared for the office, and the one evening-type dress she had bought was more for a cocktail party or dinner at a nice restaurant than a formal affair. She wished she’d thought about packing her bridesmaid dress. It wouldn’t matter that Nick had seen her in it before. At least she knew she looked good when she wore it.

Pam pushed away from her desk and moved toward Nick's door. She rapped quickly and then opened it.

"What now?" he asked, without looking up from the contract he was making notes on.

"Nick, I didn't bring anything formal to wear when I packed for this trip. If I'd known there was a possibility of this type of event happening, I would've packed the dress I wore to Jasmine's wedding. I'm sorry, but you're going to have to go by yourself."

Her comment had him looking up quickly. "No, you're coming tonight, Pamela. Leave everything with me. When we return to the apartment later on, everything you need will be there."

He turned back to the papers and made a couple of quick notes before picking it up and holding it out to her.

"If you can make these final changes, we can send this contract off and hopefully close the deal."

Pam couldn't believe the man. He thought he could wave away her concerns with an off-hand comment about getting everything sorted for her. How could he possibly do that? Was he going to go shopping for her?

She almost snorted out loud at the thought of Nick flicking through racks of clothes. No, he probably had some sexy looking stylist on hand who jumped when he called.

'today, Pamela.'

She walked over and took the pages out of Nick's hands. "One question before I leave."

"Yes?"

"Just how do you propose getting *everything I need* when I can't try things on?"

He waved his hand in the air as if he was shooing an annoying fly. "It'll be fine. The contract?"

"But, Nick, I'm no— "

“Enough, Pamela. You have a job to do and arguing with me is not part of it, even though you seem to enjoy that pastime. Trust me, everything will work out.”

She knew there was no point in trying to get the man to see reason. He was determined to cast aside her concerns.

“Fine,” she huffed. “But if the dress is hideous I’m not going.”

She turned and walked out of the office, the sound of Nick’s laughter ringing in her ears.



NICK FLICKED the cuff of his tux back to check his watch again. The car was due to arrive any minute and Pam still hadn’t come out of her room. She’d been locked in there since they’d arrived home two hours ago.

The stylist he’d spoken to had assured him she would find the perfect outfit for Pam from top to bottom. He’d emailed the stylist a photo he’d taken of Pamela at Luc’s wedding. He wasn’t a sentimental person, but he’d caught a glimpse of her looking dreamy-eyed as she watched Luc and Jasmine pose for photos. The raw emotions had called out to him and he’d whipped his phone out to take a photo. After he’d taken it he’d immediately gone to delete it but stopped himself. Now, hopefully it was enough for the stylist to work out what size Pam needed for her clothes. These people were professionals and knew what they were doing.

The in-building phone buzzed three times, the signal the car had arrived.

He was about to walk down the hallway and knock on Pam’s door when he heard the faint sound of it opening. He turned in the direction of the noise and waited, anxious to see what the stylist had chosen for Pam.

She had looked amazing today in her simple wraparound dress. He didn’t think she understood how attractive she’d looked. How tempting she’d been. When he’d whispered close

to her ear, after she'd stood up to him in his office, it had taken everything in him not to lift her face and kiss her. She was tempting him to forget his hands-off-assistant rule. Whenever his previous assistants had tried to put the moves on him, he had been repulsed and had turfed them out pretty quickly.

Pam was different, she stood up to him and challenged him, firing up his blood, and that made her extremely dangerous to his equilibrium.

As in the church, Nick watched as Pam made her way down the hallway toward him. In the dim lighting he couldn't quite see the color of her dress, but it didn't matter to his body. Whenever she got within five meters of him, his senses stirred to life; walking into the living room, a certain part of him sprang to full attention. He cursed his body for its carnal reaction to Pam. Never in his whole life had he had this strong a reaction to one woman. He didn't like it. He didn't like being unable to control his body's basic desires around this woman.

“What do you think?”

Her voice shook with nerves as she spoke.

“You look,” he paused, trying to find the right word. ‘stunning, beautiful, amazing.’”

And she did. The stylist had knocked it out of the park with her choice for Pam. The dress was the color of sapphires and it complemented the caramel honey of her hair beautifully. The design so simple yet unforgettable, the fabric hugging her neck like a silken caress. The material skimmed her breasts and waist before falling in soft folds to swirl around her legs.

‘turn around,’ he muttered. He swallowed a groan when he saw the back, a perfect cut-out showing flawless skin. She'd put her hair into a soft knot at the base of her neck, with loose tendrils escaping to fall gently around her cheeks.

‘the dress is all wrong for me, isn't it? I never know what suits me,’ she said as she looked over her shoulder at him. He could see the disappointment in her eyes, the telltale glisten of tears.

Why didn't believe she looked beautiful? Is that why she dressed to blend in with the background? She certainly hadn't done that today at the office and she wasn't going to fade into the background tonight.

A possessiveness he'd never known before swept over him. He would make sure Pam knew how attractive she looked, and make her feel comfortable in the new environment she'd find herself in at the charity event.

He wouldn't leave her side.

Nick took two swift steps and turned her so she faced him. Reaching out, he ran a finger down her cheek. 'the dress is perfect. You look perfect. I don't want you to change a thing about yourself.'

He smiled when a blush stole over her cheeks. Her lips shone and he wanted to lean down and taste them. Would the gloss have a flavor? How would she react if he kissed her again?

Nick moved his finger under her chin and tilted it up. He closed the distance until his lips were almost touching hers, and whispered against her glossy red mouth. "You look beautiful."

He closed the tiny gap and fused his lips with hers. She tasted like strawberries. Sweet and tart and he couldn't get enough of her. He flicked his tongue out to persuade her to open beneath him, like she had at the wedding. She acquiesced and allowed his tongue entrance. He swept it across her teeth, revelling in the feeling of having her in his arms again.

He hand slid down the smooth flesh of her back until he cupped her firm ass. He pulled her closer and swallowed her moan. The desire to scoop her up in his arms and peel away the dress overwhelmed him. Kiss every inch of her body he exposed, and once he had familiarised himself with it, he would sink into her and lose himself like he never had before.

She's your assistant, are you your father's son? The words whispered through his mind. It could've been his mother standing beside him.

He pulled his lips from Pam's and pushed her away until there was a good meter between them.

"Nick?" Desire filled that single word. His name had never sounded so wonderful coming from someone's lips. He wanted to disregard all sensible thought and follow through on his thoughts of losing himself in her. He feared she would make him lose all control and he couldn't afford to let that happen to him. He couldn't succumb to the desire coursing through his blood like the finest of wines.

He wasn't going to turn out like his father.

With a quick look at his watch, he dragged his focus from the beautiful woman in front of him and back to what was supposed to be happening this evening.

"We'll be late." His words terse and in complete contrast to what had happened between them only seconds before. Hearing her swift intake of breath, he knew he'd confused her. He couldn't blame her. He was confusing himself. He had to get himself under control. He had to protect Pam. He had a feeling she wasn't used to the situations they were heading into. Or dealing with men like him.

"Fine, let's go then."

She turned abruptly, and his body flared back to life at the sight of the back of her dress again.

It was going to be a long night.



PAM COULDN'T KEEP her eyes off the amazing sight of New York all lit up. The urge to keep pinching herself to see if it was real and not a dream was strong. Never in her wildest imaginings had she thought she would be standing on the observation deck of the Empire State Building sipping champagne, attending a party where the net wealth of the people in attendance was probably more than she could ever envision spending in her lifetime.

Looking at the view ensured she kept her mind off the kiss she'd shared with Nick back at the apartment. She hadn't wanted the kiss to end and when Nick had pulled her up against his body, she could tell he had been enjoying the moment with her. She'd hoped he would take it further. She'd hoped to feel his hands move over her, touching her in the most intimate way a man can touch a woman. She'd hoped he would make her feel special.

Then he'd pushed her away and had spoken to her so coldly. As if the moment they'd shared had never happened.

She should really catch the next plane back home. She didn't belong here and she especially didn't belong in Nick's arms. No matter how much she hoped it would happen.

'this is a nice surprise.'

Pam whirled around at the sound of the voice right behind her, surprised someone was speaking to her. She smiled when she saw who had addressed her. "Ethan, I didn't know you were going to be here." She laughed quietly. "Actually, that was a silly thing to say when I don't know anyone here but Nick, and well, now, you. Was this what you meant about showing me New York?"

She clamped her mouth shut. She was babbling like a naïve teenager.

"Not at all, and this isn't seeing New York. If you'd have been free I wouldn't have come, I would've sent them a generous cheque." Ethan paused and looked her up and down. Her pulse quickened slightly, but not to the same pace it had when Nick had roved his eyes over her earlier. When he'd looked at her she'd almost melted at his feet. Then he'd kissed her and all rational thought had disappeared and all she was left with was a multitude of feelings she was sure no one would ever make her feel again.

But he pushed you away, didn't he? He didn't take the extra step and make you his. Ethan may not make your blood sizzle, but he isn't going to push you away.

Pam didn't know what to make of her inner voice.

“Plus,” he continued on. “It would’ve been a grave disappointment not to see you dressed as beautifully as you are tonight. It looks stunning on you.”

Ethan’s words were almost exactly the same as the ones spoken by Nick, but they didn’t give her the same thrill as they had coming from her boss.

‘thank you.’ She didn’t know what else to say. She’d never been in this sort of situation before and wasn’t quite sure how to handle it. She wasn’t stupid enough to think Ethan didn’t know what he was doing. The man was a player. He would know his way around a woman, and could, no doubt, teach her and guide her through her first experience of making love.

Did she have the guts to take that walk down the path with him?

A light touch on her cheek had her returning to the present and pushing her thoughts aside.

“You were so far away. What were you thinking?”

Ethan’s voiced washed over her and heated her blood. No way was she going to share what she’d been thinking about with him.

“Just how amazing the view is. I feel like I’m on top of the world.” As a quick excuse for her silence, it fitted well.

“I never tire of looking at the view.” Ethan responded, and when she turned saw he was looking at her and not the view.

“I think you’re being rather fresh with me, Mr. Webster.” He laughed at her attempt at flirting.

“Can I get you another drink? Or maybe we can skip the rest of the party and I can make good on my offer to show you the city.”

Maybe it was her earlier thoughts about taking a chance, but the thought of blowing off the party and seeing the sights with Ethan was very tempting.

“I’d like that.”

Ethan stepped closer and took her hand.

“Let’s begin.”



NICK’S BLOOD boiled when he saw Ethan take hold of Pam’s hand. He had been watching the whole interaction between them. Enough was enough.

He put his glass down on the tray of a passing waiter and stalked across the room to where Ethan and Pam stood.

He thought Pam had taken note of what he’d said to her earlier about Ethan, and his instructions not to fraternize with the opposition.

He stopped a meter or so away from them, blocking their path. They walked toward him, unaware of his presence. Ethan pulled up abruptly seconds before he ran into Nick. Nick wanted the other man to run into him, then he’d have a reason to push him away. Show Ethan Webster no one touched Pamela.

With a smooth move, Nick had pulled Pam to his side and tucked a possessive arm around her waist. “I was just looking for you, Pam.” He lowered his head and placed a soft kiss on the corner of her mouth. When she gasped in surprise, he tempered the urge to take her lips with his, to taste her again, as he’d been wanting to since he’d kissed her at his apartment. Try as he might to remind himself she was his assistant, the desire to take her and have her couldn’t be denied. He hoped his kiss was enough to put Ethan off and to tell him Pam was off limits.

He tightened his hold when Pam tried to pull away. His eyes were on Ethan’s; Nick registered the other man had seen Pam’s attempt to move away.

“It doesn’t look like Pam was looking for you, Rhodes. In fact, we were about to leave. You understand, don’t you?”

When Ethan went to take Pam back, Nick all but growled at him.

‘that is it!’ Pam declared and pulled herself away from his side. “I have no idea what’s going on between the two of you, but it stops now. I’m not a toy for you two to fight over in the playground like a couple of bratty kids. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to try and find someone to talk to who won’t treat me like I’m a prize in a pissing contest.”

Nick tried hard to prevent the small smile wanting to break out over his mouth as he watched Pam walk away. Her hips swayed with each step, and his hands itched to reach out and pull her back. He liked it when Pam got all fired up. It only made him want her more, and he wondered if she was this fiery in bed. His body immediately responded to the thought of Pam using that unleashed passion on him. A vision of her riding him came to mind. A vision he wouldn’t mind coming true, even if it did mean going against everything he vowed he wouldn’t do. Perhaps he was his father’s son after all.

“What are you playing at, Rhodes?”

Ethan’s question pulled Nick from the thoughts of Pam having her way with him and him with her. He focused on the man in front of him. He wasn’t going to waste words with him. In no uncertain terms, he planned to let Ethan know Pam was off limits to him.

“I’m not playing at anything.” Nick stated mildly. “You’re the one always playing the games. Isn’t that how you make sure you earn your big fat retainer? Delay contracts until the other party gives into your requests. Pity I’m not like them. I *always* get what I want.”

“I wasn’t talking about business, but you should know I’m the same. I, too, always get what I want.”

“Not this time.” Nick stepped closer. “I’m going to say this once and once only. Stay away from Pamela.”

Nick didn’t wait for a response. He turned and left Ethan standing there. Pam had headed toward the elevators — he only hoped the elevators were slow and she was still waiting. He walked out into the lobby but the area was deserted.

‘damn.’ He punched the button and willed the elevator to arrive. He was getting anxious. He never should’ve let Pam walk out. She wasn’t familiar with the city. She didn’t even know where he lived.

Finally it arrived and he punched the button for the ground floor. He hoped he wasn’t too late. He hoped Pam was still downstairs. He would never forgive himself if something happened to her.

He reached the ground floor and strode out of the building. He looked up and down the street.

Why had he let her walk out?

Why hadn’t he stopped her?

Was putting Ethan in his place more important than ensuring the Pam’s safety?

Finally he saw her, on the opposite side of the street, looking lost and alone. Whether she sensed his perusal or not, she looked up and they locked eyes.

His heart beat triple time at the look of relief that came over her when she spied him. She went to move toward him and he shook his head. He would go to her.

As he made his way to the edge of the sidewalk so he could cross the street, Nick knew he was taking a step toward changing his life. Whether it was going to be for the better or for the worse, he didn’t know. All he knew was that he was willing to take the step. Could he convince Pam to take it with him?

Chapter Seven



‘RE HAD BEEN STANDING ON THE SIDEWALK, WONDERING where to go and what to do next, when she’d looked up and seen Nick standing across the street. Her relief had been instant. It had been so stupid of her to walk out, but she had been so annoyed at the way Ethan and Nick had been acting. Although, part of her was flattered that both men seemed to be fighting over her. She’d never experienced that before.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly, as he reached her side and gently cupped her cheek.

Relief stole through her at his presence. “I am now.”

As his arms enveloped her, she laid her head on his chest and sighed. It felt so good to be held by him. Oblivious to the people swirling around them, they stood holding each other. Pam closed her eyes, savoring the moment. She had been craving his touch since they’d kissed earlier. She’d thought she may take the plunge with Ethan, now she knew she’d have never been able to follow through with it.

There was only one person she wanted touching her. Kissing her. Holding her. And that person was Nick.

She knew he liked kissing her; he’d kissed her twice already and seemed to enjoy it. His body had. Would he be willing to take it further with her? Should she even tell him she didn’t have much experience in the bedroom?

A laughing couple ran into them on the sidewalk, jolting them apart. Pam looked up as Nick looked down. She could

lean up and capture his lips. Could she do it? Would she take that forward step?

She went to rise up when they were jostled again.

“Let’s get out of here,” Nick muttered. He kept hold of her hand as they headed down the street. Pam couldn’t believe, even though it was late in the evening, the streets were still full of people. She guessed, being a Thursday night, most people were getting into the weekend spirit.

Nick held up his hand and whistled. In a few seconds a cab pulled up. He held the door open for her and she slipped in, hitching up her dress so she could slide along the bench seat. Once Nick was settled beside her, he told the cabbie their destination.

“Times Square?” she asked. “You’re taking me to Times Square?”

She was sure they were going to be heading back to his apartment.

“I know you want to see the city and you need to see the place at night to get the real feel of it. The lights from the big screens. The people milling around. I can’t describe it. You have to experience it.”

Excitement bubbled up inside of her. She couldn’t wait to get there and experience it for herself.

After what seemed like forever, because of the traffic, the cab let them out a block down from Times Square. Nick requested it so she could experience the moment of walking toward the vibrant part of the city.

“Are you ready?” he asked, as he got out and stood beside her.

“Absolutely.”

Nick grabbed hold of her hand and her fingers tingled at the touch. He was being so gentlemanly and polite. So different from the man who had been bristling with anger when he’d stopped her and Ethan’s departure from the charity event.

They started walking down the sidewalk. Pam knew her eyes were getting wider and wider with every step they took. Nick was right. It was impossible to describe what it was like. She definitely had to experience it.

The sidewalks were full of people, plenty of tourists, she was sure, as so many seemed to have “I heart New York” t-shirts on. She couldn’t believe how many tourist shops there were and each one had customers trawling through their aisles, picking up various knick-knacks, t-shirts and caps.

They stopped near a tiered seating area, full of people talking and laughing. Music played and people danced to the tunes. Looking down the street, Pam saw a sea of people, and the screens she’d seen so many times on the television. She turned around, amazed at the amount of them flashing brightly.

“This is incredible,” she whispered as she grabbed hold of Nick’s arm. “Pinch me, please. Pinch me so I know I’m not dreaming this and that I’m actually standing here in the middle of Times Square.”

Nick laughed and gathered her close in his arms. “It’s real, trust me. You’re here.”

Pam couldn’t help it. She laughed too and pulled out of Nick’s embrace, wanting to explore more. She started to head further down the street so she could get closer them. She stopped when something registered with her. In front of her, standing tall, was a column of screens all lit up, displaying various adverts. On top was a spire with a large crystal ball on the top. It, too, was alight and she wanted to see it close up.

“Is that the ball you see on TV at New Year’s Eve, you know the one that drops at midnight?”

“Yes, it is.”

Pam stood spellbound. Never in her life had she thought she would ever see something so iconic.

“This is unbelievable,” she whispered.

“Let’s move a little closer,” Nick suggested, and once again placed his arm around her waist. She was so glad she

was sharing this experience with Nick and not Ethan. It wouldn't have been the same.

They walked through the crowd, and when they stopped she leaned back against Nick's warm, hard chest and looked up at the glittering ball. She imagined during the daytime it would still look beautiful, but not as spectacular as it looked that night.

"I wish I had my phone to take a photo," she murmured as she looked around, imprinting the image onto her brain.

"I'll take one on mine." Nick let his arms drop and reached into his pocket. "Pose and smile."

Pam struck a pose and smiled big. Nick took a couple of photos before he pocketed the device again.

She stared one last time at the ball and walked up to Nick. She went up on her tiptoes and placed her lips against his for a soft kiss. "Thank you for bringing me here."

She went to step away but Nick pulled her close. "My pleasure," he uttered as he claimed ownership of her lips again.

She sighed into his embrace, wanting it so much. She wound her arms around his neck and sunk her fingers into his hair, caressing the nape of his neck. Pam shivered as his hand gently stroked her bare back. Everything faded out of her consciousness. Her awareness turned inwards, to the sensations Nick's touch created. Her blood sang as his lips moved over hers, encouraging a response from her, which she gave freely. How did they always end up in each other's arms? She'd only known him a handful of days, but sometimes she felt as if she'd known him a lot longer.

This felt so right, sharing a kiss with the most handsome man she'd ever met in the middle of Times Square. A dream come true.

Nick pulled his mouth away from hers and kissed along her jawline until he reached her ear, where he gently blew into it. Her whole body shuddered in reaction to his breath. She wasn't sure what she should do next. Whenever she and

Wayne had kissed, the excitement she'd thought she'd experienced with him was tame in comparison to the excitement of Nick's kisses. Wayne hadn't seemed to want to take their relationship to the next level, which was why she had planned to try and seduce him, but then he'd broken up with her, making her glad she hadn't followed through with her seduction plan. Of course, him screwing around on her was pretty much the reason why he didn't want to sleep with her.

"Either I'm doing a really bad job of kissing you, or you're embarrassed that we're making out in Times Square."

Unaware her body had tensed the moment she'd thought of Wayne, she wanted to kick herself for letting her ex ruin this special moment. How could she let her mind wander to a man she hadn't seen for months when Nick was kissing her and touching her in a way that set her body alight?

"I'm sorry," she said softly. She went to say more but Nick stepped away, letting his hand trail down her arm until he found her fingers. He interlaced his fingers with hers.

"Let's go home."

She nodded, giving the ball one last look before turning to face the crowd. In the short time they'd been kissing, the crowd seemed to have doubled in size. For the first time since they'd arrived at Times Square, Pam felt a little uncertain to be surrounded by so many people.

Sensing her nervousness, Nick pulled her closer, released her hand and put his arm back around her waist.

"Don't worry, I'll keep you safe."

Pam had no doubt he would. Nick protected her from the people jostling around them as he weaved through the crowd like a pro. Within minutes, they were safely back in a cab, heading toward his apartment.

"Thank you for taking me there, Nick. It was out of this world. You're right, unless you experience it, you can't describe the atmosphere to anyone. Seeing all those lights and screens and the New Year's Eve ball. Not to mention the

people. My God, I can't believe so many people are out so late.

Nick chuckled and lifted her hand to his lips. Her body sizzled at the soft touch of his lips. What would happen when they returned to his apartment? Would he take in his arms and kiss her like he had in not fifteen minutes ago? What would he do if she kissed him instead? If she took the first step and undid the jacket of his suit, pushed it off his shoulders and started to unbutton his shirt?

They arrived at his apartment without talking. The silence should've been awkward but it appeared Nick was as lost in his thoughts as she was.

He paid the cab driver and got out, holding out his hand for her. She took it, once again experiencing the jolt of excitement she got whenever she touched him.

They walked toward the building and the doorman opened the door for them. Before they even got through it, a woman rushed up to Nick and threw her arms around his neck. Nick abruptly let go of Pam's hand and grabbed the other woman by her waist.

Any confidence Pam had for taking the attraction between her and Nick further was quickly forgotten. The way Nick had grabbed at the other woman and held her tightly told Pam she was someone important to him. If that was the case, then why the hell had he been kissing her? Touching her and acting all Neanderthal-like with Ethan?

With tears burning her eyes, she brushed past Nick and hit the elevator button. She didn't want to witness the touching reunion between Nick and his girlfriend. What she wanted to do was get out of this stupid dress and forget she'd ever spent the last couple of hours sharing new sights and sounds with a man who was as much of a dog as Wayne was.

Was she destined to always make stupid mistakes when it came to men?



“ROB, WHAT’S GOING ON?” Nick’s voice was hard as he spoke to the doorman and tried to extricate himself from Caroline’s arms. What the hell was his former assistant doing waiting for him in the foyer of his building? And how did she know where he lived? Or that he was back in the country.

“I’m sorry, sir. I tried to get her to leave but she was adamant that you had asked her to drop by.” The doorman leaned closer to Nick. “She’s been here for about two hours. I thought she would’ve left, but she has astounding resilience and patience.”

He knew from experience how persuasive Caroline could be when she wanted something. He’d been on the receiving end of her advances more times than he could care to remember.

“Thanks, Rob, perhaps you could arrange for a car to deliver Ms. Devlin back to her residence?”

“Certainly, sir.”

Once Rob had moved away Nick turned on his former assistant. “I don’t know what game you think you’re playing, Caroline, but it ends now. I thought you would’ve worked that out when I fired you.”

His blood curdled when she sent a sexy pout his way. If she thought he found it attractive she was mistaken. “But Nick, I know we’re perfect together, and I’m sorry I slipped those documents to Ethan, I was just so mad at you.”

Her whiny tone grated on his senses. The way she turned her betrayal around to make it seem like it was his fault she had to slip Ethan confidential information.

Why on earth had ever thought she was a suitable assistant for him?

“Enough, Caroline. I don’t date my assistants, or former assistants, and I especially don’t date someone who thinks it’s fine to share sensitive documents with people who shouldn’t have it.” He looked up and saw Rob inclining his head to let him know the car had arrived. “Your ride is here, I suggest you leave and don’t bother coming back.”

“You don’t date your assistant, huh?” Caroline paused before continuing. “I think you’re full of hot air and your rules are a load of rubbish. If you don’t date your assistant, then what the hell was that I saw you and your new one just doing? It certainly looked like you were returning from a date. You had your arm around her. She had that *just kissed* look about her too.”

Nick was surprised Caroline knew Pam was her replacement, and how could she tell what they’d been doing? Not that it mattered. His former assistant was of no importance to him anymore, and neither were her opinions. He wanted her gone.

“What I do and who I do it with is none of your business. The cab won’t wait for much longer.”

She scoffed and sneered at him. “Don’t try and deny she’s not your assistant. I heard all about the “new” girl you brought back with you from Australia. You’re a hypocrite, Nick Rhodes. You say one thing and do the absolute opposite. Good luck with sticking to your *rules*.”

With that parting comment, she turned and stomped out of the foyer. Once she was in the car, Nick turned back to Rob.

“Never, *ever* let that woman in this building again.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nick walked toward the elevator and wondered what the hell he was going to say to Pam. Before the run-in with Caroline, his only thought had been to get Pam upstairs and to pick up where they’d left off in Times Square. The entire drive back to his apartment he’d been thinking about peeling the dress away from Pam’s delectable body. Kissing every inch of her skin and making her call out his name. He’d had to restrain himself from taking her in the cab. He was sure she didn’t want to give the driver anything he could talk about.

What spell had she cast over him that made him lose his mind? That made him want to throw everything he believed in out the window. That made him want to give himself to a woman as he’d never done before.

Now, thanks to Caroline and her reminder Pam was his assistant and his no-getting-involved-with-his-assistant rules, all his plans were discarded. His desire had cooled and clarity had returned.

What he now planned to do was check on Pam and ensure she was settled in her room. A quick knock, ask if she was okay, then back away. It's all he had to do. Then he could go to his room with his integrity still intact. It didn't matter that he would be in bed alone.

If he was to remain true to himself, then Pamela Bishop was untouchable. He couldn't afford to let his emotions get the better of him. He wouldn't ruin his life as his father's acton had ruined his whole family.

Chapter Eight



PAM SAT IN NICK'S KITCHEN, NURSING A GLASS OF JUICE AND looking out the window at the view of the city. She stifled a yawn. Sleep had been minimal last night. She blamed it on jet lag but she knew it was more to do with what had happened downstairs when they had arrived back at the building.

Who was that woman who threw herself at Nick?

Was she a former lover?

Did it really matter who she was? The other woman had been beautiful, stylish and everything Pam wasn't. She'd known that the moment she'd seen her. She also didn't want to witness the lips that had been kissing her, not half an hour before, kissing another woman.

For a few hours Pam thought she was like that woman, dressed in a gorgeous designer gown. Out on the arm of a gorgeous man. Living a fairytale. In the cold light of day, she knew fairytales weren't real. She wasn't a princess. She was plain, boring Pamela Bishop.

Instead of wearing one of her new outfits, she'd gone back to what she was comfortable in. Her sensible navy blue skirt with matching jacket. The proper attire for an executive assistant. The complete opposite to the dress she'd worn the previous day, something she imagined the girl from last night who had been waiting for Nick downstairs, would look dynamite in. No, today, in the clothes she had on, she felt

moderately in control of herself and the way her life was heading.

“Morning.”

Pam looked up as Nick entered the room carrying his laptop bag. Dressed in a black suit with a pale blue shirt and dark grey tie, he looked sophisticated and breathtakingly handsome. She wanted to walk over there and put her arms around him. The look in his eyes stopped the urge quickly. He looked so hard and untouchable.

Did he regret touching her last night? Maybe he felt guilty he had his hands all over her when he was already spoken for.

Pam hated feeling like this. Feeling like she was the *other* woman, the woman responsible for other people’s heartache. Making her as bad as the woman who’d broken up her parent’s marriage. She had always promised herself she wouldn’t get involved with a man who was in a relationship; clearly, she’d done exactly that.

Well, it didn’t mean she had to be that person. If Nick wanted to play it cool then she’d play it cool too. She would be his perfect assistant. That was her role.

“Good morning. If you give me a couple of minutes I’ll be ready to leave.”

He nodded his head, moved to the coffee machine and poured himself a cup. “About last night.”

Pam held up her hand. She’d had an evening where she’d experienced almost every emotion possible. She had no desire to relive each and every one as Nick told her how it had been a huge mistake to kiss her. To take her to the event, when he could’ve taken his lovely girlfriend. She didn’t need him to try and let her down gently. She’d landed already, and it was with a great big thump of reality.

“There’s nothing to talk about, Nick. I’d rather put it down to the excitement of seeing the city and leave it at that.”

She got up from her stool and moved over to the sink, where she dumped the remainder of her juice. As she moved

past him, he stopped her progression with a hand around her wrist.

She froze as, with that slightest touch, her body was back remembering what it had felt like to be in his arms. To feel his lips trailing soft kisses over her jaw. To feel his hardness against her belly. At the time she'd thought it was because he desired and wanted her. Now she knew it was something completely different. It wasn't desire, it was simply a man's natural reaction to kissing a woman.

"Please, Pam, let me explain Caroline's presence downstairs when we arrived home."

She didn't want to hear about Caroline. Caroline was probably the daughter of a rich billionaire who went to all the right places, said all the right things and dressed all the right ways. Complete opposite to Pam. Pam, who dressed in sensible clothes. Pam, who'd never made love to a man before. Pam, who was drowning under a mountain of debt with no end in sight.

"I don't want you touching me again, Nick. Please let go of my hand." Her voice was an octave above a whisper. But the meaning behind it was clear. Nick dropped her wrist, and she continued on her way out of the kitchen to her room.

Somehow she'd get through the rest of the time they were in New York sorting out this deal. The moment it was finalised, she would bring into play the clause he'd had written into the contract and leave.

Last night had been an eye-opener in many ways. After experiencing the buzz of Times Square she wanted to see more exciting places, and she couldn't do that while she owed so much money. As much as it would kill her to lose the home that had been in her family for generations, she knew she had to sell it. It was the only way she could live her life. If she didn't, she'd never have financial freedom.

Decision made, she'd contact the real estate agent and instruct him to sell her house. Once it was sold she'd pay off the mortgage and her mother's medical bills. The debt

collectors would be off her back and she would be free to do what she wanted.

It was time to take control of her life and not let people like Nick Rhodes think she was something they could play with. For so long she'd done what her mother had told her to do. When she should've been experiencing life, she'd been looking after her mother.

For the first time in her life she could do things for herself. She didn't need to answer to anyone.

It was time to find who Pamela Bishop really was.



PAM CURLED up on the couch with a slice of pizza and flicked through the channels on the television. Nick was out again and she hadn't asked him where he was going. Ever since their night at the Empire State Building, he'd pretty much gone out and left her by herself each evening.

The first couple of nights he was out hadn't bothered her, she was still adjusting to the time difference and full-on workdays, so she'd been happy to order from whatever takeaway menu she found in the junk drawer in the kitchen. After she'd eaten, she'd curl up with a book and fall asleep. She had no idea what time Nick came home. Many times she'd expected him not to come home, but he was always in the kitchen before her every morning.

Now it was Friday night, she'd been in New York over a week, she was full of energy and she didn't want to sit around. She wanted to go and try the nightlife.

Turning the television off, she put the pizza box in the fridge and walked to her room. She would speak to Rob and ask where the best and safest place was for a single woman to go to. She figured he would probably try and talk her out of it, but she wasn't going to be swayed. She was following through on her epiphany that she was going to find herself. She'd emailed the real estate agent and told him to put her house up for sale instead of rent. She could cover the mortgage for a

couple more months. She'd then emailed the debt collection agency advising them she was placing her house on the market so she would be able to pay them in full in a couple of months. She'd also included a copy of the sellers' contract with the real estate agent so they knew she wasn't lying.

For once they'd been open to her making a small payment to keep them happy until she'd sold the house and had the funds to settle the debt. She hoped the agent sold it quickly.

Pam pushed thoughts of her house and money problems away. She was going to put on her cute cocktail dress and have some fun.



NICK WALKED into his apartment building, thinking about taking a shower after yet another after-work gym workout, trying to ignore the guilt gnawing at his gut. He had left Pam home alone again, just as he had since their night in Times Square. He'd hoped his workouts would tire him out so when he got home he wasn't tempted to knock on Pam's door. He'd even found a Lodge close by to his apartment and had gone to a meeting. Something he never did when he was overseas working.

That's how desperate he had been to put distance between him and Pam. It had all been a huge waste of time. His thoughts always drifted back to her. Sleep had been elusive and he'd lain awake most nights knowing that Pam lay only a few feet away from him.

"Mr. Rhodes, I'm so glad you're back." The doorman rushed up to Nick the moment he walked through the door.

He immediately went on alert, his instincts telling him something had happened to Pam.

"Is Pam all right?"

"I don't know, sir."

Nick tried not to shake the other man. "What do you mean you don't know?"

“She wanted to go out to a popular nightspot. I tried to talk her out of it but she was adamant she was going and if I didn’t give her location of a good, but safe, place to visit, she’d find one herself.”

Through his anger, he had to admire Pam for her assertiveness. He’d seen it the couple of times she’d raked him over the coals for the way he’d treated her. Over the last week, he’d been nothing but polite and she had been the same to him. They might as well have been strangers, with the amount of conversation they’d shared.

He should be happy with their situation. After all, it was what he had been striving for, total professionalism between them and nothing more. But he couldn’t help feeling if Pam got hurt tonight it would be his fault because of his need to keep her at arms-length.

“Where is she?”

“I told her the best place to go to was The Loft on Fifth. I know it’s one of the safest nightclubs for young, single women to go to by themselves.”

Nick knew the place well. He’d been there with quite a few of his dates and he’d given the owner some financial advice, so he always had a standing invite to attend the club. Out of all the nightclubs in the city, Rob was right, it was one of the safest, and Rob was probably aware that Nick knew the owner, hence his recommendation to Pam. But still, she was unfamiliar with the city and the uniqueness of New York clubs.

She’d mentioned she’d been caring for her mother for a couple of years, inhibiting her ability to travel and explore the world. Doing that, it would’ve been difficult for her to get out and experience all that life offered. The thought gave him pause, how much experience had she had with the opposite sex?

Nick shook his head. He didn’t need to think about her love life. He needed to get down to the nightclub to make sure Pam was safe.

“Can you arrange for a car to be here in fifteen minutes to take me there? I’m going to go upstairs to shower and change, and then I’m going to get Pam. Thank you for telling me, and for looking out for her.”

“My pleasure, sir. Miss Bishop is always friendly when she comes home in the evenings. I have to admit I’m quite partial to her, maybe it’s her accent.”

Nick laughed. He had the same accent as Pam; somehow he didn’t think Rob was quite as “partial” to him as he was to Pam.

Nick returned downstairs in ten minutes, he spied a silver sedan waiting at the kerb.

He walked over to where Rob was standing and reached into his pocket, pulling out some money and handing it to him. “Thanks again for everything.”

“All part of my job, sir.” Rob replied, pocketing the money as he walked over and opened the door for Nick to leave.

Nick strode out and gave the driver the address. He hoped he wasn’t too late and nothing had happened to Pam. He hadn’t even given her a damn mobile phone so she could contact him in an emergency. Not that it was likely she would, the way he’d frozen her out all week. But it was for the best that he’d kept his distance.

When they pulled up to the nightclub, Nick handed over some cash to the driver.

He stepped up to the entrance of the club, bypassing the long queue of people to get in. When the doorman saw him, he unlatched the thick red rope that closed off the entrance and Nick walked through, nodding his thanks to the man as he went past.

He made his way through the dimly lit entrance to stand at the opening of the nightclub. The music thumped a bass rhythm which he seemed to feel inside of him. People were talking loudly to be heard over it. Trying to find Pam amongst them all would be a challenge. He was confident he could do it: failure wasn’t an option.

He surveyed the room. He had no idea what she was wearing. He should've asked Rob if he remembered what Pam had on. He was pretty sure she wouldn't be wearing the blue evening dress she'd worn the other evening, and if she wore one of the usual black suits she wore to the office, finding her would be almost impossible. Maybe she was wearing that dress she'd worn the first day. His body stirred remembering how the dress hugged and accentuated her curves.

A figure in white caught his eye. He could only see the back of the dress, which was scooped low, showing a generous amount of skin. It finished about mid thigh on killer long legs encased in silver sandals. The straps curved around her slender ankles like a lover's embrace. What would it be like to gently undo those straps and caress the instep of her foot? The dress hugged her bottom and his hands itched to smooth over the gentle swell. The woman's hair color was hard to distinguish in the subdued lighting of the club, but he could tell it wasn't blonde.

His feet wanted to move in her direction. He wanted to get close to see if the skin of her back was as soft to touch as it looked. He had so many fantasies going through his mind it shocked him. He was here to find Pam, not to hook up with a random stranger. The woman who'd captured his interest turned her head to the side and he caught her profile.

Pam.

What the hell?

She looked carefree, tossing her hair and laughing at something the man to her right said in her ear.

Now he knew why his body went into desire mode the moment he saw her. His body recognized a potential mate in Pam and he had to finally acknowledge he wanted her in the most basic of ways. The way a man wanted a woman, under him, writhing as he drove into her. Right at that second he didn't care that Pam was his assistant. He'd been denying his need for her all week. He could deny it no longer. He wanted her and he would have her.

Rules be damned.

He threaded his way through the crowd, his eyes never moving from his prize. He could see the front of her dress, shocked by what he saw. After seeing the back he'd expected the front to be as low-cut. He couldn't have been more wrong. The straight neckline of the dress was even more tempting. It hinted at what lay underneath the fabric.

He finally reached Pam's side as she was about to head to the dance floor. Her hand was in another man's, a man he recognized from the office. He didn't plan on letting that stop him getting what he wanted. He wanted to take Pam home.

He slipped his arm around Pam's waist, the fabric of her dress silky beneath his fingers. He tightened his hold when he felt her pulling away. He sent the other man a look that told him to back off. He was smart enough to take Nick's hint.

"Nick! What do you want? I'm about to go for a dance."

Her tone exuded her displeasure at his interruption. As he looked down at her, he noticed her glassy eyes. He wondered how many drinks she'd had, and hoped none of the people she was keeping company, ones she'd worked with the last week, had decided it might be fun to slip a little something into one of them. If he found out they had, heads would roll.

"I asked what you were doing here, Nick."

"The dance can wait."

"No, it can't. I want to dance and I want to dance now." Pam ground out as she made a move to pull away from him.

He smoothed his hand up her back until he connected with the warm flesh of her back. "I've come to get you."

With a gentle tug, he had her flush against his body. Her hands rested on his chest and she craned her neck so she was looking up at him. For a moment there was clarity in her vision; maybe she hadn't had as much to drink as he'd thought.

"You always spoil my fun." She all but shouted at him. "Why are you here?"

He smiled; feisty Pam was in the house. As he stared down into her face he lost himself in the green pools of her eyes. The sounds of the music thumping through the club faded out of his conscious hearing. He reached one hand out and gently cupped her cheek.

“I told you, I’ve come for you.”

Confusion glazed her green eyes and a sigh rippled through her.

“Why do you do this to me?” she asked, and leaned up to take possession of his lips. Surprise at her bold move kept him still for a moment, before instinct took over. He sipped at her, enjoying the sweet taste of her lips. A combination of the cherry gloss she wore and the champagne she must have drunk. He gathered her closer and weaved his fingers through the soft locks of her hair. He wanted to lose himself in her. For once he didn’t want to think about all the reasons why this could be wrong. He was tired of being sensible. He never let himself lose control with a woman. For Pamela he was willing to. She fired his soul like no other had ever.

He trailed his lips to her neck, enjoying the essential Pam he was getting to sample.

“Nick,” she moaned, and it broke the thrall he had been trapped in from the moment her lips had touched his. He lifted his head and saw they were attracting the attention of the people Pam had been talking to. People they worked with.

He could imagine what the main topic of conversation around the water cooler would be on Monday. Somehow, he didn’t think Pam would appreciate it.

Pam laid her head on his shoulder, her body relaxing against his. He could tell she was getting tired.

He nodded to those standing near them. “See you Monday. And this,” he waved his arm around the club, “Stays here.”

There was a collective sound of agreement from everyone present. Satisfied Pam would be able to hold her head high at the office, he turned them away from the group and threaded his way through the crowd.

Was she actually aware of what was happening around her? Any thoughts of taking up where they had left off with the kiss were rapidly departing. She stumbled and he pulled her closer to him. The champagne she'd been drinking had obviously caught up with her. When he had Pam in his bed, and he would, he wanted her to feel and remember every touch and every caress he gave her. In her current state he didn't think that was likely.

They got outside and the doorman flagged down a cab for them.

"Where are we going?" Pam mumbled into his shoulder once he had her settled on the bench seat beside him.

He reached up and stroked her hair. "Home, sweetheart, home."

She shook her head, the movement dislodging his hand from her hair. "I don't have a home, I'm selling my house. When it's sold I'll be free."

He didn't know if it was a fact or the alcohol talking but her words piqued his interest. What had she meant by free? Now wasn't the time to discuss it.

The cab drive to his apartment passed in silence. Pam had settled herself against his shoulder and he could feel her body slowly drifting into sleep. He tightened his hold around her shoulders. The fabric of her dress was thin and silky against his touch and his fingers ached to push it aside so he could feel her warm flesh.

The cab stopped and he gently woke Pam. "Sweetheart, time to wake up."

Pam opened her eyes, and what he saw in the green depths had him brushing her lips softly with his. He pulled away before he was tempted to take it further and ravish her in the back seat of the cab. Not a good idea.

"Let's get you inside," he murmured against her forehead, where he lightly touched his lips again.

He opened the door and slid across the seat, his arm firmly around Pam. He helped her out and made his way to the front

door of the building.

As he reached the door, Rob opened it quickly.

“Thanks, Rob.”

As he walked through, Pam stumbled again and he quickly scooped her up in his arms, enjoying the feeling of having her there.

“Is Miss Bishop all right, sir?”

Nick looked at the woman in his arms. “She’s fine, just a little too much excitement for one evening. She’ll be fine in the morning.”

He wasn’t sure how he was going to be in the morning. Not after tasting her and having her in his arms. He couldn’t go back to keeping her at arms-length. It was impossible. He’d had a taste and feel of heaven and he wasn’t going to let that go.

Chapter Nine



PAM WOKE SLOWLY. HER HEAD WAS POUNDING AND SHE WAS sure she had a whole basketball team in her head bouncing the damn ball around. Something warned her that once she opened her eyes, another team would join in and it would make things worse. Much worse.

She rolled to her side and became aware of her state of undress and the fact she was in her bed. The last thing she coherently remembered was being in Nick's arms and kissing him. The pounding in her head eased a little when she recalled the feel of being back in Nick's arms. So warm and safe, like she'd found nirvana and hadn't wanted to let go. Their lips all but devouring each other. With a shaky hand she brought her fingers to her lips. They felt the same.

She pulled her hand away and tried to decipher through the fog in her brain exactly what happened after Nick had turned up at the club.

I've come for you.

The words echoed in her mind. Had he really said that to her? Or were they words she wished he'd said to her? Did it really matter if they were true or not? They had kissed. She was home in bed in her underwear, which could only mean one thing — Nick had undressed her.

She squirmed in embarrassment as it finally hit her: she'd passed out like a common drunk and Nick had had to put her to bed. There was no way he was going to be interested in

taking anything further with her. Why would he when she couldn't handle a few glasses of champagne without acting like a fool?

Had she initiated the kiss? Had Nick had been totally embarrassed by it? She wanted to discount the thought because she recalled he kissed her back. Or maybe that's what she wanted to remember. Maybe he had been trying to let her down gently. After all, she had been standing with some people from the office.

Relief had filled her when she'd turned up to the club and had seen them standing in the line. They'd been happy to see her, too. They'd welcomed her as if she'd been working with them for ages and not a week.

What must they think of her now? It didn't matter. She was only here for a short time and, after last night, it was pretty likely Nick was going to send her back to Perth, so she may as well prepare herself for that. He probably didn't appreciate his assistant throwing herself at him in front of his employees. But she would fight him on it. She would ask for a second chance. She had found she liked the challenge of working with Nick. She wanted to experience all the places he'd tempted her with when they had first discussed her taking this position. She wanted to see the world and she knew this job would be the way to do it. This plan was much better than enacting the leave clause as she'd previously considered.

Determined to put all that had happened the night before behind her, she cracked open her eyes. The pounding, though still there, seemed to be co-operating with her efforts to get moving, as it had softened with every passing second. Throwing back the covers, a cool waft of air swept over her body, bringing it to wakefulness.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed she gasped, like she had every morning she'd woken here, at the view of the city of New York. The urge to pinch herself to make sure she was dreaming had definitely subsided, and she gave herself a few moments to enjoy seeing the city in the morning sunshine.

Pam hoped her house sold soon. Then she could enjoy more views like the this one. She would have to give the real estate agent a call and see what was happening. It may only be the start of the weekend in New York, but it was halfway through it back in Perth. She could call later today but it might be better to wait until Monday to find out what the status of the deal was. Hopefully it would be good news and she had an offer on the house. Then she'd be able rid herself of the debt and begin to see the world, with Nick by her side.

Pam pulled herself up short with that thought. Nick was her boss. She had to remember that, no matter how tempting his lips were. No matter how attractive she found him. No matter how her dreams tempted her to believe he'd come for her last night at the club.

Nick was out of her league and it would do her good to remember that. He wouldn't be interested in a virgin.



PAM WAS on her second cup of coffee, contemplating what to do for the day, when Nick wandered into the kitchen. She gripped her mug tighter at the sight of a bare-chested, bare-footed Nick, in low-slung soft denim jeans that tempted her hands to touch and find out what hidden treasures lay behind the material.

She'd rested her hands against that chest. Had laid her head on it. Knew the strength that lay beneath the business shirts he'd wore. For all her imaginings, though, seeing it was another thing.

He held a piece of paper in his hand, reading as he walked in, and he hadn't noticed her standing against the counter.

"Morning," she mumbled out.

His head jerked up in surprise, the paper falling silently to the floor. His eyes narrowed. Had she spilled coffee down the front of her top? She quelled the desire to look down and check.

Nick took a couple of steps closer to her, the paper he'd been reading forgotten on the floor. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

She noticed he spoke softly, conscious of the possibility of her having a hangover. Her shower had been a wonderful tool in clearing away the after-effects of a few too many champagnes. The coffee and toast she'd consumed had helped as well.

"Fine." She rocked back on her heels, trying to stem the flow of embarrassment at the state he'd found her in last night. "I, uh, I want to apologize for passing out on you last night."

Pam cringed at the words after they'd left her mouth. Couldn't she think of something more sophisticated to say? No, she couldn't. She acknowledged within herself she didn't have worldly experience, and that included knowing what to say in uncomfortable situations. She'd never found herself in this sort of predicament before. It wasn't one she wanted to find herself in again.

"You've nothing to apologize for," Nick murmured on a soft laugh. "It was probably for the best."

His words confused her. Why was it for the best that she passed out? No sooner had she finished the thought, than the meaning of what he truly meant sunk in.

She had initiated the kiss at the club and her passing out on the way home had saved her from Nick having to rebuff her clumsy attempts at seduction.

"Are you working today?" she asked, deciding it was best to leave all discussion of the previous evening behind. Nothing good was going to come of rehashing what might have been, what could have been and what actually was.

"I've got to deal with a couple of things, but I thought," he paused and cleared his throat, almost like he was unsure of how she was going to take his next words. "I thought we could spend the day doing some of the touristy things — together."

"Touristy things?"

“Yeah, you know, go see the Statue of Liberty. Visit Time Square during the day. Go to the top of Rockefeller center and have a picnic in Central Park.”

Pam was rendered speechless. The last thing she'd expected Nick to do would be play tour guide for her.

“Sounds like a full day, but if you've got a lot to do, you don't have to play nursemaid to me. I can take an organized tour, that is if you don't need me to help you with what you have to work on.”

She stood her ground as Nick stalked toward her. She kept her eyes locked on the cupboard above his left shoulder. If she looked lower she would be tempted to reach out and touch his chest.

When he stopped she held her breath waiting to see what he was going to do next.

“Pam,” he paused. When it continued for a while, she finally looked up at him. A slow smile broke out over his face. “I want to do this with you. It's the weekend and I'm not that much of a tyrant to expect you to work continuously. Give me ten minutes and then we'll leave.”

Words were impossible for her so she nodded her agreement. All she wanted to do was reach out and clasp her hands around his head and bring it down so she could sample his lips.

He moved backwards for a couple of steps, with the same stealth he'd shown walking toward her, before turning and heading back to where he'd come from, stopping only to pick up the piece of paper he'd dropped. She'd never known a man to move with such grace and ease.

When he left the kitchen, she gripped the kitchen counter and concentrated on breathing in and out. How on earth was she going to last the day without wanting to lose herself in his arms?



NICK WATCHED the delight breaking over Pam's face as the ferry got closer and closer to Liberty Island and the wonder of the Statue of Liberty. He felt the same way the first time he'd seen her. There was something spectacular about the grand old lady watching over her city of Manhattan.

"She's breathtaking," Pam husked out.

"I know. No matter how many times you see her, you never tire of the majesty that is intrinsically her." Nick reached for the camera Pam had lowered after taking pictures of the Statue. "Here, let me take a picture of you with Lady Liberty in the background.

She handed him the camera and he took it before focusing on Pam. Through the lens, her joy reached out toward him. He took a couple of quick snaps and then handed the camera back.

Within minutes the boat had docked and they were making their way down the jetty so they could walk around the island and get a closer look the statue.

Nick laid his hand on the small of Pam's back, feeling the slight tremor from his touch. Somehow, he knew after today things between them were going to be very different. He'd acknowledged to himself last night he wanted to pursue what he was feeling for Pam. That with her, his rules were obsolete.

He didn't think she would be opposed to the idea. Not after the way she'd reacted to him in the kitchen this morning. He hadn't missed the way her eyes had gotten wider with every step he took toward her. He'd known that he could lean in and taste her lips and she wouldn't object.

He pulled himself from thoughts of seducing Pam when she stumbled slightly as they stepped off the jetty and onto the path leading to the statue. He slipped his arm around her waist, tucking her closer to his side.

"Careful, we don't want you hurting yourself before we've even got a chance to get up close to Lady Liberty."

With her so close to him, the ripples from her small laugh had his body stirring to life. "Thanks for rescuing me, I was

too busy looking up when I should've been paying attention to where I was going.”

“I’ll always keep you safe.” Nick had no idea where the words came from but he knew they were true. Something in Pam called to the inner part of his soul, a part that had been so deeply buried he’d forgotten it existed. The part that wanted to protect a woman and keep her safe. The part that wanted to care. A feeling he thought he’d never want to experience after what he’d seen happen to his mother and father and what love could do.

He stopped his thoughts there. He didn’t “love” Pam. He felt responsible for her because she was in a city she’d never been to before. He dropped his arm from around her and took a step to the side to put some distance between them.

“We have tickets to enter the pedestal of the statue. We can’t go up to the crown because those tickets were sold out.”

“I had no idea you could go up to the crown, but I’m not sure I could deal with being up so high. I mean, the observation deck of the Empire State building was okay, but in the statue... I think that’s something I wouldn’t deal with too well. I’d feel like I’d fall out of it.”

“It’s very safe and the view is spectacular. Maybe next time you’re visiting you’ll have the opportunity to get up there. Although they do sell out pretty quickly, which was why I couldn’t get us tickets.” Going against his thoughts of moments ago of putting distance between him and Pam, he reached out and took hold of her hand. She went to pull her hand away, but he wouldn’t let her. He was enjoying the sensation of having her fingers entwined with his. Nick led her toward the bottom of the statue. He knew he had to stop blowing hot and cold with her. He knew when he did that he confused her. Her innocent enjoyment of the simplest things was catching. He wanted to enjoy the simple things again.

Over the years he’d forgotten how to do that. Perhaps it was time to start remembering how to live.

Chapter Ten



PAM SAT ON THE PICNIC BLANKET AND LOOKED ALL AROUND her at the sights that were Central Park. People sitting in groups laughing and, like her and Nick, enjoying a picnic lunch. Others were throwing a football and she even spied a couple getting married. Men and women walked or jogged, enjoying the little piece of paradise.

“Movies and television shows don’t do the park justice. They can’t capture the unique atmosphere, can they?”

“No, it’s not possible. Real life can’t be translated to the television or big screen. Even most reality shows are scripted. No one is real these days. Everyone is always hiding behind a façade. The perfect image they want people to see.”

Nick was lying on his back with an arm over his eyes. He looked relaxed, and part of her wished she could lie down and rest her head on his chest. He’d kept her by his side the whole time they toured the Statue of Liberty. While they’d traveled on the ferry back to Battery Point, he pointed things out to her. Places she’d seen in the movies and television shows.

For a while she’d let herself imagine they were actually a couple. That at the end of the day she’d be going home with him and spending the night in his bed. Part of that was true; she would be going home with him, but the going to bed part was a fantasy she was pretty sure wasn’t going to be played out anytime soon.

But something he said intrigued her. He didn't think she was playing a part, did he? Did he think she was trying to be something or someone she wasn't?

“Sounds like you've been burned a couple of times.”

He rolled over onto his side, resting his head on his elbow. “Not burned, just cautious now. You know the reason I brought you here was because my previous assistants decided that I was perfect marriage material?”

“Yes? Are you saying they were faking their qualifications?”

“To some degree, yes, but their main motivation was looking for a fast-track to easy street. They didn't appreciate it when I fired them. The last one decided to take some confidential information pertaining to the deal we're working on. She gave it to the attorney of the people we are negotiating with. You may be aware of who that attorney is.” He finished on a sardonic tone and it didn't take much for Pam to work out who he was referring to.

“Ethan?” She voiced her suspicions, and wasn't surprised when he gave a slight nod.

Now she understood why he hadn't wanted her near Ethan, he was worried she would do the same as his previous assistant. All her thoughts about him warning her away from Ethan because he was jealous flew out the window. “Did you think I would do the same?”

Nick sat up quickly and took hold of her hands. “No, I knew you wouldn't do that. From the first moment I met you were different to the others. You're loyal and have more integrity in your little finger than those girls had in their whole body. I knew your loyalty would be to me and to Luciano.”

Even though the words comforted her, Pam wished she could see Nick's eyes to know whether he was telling the truth or saying things to make her feel better. His sunglasses hid them from her. What would he think if she leaned over and pulled them up, asking him to repeat his words? At the end of the day, did it really matter?

“Thank you. And yes, there’s no way I would ever betray you, Luciano or the Morelli Corporation. Even if I didn’t need my job, there’s no way I’d consider doing something like that.”

She stopped. There was no need to let Nick know how important it was for her to keep this job. She’d received an email from the real estate agent and there’d been no offers presented on her house. He was hopeful that he’d soon have an offer to present to her.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Pam hoped it was something as simple as would she like a drink.

“Why were you going to resign? From what I understand, there was no need for you to quit your job.”

Pam closed her eyes, trying to find the right words. “I don’t know. I just felt that with Jasmine leaving, maybe it was time to move on. You know, see if there was something bigger and better out there.”

“Why didn’t you just ask for a transfer to a different department?”

She shrugged. “It never occurred to me to ask for a transfer. I figured finding a new job was the better option.”

Nick nodded and Pam hoped that was the end of the conversation. “Can I ask you another question?”

“If you want.”

“Are you in financial difficulties, Pam?”

That question came out of nowhere. Although maybe not. She had said she needed the job a couple of times. Nick was an astute businessman, it shouldn’t surprise her he’d picked up on those flyaway comments. “Why would you ask that?”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve alluded to the need to keep your job. Is there something I can help you with?”

It would be so easy to spill her guts to Nick. To share the burden of the financial difficulties weighing her down. If their

circumstances were different, if they were a couple, then yes, she'd share her burden with him. The reality of the situation was, as far as she knew, they were simply employer and employee. He may have been touching her a lot today. They may have shared a few kisses; it didn't mean things were changing between them.

"There are things I'm working on, and hopefully everything will soon be solved."

She hoped her vague answer would satisfy Nick. She didn't want him to think she was after a convenient way to easy street. She knew that what she owed in medical expenses and her outstanding mortgage would be nothing to a man like Nick.

"How are they going to be solved?"

She should've known Nick wouldn't be easily put off. He'd shown this tenacity to her before. "Look, you don't need to worry about my financial situation. It's none of your concern. It's mine and I've got plans in motion to solve the issue. Hopefully, by this time next week everything will be sorted and I won't have to think about it anymore and I can start to follow my own dreams."

"If you need any help at all, I want you to come to me, Pam. I mean it."

"Thank you, but I think I should be fine."

She was touched that he would offer. It would be so easy to tell him. So easy. But so wrong. She'd never been one to rely on others to help her out of her predicaments and she wasn't planning to start now.

Had he offered to help any of his other assistants? It didn't seem like he would, considering the reasons behind why he employed her.

God, what did it matter anyway? She wouldn't ask for his help. The last thing she'd want is to be in debt to Nick Rhodes.

"The offer is always there." He lazily stroked his thumb over the top of her palm. "So tell me, Pamela Bishop, what are your dreams?"

Her most pressing dream, right at that moment, was for Nick to kiss her. Kiss her right in the middle of Central Park.

“I don’t think you need to tell me what one of your dreams is at all.” Nick whispered. With a gentle tug of his hands she fell toward him. “I wonder if your dream might match mine.”

He didn’t give her an opportunity to confirm or deny his question as he leaned forward and took ownership of her lips with his. She melted at the first touch. Nick released her hands and wrapped his arms around her, falling back onto the blanket so that she lay across his chest. With her hands free, she was able to put them on either side of his face. Her fingers brushed against his lightly stubbled cheeks. She wished she had the courage to trail her hands down to the bottom of his shirt and lift it so she could feel his warm skin.

Nick obviously had no problem doing that, as in the next instant a cool breeze wafted over her back before warmth filtered over her skin. As his fingers skimmed up her back under her shirt, so did the blood heat up inside her.

Never in her wildest imagination did she think, at the beginning of the day, when she’d woken up mortified about what had happened the night before, that she and Nick would be in the middle of Central Park making out.

As if he knew her thoughts, he pulled his lips away and removed his hands from under her top.

“Yes, I do think one of our dreams may have matched. However, this is probably not the time or the place to take it any further.”

The laughter of the people in the park infiltrated her mind, reminding her where they were. In the middle of Central Park, in front of God knows how many people. It seemed they didn’t have a problem with public displays of affection. Something she didn’t think Nick would be into.

“I suppose so,” she sighed and rolled off Nick, missing the strength of his arms around her and his hard body beneath hers. She may be a virgin but she knew Nick was aroused by their kisses. She’d felt the evidence of his erection pushing

against his jeans and into her belly. What would it be like to actually feel his naked flesh against hers?

“How about we take a carriage ride around the park? I know you want to do it. Every time one has gone by you’ve tracked its entire route.”

She laughed and couldn’t deny it. It was true and today was a day of experiencing firsts, so she was all up for a ride around the park. “Sounds perfect. How do you know which carriage to choose? Are there good tour guides and bad ones?”

“Nope, from what I can tell they’re all pretty good.”

“Well, I guess I’ll pick the prettiest horse then.”

Nick laughed. “Seems like as good approach as any.”

Within minutes their picnic blanket was folded and the containers that had held their lunches were disposed of. Nick grabbed Pam’s hand again, and together they walked through the park and toward the row of horse and carriages lined up on the side of the road.

As they got closer, Pam’s eye was drawn to a dark brown horse standing in front of a white open carriage. She walked up to the horse and it lowered its head toward her.

“Can I pat it?” she asked the man in the top hat, standing at the head of the horse.

“Course you can, love. You want to take a tour?”

Pam went over and stroked his soft nose. The horse nuzzled into her hand. Without checking with Nick, she turned back to the man. “We sure would.”

“Then climb in and I’ll take you on the best tour around Central Park you’ll ever get.”

She laughed. She had a feeling all the tour guides said the same thing. She climbed up the steps and settled herself on the soft leather seat. Nick followed her in and sat next to her, slinging his arm across the back of the bench seat and resting it lightly on her shoulder. His fingers played with her hair as they slowly made their way around the park. The guide was very informative and she was amazed at the stories he told

about some of the residents of the buildings. To see the apartment building where John Lennon was shot in front of was surreal. She recalled her mum listening to his music and telling Pam about how he'd died when he was making a comeback. She wished she could share this experience of a lifetime with her mum.

The ride was over too quickly for Pam, and the day was drawing to a close. Nick had taken her to all the major tourists points and she didn't want it to end.

Pam stood and watched as the carriage drove away with another lot of visitors on board.

“Thanks, Nick, for making this day so unbelievable.”

“My pleasure, I've enjoyed it too. How about we go to the top of 30 Rock now?”

As much as she didn't want the day to end, tiredness seeped into her bones. What she really wanted to do was go back and relax at the apartment.

“As much as I'd love to do that, I think I'm all toured out. Would you mind if we went back to the apartment? It's not too far away is it?”

“No, home's not far. Come on, we'll get food delivered tonight.”

Letting instinct take over, Pam went up on tiptoe and laid a soft kiss on Nick's lips. “Sounds perfect.”

She went to move away from him but Nick pulled her closer and took her lips with his. The touch and taste intoxicating, and she didn't think she would ever tire of it. Would she have the courage to take things further tonight? Take a chance and attempt to seduce him?

She wound her arms around his neck and opened her mouth wider to tentatively touch her tongue to his. The moment their tongues met, Nick pulled away and immediately Pam wished she'd hadn't been so impulsive. Clearly she'd done it wrong, and he wasn't turned on but turned off by her actions.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled and turned away, wishing she had more experience when it came to men and what turned them on. Wayne hadn’t exactly been the best teacher.

Nick grabbed her hand again and stopped her movement. “Pam, believe me when I say I want you.” He reached out and ran a finger down her cheek. “I’m not sure the middle of street is the best place to show you how much I do. Let’s go home.”



PAM RAN her finger across the spines of the Blu-rays Nick had lined up neatly in the drawer of his entertainment unit. There was nothing there that appealed to her. Most of them were action movies. There were some foreign martial arts movies mixed in. While she enjoyed the odd action movie, tonight she was looking for something that didn’t require too much thinking, and most of the movies required her to pay attention so she didn’t miss the major turning points.

“Anything take your fancy?”

“Umm,” she paused and continued looking.

“Too many action movies and not enough chick flicks?” Nick had squatted down next to her, his words were spoken close to her ear. She tried to suppress the shiver attempting to ripple through her, but it wouldn’t be denied. She could turn her head and his lips would brush up against her cheek. Then it would only take another little turn and then their lips would meet.

“It’s to be expected. After all, you live alone. Why would you have any movies that appealed to women?” Not that she imagined Nick spent too many nights watching movies. She was pretty sure he’d take his dates out for dinner, and when he brought them back home, watching a movie was the last thing he and his date would be doing.

“I could check to see what’s on cable? Or a streaming service. I’ve got them all. Maybe there’s a movie playing that would interest you.”

The more he spoke, the more his words fired her body to life. There was only one thing she was interested in doing and that was getting Nick into bed with her. If only she had the confidence to turn and push him to the ground and take what she wanted.

Instead of reaching for Nick, she pushed the drawer in and rested back on her haunches. "We could do that."

"Actually I have a better idea," Nick responded, as he stood and pulled out another drawer. He extracted something, and moments later soft music filled the room. With all the latest gadgets today to play music, she liked that he still had a CD player.

"How about we dance? Seeing as you missed out last night."

Words were impossible so she gave a quick nod as her answer. He reached down and pulled her into his arms, clasping his arms loosely around her waist. Pam laid her head on his chest and her hands rested on his shoulders as they slowly swayed to the music.

Nick's hands trailed up and down her back, their movement intoxicating, relaxing her until, with a sigh, she moved her own from his chest to his back and her eyes closed gently while savoring the feeling of being in Nick's arms.

One song led into another and another. They hadn't moved from where they'd been when the dancing had started. Nick found the bottom of her top and traced her skin with his fingertips. His lips brushed her hair and Pam had a feeling dancing wasn't going to be on his mind for much longer. Excitement sizzled through her, reminding her of the times when she was a child waking up on Christmas morning to see if Santa had been.

She leaned back slightly to look at him. His eyes were half closed in what she could only assume was desire. The excitement that had only seconds ago fired her blood had quickly transformed to nerves.

What would happen next?

“Nick?”

His lips closed over hers, halting the words she was planning on blurting out. They moved confidently, sweeping away her nerves as if he'd sensed her apprehension all along. His teeth nibbled on her bottom lip, encouraging her to open up beneath him. She couldn't deny his wish and opened up to let him in. She moved her hands to the bottom of his shirt, pulling it up so that, at last, she could touch the muscles that had been tempting her for so long.

No sooner had she achieved her goal than she was scooped up in his arms and her hands slipped out from beneath his shirt. She grabbed onto his shoulders, their mouths clinging to each other, as they made their way from the living room down the hall toward Nick's bedroom. He paused before entering his room and broke their kiss.

“Is this what you want, Pam?” He spoke softly against her cheek. “Because, even though it would kill me, I'll take you to your room right now.”

The fact that he took the time to make sure she wanted to take the next step with him endeared him to her more than he already had.

Here was her chance to halt things if she wanted to. She knew if she didn't go forward with Nick, she would regret it for the rest of her life.

Was she ready?

Chapter Eleven



NICK HELD HIS BREATH WAITING TO SEE WHAT PAM'S ANSWER would be. It wouldn't kill him if she said no, but he'd be disappointed. It had been so hard to keep his hands to himself all throughout dinner. She'd sat on the couch eating her Chinese food and all he'd wanted to do was take it from her and devour her.

Would she say yes?

He knew he was going against everything he said to her. The rules he'd reiterated to her many times. Yet, with Pam, he wanted to take the risk. To throw caution to the wind. Do everything that he wouldn't normally do.

It should scare him, these feelings and worries that he was just like his father, but they didn't.

He wanted Pam. What she made him feel were things he hadn't experienced in any relationship he'd had.

His tumbling thoughts stopped the moment her tongue flicked out to moisten her lips. His groin tightened, imagining what that tongue could do to him.

But he wouldn't act until she'd told him this was what she wanted.

"There's no pressure, Pam. Whatever you decide I won't think or feel any differently toward you. I may need a cold shower." He lowered his head again and placed a gentle kiss upon her luscious lips. "Whatever you want or ne — "

A soft finger stopped anything else he was about to say.
“Yes, Nick.”

“Yes Nick, what?”

“Yes, I want this. But,” she paused and his heart stopped.
“Us doing this goes against what you told me when you hired me. You want to do this?”

He shouldn't be surprised that she called him out. He respected her even more.

“I want this too. And yes, I know I'm breaking my own rules, but Pam I've never wanted anyone the way I want you.”

“I want you too, so much.”

Nothing more needed to be said, he shouldered his way through the door while kissing Pam again. Once he got to the edge of his bed, he stopped and slid her down his body until she was flush against him. He wanted to make the moment last. Savor each taste and touch. Imprint it on his memory so that when it was all over he could relive the moment over and over again.

Nick smoothed his arms down hers until their fingertips met. He lost himself in the pools of shimmering emerald shining out of her eyes. Hiding in the green depths he could see the nerves, and her convulsive swallowing confirmed his thoughts: this was a new situation for her. He wondered, briefly, if she'd never been with a man before. It didn't matter to him. His plans were to take his time, no matter how painful that would be for him.

With infinite care, he slipped his fingers under her top. The earlier touches of her soft skin had left him craving for more. Now he was going to fulfil those longings and desires. He grasped the hem and slowly lifted it up until he had it over her head. He dropped the fabric to the floor. Her breasts were encased in a pale pink lace bra, the scalloped edging cupping them like his hands would be in a moment.

He traced the edge of the soft fabric as his eyes connected back with Pam's. They were turning a deeper green and the apprehension he saw there previously was fading. He

enveloped her in his embrace, and took possession of her lips again.

Her hands had moved to his shirt, fumbling with the buttons, but once she had them undone he had to relinquish his hold on her so he could shrug out of his shirt. While his hands were free he undid his jeans and stepped out of them and his briefs.

His body vibrated to life at Pam's tentative touch on his waist. Deciding he wanted her lying underneath him, naked, he set to work on her pants and got them off her, leaving her only in her lingerie. He wanted to relish the slow removal of the last barrier of clothing.

Once again, he picked her up, all the while keepings his lips fused to hers, his erection jutting against her bottom, tormenting him with the need to sink into her pliant flesh.

He placed her on the bed, reaching a hand out to the bedside table, where he opened a drawer and extracted a foil packet. Once he'd dealt with the protection, he lay down beside her.

"You are so beautiful, sweetheart." His hand roamed over her belly, the muscles beneath quivering with each millimeter of skin he grazed.

His lips followed the trail of his fingers; her skin tasted sweet, like the juiciest strawberry. As his tongue traced the seam of her lace panties, she started in surprise. He changed direction and headed back toward her breast. He could taste her later, they had all night. He wasn't going to rush her with actions she wasn't ready for.

His reached underneath and undid her bra. He slid the fabric off her and threw it to the ground. Cupped her breasts in his hands, he smoothed his thumb over her nipples. She moaned at the touch so he did it again. Her hips moved restlessly. He took a nipple into his mouth and sucked on it, while his other hand slipped beneath the fabric of her panties. He teased the curls before taking hold of the band and pulling them down her legs. She was at last exposed to him, and he

relinquished her nipple so he could lift himself and get his first full look of a naked Pam.

Her eyes were squeezed shut and she was nibbling on her bottom lip. The action caused his already hard cock to harden even more.

“Sweetheart, open your eyes.”

He waited until her eyelids lifted before he spoke again. He rested his hand on her belly. “You still with me?”

She nodded.

“Good.”

He moved his hand from her belly back to between her legs. His fingers found her moist center and stroked gently. His lips landed on hers once again. Her hands gripped his shoulders. Her nails digging in every time he teased her sensitive bud. Her responses so free and real. He’d forgotten how pleasurable it was to make love with someone who was not doing it with an ulterior motive in mind.

He sunk a finger into her and her inner muscles clamped onto it in shock. He stilled his movements, and the moment her body relaxed into him he moved it gently, teasing her until her head was moving from side to side and little moans were coming from her.

Nick removed his hand and shifted his body so he lay over her. He kept his weight on his forearms as he rested his thickening length between her legs. He caught her lips with his, giving her an opened-mouth kiss. She answered with the thrust of her tongue. He lowered his body fractionally, bringing his cock closer to her center. He really wanted to thrust into her and make her his own, the urge so strong he knew controlling it was imperative or he’d frighten her away.

He kept his lips against hers, nipping at them until she moaned, and then he moved his hand back between her thighs. Stroking again to rebuild the sensations within her. Her hips lifted as he stroked, each time teasing his erection until he almost burst.

Nick took her nipple in his mouth as he spread her folds, ready for him to take possession of her. Her little moans were getting louder and the slickness on his fingers told him she was more than ready.

He braced himself on his hands on either side of her shoulders. He nudged her legs a bit further apart and, applying a little pressure, slowly entered her tight channel. Her body tensed around him and Pam had gone from being relaxed to tenser than a steel pipe. He pulled out and kissed her again.

What was going on here? It couldn't be what he thought it was, but everything pointed to the fact he could be right — would he be Pam's first lover?

It empowered him to know he was going to introduce her to the miracles of what a man and woman could do together.

He laid his forehead against hers. "Relax, sweetheart, I'm not going to hurt you. Trust me."

He rolled their bodies so Pam was lying on top of him. He hoped the position would give her the confidence she needed to feel comfortable with what they were about to do. Nick had no doubt in his mind he was going to make love to Pam tonight. If it took hours, he didn't care. He finally had her in his bed.

He nibbled gently on her earlobe, moving his hips slowly against hers. Pam arched her neck, enabling him to nip and lick the soft flesh of her neck. With every touch of his lips on her skin he could feel the tension seeping slowly out of her. Her body relaxed against his hard length, which stirred at the connection between them.

He rolled again so they lay on their sides facing each other. Her eyes were luminous green, glowing with a mixture of desire and fear. He wanted to wipe that fear away.

Keeping his attention on her, he trailed his hand, brushing her nipple lightly before tangling in her curls. He stroked her flesh lightly, tempting her to move her hips into his hands. He increased his pace when her hips answered the challenge. Her eyelids drooped and her mouth opened as the breath rushed

out of her. He could watch her all night as he got to learn her body and know what she liked and what made her body sing.

The tension built again in her body, but this time it wasn't from nerves; it was from the onset of an orgasm. She moved her hips restlessly against his fingers. He wanted to bury himself so deeply in her, it hurt.

With one last stroke of his finger she burst apart in his arms. While her body was still pulsing with her first release he rolled her onto her back and entered her. As her muscles pulsed around him with the remnants of her orgasm he almost let his load go. He pulled out and then sunk in again, a little deeper. He encountered the resistance of her flesh.

He'd been right, she was a virgin and he hated that he had to hurt her. He paused in his thrusting and massaged her breast, flicking at her nipple. As he massaged he moved his hips in quick succession, stretching her tight skin, until with one last thrust he broke the barrier. She cried out against him and her hands pushed against his chest. He gathered her close and kept moving, hoping that with each movement the stinging he knew she would be feeling would subside.

Her hands went from pushing him to stop to encouraging him to move quicker. Nick lost himself as the sensations of her touching him swept over him, vitalizing the blood in his veins until all he could concentrate on was giving her pleasure. As her muscles contracted around him again, he let go of the control he'd been keeping in check. He thrust harder and faster and her hips rose to meet him each and every time. The bottom of his spine tingled in anticipation of his impending release. Pam cried out again, the wonder of the experience in her eyes. He gave one last thrust and groaned out her name as his body throbbed inside her.

He captured her lips in a possessive kiss. A kiss to brand her as his. And she was his. No other man was going to have this woman. He wouldn't let them.



BONELESS LETHARGY CONSUMED PAM. She couldn't move even if she wanted to. Nick's body rested over hers and she never wanted to let him go.

What they'd shared could only be described as out of this world, as cheesy as it sounded. Never had she imagined that making love would feel like she'd left her body and had been transported to a higher plane.

Would it always be like this? Or was because it was her first time it held a special quality that could never be repeated?

"Are you okay, sweetheart? Did I hurt you?" The brush of his lips against her ear had her whole body shivering in reaction.

With those simple questions, Pam knew Nick had worked out this had been her first time. "Yes, and no you didn't hurt me."

"Good, I'll be right back." He pulled out from her body and, as he walked away, Pam used the time to really look at the man who now owned her, body and heart. She couldn't deny Nick had become important to her.

His butt was nice and tight and his back muscles rippled as he moved. She couldn't believe she had been enough to attract a man like Nick Rhodes.

She pulled the blankets tighter around herself as her body began cooling after being so warm for so long.

What happened now?

Should she go back to her bedroom? Should she stay here and wait for Nick to return?

Having never been in bed with a man before, she had no idea what the correct protocol was. Would Nick expect her to go back to her room? Maybe it would be better if she did.

She tossed back the covers she'd recently pulled around herself and swung her legs so they dangled over the side. Her toes met the cool wood of Nick's bedroom floor. At least in her room she had carpet. She took a few moments to look around the room. Like most of the others in the apartment,

there was a decided lack of personal touches. She supposed with him renting it out it made sense not to make the space personal, but it seemed so cold to her. So sterile, as though the thought of getting close to someone was a foreign concept to Nick.

A shiver traversed the length of her spine at the thought of locking herself away from the intimacy being with another person could bring.

An inelegant snort erupted from her — like she could talk. She'd been doing the exact same thing until this job offer came up. Going through life without noticing all the treasures it could bring. Not that she was an expert in relationships. One foray into a man's bed didn't make her knowledgeable on the ways of life with a person of the opposite sex.

Perhaps Nick had the right idea after all. Keep moving, never put down ties and it will keep the hurt at bay.

Pam buried the troubling thoughts, unsure where they'd come from in the first place. She stood and, before she could even take a step, warm arms wrapped around her.

“You're not thinking of leaving me, are you?” Nick nuzzled her neck before taking her lips with his again, making conversation between them impossible.

It didn't take much effort to have her softening into his embrace. With a simple touch, her body melted against him like butter in a hot skillet.

Her back hit the soft mattress of the bed. Nick increased his onslaught and she ran her fingers through his short hair. Short, spikey damp strands floated through her spread fingers. He must have wet it when he'd been in the bathroom.

Her body ached to know his possession again. To have the power and strength of Nick inside of her, moving until she couldn't even remember her name.

How could she want him so badly again?

As Nick dragged his lips away from hers, she gasped in some much needed air. With her fingers still in his hair, she dug them in a little, moving his head to her left breast. His

chuckle resonated around her aroused flesh and his tongue traced her engorged peak. A sigh whispered out from between her kiss-swollen lips.

Pam was never going to tire of the sensations Nick's touch generated in her body. She gave herself up to his touch, not worrying about what tomorrow would bring. All she needed was Nick worshipping her. Never had she felt so cherished or so wanted. She never wanted it to end.

Chapter Twelve



THE WORDS ON THE COMPUTER SCREEN STARED BACK AT PAM. Reading the email from her real estate agent for the third time still didn't make it seem real. How was it possible that a caveat could be put on her house without her knowing?

She fired the question back to the agent, knowing that with the time difference she wouldn't get an answer until the next day.

The urge to pick up the stapler and throw it at the computer screen threatened to overwhelm her. Helplessness leached into her bones and she slumped in her chair. She had no idea what to do now. It looked like she might have to go back to her original plan of renting out her house. It would take her too many years to think about to pay off her mother's medical expenses, and the mortgage.

When she and Nick had arrived at the office this morning, she'd been walking on air. Nick had given her a kiss before he disappeared into his own office.

The weekend they'd just spent together was something dreams were made of. After spending all of the day yesterday in bed, Nick had decided to take her out to dinner at a wonderful little restaurant tucked away in a side street. The food was amazing, and the hours spent in his arms afterwards had her believing in a happy ever after. Now an email had shattered the bubble she'd been living in for the past forty-eight hours.

For the first time in her life she wished she had the disposable income Nick had. Now she understood why some people married for money and love became a low priority. Knowing you had the means to pay for anything you needed at any time created a security she craved at this moment.

The buzzing of the intercom pulled her from her dilemma and pushed her mind back on to her job — a job she couldn't afford to lose now.

“Pam, have we received anything from Ethan yet? He's supposed to be getting final documents to us.”

She scrolled through her emails, having forgotten her inbox after she opened the real estate's email. She saw an email from Ethan.

“Yes, I'll print it out and bring it in.”

“Thank you.”

In minutes she had the relevant papers and, from what she'd read in the email, Nick wasn't going to be happy. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door between her workspace and Nick's office. Nick had his back to her and was talking on his cell. She took the opportunity to admire him as she walked forward.

She knew every inch of those broad shoulders, which filled out his suit jacket perfectly. She spied the surface of his desk. If anything could take away her financial troubles, it would be to lose herself in Nick's arms. Let the emotions only Nick could draw out of her carry her far, far away from all her troubles.

“If I didn't need to get a look at those papers you have in your hand, I'd be extremely willing to take you up on your offer.”

Nick's words startled her from her fantasies. A blush bloomed from her neck to her cheeks and she couldn't look up, too afraid of what she might see in Nick's face.

He wasn't having any of her shyness. He hooked a finger under chin and gently raised it so their eyes collided. She was

familiar with the look she saw shining in their gorgeous depths. She'd seen it many times over the weekend.

Nick leaned forward and her breath hitched in her throat. Spellbound, she waited to see what his next step would be. Sighing as his lips tenderly touched hers. A soft mating of their mouths, over before it truly began.

Pam took a tiny step back, his heat still enveloped her. How she wished they were standing in the living room of Nick's apartment, where his bed was only a few steps away.

"Don't tempt me, Pam." All lightness gone from his voice, replaced by a harshness she'd only ever heard directed at Ethan when Nick had been warning the other man off her.

She took two steps back, the distance enough for her to get her wayward thoughts under control.

How could she lose sight of the fact they were at work? She'd never lost her concentration before. Then again, she'd never spent the weekend with her boss either.

She couldn't believe she'd done what every previous assistant Nick had employed had done. How could she forget he wanted an assistant who wouldn't throw herself at him in the work place? She'd done everything he disliked in his employees.

"I'm sorry, Nick. I've been totally unprofessional, it won't happen again." She needed to keep her mind fully focused on what she was there to do. Her job. "Here are the papers you wanted. I don't think you're going to be too happy with what Ethan has to say."

As Nick reviewed the papers, anger etched into his face. For a moment Pam thought it might have been better if she'd left the room the moment she'd handed the papers over. However, her role was to assist him and staying right where she stood was her only option.

"This is ridiculous, he can't demand these things." Nick slammed the papers on his desk. "Get him on the phone, now!"

"I'm on it."

Pam backed out of the room, and once she sat she sucked in some deep breaths before reaching out to pick up the phone and dial the lawyer's number. This was her role. During working hours she needed to remember what her role was. After working hours, well, after today, she wasn't entirely too sure what her role would be. She only hoped Nick wouldn't hold her lapse in attention from assistant to lover against her and send her back home. She couldn't forget how much she needed this job.



NICK SWIVELLED his chair and looked out his floor to ceiling windows at the view. New York was drifting from dusk into evening. The vibrant city lights were getting brighter with every passing second. Even sitting fifty-two floors above the city, the vibrancy that was essentially New York reached out to him.

It had been a bitch of a day and he knew it was going to be a long night. He'd gone over the contract with a fine tooth comb before sending it to Ethan. Still it wasn't enough for the lawyer, and his requests were getting more and more ridiculous with every passing day. He wasn't going to be forced into making stupid compromises just to appease a lawyer's ego.

A knock shattered the stillness that had permeated his office. He thought he was the only one who hadn't gone home. He'd buzzed Pam and told her to leave when the clock had hit five. Maybe it was the janitor coming to clean, but they'd never bothered him before.

A knock sounded again. This time the door opened and Pam stood in the doorway, looking more like a siren than a competent assistant. Her hair was down and curled sexily over one shoulder. Silhouetted in his doorframe wearing, from what he could tell, skinny jeans and a tight-fitting sweater, his body flared to life and all thoughts of contracts and amendments flew out of his mind.

“Can I come in?” her voice wafted toward him, like a soft summer breeze, tempting him to take her in his arms and lose himself in her sweet body. He couldn’t deny his attraction to Pam was getting stronger and stronger, especially after the weekend they’d spent together.

Was this how his father had felt when he embarked on an affair with his assistant? Had he tried to suppress the longing, to remember he was married, or had he succumbed the first time she’d smiled at him?

His thoughts cooled the desire burning through him. He was not his father. He wasn’t going to let anything or anyone make him lose track of what was his only goal in life.

He couldn’t let himself fall further under her spell. She’d cast it when he’d seen her walking down the aisle toward him at Luciano’s wedding.

“I suppose.” He clipped out as he picked up a piece of paper.

Nick could sense her hesitation, and when she walked into his office with a toss of her hair, he tried hard to suppress the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. She had fire and he admired that about her.

She stalked toward his desk. His resolve of not touching her was tested with every step she took toward him. He dropped the paper he had in his hand and sat back in his chair, waiting and wondering just what his spitfire Pam was planning to do next, acknowledging his attraction toward her couldn’t be brushed aside so easily.

He was his father’s son after all. He was bound by his desire for her. The only saving grace was he didn’t have a wife and child at home waiting for him. A wife whose jealousy ate away at her like acid on metal until all that was left was nothing but a hole in place of the love that once was shared.

As she leaned over his desk, her eyes flashing green fire, he fought the urge to jump out of his chair and haul her over the desk and kiss her until she was moaning out his name.

“I thought perhaps you might be hungry and I brought you some dinner. But,” she paused, her gaze roaming over him, re-enforcing the idea of taking her in his arms, “I see you’ve had your fill of grumpy pie so I’ll just leave.”

Before he could say anything, she turned on her heel and headed toward his door. This time he followed his instincts and jumped out of his chair, his only goal to have her in his arms.

“And another thi — ,” she started as she whirled back around to face him. He reached her at the same time she turned. His arms stretched out to steady her, reveling in having her close to him again.

“Yes.”

“I was going to say,” she again stopped mid-sentence. His groin tightened as her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. He lowered his head toward her shining lips.

“Yes, what were you going to say?” he teased the corner of her mouth, her body melting underneath his touch.

“I don’t remember.” The words whispered against his cheek before she moved the fraction of a millimeter so their lips fused together.

He pulled her closer, and the tension that had encased his body since he’d read Ethan’s email swept out from him, like a wave rushing back out on the ocean tide.

He let himself get lost in the sensation of the kiss. When he was with Pam he felt grounded, like he could take on the world and know that everything would be all right, because he had her by his side.

His fingers found the hem of her sweater, the fabric as soft as the skin he knew was underneath. As her fingers curled in his shirt, he waited for her to start unbuttoning it. He wouldn’t stop her. He planned to have her and he couldn’t wait to experience her again. Instead of unbuttoning his shirt, she pushed her palms against his chest. Her action surprised him, considering the way she’d relaxed into him. But he was never one to force a woman into something she didn’t want to do.

He released her and took two steps back, giving her the space she so clearly desired. He tried to ignore the feelings of loss, which were swamping the desire so recently burning through his soul.

The clashing emotions were new to him, unnerving him like he'd never been before. He didn't know how to deal with them. He'd never had these sorts of emotions when he'd been involved with women before.

Why was Pam so different? Why was he yearning to have her so much?



PAM WANTED to throw herself back into his arms, to push away a disappointing day where her dreams of financial freedom had been snatched from her. The need to grasp back the feelings of wonder they'd shared over the weekend was strong inside her. The only thing stopping her from doing that was the man standing in front of her and how he blew so hot and cold with her. Her mind was telling her to walk away, finish the job, get a good reference and then find a position in another company.

Her heart had different ideas. Her heart was yelling at her that Nick was her man. Her one and only and she needed to do whatever it took to make him realize the same thing. Only she had no idea how to achieve her goal.

“I don't get you, Nick.” The words burst out of her in frustration from everything going on in her life.

“What do you mean?”

A scream of annoyance at his obstinate attitude threatened to erupt out of her. She was pretty confident he knew what she was getting at.

“This backwards and forwards game you seem to be playing with me. All day you've done it to me. I thought aft —
“

“You thought what? Because we had sex on the weekend, when we’re in the office I would be all over you? Treat you differently?”

“I never took you for cruel, Nick. Especially since you had your lips all over me just two minutes ago. You were the one who initiated it, too. I simply came here tonight to bring you something to eat. I thought you could use some food. More fool me.”

He couldn’t have hurt her more if he’d physically hit her. Tears were collecting behind her eyes; she had to get out of there before he saw them. No way would she let Nick see how his words hurt. Somehow gaining her composure, she straightened her shoulders and flipped her hair over her shoulder, hoping her actions were convincing enough to show Nick he had no power to hurt her.

“I’ll see you back at ho — the apartment.”

She made her way to the door, straining to hear a soft footfall on the lush carpet of his office stopping her departure. The only sound filling her ears was the sound of a crack forming in her heart.

Chapter Thirteen



FINALLY THE SOUND PAM HAD BEEN WAITING FOR ALL NIGHT came, the snick of the front door of the apartment closing. She huddled down further on the couch so Nick wouldn't see her. She knew she should be in her room. Why she wasn't was something she couldn't answer. Or didn't want to examine too closely.

After she'd gotten home from the disaster of trying to bring dinner to Nick, she'd cried on the couch before falling into an exhausted, emotional slumber, waking to find the apartment still glowing with the lights she'd left on. She'd gotten up and turned them off, intending to go to her room. Instead, she'd made her way back to the couch and had stared out at the twinkling city lights.

A muttered curse resounded around the quiet, stillness of the room. Pam wished she'd gone to her room. She certainly didn't want Nick to think she'd waited up for him. What would be the point of her staying up? It's not like he would expect to see her.

"You should be in bed."

Pam popped her head up over the top of the couch, shocked Nick knew where she was lying. Not wanting to let him think she'd been waiting for him, she told a little white lie.

"You woke me when you swore."

Nick switched on the lamp sitting on the table by her head, causing her to blink rapidly at the sudden light shining in her eyes.

“A little warning would’ve been nice,” she huffed out, waiting to see what Nick was doing, when he lifted her legs and sat down at the end of the couch. He rested her legs on top of his and started to massage her left foot. The action intimate and, after what she’d thrown at him in the office, the temptation to yank her foot away from his massaging fingers was strong. But the pressure he was placing on her tense nerve endings was hypnotising. A soft moan escaped from between her lips when he deepened his touch.

“I’m sorry.” His apology, so tenderly spoken, threw her. Was he apologising for waking her, or did he think her moan of pleasure was a moan of pain?

“For what.”

“Tonight. Today. For being an insensitive jerk.”

“I won’t argue with that.”

His chuckle shuddered through her from where his fingers were on her foot to the top of her head. Looking at him, she could see the sincerity shining in the depth of his chocolate-colored eyes.

“I’m sorry too.”

He switched his ministrations to her other foot. “I don’t think you have anything to be sorry for. You were totally right. I have been sending you mixed messages and that’s not fair. Not fair at all.”

It would be so easy to let him take all the blame but she knew, deep down, her snapping at him had been due to the issues with her house.

“No, it’s not fair, but I was being overly sensitive. I wasn’t having the best day either.”

His hands continued their gentle massage from the sole of her foot to her ankle, before slowly slipping beneath the loose

pants she'd changed in to, to her calf. "Do you want to talk about it?" he offered.

Again it would be so easy to ask for his help. To see if there was a way he could look into getting the caveat lifted from her property. But, according to her realtor, the only way to get it lifted would be by paying the outstanding amount to the company that had placed the caveat.

"Not really."

"A problem shared is a problem halved. Or so I've heard."

"I've heard that too, but really, this is something I need to handle myself."

"Well, the offer stands." He pulled his hand away from her calf and made the move to get up off the couch. She didn't want him to go. She wanted him to continue his massage, over her whole body, not just her feet and legs.

The chance to express her need for him to stay dwindled with each step he took away from her.

"Don't go," she whispered. He kept walking. He hadn't heard her. This was her chance to go after something she really wanted. And she wanted Nick. She thrust aside the blanket and got off the couch. "Nick!"

He stopped where he was, in the middle of the hallway. "Yes?"

"I need you."

Three simple words, but with so much meaning and depth to them.

"Why?"

She didn't want think about the consequences of them being together again, and his question required her to think. Her answer was going to be based purely on the emotions running through her now.

"Because we both need this. We both need to forget."

Pam held her breath as Nick walked toward her. When he got close he reached out, cupping her cheek with his hand,

warming the skin under his fingers immediately.

“It will only be a bandaid. The problems will still be there tomorrow.”

“I know, but I know we both need this. I don’t know what’s going to come tomorrow or the day after or the day after that. But what I do know is that I want to explore whatever is happening between us. Because there is something, Nick, and I know you feel it too.”

As he closed his eyes, Pam thought he was going to take his hand away and turn on his heel, leaving her standing in the hallway to deal with her embarrassment of, for once, speaking her mind and asking for something she really wanted.

Then he opened his eyes and the desire flared strong and true in their brown depths. “I don’t want to feel this,” he muttered. “It goes against everything I believe in, but I can’t deny it either. I’ve tried all day to forget about what we shared on the weekend and it was impossible.”

He finished by sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her to his room. Elation sparkled through her at the thought Nick felt what she felt. That he reciprocated the desire that had enveloped her from their first touch at Jasmine’s wedding.

He shouldered through the door and then let her slide down his body until her feet touched his floor.

“I can’t promise anything long-term, Pam. I don’t do long-term.”

She placed her fingers over his mouth. “I’m not expecting anything, Nick. I’ve got so much going on with my life that I can’t promise long-term now either. Let’s just take each day and whatever happens, happens. It’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

She replaced her fingers with his lips and pushed his jacket off his shoulders. His hands were once again at the hem of her sweater, only this time he lifted it up and off her. His hands swept up and cupped her breasts. She moaned against his lips. This was what she’d been craving all day. To feel his hands on her, taking her places only he could.

Their clothes were quickly disposed of and Nick pushed her gently so she fell onto the bed.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you,” he muttered against her belly, before trailing his lips to the heat between her legs. Pam lost all conscious thought and succumbed to the sensations of pure bliss coursing through her bloodstream as he delved his tongue through her slick folds. Her hands gripped his hair, pressing him closer so that he could deepen the contact. As his tongue stroked in and out, her hands lost their grip on his hair and fell uselessly to her sides. In a matter of minutes, she was shattering against him in a wild orgasm. With her body still trembling, he kissed his way back up, giving each of her breasts special attention.

Each time they’d made love, Nick worshipped her body. Made her feel like she was a queen. She wanted to do something for him. When feeling returned to her arms, she raised them to his shoulders and pushed until he was lying on his back.

“My turn,” she said as she straddled the lower part of his body, his erection nudging against her belly.

“Really?” A slow, wicked grin broke out over his face. “What do you plan on doing?”

Pam leaned down and placed a kiss on his lips. “Wait and see.”

She swept one hand down his chest until she came in contact with his hard cock. The skin smooth and warm. Seeing as she liked it when Nick stroked her, she moved her hand slowly up and down his length, all the while watching to see if he she was doing the right thing. When she smoothed her hand across the tip of his erection a half grimace, half smile contorted his features. She stopped, wondering if she’d hurt him.

His eyelids lifted slightly. “Why did you stop?”

“I thought I was hurting you.”

Nick’s hand came up and rested against the one still wrapped around him. “Don’t stop.” He then encouraged her to

continue. With his hand over hers he guided her, showing her what he liked. Soon she had a rhythm going and his hand moved from holding hers to caressing her breast, teasing her nipple. Sensations were building inside of her and she knew she wanted to have Nick filling her once again.

As if reading her mind, he grabbed a foil packet and handed it to her. "Put it on, please."

She opened it and gently rolled the latex over his hard length. When she was done, he lifted her until her pussy was resting on his tip. With a gentle push down from him, and a lifting of his hips, he entered her.

Pam sighed in pleasure at having Nick fill her completely. She didn't move. She just enjoyed the sensation of them fitting together so perfectly. Then instinct took over and she slowly, carefully rode his length.

Being on top created a new set of feelings and desires she'd not felt the previous times they were together. She liked being in control. Liked being able to move swiftly and then slowly, torturing them both.

Her orgasm built, the muscles in her belly clenching with each upward thrust from Nick's hips. Flinging her head back, she left herself be carried away on the wave of her orgasm. So lost in the emotions swirling around her like a warm summer breeze, she wasn't aware of being flipped over by Nick until her back hit the soft sheets .

Nick drove into her, sustaining her orgasm, until with one long thrust he groaned her name as he came inside her. Her heart was beating so rapidly she was sure it was going to burst out of her chest.

How was she ever going to be able to walk away from Nick? She may have sounded all brave telling him she only wanted the here and now with him, but with Nick lying on top of her, their bodies still tightly joined together as one, as if she was made for him and he for her, Pam knew right then she wanted more than a quick fling. She was falling for Nick and could imagine a future together with him. How was she going to convince Nick that he wanted a future with her?



A FEATHERY TOUCH trickled down Pam's spine. She arched her back into it. Wanting more than a light touch. Lips replaced the fingers and she moaned in delight.

"Good morning," Nick murmured against her skin, as he kissed his way up to her neck. Pushing her hair aside, he nipped at it before leaning over to gently suck her earlobe. His heat encompassed her, making her feel cherished and safe.

"I could get used to wake up calls like this."

Immediately she said the words she wished them back. Even though in her mind she was ready to take their relationship further, she knew Nick wasn't. The stiffening of his body and then the coolness brushing her skin as he moved away confirmed she'd said the entirely wrong thing. But how to salvage the situation without making a fool out of herself? How to make light of the words she'd spoken in carelessness?

"I'm going to take a shower." The words were fired at her as Nick thrust back the covers and got out of bed. He stalked toward the bathroom and Pam admired the clean lines of his back and his taut butt, all the while mentally kicking herself.

With the closing of the door she rolled over and grabbed a pillow, hugging it close to her. It was still warm and Nick's scent wafted up to her. She had to fix this somehow. Had to make him understand she knew the ground rules, even though she was breaking them. He didn't have to know what she was feeling. As the sound of rushing water reached out to her, an idea formed in her mind. Dumping the pillow on the bed, she got up and made her way to the bathroom. She'd read in many books that shower sex was pretty awesome; she was going to find out if it was true, or just pretty words.

Quietly, she opened the bathroom door. Steam greeted her but she could see Nick, in all his naked glory, standing under the stream of water. His face lifted into the spray as his hands slicked back his hair. Her body loosened in desire. Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the stall. She opened it before

she thought too much more about it and chickened out. She plastered herself against Nick's body, wrapping her arms around him. In seconds, her hair flattened against her scalp from the cascade of warm water.

"Pam?"

"You were expecting someone else?"

"No, just surprised." He turned in her arms so they were chest-to-chest, hip-to-hip. There was no denying Nick didn't mind her crashing his shower. The evidence of his happiness was nudging at her belly.

"Good surprise or bad surprise?" She ran her hands down his back until she cupped the butt she had been admiring not so long ago, squeezing the firm flesh. He felt so good, and right at this moment he was all hers.

Pam lifted her head and looked into his eyes. They were dark with want for her.

"Good morning, Nick."

She rose up on tiptoes and kissed him. His arms tightened his hold on her. She gave herself over to the kiss and to being back in Nick's arms. Nothing mattered except living in the moment, and she was going to live one hundred percent in the moment right now.



NICK'S BODY still hummed from the shower sex he'd shared with Pam. If he didn't have the issue with the contract for the deal to sort out, he would have blown off work and stayed in bed all day with her. She was so giving in her responses to him. Her body came to life under his touch and, if he was truthful with himself, his body responded likewise.

But it wasn't only in bed that they were compatible. He thought about the day they'd spent looking around the city. The conversation had flowed easily between them. No awkward silences. Nothing. Just a peacefulness and completeness he'd never felt with any other woman in his life.

Normally his relationships lasted a couple of months at most. Recently, he'd been steering clear of women. Having to fight them off at the office had made the idea of cultivating a relationship with another woman unpleasant. With Pam, it wasn't like he had to try hard. She liked even the simplest of things. While they'd waited for the car to arrive this morning, she'd spent the time talking to Rob, asking after his family. She'd laughed when Rob had told her a funny story. He couldn't imagine any of the women he'd dated previously taking the time to talk to his doorman. Usually they were too busy on their phones to give Rob more than a cursory hello.

Yes, Pam was different, and it was those differences that were troubling him. Her words when they'd first woken had freaked him out. He didn't want her to get ideas that this arrangement between them was permanent. But he couldn't deny he enjoyed having her with him. Enjoyed the ease with which they lived together. The fireworks they sparked off each other in bed was an added bonus.

"Nick." Her soft voice sounded around the office and he smiled. He could hear a slight hesitation in how she'd said his name.

"Yes, swee — , Pam." He couldn't believe he'd almost called her *sweetheart* in the office. What if a staff member was standing beside her and heard him over the loudspeaker? He only hoped she'd lifted the handset when she'd buzzed through to him.

"Ethan's here to see you."

"Right, send him in." Hearing that it was Ethan, he doubly hoped she'd lifted the handset and hadn't had him on loudspeaker.

As his door opened, Nick looked up and scrutinised the man walking in. His face impassive, showing no signs that he'd heard Nick's almost faux pas. Relief coursed through him, but also caution. He couldn't let what was happening between him and Pam affect his business. He'd worked too long and too hard to let a woman derail him. He wasn't going to let a woman ruin his life, like his father had.



TWO HOURS LATER, Nick closed the door on Ethan triumphantly. He'd finally got him to buckle under and withdraw his outrageous demands. At last the deal had been sorted out and he had to give credit to Pam for digging through the previous negotiations and finding that the people Ethan was representing had been favorable to the terms of the contract when it had been initially presented to them. Nick knew Ethan had been deliberately stalling negotiations with petty little things and once he had the proof, Ethan backed down. Now the deal was all signed off and Nick could move onto the next acquisition for the Morelli Corporation.

The corporation had many branches. They had hotels, resorts, investment banks, property development deals. Nick was sure there was more they could look into, but he'd have to speak to Luc to see what avenue he wanted to take the company down now.

The thought troubled him. With Luc settled with Jasmine and expecting to become a father soon, he may not want to expand the company further. It wasn't like they really needed to. They both had more wealth than they could possibly use in a lifetime. But Nick didn't want to get stagnant. He lived for the drive of acquiring struggling businesses and turning them around. Had Luc lost the drive for it, now his personal life was becoming his number one priority? There was only one way to find out.

He got up and strode to the door and opened it, only to stop when he saw Pam sitting at her desk. She was busy typing up the notes from the meeting and hadn't noticed him. He took the time to watch as her fingers flew over the keyboard. Those same fingers had flown over his body too. Bringing him pleasure and pain. The desire to pull her into his arms and kiss her was strong. He wanted to push those papers on her desk aside and lower her to the hard surface, before sinking deeply into her. But he held back. They were at the office; any member of staff could come across them.

“Did you want something, Nick?”

So caught up in his thoughts of kissing and making love to her, he hadn't noticed that she'd stopped what she was doing and was looking at him expectantly. What would she do if he did lean over and kiss her? The faint ding of the elevator reminded him it wouldn't be the best idea.

“Can you call the pilot and get a flight plan lodged to go back to Perth tomorrow, please?”

“We're going back?” Her shock was visible. He could see the flash of disappointment dull the normally bright green eyes.

“Yes, the deal is done. Your efficiency in getting the mess my previous assistant left behind sorted out, and finding that information about our initial negotiations, helped seal the deal. You really are worth your weight in gold.”

“Great. That's great, and of course I'll call the pilot. I'll do it right now.”

He heard the forced enthusiasm in her voice and it hit him why she sounded so disappointed. This wasn't his first trip to New York, but it was Pam's. She enjoyed being in a place that was new and exciting.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. “Wear that nice white dress tonight, I'm taking you out on the town.”

He dropped a quick kiss on her neck and then turned back to his office. He had a night to plan for. He was going to make Pam's last evening in New York one to remember.



PAM SMOOTHED down the white dress. She knew she looked good in it. And obviously Nick liked it. A shiver brushed down her spine as she recalled his whispered words in her ear, requesting she wear the dress.

“Pam, sweetheart, are you ready?” His words were muffled from behind the door. She wondered if he suspected that if he

walked into the room, they wouldn't leave. He had kissed her senseless on the drive home from the office, and even though she'd wanted to continue with the kissing when they arrived back at the apartment, Nick had pushed her toward her room and told her to get ready.

Then she'd received an email from the debt collectors again. The last thing she wanted to do was think about what was going to greet her when she returned to Perth. She had hoped she'd be able to tell them that in thirty days the sale on her house would be finalised and she'd be able to pay them out. Now she was back to avoiding their calls and trying to work out how to sort out the mess that was the financial part of her life. The small payment she'd made hadn't satisfied them even though everything they said when she made it, suggested they'd be happy with it.

But she wasn't going to think about that. Tonight was her last night in New York and she was spending it with the most handsome man she'd ever met. The fact he found her attractive was still something she couldn't comprehend.

Pam couldn't wait for what was going to happen tonight. She hoped they were going dancing. To be held in Nick's arms again while they moved to music was sensual foreplay. Giving herself another once over in the mirror, she was pleased with how the dress looked, she picked her purse up from the bed, along with her wrap, and opened the door.

Her resolve to not drag Nick into her room was severely tested with the sight that greeted her. He was lounging by the side of her room, looking sexy in black trousers and black shirt. A matching jacket was folded over his arm.

"Going for the opposite of what I'm wearing, huh?" she commented on a laugh.

Shrugging his shoulder negligently, he took hold of her hand, raising it to his lips to place a gentle kiss on top. "I'm dressed so you can shine tonight."

Pam was glad Nick had hold of her hand, as she was positive if he hadn't she'd have fallen in a puddle at his feet. He couldn't have said anything nicer to her. In that moment

she felt like she was his one and only. So special, and he was happy to take a backseat to her.

“Thank you, but I like to think we complement each other.”

His response was to lean forward and give her a quick kiss on her lips. “Let’s go, shall we?”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise, but trust me, sweetheart. You’re going to enjoy every minute of it.”

They made their way through the apartment. As they went, Pam took note of everything so she could remember her time in this fabulous city. The time she spent it in the most amazing apartment with views others only dream about.

When they got downstairs, she gave the doorman a wide smile as he opened the door for them to pass through.

“You’re looking extra lovely this evening, Pam,” Rob said as he tipped his hat to her. “Going somewhere special?”

“Thank you. And I have no idea where we’re going. Nick’s going to surprise me.”

“Have a pleasant evening.”

“We will,” Nick replied as he slipped the man some money. The action of tipping Rob was still a concept she found mind-boggling. But she knew most of the people worked for minimum wages, so tips helped them with their everyday needs.

A black limousine waited at the curb for them, the engine purring quietly. This was another luxury Pam would miss once they returned to Perth. There was nothing quite like being driven around in the back of a car with blacked-out windows and feeling like a superstar.

She got herself settled and waited while Nick spoke quietly to the driver. Anticipation hummed through her.

“All set?” Nick asked, as he took hold of her hand and rested it on his leg.

“Sure am, I can’t wait. Now are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“No, but you’ll find out soon enough.”

“You don’t play fair.” She stuck her lip out, acting like a spoiled child, but all the while trying not to laugh.

His eyes twinkled, like shining stars, in amusement at her antics. “You know you’ll stay like that if the wind changes.”

This time she couldn’t stop the laughter from erupting from her. She sidled closer to Nick and lay her head on his shoulder. His hand came up and stroked her hair sweetly.

“Thank you,” she murmured after a moment.

“My pleasure.”

They sat in companionable silence while the car made its way through the New York traffic. Pam could look out the window but there’d be no point. Even after almost two weeks in the city she couldn’t tell which direction they were heading. She trusted that Nick would keep her safe.

Soon the car pulled to a stop. The driver killed the engine and got out to get the door for Nick. When he was out, Nick bent forward and held out his hand.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?”

Pam had no hesitation in putting her hand in his. The realization that she was falling in love with him had hit her as they sat quietly in the car. Nick could’ve taken her anywhere. Could’ve done anything, but she knew he’d planned out a night to remember, just for her. To give her a wonderful memory of her time in New York. Those actions spoke of a man who had to care for her a little bit.

But she wasn’t going to risk spoiling the evening by blurting out the feelings of love, which were taking root in her heart and spreading out their joyous arms until they captured her whole soul.

She was ready for anything.

Placing her hand in his. “I’m ready for this adventure you’re about to take me on. I trust you’re going to give me a night to remember.”

“You can count on it.” He pulled her hand slightly and she eased out of the car. He wrapped his arm around her waist, anchoring her to his side. She took a moment to look around to see if she could recognize where they were.

They were at the place where they’d caught the ferry to visit the Statue of Liberty. Except off to the side a bit. She looked around, and spied a massive white boat moored to the side of the jetty.

“Are we going on that?” she asked as she pointed to it.

“Yes.”

“But it’s huge.” A flash of disappointment threatened to dissolve her excitement of the evening. A boat that big wouldn’t be just for the two of them. There had to be more people going on it. It didn’t make sense, though; they were the only two people in close proximity to the jetty. Maybe this was the first stop and then they would pick more people up at another location. She tried to inject excitement back into her voice. “Are we going to a party?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, well, I’m sure that’s going to be fun.”

Nick leaned down and whispered in her ear. “It’s a party for two.”

She whipped her head around, almost knocking him out with the movement. “What? Just us?”

“Yes. I promised you a night to remember and I always keep my promises.”

A night on a boat, just two of them. Nothing could be more perfect. What else did Nick have planned for her?

Chapter Fourteen



A GENTLE BREEZE WHISPERED OVER HER, RUFFLING HER HAIR and blowing strands across her face. She pushed the offending wisps away, not wanting to miss out on the scene in front of her. They'd been cruising around the Hudson River for a couple of hours. Ate dinner on the deck under the watchful eye of the Statue of Liberty. The city at night, all lit up, sparkling like the brightest star, was a sight she would never forget.

She wished they weren't flying back to Perth the next day. There was still so much more of the city she knew she wanted to see and experience. She hadn't seen a show on Broadway. Hadn't visited Chinatown or Soho, or the Met; so much culture and history to soak up. But if she continued working with Nick then perhaps she'd come back again. That is, if he wanted her to still work for him. He'd initially wanted her to help him sort out this New York deal and now it was completed and they were heading back to Perth. What happened next for her?

Warm arms slipped around her waist, pulling her against a strong, hard chest. "You shouldn't be thinking so hard. You should be enjoying the view."

Pam laid her hands over Nick's. The evening had been so perfect. A beautiful yacht, with a beautiful setting and a beautiful man who was all hers.

For the moment.

The voice of reason kept reminding her. She didn't want to listen to that voice tonight. Nick was right. Tonight was about enjoying their last night in New York, and each other.

She turned in his arms and looped hers around his neck, teasing the back of his neck with her fingers.

"I am enjoying the view. How can you not?" She went up on her tiptoes and gave his lips the briefest of touches. His lips were cool and firm. She would never get tired of tasting them. "Thank you for such a wonderful evening, Nick. I'm not sure I deserve all this."

"This isn't payment for a job well done, if that's what you're thinking. I did this because I wanted to give you a wonderful memory of your time in New York."

"And you have. I won't ever forget coming here. I almost don't want to leave," she finished off wistfully. "Do we have to go back? Can't we keep sailing around?"

Nick chuckled against her ear. A shiver rippled through her. "As much as I would love to stay here, I only hired the boat for the evening. But let's not worry about tomorrow. Let's enjoy tonight."

He swooped down and kissed the corners of her mouth before settling his lips over hers. She tasted champagne and the essence she was recognising as essentially Nick. It was intoxicating and she couldn't get enough of it. Pam tightened her arms around his neck, pressing the lower part of her body against his, feeling his hardness against her belly.

She arched her neck as Nick trailed his lips down it. His light five o'clock shadow rough against her neck. A contrast from the softness of his lips.

With a groan, he pulled them from where they had been nipping lightly at her neck.

"Why did you stop?"

Nick rested his forehead against hers. "I don't want to start something I can't follow through on and I know we'll be pulling up to the jetty any minute now."

“Oh.”

If only she could slow time down and make the hours drag, instead of flying by like they were doing right now.

Pam twisted around again so she could take one last look at the city. With Nick standing behind her, his arms loosely clasped around her, she let herself imagine they were a true couple. That they were totally committed to each other and were planning to spend the rest of their lives together.

Before she was ready, the boat pulled by the side of the jetty. The crew, which she'd had no idea were onboard, having kept themselves totally hidden while they'd cruised around, began pulling ropes out and throwing them onto the jetty. In a matter of minutes, the boat was securely moored and Nick was leading her down the gangplank back onto the steady ground.

Waiting where it had dropped them off was the limousine from earlier in the evening. The door stood open, waiting for her to slip into it. Pam glanced over her shoulder for one last look at the yacht and the Statue of Liberty. She vowed to herself that one day she would come back. The city was too unique not to want to visit it over and over again.

“We'll be back, I promise.” Nick uttered the words as the car pulled away from the kerb.

They surprised her. Had he just hinted at wanting to have a future with her? That once they got back to Perth he'd still want her, but as what? As his assistant and lover. Or just as his lover. Or just his assistant. Should she bring it up with him now and possibly spoil the rest of the night?

It was only ten in the evening and, as their flight wasn't scheduled to leave until four the next afternoon, Nick could've arranged for another surprise for her. Or they could be heading home. She wouldn't be able to enjoy herself if she didn't know what his promise meant.

Nick had his arm around her shoulders, his fingers rubbing absently at the back of her head. Her body was telling her to forget about her insane idea of pushing him to explain his words and let herself relax into his embrace. Her mind was

yelling at her that before spending the night in his arms, because that was definitely going to happen, she needed to get to the truth of what was happening between them. “What do you mean by us coming back here? And why would you promise that?”

His wandering fingers stopped and tension radiated from him to her. She wished she’d kept her mouth shut and waited until they were back in Perth to ask the question. How was Nick going to answer it, and would she like the answer he was going to give?



THE EXPECTATION and hope calling out to him from Pam’s eyes had him wishing he’d kept his mouth shut when he’d seen her gazing back at the city. He’d seen the longing in her gaze. Knew she didn’t want to say goodbye. He’d felt the same way the first time he’d visited New York and, fortunately for him, his job enabled him to return here often.

He’d wanted to make the sadness go away so he’d said the first thing that had popped into his head, and now he was regretting the impulse.

He took a deep breath, composing in his mind what he wanted to say. Only problem was, he kept drawing a blank. He knew he wanted to spend more time with Pam and show her more of the city and he would love to bring her back. But by admitting that to himself would be like admitting he wanted a long-term relationship with her. And the thought scared him.

He’d seen what love could do to a person. His mother had loved his father so desperately, to the point of suffocation; it had driven his father into the arms of another woman — a woman who happened to be his assistant. Love had ultimately led his mother to kill his father in a jealous rage, and then herself. Leaving him without anyone to love him and having him to find his parents lying side by side in a pool of blood.

He shuddered in memory. Yeah, he knew how bad love could hurt people, and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt

Pam.

“Nick?”

“Can we leave it, Pam? Please?”

He knew it was a cop-out, but he really didn't want to spoil the evening. Except it was too late now. The evening had been spoiled the moment she'd asked the question.

She moved away from him. The distance between them only small, but he knew the significance of the gesture. By fobbing her off, he'd killed the sensual mood that had been their companion all evening.

“Are we going back to the apartment?” she asked, fiddling with the strap of her evening bag.

He hadn't planned on going back to the apartment. He'd planned for them to go to a nightclub for a little while and then head home. “No, I thought we might continue on to a club for a little while.”

“I don't want to go to a place packed with people. I'd rather go back to the apartment.”

She turned her head to the window and Nick could tell he couldn't talk her around. With a sigh of resignation, he tapped on the glass separating them from the driver. When the window lowered, he told the driver to take them back to his place instead of the club.

Silence filled the car and Nick wanted to say something to make it go away. He could lie and say he'd bring her back as his assistant. Somehow he knew that would make the situation even worse. Telling the truth: that he wanted to explore a relationship with Pam, and wanted to bring her back to New York as more than his assistant, would create false hope for her.

He'd never done a relationship before. Hadn't wanted to or hadn't found the need to pursue a relationship. Casual sex for a couple of months was ideal for him. Even going without sex had been fine.

He found himself in a situation he had no idea how to handle. For one of the first times in his life, Nick had no idea what his next move should be.

They pulled up to the apartment and Nick got out of the car, turning to help Pam out. She took his hand but the moment her feet hit the pavement she dropped it like it was a hot potato. She didn't wait for him and marched up to the door, pulling it open even before the night duty doorman could do it for her.

He quickly thanked the driver and rushed through the open door. He squeezed into the lift just before the doors closed on him, not at all surprised that she hadn't waited for him to join her.

He deserved her anger. He had to make it better. He couldn't lose her.



PAM KEPT her concentration on tracking the rising numbers, willing the elevator to go faster. She wasn't sure how much longer she could keep the tears at bay.

How could Nick have brushed her off like that?

How could he say something so personal and then refuse to explain why he'd said it?

Was this what her mother had felt like when her father had walked out without any real explanation? She could totally understand her mother's bitterness toward men.

At last the elevator arrived, and as soon as the doors were opened she moved out swiftly and headed toward her bedroom, Nick's footfall muffled behind her on the plush carpet.

The first trickle of a tear broke over the rim of her eye and snaked slowly down her cheek. She didn't want to brush it away in case Nick saw the action and knew she was crying.

When she reached the closed door of her room, she fought an inner battle with herself. Her good manners were telling her to thank him for the lovely evening, and it had been wonderful until they'd left the yacht. The hurt little girl part of her was encouraging her to move inside her room.

Good manners be damned, she craved the sanctuary of her room. Her hand started to twist the door handle when a large one landed over hers. Nick engulfed her with his heat and strength from behind. His breath whispered against her ear, awareness of his close proximity had the hair on the back of her neck standing up.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

Her head fell forward and her shoulders slumped in defeat. "Sorry isn't good enough, Nick."

His hands grabbed her shoulders and gently turned her so that her back was resting against the door. "Don't cry, please don't cry," he begged, as he wiped away the silent tears trailing down her face. "I never meant to hurt you, sweetheart. It kills me to see you like this."

"You did hurt me, Nick. You brushed me off, after saying and promising something so wonderful. I thought I meant something to you."

When he took a step back again, Pam wanted to scream in frustration. "You're doing it again, Nick. I can't do this."

She reached behind her, fumbling around until her hand connected with the door handle. When she found it, twisted it so that it opened. Her salvation of solitude waited behind the thin wood. "Goodnight, Nick."

"No!" The word exploded out of Nick. "No, it's not goodnight."

He pulled her against him and captured her lips in a kiss full of determination and desperation. Her evening bag fell to the ground as she wrapped her arms around him.

Pam could deny it all she wanted, but the truth of the matter was she wanted Nick, just as desperately as it appeared he wanted her. She knew they should talk. They had so much

that needed to be said and sorted. But her body's needs and wants overrode her mind.

She pulled at his shirt, to free it from his trousers. He helped by loosening his belt, all the while his lips demanding hers to open beneath his. She granted his wish as she tore at his shirt, buttons popping to the carpet with a soft thud. His pants and briefs followed quickly.

Her hands roamed his smooth, hard chest while his hands grabbed the hem of her dress and pulled it up. They had to break the kiss to get her dress off. She gasped for air at the break of contact but he gave her no time to fill her lungs as he quickly reclaimed her lips.

In seconds he had her panties off, and with the low back of her dress she hadn't been able to wear a bra. He lifted her up and she hooked her legs around his waist. He walked them to her bed, and once his knees connected with her mattress he fell forward until they were both lying on the soft downy sheets.

He dragged his lips from hers. "I can't go slow, sweetheart. I need hard and fast and I need it now."

"I'm all yours." She wanted to have him possess her as much as he wanted to possess her. She widened her legs, encouraging him to take her. With one clean thrust he did. There was no finesse to their lovemaking. It was hot, hard, animal sex. Nick took her on a ride and she was more than happy to join him on it. With each thrust of his hips her blood sizzled until she was sure it was going to boil out of her.

"Nick!" Her orgasm hit her by surprise. The ferocity of it almost blew her mind. Nick shouted out his release moments later, collapsing on top of her breathing heavily.

After their breathing settled down Nick peeled himself away from her and rolled over to the other side of the bed. She immediately felt his loss. With the loss of his warmth of his body over hers, goosebumps broke out over her exposed flesh. She reached down and pulled the blankets up.

Uncertainty about what to do next or what to say hit her. They hadn't sorted out anything. Confusion reigned in her

mind. His actions were telling her he cared and wanted something more with her.

He wouldn't accept it when she'd told him goodnight. He hadn't given her any time to think about his brushing aside the reason she was so upset with him.

Perhaps now was the perfect time to talk, while he was relaxed from making love to her. Hopefully his guard would be down enough for her to get to the bottom of what was really going on with him. If it were any person other than Nick, she would suspect he was scared about facing his feelings. It didn't seem possible that that would be him. He was confident in everything. She'd never met him until a few weeks ago, so she had no idea if he'd ever had any long-term girlfriends or if he'd even been married before. Was it wrong that she knew nothing about him? Then again, she hadn't told him anything about her past, so she shouldn't expect him to share things with her if she didn't share things with him.

She rolled over and propped herself up on one elbow so she was facing him. "Nick?"

He cracked open an eyelid. "Mmmm?"

His bare chest lured her to touch him. Using her index finger she drew lazy circles around his pecs. "Why do you blow so hot and cold? One minute you want me, the next you're pushing me away, only to chase me down when I do walk. I don't get it."

His hand clasped hers, stilling her movement over his chest. A sigh lifted it up and down. He then brought her fingers to his lips where he pressed a kiss on each one. If he was hoping to use it as a distraction and make her forget her question, she wasn't going to let him this time.

"Don't go trying to distract me, Nick Rhodes. I think the time has come for us to really talk. Don't you realize you don't really know anything about me? Doesn't that bother you?"

Nick sat up and moved toward her, until his body was almost flush with hers. He kissed her below her earlobe before taking the soft flesh into his mouth and sucking it gently. She

couldn't hold back the shiver or moan that swelled through her.

"I know you like this." He then pulled the sheet down and kissed the top of her left breast. "And this." She grabbed his hand when he went to trail it under the sheet.

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it. You're doing it now. Why? Don't you even care?"

"Fine," he said, as he went back over to his side of the bed, plumped the pillows behind him and folded his arms across his impressive chest. "Tell me all about what a wonderful childhood you had. How your mum was always there for you when you got home from school with a smile and happy to help you with your homework." He shoved the sheets aside and got out of the bed. "Guess what? Not everyone had a perfect childhood. I'd much rather forget mine. How's that for an answer?" He bent down and scooped up his trousers and stalked out of her room, slamming the door as he went.

Pam couldn't move. She'd never seen Nick so angry, not even when Ethan was being a jerk over the deal. Talking about his past was clearly a topic he shied away from.

What happened to him?

She didn't have a perfect childhood, far from it.

She got up and grabbed her robe and decided she was going to have this out with Nick, once and for all. She didn't care if it brought up bad memories for him. He needed to talk about it, because if there was any chance of a future together they had to be honest with each other.

She stopped in the middle of the hallway. What was she doing dreaming of a future with him?

You're dreaming about a future because you love him and can't imagine what life will be like without him now that you've had him.

The voice was true. She did love Nick. She'd tried so hard not let it happen. Tried so hard not to fall for Nick because she knew her life would become complicated. But he made her

feel so alive. She may have known him only a little while, but he had given her so much.

She continued walking down the hallway toward his room. She knocked quietly on the door, and waited. When she didn't hear anything, she turned the handle and opened the door.

The room was lit by the ambient glow from the city lights. It didn't take long for her eyes to adjust to it. She glanced around the room, stillness permeating the air. She almost thought he wasn't in there, but then she spied him in the far corner. It appeared he was gazing out at the view. His arm rested against the window, his head lying against the glass. Even from her vantage point at the door, she could tell he had closed himself off. His body so rigid, as if made of the hardest granite on the planet.

Her anger subsided a little. For the first time since she'd locked gazes with him at Jasmine's wedding, Nick had the air of defeat around him. The man who always confidently strode into boardrooms, like he knew everyone was going to say yes to his ideas the moment he uttered them, wasn't standing at the window. An angry, hurt boy stood there and her heart bled for him. Pam wanted to take the defeat away. Would he let her?

She took a couple of tentative steps into the room.

“What do you want?”

Chapter Fifteen



NOT EXACTLY THE WARMEST GREETING IN THE WORLD, however she wasn't surprised by it. From his outburst in her room, she knew he never relied on anyone. Apart from Luciano; the two men were the best of friends. She wasn't going to let his cloak of back-off-you're-not-welcome-here deter her.

Straightening her shoulders, she walked over to where he was standing, the smooth lines of his back glowing in the dim lighting. Tentatively she laid her hand on his back. The flesh jumped underneath her touch. He didn't shake her off, though, so she used that as a positive sign he was willing to listen to her.

"My father walked out on us when I was eight. My mother turned into a bitter woman who scorned every man's very presence on the face of the planet. When I was ten, my father got remarried. That was the last time I saw him, and that added salt into my mum's already very open wound.

"I couldn't even mention a boy's name without her flying off the handle, warning me that I was going to be used. Men were unreliable and only wanted one thing from me — the use of my body. She would forbid me to go to any school dances. She used to give me a lecture every time I went to work functions. Men were the enemy and my father was enemy number one." Pam paused to catch her breath.

She hadn't meant to blurt it all out like that. With each word she spoke, the tension seemed to seep, little by little, out

of him. “My father didn’t even bother to come and help me when I told him my mum had a terminal disease. I was his first child and he couldn’t spare the time to help me bury her when she died. I stood by myself at the graveside as they lowered her coffin into the ground. The only important person in my life was my mother. Even though she was a bitch, I loved her. I was all she had. And I had to bury her alone.”

She finished on a whisper, not knowing if her words had helped or had only made things worse between them. The tension, which had seeped out only seconds ago, inched its way back into his flesh. The muscles under her hand firmed up until they were harder than when she’d first touched him.

Pam had no idea what drove her. Instinctively she knew something was about to happen. Something that couldn’t be good. She took a couple of steps back.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? Am I supposed to feel sorry for you because you grew up without a father?”

She pulled her robe tighter around herself, trying to shield herself from what was about to come at her. The Nick standing in front of her wasn’t the Nick she knew. This Nick appeared out of control. Something deep and dark was driving him. It was up to her to decide if she would let what he was about to say kill any of the love she had for him. Or if she could absorb what he said, and help him through the darkness that had taken up residence in his soul.

“What happened, Nick? What happened that hurt you so badly?”

“Oh, no you don’t,” he flung at her. “Don’t you start with the *share your feelings* bullshit you girls are always on about. Talking won’t make it better.”

She could walk away. She could turn around and walk back to her room and leave him to wallow in his self-pity. But she cared too much to walk away.

“Is not talking about it making it any better for you, Nick? Because from where I’m standing it looks like it’s eating you

up from the inside. The man standing in front of me is not the cool businessman I know.”

He slapped his hand against the window and turned to stalk toward her. He stopped, placed a finger under her chin and lifted it so their eyes met. In the dimly lit room his eyes glowed. She never thought brown eyes could look as bright as they did. If desire darkened their depths, anger made them light up with fire. “You think you know me? Trust me, honey, you don’t.”

“Then tell me who you are. Tell me who the real Nick is. Tell me about the boy who doesn’t want to remember what happened to him, even though those memories are eating away at his soul.”

A harsh laugh erupted from him. “Such pretty words. You really don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“You don’t have to sugar-coat anything you say to me, Nick. I’ve been sworn at, hit, spat at by my mother during the darkest days of her illness. I took it all because I knew it was frustration that was eating at her. Frustration that her limbs were so useless I had to feed her. Frustration that I had to clean her up when she lost the ability to control her bodily functions.” She jabbed a finger in his chest. “So nothing you say will shock me.”

“My mother killed my father and then shot herself and I found them. I found them lying in a pool of blood,” he started in a voice with no emotion; so monotone, so dead, she wondered if perhaps she’d never be able to bring him back to the land of the living.

“Nick.” She whispered but he didn’t hear it. For all intents and purposes, she may as well not have been in the room.

He continued on without acknowledging her. “My mother’s face was half shot off. I didn’t even recognize her, and my father was gazing up at me with dead eyes and a look of shock and despair on his face. You try calling the cops and explaining the scene you walked in on. The mass of red on the ground, the liquid inching its way toward you. Answering

questions when you didn't understand what the hell had happened."

"I'm sor — "

"Don't tell me you're *sorry*. Every goddamn policeman, welfare officer, nosy neighbour told me they were *sorry* a boy my age had to come upon the tragic scene of a love so deep that one couldn't live without the other." Sarcasm dripped from every word. "What a load of shit. They had no idea what went on behind closed doors. Love is not beautiful. Love is destructive. Love kills. Love strangulates the life out of you until you can't see or think clearly. Love can drive you to the arms of another person because you can't take the endless questions you have to come home to each night. The demands of wanting to know who you spoke to or who you saw that day. Love is evil and I'm not looking for it." He looked her dead in the eye. "And neither should you."

He brushed past her and out the bedroom door. Pam knew there would be no point following him. What could she say?

Nothing.

She could say nothing. She couldn't convince him love could be beautiful or everlasting when she understood exactly where he was coming from. When things had become difficult for her father, he went and found solace in the arms of another woman, eventually creating a new family she wasn't allowed to be a part of. Her mother had never looked for love again. Like Nick, she believed love was a stupid emotion.

How did Pam even know what love was?

How could she be sure what she was feeling for Nick was love?

She'd never been in love before. She'd never even had sex until a few nights ago. What great example could she hold up to compare to what she was feeling for Nick and know if it truly was love?

Maybe Nick was right. Maybe both of them should steer clear of love. She made her way over to the bed and sat on the edge.

She didn't want to give up on love. She wanted what Jasmine and Luciano had. Couldn't Nick see the love the two of them shared? Tragedy and circumstance had kept them apart, but they'd found their way back to each other. Their love was a lot stronger because of the adversity they'd gone through to find each other again.

She may have nothing in her past to go on. No shining example of everlasting love between two people. But she had people around her she could look to. People who had found love with each other.

Love did exist. She knew it and she would find it.

You've already found it.

The voice in her head was right. She had found love and she'd found it in Nick. It was now up to her to show him.



NICK DOWNED his second glass of whisky, enjoying the burn of the liquid down his throat. Hurt was a constant companion. Usually he kept it buried. Tonight it had reared its ugly head. By the time he got to the bottom of the scotch bottle, it would be buried again and he could go on as before. Be numb to everything but the next deal and the next deal after that.

He poured another glass. How many nights had he done this before? Only when he'd realized it was becoming a regular occurrence had he stopped. But tonight he didn't care. Pam had made him rip the bandaid off a wound that would never heal. He never wanted it to heal. If it healed he would forget about what he'd seen and what had caused the utter devastation of his life. He couldn't let that happen. Out of the tragedy of his parents death came the will and determination not to follow that same destructive path.

And he'd let himself fall down that slippery slope by getting involved with Pam. His assistant, just like his father. It didn't matter that it was different circumstances. It didn't matter that they were both free.

He downed the whisky he held in his hand. He had to end it. Hell, it was probably already ended after what he'd just thrown at her. He ignored the burn in his stomach at the thought of never tasting her sweet skin again. Never hearing her moan his name when she came apart in his arms. It was the whisky searing a hole in his gut, nothing more. He couldn't let it be more.

Once they got back to Perth, he would talk to Luc about seeing if she would be interested in a position at one of the international branches. He knew she wanted to travel. If she lived far away from him, he wouldn't be tempted to keep seeing her. He could continue on with his life exactly the way it had been before he'd flown back to Perth for Luc's wedding.

Before he'd arrived for the wedding he'd known where he was going and what he was doing. He'd kept his eye on the ball and his head in the game. He'd never let any one woman sway him from his ultimate goal. He wasn't going to start with Pam. No matter how complete being with her made him feel.



PAM STARED out the window and wished the flight would be over. Nick had barely spoken to her since his outburst the previous evening. She fallen asleep on Nick's bed, waiting to see if he would return so they could talk some more. She hadn't want to search for him again; she'd done that once. It was up to him to come to her, but he hadn't. She'd woken up alone and cold and feeling a little lost. When she'd gone looking for Nick she hadn't been able to find him. The apartment was as empty as she felt. She finally found a note propped up in the kitchen, telling her he had packed and would be at the office until he needed to get to the airport. Where he would meet her.

She had spent the rest of the morning packing and waiting for the buzzer to sound to let her know the car had arrived. It wasn't how she'd wanted to spend her last day in New York. Before the fight she'd hoped that Nick and she would've spent the morning making love and then laughing as they packed.

She'd even let herself imagine the both of them testing out the bed in the back of the plane on the trip home.

Pam should know not to let herself dream. Her dreams were always shattered and all she was left with were nightmares. One big nightmare was waiting for her when she got off the plane back in Perth. She still had no idea what she was going to do about her house. But she'd find the money somehow to lift the caveat, and then she'd sell it and be free of the burden of home ownership.

"Can I get you something to drink or eat?" The voice of the stewardess penetrated her thoughts. She didn't want to eat but it was going to be a long flight so she couldn't starve herself for over twenty-four hours.

"Yes please, do you have any fruit?"

"We sure do. I'll organize a platter for you, and what about a drink?"

"A soda will be fine, thank you."

The other woman nodded and turned toward where Nick was sitting opposite her. He had papers spread out on the table in front of him. Pam didn't think he'd been doing much with them. She hadn't heard them being shuffled around.

"Mr. Rhodes, do you require anything?"

He gave a grunt and shook his head, pretty much like every other response anyone got from Nick today.

Once the stewardess had moved to the back of the plane, Pam unbuckled her seatbelt and crossed the aisle to where Nick was sitting. She took a seat facing him.

"What do you want?"

In all the time they'd worked together she'd never put up with his surliness. She'd always answered him back with a snappy reply. From the way Nick reacted to her when she did, she knew he didn't mind it. He'd opened his soul to her last night, and probably hated the fact. She wasn't going to let him get away with it.

“We’re going to be stuck together for over twenty-four hours. Do you think you could snap out of your surly mood?”

Pam bit her lip to stop a gasp from escaping when he lifted his head to meet her gaze. The man sitting in front of her looked nothing like the man she was used to seeing. He’d been on the plane when she’d arrived, his head averted and looking out the window. Sunglasses had hidden his eyes. She’d been hurt that he hadn’t acknowledged her so she’d done the same.

She wanted to go to where he sat and hold him. His eyes, normally sparkling with confidence and humour, were bloodshot and dull. His jaw was covered in a five o’clock shadow, and the full lips that had teased and tempted her until she screamed in ecstasy were thin straight lines. No hint of passion or the man she’d slept with.

“Are you all right?” she whispered.

“Don’t tell me you care?”

“Would you be in a better mood if I told you I didn’t care? That I don’t really give a damn what’s wrong with you? Because if that’s what it takes, that’s what I’ll do.”

A clearing of a throat let Pam know the stewardess had returned with the fruit she’d asked for, placing it on the table in front of them. Pam should’ve been embarrassed because she was pretty sure the other woman had heard her outburst, but she was beyond caring.

“Thanks.” She gave the other woman a small smile as she picked up the fork and placed a piece of melon into her mouth. When she heard the soft click of the door closing behind the stewardess, she carefully placed the fork down. “So is that what you want to hear, Nick? That you mean nothing to me and you can go right ahead and drown your sorrows for the rest of the flight.”

“If it will make you go away, then yes, that’s what I want to hear.”

Pam sat back, defeat winding its way through her. She was sure that being rude and abrupt would snap Nick out of his depression. It had the opposite affect. She should’ve realized

he would dig his heels in. She'd been in the boardroom when he'd been heading negotiations. He never backed down. He kept going after what he wanted until eventually they gave in to his demands.

He was expecting her to do that. To give in and walk away. And right now, she was going to give him the satisfaction of thinking he'd won this battle. He couldn't be more wrong. She wasn't going to give up on him. For once, someone was going to be in Nick's corner. Someone was going to show him he didn't have to go through life alone.

"Fine," she picked up a plate of fruit and drink. "But I'll be right over there if you change your mind."

"I don't plan on doing that."

Pam shrugged and went back to sit where she had been before. He may have thought he'd won the first round, but he hadn't. She would let him stew a little bit longer and then she'd try again.



NICK STOLE A GLANCE AT PAM, curled up in her seat watching a movie. Disappointment at the way she'd walked away from him still ate at his soul. It was irrational for him to feel that way. His goal had been for her to walk away, it was what he really wanted. Or so he'd thought.

He turned back out to the window. Darkness had fallen. The flashing light on the end of the wing shone brightly, mesmerising him with the monotonous blinking.

Tiredness pervaded his bones. Sleep beckoned but he was too afraid to close his eyes. After baring his darkest secret to Pam, he was worried that the moment he shut his eyes it would all be there, behind his eyelids in all its technicolor glory. He didn't need to close his eyes to have the scene in the kitchen, where he'd once laughed with his mother and father, when they'd been happier, come blazing to the forefront.

A soft, warm hand cupped his cheek. “Nick, you’re not alone anymore. I’m here. I care even though you think you don’t want me to. But I do. Let me in.”

He turned his face into the hand and kissed the fleshy part of Pam’s palm. He wanted to let her in. He really did. Would it be so hard to do that? Would it be so wrong to let Pam in and bring light into days he’d only just realized were dark?

No, it wouldn’t be wrong. It would be so very right.

Decision made, he flicked open his seatbelt and stood, all the while keeping Pam’s hand close to his skin.

“I’m sorry. I know I keep saying it. Please don’t give up on me.” He whispered as he pulled her into his embrace. Holding her tight against his body, not wanting to let her go.

When she wrapped her arms around him, all the tension that had been filling him whooshed out. A calmness he’d never felt before replaced the acid-eating loss in his soul. And it was all because of this woman in his arms. The woman who was coming to mean the world to him.

“Oh, honey, you have nothing to be sorry about. I’m glad you recognize you deserve someone who cares about you. And I do. I do care and I won’t give up on you.”

He couldn’t respond to her words. His ability to speak was lost. No one had ever put him first. His father had always put his business first and then his mistress. His mother’s one and only priority had been her husband. Their son had fallen a distant last place in their priorities.

As if knowing words were impossible, Pam pulled his head toward hers. Millimeters from their lips meeting, she stopped and spoke. “Make me a member of the mile-high club.”

He would’ve laughed out loud at her request, but she’d closed the small gap between their lips and kissed him hungrily. Desire and want and caring evident in every second of the kiss. Desperation to feel again had Nick scooping her up into his arms and marching down the aisle, heading for the

room at the back of the plane. He shouldered open the door, as Pam pulled her lips from his and nipped at his jaw.

“I never thought stubble could be so sexy.” She rasped her hand over his rough skin, the touch sending a million feelings of sexual need flying to his already hard erection. He didn’t think he was going to last very long. Somehow he didn’t think Pam would mind.

He slid her down his body until they were standing so close nothing could separate them. “Everything about you is mind-blowingly sexy, and I’m about to worship you.”

With a gentle push, Pam fell onto the bed and he followed, losing himself in the one woman who’d touched his soul.

Chapter Sixteen



AS THE PLANE DESCENDED INTO PERTH, DELIGHT AT SEEING the familiar skyline vied for place alongside the sexual malaise Nick had created within her. She was now a fully-fledged member of the mile-high club. They'd spent most of the flight in bed, exploring each other's bodies. Only moving from the bed to a seat when they'd had to stop and refuel. Once they were back at cruising altitude and the pilot had assured them it was safe to do so, they'd made their way back to the bedroom.

"It's so pretty. I didn't realize how much I missed home until right now." She squeezed Nick's hand, glad that he was sitting beside her and not on the other side of the plane.

"I know. It's always nice to come home after being away."

"You almost sound surprised saying that. Do you have an idea of where you'd like to settle down, Nick? Where you'd like to make your permanent home base? Like Luciano and Jasmine have decided Perth will be theirs."

Pam wanted to look at him but she was also afraid of what she might see in the depths of his eyes. The look of terror at the thought of settling down in one place. She knew he liked to travel the world and make deals for the corporation. He'd as good as said that when he offered her the job. What if he didn't want to have a permanent home base? Where did that leave her?

Stop it! She commanded herself. *Stop thinking ahead. You need to take one day at a time with Nick. One day at a time.*

“To be honest, I haven’t thought about it.”

She nodded and squeezed his hand a little tighter as the trees seemed to grow larger and larger with every millisecond as the plane descended toward the runway. Only once the reassuring bump and the high whine of the brakes filled the cabin did she relax her hold on Nick’s hand.

Raising her hand, his lips brushed across the top of her hand. “We’re home.”

“We sure are. I can’t wait to get my hou — “ She stopped when the realization struck. She didn’t have a home to go to. Because her house was still in a place of limbo, her realtor had found someone who was looking for a month-long lease while they were working on a job. The money had been too good for Pam to turn down, considering her current situation, so she’d jumped at the offer.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong.” She shook her head. Her lack of a place to go home to wasn’t Nick’s problem. It was hers. She’d have to find a cheap motel or something. Although it kind of defeated the purpose of having someone paying her to live in her home if she was forking out for a hotel.

“Sweetheart, I thought we were past shutting each other out?” Nick admonished gently.

Had they? They hadn’t really discussed much, except he’d apologized for being a cad and she’d accepted it. They hadn’t discussed anything about what he’d said to her about his parents. About what had happened to him afterwards. Whether he’d gone to family or friends or if he’d gone into the foster care system. So many things still left unsaid between them.

He didn’t know how her mother had died nor the financial struggles she was experiencing. She didn’t want to share that with him just yet. There was still so much they had to learn about each other.

However, surely she could share this one thing. Let him in on one of her burdens.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, I’m just so used to doing everything on my own.”

The plane finally stopped moving and Pam reached to undo her seatbelt one-handed; she didn’t want to let go of Nick’s hand. Lose the contact they shared and the connection they’d made while the plane had flown thousands of miles.

“Not so fast.” Nick placed his free hand over hers. “You’re not leaving until you tell me what the problem is.”

Looking at him, the steely glint of determination in his eyes, it was a battle she was going to lose if she tried to fight him on it.

“I forgot I have no home to go to. My house is being leased at present.” She shrugged. “I kind of thought we were going to be overseas a little longer than we were. So I didn’t think to make alternative arrangements.”

“Is that all?” Nick laughed and, using the hand that was covering hers, released her seatbelt. “I can fix that, come stay with me.”

Her heart leapt at the thought of being able to spend more time with Nick, but it also scared her. Their relationship so far had been a game of one step forward, five steps back. Who knew what was going to greet them when they walked out of the plane. Disaster could’ve happened with a business deal while they’d been in the air and Nick would go all cold and distant on her again.

On the other hand, spending time with him, living with him, sleeping with him could only enhance their relationship. Without a shadow of a doubt Pam knew she loved Nick. Wanted to spend her life with him. Wanted to be the one to make him smile when things got tense. Wanted to ease the stress of work out of him when he came home. She wanted to carry his child and make him smile all the time.

The thoughts of a future with Nick pushed the cautionary voice to the back of her mind. The voice telling her to find her own place and not become too dependent on Nick because he could hurt her.

“Fine, I’ll come with you. But,” she reached out and cupped his face. “We need to talk about what happened in New York. What you told me and what I told you. If this thing between us is going to develop into something more serious, then we need to talk.”

Pam held her breath, waiting to see what his reaction would be. She’d all but admitted out loud that she assumed they were in a relationship. How would he take it? What was he going to say?

He inclined his head briefly. “Okay.”

Satisfied that she’d had a small victory, she leaned over and placed a kiss on his lips. “Let’s get out of here.”



PAM WOKE UP, disoriented for a moment, her heart beating a rapid tattoo. Something had woken her but she didn’t know what. The bed she lay in didn’t feel familiar. The pillows were soft, and warmth cocooned her body. She relaxed against the heat as it was so welcoming, and an arm snaked out, over her waist, pulling her against a hard chest.

“Nick.” The word sighed out of her and she closed her eyes as her heart slowed to a normal pace, the anxiety that she’d woken with disappearing with each lazy stroke of Nick’s hand across her belly.

“You okay?”

“Yes.” Her heart melted at the concern in his voice. Opening her eyes, she rolled over so she was facing him. His eyes burned with desire, the early morning light filtering into the room. Pam didn’t want the sun to rise, even though it signified a new day. A new day meant going to work and all she wanted was to remain locked in Nick’s arms, forever.

After getting off the plane they’d headed straight to his apartment, high on the hill overlooking the city. The view she was sure would be magnificent, but the moment they’d got

into his home, Nick had dragged her to the shower, undressing her on the way. They hadn't moved from the bed after that.

Now, with the morning light, their little escape from the world was over and they'd be heading into the office. She could now contact the real estate agent and find out what the next move would be. If there was a way she could sell her house, even with a caveat over it. She needed to sell it or find a way to get some money to lift the caveat and then she could sell.

Sometimes it sucked to be a grown-up. She wanted nothing more than to hand over all her problems to someone else to fix. As tempting as it was to unload everything to Nick and ask for some financial help, she wouldn't do it. She didn't want him to think she was seeing him purely because of his bank balance. He'd told her time and time again women had thrown themselves at his feet, all for the financial security marrying a man like Nick would give them. She wasn't going to be one of them. She would sort out her financial issues by herself.

“Why are you thinking so hard?” asked Nick.

“It's what I do. What I've always done.”



NICK ROSE UP on his elbow and looked down at Pam. She was sexily rumped and the desire to kiss her and make her troubles go away was strong. Like him, there were secrets in her past she didn't want to share. She'd given a little background about her father walking out but nothing else. He suspected there was something deeper happening with her right at this moment. Something to do with her house but he couldn't be sure, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know either. Knowing would give a permanence to what they were sharing and he wasn't ready for that. Not yet anyway.

He would act on his initial impulse to kiss her. There would be plenty of time to talk later — much later.

“Well, let me see if I can make you think of something else.”

He closed the distance between them and took possession of her lips. Her body opened up beneath him. Welcoming his hands as they trailed over her smooth curves. He couldn't believe how openly she reacted to his touch. With every touch a sigh escaped her. Her body arching into his hands, encouraging him to take what he wanted, and she would give him what he wanted.

He fumbled with the protection and donned it with Pam's help, her hands following his movements as he rolled the condom down. It took everything he had not to thrust into her hand. Her touch tentative but enticing. He slipped his hands under her hips, lifting her to meet his thrust. He honestly believed he could never get enough of her. His feelings and emotions were like none he'd ever experienced with anyone before. His body came alive with every thrust into her.

He couldn't hold back, and when her body contracted around him he let go of his control and let his orgasm roll over him. He collapsed on top of her, spent and peaceful in a way he'd never felt.

“You make me feel so special, Nick.” Pam whispered into his ear, her breath tickling the sensitive flesh of her neck.

“Ditto, sweetheart, ditto.”



“ANY IDEA what you'll be working on next?” Pam asked as Nick drove them to the office. Her body was still relaxed from the morning wake up call Nick had treated her to.

“Not sure, Luc wants to meet with me when I get in. He mentioned something about us sitting in on the marketing presentation for Jeffrey's new jewelry line.”

Pam recalled how Luc had been able to entice the brilliant but reclusive jewelry designer, Jeffrey Courteux, out of hiding

to design a collection for the Regent Hotel chain Luc had bought a year ago.

“I can’t wait to see the collection. Jasmine’s rings are gorgeous and the necklace Luc bought for her while they were in Broome is breathtaking. How on earth did Luc convince Jeffrey to design a new collection? Do you think he’ll be at the meeting?”

Nick laughed at her excitement and she knew she sounded like a gauche school girl, but everyone she knew wanted to own a piece of Jeffrey’s jewelry and she had every chance of meeting him today.

“I would imagine Luc presented a convincing case as to why designing a new collection would be of benefit to him. And yes, Luc would also make sure Jeff attended today’s meeting. It helps that the three of us, not only joined the same Lodge, but we all went to university together too.”

Pam swivelled in her seat in surprise. “You went to university together? All three of you? I didn’t realize you had to go to university to design jewelry. I would’ve thought art school would’ve been the place to study.”

“Yes, we did all meet up at university. Jeff initially majored in business and minored in fine arts. But he found he definitely preferred the arts to business so he switched his majors and went from there.”

“And what is ‘lodge’? You mentioned you all joined it.”

“We’re Freemasons,” Nick said as if that explained everything. And it did in some ways.

“Oh so you all have a secret handshake and stuff like that.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “Yeah stuff like that. I haven’t been to a meeting in ages because of work, but Luc has started going again. He’s trying to get me back involved.”

“And you don’t want to be?”

“I do. I’ll probably see if I can get to one or two, depends what we have on the horizon work wise. I’m sure Cole and Dominic would be happy to see me there.”

“Cole and Dominic as in Cole Jacobs and Dominic Cacciari two of the Fab Four?”

Nick laughed. “Yeah them.”

“Wow. Although I shouldn’t be surprised you know them.”

“We’re all still men. But it will be good to see Jeff again.”

Pam was having a hard time comprehending the information Nick had imparted to her. She also couldn’t believe that in a few short hours she’d be getting to meet the world-famous jewelry designer.

“Why does he keep himself away from everyone?”

“I don’t know. He’s never told Luc or I what happened. He finished his course and went over to Europe to study further. When he came back he bought a property on the outskirts of Broome and kept his contact with us to a minimum.”

“So something happened while he was away but he never told you or Luc about it?”

They pulled into the underground car park and, once Nick turned the engine off, he turned to her. “No, he didn’t. He pretty much kept to himself. Luc obviously saw him more than I did. Luc was determined not to let Jeff forget he had people who cared, so he made sure he contacted him regularly. So if at some stage Jeff confided in Luc, Luc hasn’t told me.”

“I’m glad that you and Luc didn’t give up on him.”

Nick gave a negligent shrug of his shoulders. “Friends don’t give up on each other. They’re always there to help when things get difficult.” He reached out and ran a finger down her cheek. “Don’t forget that.”

Pam recognized a hidden message when given one. Nick hadn’t forgotten about what they’d talked about that morning, he’d just given her the impression that he had.

“I won’t.”

Pam exited the car and they made their way to the underground elevator that would take them to the executive floor. Excitement corralled through her. She’d enjoyed being

Nick's assistant in New York and she couldn't wait to continue in the position.

The moment they arrived at the office, one of the marketing personnel immediately took Nick aside to discuss the upcoming meeting. Nick pointed her to an office at the end of the hallway.

"I'll be with you in a few minutes, Pam," he got out, before the other man ushered Nick into another room.

Pam headed down the hallway and opened the door of the office Nick indicated. It was a large room, which had a desk she figured would be hers, and another door just to the left of the desk. Walking in, she placed her handbag on the shiny wooden surface and then opened the other door. As she'd suspected, it opened up to another room; a large desk dominated the area, and two sofas with a table in between them were placed to take advantage of the spectacular city view.

She walked over to the windows and looked out. The river sparkled in the morning light as it wound its way around the city. It felt good to be home.

"Pam, you're back. How was New York?"

She swivelled around to see Jasmine standing in the doorway, looking gorgeous. She moved toward her to give her a hug. "Jasmine, it's good to see you. You're looking beautiful today."

Jasmine laughed and patted her protruding stomach. "Thank you. So what did you think of New York? It's amazing, isn't it?"

Pam thought about all she'd seen and done in the short time she had visited New York. "Amazing doesn't even begin to describe it. I don't think there are enough adjectives in the vocabulary."

"It is a bit that way. So, with you being here, does this mean you're going to stay working with us? Just because I am taking a step back, doesn't mean you have to leave."

Pam acknowledged the truth in Jasmine's words. She'd reacted instinctively about resigning. "No, I plan on staying, that is if you think Luc will want to keep me on."

"I'm sure he will, you proved your worth in getting that deal back on track in New York. I knew you would be fantastic."

Heat crept up her neck from Jasmine's compliments. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, and now that you don't have the stress of looking after your mother, may she rest in peace, you can travel and live a little."

Pam was saved from answering the question by the phone ringing. Her mum dying had left her with more stress but Jasmine didn't know that. No one did.

Jasmine waved on her way out as Pam dealt with the person on the phone. Pam smiled her goodbye.

When she'd finished with the call and made the necessary notes to pass onto Nick, she reached into her purse and pulled out her mobile. Scrolling through the numbers, she found the one she was after.

The time had come to find out exactly what she had to do to lift the caveat and be able to sell the house. Then she could concentrate on her career and Nick.



NICK PERUSED the papers outlining the goals and objectives of the upcoming meeting. He paused outside the suite of rooms housing his office. With the door ajar, Pam's voice floated out to him. His hand hovered over the handle to push it open and let her know he was there, but something compelled him to wait.

"I just need a little more time," her voice rose with each word and his curiosity was piqued. She needed more time for what?

“I told you I was in the process of making arrangements to get you the money.”

What was Pam talking about? He should make his presence known, he really should, but he wanted to see what she would say next. Did she have a gambling problem? If she did, she'd showed no signs of it while they were away. She showed no signs of any sort of addiction that would cause her to owe people money.

“Look, I’m trying a different avenue now, something I’m pretty sure is going to work out, and then money will be no problem, trust me, I’ll have plenty to pay you and then have some left over.”

Dread filled Nick’s stomach. There was a cynical edge in her tone. An edge he’d never heard before. Had he gotten Pam wrong? Was she like every other woman he’d gotten involved with, only interested in him because of his bank balance?

Surely he couldn’t have read her wrong? It didn’t seem possible that everything he thought about her was the opposite of what she really was.

“Fine, I’ll speak to you next week. By then I hope to have everything sorted out.”

Nick heard the phone being placed on her desk and the soft curse she emitted. He would act as if he hadn’t heard her basically admitting she had found her ticket out of a financial hole and he happened to be that ticket. Taking a deep breath, he walked into the room, pushing the door open with more force than was strictly necessary.

“Nick, you scared me.”

He narrowed his eyes, watching her reaction with interest. Her eyes shifted between him and the door. He knew what was going through her mind — how much had he heard? A guilty flush crept up her neck, fanning out over her cheeks as she squirmed a little on her chair.

“Did I interrupt something?” He cocked an eyebrow in query.

“No, no, not at all.” She glanced at her computer screen and then back at him. “Are we heading into the meeting soon?”

“Yes, I need to make a phone call and then we’ll head to the boardroom.” His words were clipped and he could tell Pam didn’t know what was going on, which was fine with him. The thoughts he had earlier of taking their relationship to the next level, where he’d imagined a possible future, were slowly disintegrating with every passing second. He didn’t know if he could trust Pam now, and that hurt. It really hurt.



THE WORDS of the advertising executive washed over him. Any other time, he would notice how attractive she was. He would even consider asking her out on a date, but at present his thoughts were a mass of tangled vines. He didn’t know where to start to unravel it. It also didn’t help that one of the other women from the agency kept staring at him. She was an older woman and he didn’t think he’d met her before, but her eyes had glommed onto him the moment he’d walked into the room. Even the stunning pieces of jewelry Jeffrey had laid out on the table hadn’t pulled the older woman’s contemplation from him. It was unnerving.

Finally the meeting wound up. The general feeling around the table was that while the campaign was impressive, also a little outlandish. Being a risky type of campaign it could be a success or it could fall flat on its face, and that wasn’t the type of publicity the company or Jeffrey would want.

He shook the hand of the young, pretty ad executive and nothing sparked his body to life. Not like a simple touch from Pam had him looking for the nearest horizontal surface on which to take her.

The anger that had been simmering during the meeting, after overhearing Pam’s telephone conversation, flared to high burn. He could kick himself for his stupidity in thinking Pam

was any different to any other woman. Women couldn't be trusted.

“Excuse me, Nick?”

“Yes?” He found himself looking at the woman who had been watching him through the whole meeting. His anger increased a notch, irrational as it was — the woman hadn't done anything except observe him. “What do you want?”

When she took a step back, as if trying to get away from his anger, he ran his hand through his hair. He didn't want to mess up the fledging relationship they had with the ad agency. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Jeff in a deep conversation with the executive who had done the presentation.

He sighed and gave himself a quick mental slap to get a handle on his anger. “I'm sorry, how can I help you?”

His body went on high alert when Pam stepped up to stand beside him. He didn't want her standing beside him, but he acknowledged that moving away from her wouldn't make a difference. He would still be aware of her.

“I wanted to say that I knew your father. He would be very proud of what you've achieved.” The older woman paused and, as she swallowed, Nick looked into her eyes, shocked to see the sheen of tears in her eyes. “I'm so sorry that he couldn't be here to see what a wonderful and accomplished businessman you've become.”

Something about the way she spoke about his father struck a chord deep inside of him. A chord that had been so deeply buried, he hadn't identified its existence until right now. In that moment he became aware she had known his father — intimately. And there was only one way she could possibly know how his father would feel.

“It was you, wasn't it?” He spat the words out at her. “It was you who wrecked everything that ever meant anything to me.”

“Nick?” Pam laid her hand on his arm.

He shook Pam's hand off and stepped closer to the other woman, his anger making him oblivious to her distress. "Do not speak to me about how my father would be proud of him. He's not here because of *you*."

He stormed away, uncaring of the looks he was receiving from the people still in the room. As he walked past Jeffrey, his friend tried to stop him. He sent a look Jeffrey's way, which had him giving a brief nod, knowing the way good friends did, that Nick needed to be by himself.

He headed straight for the elevator, not caring that it was the middle of the day. He needed to get away. What had once been a haven was now going to be a bitter reminder of the day he'd met his father's mistress. The woman who had been the catalyst for his mother to murder his father and then take her own life. The woman who had taken away his innocence.

Chapter Seventeen



PAM COMFORTED THE WOMAN NICK HAD YELLED AT.

“I didn’t mean to upset him. His resemblance to David is uncanny.”

Pam had no idea what to say to the other woman, and her mind was totally on Nick and wanting to find him to see if she could ease his hurt. It had to have cut deep to meet the woman who had caused him so much pain.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Pam asked, easing the awkward silence that had sprung up between them.

“No, I’m fine. I need to leave, I can’t imagine what the others from the agency think.”

“I’m sure they’re worried about you, that’s all.”

“Like you’re worried about Nick?” Even in her distress the other woman had picked up on Pam’s preoccupation. “Does that mean he told you about what happened?”

How did she answer that? Nick hadn’t exactly told her what had caused the tragedy he had stumbled upon. “He told me that his parents had died, and the circumstances of their death. But he never told me what the catalyst was for his mother’s actions.”

“David and I were the catalyst. We pushed his mother over the edge. I had a breakdown after I’d heard the news of David’s death. I couldn’t function. I never meant to fall in love with him. I knew he was married,” she sent Pam a wry grin.

“But he was so charismatic and handsome and I could see he wasn’t happy. I tried to fight it but it was impossible. I think David tried to fight it too, until things got too much for him and he gave into his basic needs. Needs I could provide and was happy to.”

What did you say to a woman like that? Pam could tell she was lost in her memories. She stole a look at the other woman’s left hand. It was bare of any rings. Had she ever found another person to care for again, or had she gone through life lonely?

The thought scared her. Life without Nick in it. She didn’t want to contemplate it.

“I’m thinking you’ve been exposed to the Rhodes charm too, and who can blame you. Nick is as every bit as handsome as David.” She sighed and absently rubbed at the locket that hung around her neck. “I tried so many times to break things off. Tried to end things. But when you’re in love like David and I were...” Her voice trailed off to a whisper. “We didn’t mean to do it. It just happened. Never did I imagine that my actions would cause so much pain for David’s son. He loved Nick and wanted him to succeed. I hate knowing that because I couldn’t stop my feelings, Nick grew up without his parents. And David never saw what a wonderful man Nick had turned into.”

Pam could sympathize with the other woman, but that didn’t mean she agreed with her actions. Nick’s world had been ripped to shreds by the actions of two people. No one won when an affair happened. Someone always got hurt. In this situation, so many lives had been affected.

No wonder he didn’t believe in love. She acknowledged in all likelihood her love would never be returned by Nick. He’d said he wasn’t capable of loving and didn’t want love. Didn’t believe in love. Now, after meeting this woman, being confronted with his past, he would push the idea of love so far away it would take a miracle for him to start believing in it.

When the other woman stood, her spine tightened and Pam could see she had pushed the memories of her failed love

affair behind her.

“If you love Nick, and I have a feeling you do, don’t let him push you away. Don’t let what happened to his family hurt him for the rest of his life. I know it’s wrong of me to say this seeing as I caused it. Love is wonderful and I wouldn’t change what I had with David for anything. Fight for Nick. Fight for yourselves. Don’t ever give up on love, like I did when David died. Don’t end up lonely.”

With those parting words, she walked out the door. A sad, lonely woman who’d made the mistake of falling in love with the wrong man. Was Pam looking at her future self?



PAM WALKED into Nick’s home, hoping he was there. She had no idea where he’d gone when he’d walked out of the boardroom. Her conversation with his father’s former lover still sounded loudly in her mind. She wouldn’t give up on Nick. She’d told him she wouldn’t on the plane.

“Nick? Are you here?”

Her voice echoed around the entryway. She wandered through the apartment, going from room to room, finding each one empty. Her mind was coming up with horrible scenarios of Nick having had an accident on the way to wherever he was going. Of him doing something completely stupid, like... She stopped herself. She wasn’t going to go there. If Nick had survived the tragic loss of his parents and had built up a business with Luc, there was no way he was going to do something stupid just because he was confronted by his father’s mistress.

She wandered through the apartment, hope that he was there fading with every step. She ended up back in the living room, looking at the gorgeous panoramic view, wondering where to go next to find Nick. She’d have to arrange a ride, seeing as she didn’t have a car.

Her distinctive ring tone sounded faintly around the room. She raced toward where she’d dumped her handbag by Nick’s

front door, frantic to get to it in case it was him. She reached her bag just as it stopped. Cursing, she pulled the device out and saw that the missed call was from her real estate agent. The last thing she wanted to do was hear more bad news, so part of her was glad she'd missed the call.

There was so much going on and everything was becoming almost too much for her to bear.

“Goddamn it Nick, where are you?”

While she had her phone in her hand, she tried his number again. An echoing ring sounded in her ear and somewhere else in the apartment. She followed the sound until she was in the living room again. She hung up when she saw Nick standing in the shadows, the clinking of ice in a glass helping her to hone in on where he was standing. With his dark suit on, he'd blended into the shadows, hiding from all who came looking for him. Pam knew it wasn't accidental. It was a precise move.

Nick didn't want to be found.

She walked slowly over to where he stood. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, why wouldn't I be.” He moved out of the shadows and Pam bit her lip. The face she saw was the face she'd seen on the plane. She hadn't expected to see that man again. She wanted the man who, only a few hours ago, had taken her to heaven and back. She wanted to see the smiling man she'd joked with in the car on the way to work. The man standing in front of her could've been made out of stone. His features so cold and remote, giving off the air of come closer at your own peril.

“You got a pretty big shock today, it's understandable if you feel a bit lost.”

“Is that so?”

Pam knew the conversation would be difficult. Of course it would be. Nick had just met the woman who had slept with his father. For years she'd been this background person. He'd probably never given any thought about what she looked like,

or wanted to. Or the fact she was actually a living, breathing person.

“Nick, please let me help you get through this.” She walked up to him and put her hand on his face. “Let me care for you.”

He laughed harshly and shook his head, dislodging her hand. “Your caring is wasted on me. You’re as bad as every other woman I’ve gotten involved with. You’re only after one thing and that’s money.” He leaned closer to her, until they were almost nose-to-nose. “Well guess what, sweetheart, you’re not getting a cent from me.”

She gasped in shock. Why would he think she was after his money? “I don’t want any money from you. Why would you think that?”

“Don’t lie to me, *sweetheart*. I heard you on the phone. I heard you tell your bookie or your dealer or your loan shark or whoever it was you were talking to, that you were going to get the money to him within a week. You’d found a *sure thing* and all your financial worries were gone. Listen up: I’m not your *sure thing*.”

Nick had heard her talking to the debt collector? She wondered when he walked into the office if he’d heard some of her conversation. She’d wanted to get the guy off her back and so she told a little lie. It wasn’t exactly a lie; she did want to talk to Nick to get his advice. Now she wasn’t sure he would believe her if she told him.

Contempt on his face, aimed squarely at her. She knew she had nothing to lose by telling him exactly what was going on.

“I wanted to talk to you about my financial status, Nick. Get your advice.”

“You mean get to my bank account.”

The urge to stamp her foot and shake the man threatened to overwhelm her. It was imperative she keep a cool head in this situation. Getting angry wouldn’t help in getting Nick to believe what she was saying.

“No, I don’t want access to your account. That’s the furthest thing from my mind.” His snort at her comment didn’t help in keeping her temper at bay. “You want the truth, is that it?”

“Of course I want the truth. Question is, what truth will you be giving me? The real truth, or the truth you want me to believe?”

Pam took a couple of deep breaths before continuing. “Yes, I admit I told the debt collector on the phone that I was going to be able to get everything sorted in a week. Yes, I lied, but it was the only way I could get a little breathing space. I’m drowning here, Nick, and I don’t know what to do.”

She looked up in the vain hope his attitude toward her was softening. If anything, he looked harder than he had when she’d come across him in the room. When it became clear he had no desire to say anything to her, she knew the time had come to lay everything out on the table. To bare her soul and ask for someone’s help. She’d never asked for anyone’s help, not even when she couldn’t cope with her mother and juggle her work commitments. Somehow she’d managed, and she thought she’d be able to manage the debt she found herself in. But the interest on the outstanding amount was crippling her. Bankruptcy seemed the only option, but it was an embarrassing option and she didn’t want to go there.

She turned her back and walked over to the windows, hoping by looking at the view her words would come easily.

“My mother died four months ago. She suffered from motor neurone disease. We had basic health care coverage but what we had didn’t even make a dent in the cost of her treatments and medicines. We already had a mortgage on the house; it was only small so I increased it, hoping that would be all I’d need to do. Only the medical bills grew larger, I started living off my credit cards, paying as much down as I could, but I was basically robbing Peter to pay Paul.” She turned around and implored him to understand. “Once you get in that vicious circle nothing stops it.”

“Why didn’t you sell your house? Wouldn’t that have paid off the debt?”

With his questions hope rose up in Pam that Nick was starting to believe what she was telling him.

“I didn’t want to at first. I didn’t want to say goodbye to my home and the memories I had of my mum. She wasn’t a stellar parent and was bitter and twisted but I loved her and I didn’t want to let her go.” Pam smoothed down her skirt, willing away the tears that had sprung up talking about her mother. “I was getting hounded every second day by debt collectors, and then you presented an opportunity to get away from it all. The lure of the prospect of getting rent for my house and living overseas, away from the badgering calls, was too strong to resist. When I got to New York, away from my home and memories, I realized I wanted to start afresh. I didn’t want to go back to all the debt and stress. So I rang the real estate agent and told him to sell my place instead of renting it out.”

“There you go, problem solved.” He clipped out.

No, she’d been wrong. His attitude toward her hadn’t softened at all.

“I wish. Unfortunately, one of the medical companies placed a caveat on the house due to my non-payment of their account. Until I pay their account and get the caveat lifted, my house will never sell.”

“Ahh, I see, so this is where I come in. I bet you had plans to seduce me and then, when I was all relaxed from our lovemaking, you would ask for me to pay the debt so you could get the caveat lifted.”

“No,” she burst out. The thought of seducing Nick to help pay for her debt was abhorrent to her. “I wanted your advice. I was going to ask you if you thought bankruptcy was the way to go or if there was another alternative you could suggest. I would never seduce you for money.”

“So you say now.”

He could've slapped her and she wouldn't have been more shocked than she was right that minute. Who was this man standing in front of her? It certainly wasn't the man she'd known the last few weeks. That man had been reasonable and open. This man had closed himself off tighter than a safe in a bank. Reaching out to him seemed impossible.

"I don't think you're going to believe what I'm going to say, are you?"

As Nick walked over to the bar and poured himself another drink, she had her answer. Not giving him a chance to cut her down any further, she left the room.

Fighting back the tears, she turned back and gave him one last blast. "What I told you is the truth, Nick. I never wanted to hold things back from you, it just happened. Now I can see my mistake in doing that. I should've been upfront with you from the beginning."

"It wouldn't have made any difference." He returned. "I'm no one's ticket to easy street."

"I never thought you were. To me you were the man who gave me New York and I'll never forget that. There's one thing I did give you which I now wish I held back."

"Really, and what's that?" Nick swirled his glass before tossing the contents back. Was he hurting as much as she was?

She closed her eyes, wishing they could start the day over and she'd told him everything this morning. Before he'd overheard her conversation. Before he'd met the woman who'd changed his life. Now it was too late.

"My heart, Nick. I gave you my whole heart and now I wish I hadn't."

"I warned you I didn't do love. You should've listened."

Chapter Eighteen



HOW NICK MADE IT THROUGH THE LAST COUPLE OF DAYS HE didn't know. He got up and went to work. Did what he had to do and went home. He knew he was a bear at work and he didn't care. He had no idea where Pam was. Her empty desk mocked him each time he walked past it. He hadn't bothered to arrange for a new assistant. He couldn't picture anyone sitting there but Pam. Where had she gone? He kept telling himself he didn't care and was glad she was out of his life. He was lying to himself.

Now he sat at the bar of the Palazzo Regent, nursing a scotch, wishing the amber liquid would take away the pain that had sunk its claws into him the moment Pam had walked out of his apartment.

“Mind if I join you?”

Nick looked up, surprised to see his friend Jeffrey Courteux standing beside him. He'd had no idea he was still in town. Nick had thought he'd disappeared back to his secluded house in the north of Western Australia after the marketing meeting that had sent his life spiralling out of control.

“Sure, I'm not waiting for anyone.”

“Not even your hot assistant.”

Jealousy hotter than the burn of any scotch down his throat ignited through Nick, and in a flash of red haze he had his hands on Jeff's jacket, pulling the other man toward him. “What did you say?” he ground out.

Jeff laughed, and with a deft martial arts movement had Nick's arms off his jacket. "Now I know the reason you're sitting here nursing a scotch at three in the afternoon. You've got it bad, man."

As the red haze seeped out of him, sensible thought returned. Nick had never gone after any of his friends before, especially not after one of them made a comment about how hot a woman looked. He usually agreed with them.

"Sorry." He looked at his friend. A friend he hadn't really spoken to at length in years. A friend he'd almost knocked out in a fit of jealousy. "I'm not sure what came over me."

"No worries, mate. Do you want to go all girlie and talk about it?"

Nick laughed like he was supposed to. Jeff was the last person who liked to discuss heavy topics. "I didn't know you were into deep and meaningful conversations."

Jeff shrugged and picked up the bottle of beer the barman had placed in front of him. "Not usually, but you look like you need a friend, and that's what we are."

"Do you believe in love?" The question burst out of Nick before he had time to control it, embarrassment at sounding so sappy washing over him. "Don't answer that, it was a stupid question."

"I believe in love. Thought I found it once, but it didn't work out."

"Would you travel that road again?" Nick asked, surprised his friend was being open with him.

"Yes," he responded quietly. "Yes I would, for the right woman, I would definitely give love another shot."

Something about the way he talked piqued Nick's interest. Had his friend found someone he could love again? Was that why there seemed to be an air of openness around him when he'd been closed off previously?

"Is there something you want to tell me?" Nick asked.

Jeff laughed. “No, just if you’ve found the right woman, then do everything in your power to keep her. Look at Luc, look at the extremes he went through to get Jasmine back.”

“His initial motives weren’t to win her back,” Nick replied dryly. “Luc was hell bent on bringing Jasmine and her father down.”

“Was he? If Luc wanted to make them pay he’d have done it impersonally and without facing them. He wanted Jasmine back. He was just lucky Regents wanted to sell and presented him with the perfect opportunity to get back in her orbit. He just wasn’t aware of it at the time. It wasn’t until he saw her again that it hit him he still loved her.” Jeff took another sip of his beer and Nick waited to see if he would say more. “Luc would never have intentionally hurt Jasmine.”

“He did a pretty good job of almost wrecking things.”

“Love makes you mess up.” Jeff looked pointedly at him. “It makes you say and do things you wouldn’t normally do if you were thinking unemotionally. Love also makes you able to acknowledge the fuck ups and fix them.”

Nick let Jeff’s words wash over him. Tried to make some sort of sense of them. “I’m not even sure I know what real love is.” He muttered. “The only love I’ve ever known has been destructive. I think it’s safer not to fall in love.”

“I think it’s too late for you. I think love has already found you, Nick.”

Nick didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to acknowledge there could be truth in anything Jeffrey was saying to him. They sat in silence, two guys lost in their own thoughts.

Finally Jeffrey broke the silence. “Do you want some advice?”

Nick looked over at his friend. If he thought anyone would be giving him advice on love it would be Luc, considering he was the one that was happily married out of the three of them. “Sure, I’ll take anything at this moment.”

“You’ll know if you’re in love with Pam if you can’t get through a day without thinking of her. When even the most

pressing negotiations don't hold your attention, you're in love. If you feel any of this, then go after her and sort it out. If she's not constantly on your mind, then stop wallowing and get on with your life."

"Is that what you're going to do?" Nick asked.

"Who said anything about me being in love? I'm just giving you advice, man."

Nick laughed, his mood lifting. Perhaps there was some truth in what Jeff was saying. Pam had been on his mind constantly, even when he was angry with her. He could even overlook her seeing him as a meal ticket. And that made him perhaps the stupidest schmuck on this earth.

He didn't want to think anymore and he didn't want to drink. He didn't know what he wanted from his life.

"Let's get out of here, Jeff. I've had enough."



THE NEXT DAY Nick walked toward Luc's office, purpose and resolve strumming through him. He'd thought all night about his conversation with Jeff. Going over everything they'd talked about. Even after leaving the bar and going to shoot some pool, the discussion had centered on love, life and women. Not manly conversation, but neither of them seemed to mind. And neither did the girls in the bar. They both got hit on too many times for Nick to remember, but they had gently let the women down. Nick was surprised Jeff hadn't taken what had been offered. They'd parted after they'd had burgers. Nick for his lonely apartment and Jeff for a late flight back to Broome and his secluded home.

Nick knocked once before opening the door. "Luc, I need to know whe—"

He stopped mid-sentence when he looked up and saw Luc and Jasmine's arms wrapped around each other. He still couldn't get used to the sight of his best friend and ruthless business partner openly showing his affection for his wife.

“I’ll come back,” he said, as he retraced his steps.

“No, it’s okay, Nick, stay. I want to talk to you.” It was Jasmine who stopped his retreat. It never boded well when a woman said they wanted to talk to you.

“Go gentle with him, *cara*.” Luc murmured the words, loud enough, though, for Nick to hear. “I don’t think this is as easy on him as you think.”

He took a deep breath and turned to face the happy couple. Luc had a smug look on his face, as if knowing exactly what Jasmine was about to say. Somehow Nick knew what she was about to talk about.

“How are you, Nick?” It wasn’t the question he was expecting from her. He’d expected her to go straight for the jugular.

“I’m okay.”

Jasmine moved closer to him, her hand rubbing her belly gently. Immediately he transposed Jasmine’s body with Pam’s, seeing her body swelling with the life of another human being. He ached to be the one who was the father of her child.

“Are you really, Nick?” Jasmine asked softly. “Have been you okay since your argument with Pam?”

He shouldn’t be surprised Jasmine knew about it. He had been aware that when Pam and Jasmine worked together they’d forged a close friendship. Pam had been her maid of honour, for goodness sake.

“Is Pam okay?” He had to know. He didn’t care about himself but he wanted to know everything was okay with Pam.

Jasmine reached out and touched his arm. “She’s hurting. I don’t know exactly what happened between the two of you. Pam wouldn’t say but she did suggest you thought she was a gold digger who was after only one thing.”

“She’s not,” he responded automatically, knowing deep inside it was true. “I know she’s not.”

“Then why did you accuse her of being one?”

That was the interesting question. When he'd overheard her conversation, part of him knew there had to be a decent reason for what she was saying to the other person. If he'd thought about it rationally, kept the emotions out of it, he probably wouldn't have reacted the way he had when he'd been confronted with his father's former mistress. The one woman who had wrecked his life. He took his anger out on Pam, which had been wrong. So very wrong. "It was easier to push her away."

"But lonely. I'm not going to yell at you or beat you down with words, I think you've probably done that to yourself enough times over the last couple of days."

He laughed at the truth of her words. "You could say that."

"Then I think you know what you need to do now, don't you?"

Did he? He thought about what Jeff had said to him last night. How if he couldn't go a day without seeing Pam. A day without hearing her laugh. Without seeing her smile. Then it was love and he should grasp it with both hands.

"I can see you are coming to a decision." She walked back and gave her husband kiss on the lips. "I'll leave you boys to talk business. I'm going shopping. By the way, Nick, Pam's at our house if you're interested. And I don't plan on being home for a few hours."

She blew Luc another kiss and then walked out the door.

"It's worth every sacrifice. Every compromise you have to make. And I wouldn't have it any other way." Luc spoke behind him.

Nick turned to look at his best friend.

"Love. Love is worth everything, Nick."



PAM GAZED out the floor to ceiling windows, not really seeing the view. After leaving Nick's apartment, she didn't know

where to go or what to do. She went to Jasmine to see if it would be okay if she could stay in a hotel room for a couple of days. All it had taken was one look at her for Jasmine to know she was in pain. A pain Jasmine herself had experienced once before. Jasmine had taken her to her house, and told Luc that Pam was staying as long she needed.

The most amazing thing was, once Jasmine had known the story of her financial situation, she'd set about sorting everything out for her, admonishing her for struggling by herself. So now her financial woes would soon be over, her house issue could be solved and she would be free. Except she'd be free and alone.

She turned away from the window, only to scream when she spied a figure silhouetted in the doorway. She grabbed at the nearest chair, digging her fingers into the wood as the figure walked toward her.

"Nick, what are you doing here?" She never expected to see him again. Not after what he'd said to her. What he'd accused her of being.

She held her breath and gripped the chair even tighter, to stop herself from reaching out and touching him. She'd missed him so much. Missed his smiles and his kisses.

"I came to see you."

"Why? To throw more accusations at me?"

"No." He was beside her now, and reached out and cupped her cheek. She badly wanted to melt into his touch. But she held herself stiff. "No, I've come to say sorry. Again, and this time it's for the last time. I'm sorry, Pam so very sorry. I know you're not a gold digger. I know that's not who you are or what you would ever do. I let my past influence my future and I shouldn't have. It was wrong. So very wrong."

Sincerity tinged his every word, and even though her heart wanted to believe it, her mind was warning her to be cautious. He'd said sorry so many times, only to turn around and snap at her again.

“Thank you,” she moved away from him, needing some space as his scent, the spicy scent she’d come to love, was tempting her to throw herself at him. “Now you’ve said your apology you can leave. I’m sure you won’t mind it if I don’t show you out.”

She made her way back to the window, willing Nick to walk away as tears threatened to fall. She didn’t know why she wanted to cry.

Because you miss him. You miss him so much.

The voice inside her head yelled at her. It was true. She had missed him desperately over the last couple of days.

Warm hands landed on her shoulder and turned her around. Before she had a chance to ask what was going on, Nick lowered his head and took ownership of her mouth. His kiss was powerful and unforgiving, so reminiscent of all the kisses they’d shared. She didn’t think she wanted him to kiss her any other way.

She moaned and wrapped her arms around his neck, deepening the kiss. This was what she’d been aching for over the last few days. Nick to hold her and kiss her. Tell her he loved her. His lips trailed down her throat.

“I need to stop,” he muttered against her neck.

“No you don’t. Don’t ever stop.”

He chuckled and the sound vibrated through her soul, touching her heart. She bit back the groan of disappointment when he pulled away from her and put some distance between them.

“Pam, sweetheart, I love you. These last few days have been total hell without you. I couldn’t concentrate at work. All I could think about was you and being with you. I’ll give everything I own to have you by my side for the rest of my life.”

Pam wanted to believe him so very much, but how could she be sure he was being truthful when he was always changing his attitude around her?

He sighed as if reading her mind. “You don’t believe me, do you? You still think I don’t mean it.”

“You said some really horrible things to me, Nick, when I hadn’t given you any reason to think that. I gave all of myself to you, and when I wanted your help you turned on me without even letting me explain myself fully. You called me a liar when I did.”

Nick ran his fingers through his hair, ruffling it, making him look younger and more vulnerable. “I know. What I said and did was unforgiveable, and I can totally understand you being wary, but I’m laying my heart on the line here for you. I meant what I said. I will give up everything I own to have you. Money and luxuries mean nothing to me if you aren’t in my life sharing them with me. I want you to travel with me always. I want you by my side every minute of every day. When we worked together in New York it was some of the best days of my life.” He placed a soft kiss on her lips. “Please Pam, give me another chance. Let me show you how much I love you.”

With every word he spoke, the ice that had formed around her heart when he’d accused of being a gold digger cracked until it shattered in tiny pieces. She didn’t want to not have Nick in her life. He’d shown her how beautiful the world could be when you shared it with someone you loved. And yes, she loved him. Wholeheartedly, without a doubt.

“Oh, Nick, yes I will give you a second chance. How can I not when I love you so completely?”

“I promise I won’t let you down, ever again. I’ll help you sort out the issues with your house. I’ll help you pay off your mother’s medical bills. I will never, ever let you struggle by yourself again.”

“It’s all sorted, Nick. Jasmine helped me and I think it’s probably for the best that she did. I would always feel guilty if you’d helped me. I would always wonder when we argue in the future, and we will even though you said you wouldn’t be saying sorry to me again. You can’t go through life like that.

You could bring up you helping me financially all the time and use it against me. This way the slate is clean.”

“I would never use it against you, but I can understand why you wouldn’t want my help. But I will be there the next time you need me. Marry me, Pam. Marry me and let’s start a brand new story for the both of us. A story where love is beautiful and free from all constraints of doubts and mistrust.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in love.”

“I didn’t until I met you. You made me believe. You made me whole and I don’t think I can ever thank you enough.”

“You made me whole too.”

They kissed again, each pouring their love for the other into each other. When they broke apart to catch their breath, Nick spoke. “You never did answer my question.”

Pam smiled cheekily at him, like a cat who’d caught a canary. “And what question was that?”

Nick got down on bended knee and clasped her hand to his chest. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes, Nick,” she whispered. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

A smile like one she’d never seen before broke out over his face. The smile told her all she needed to know. Nick had let go of the past where darkness had pervaded much of his soul. He’d made peace within himself with regards to his parents’ death and he was ready to move forward. It humbled her to think she was the person responsible for helping him to break free of the chains that had constricted his heart.

“You’ve made me the happiest man in the world,” he uttered as he pulled her into his arms.

“Take me home, Nick. Let’s start our story now.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Nick swept her up into his arms and headed for the front door of the house. Pam knew when they walked through those doors, their life together was just beginning, and she couldn’t wait to see what adventures Nick and she would share.

She'd accepted the job with Nick as a means to try and get her life in order. What she'd found was her destiny. And her destiny was Nick.

Epilogue



PAM LAY SNUGGLED IN NICK’S ARMS. THERE WAS DEFINITELY something to be said about make-up sex—it was pretty amazing.

“You happy, Pam?” Nick asked, a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

She rolled on top of the love of her life. “Happier than I ever thought possible.”

There was still a hint of worry in his gaze, as though he wasn’t convinced that she’d totally forgiven him for the way he’d treated her.

Pam reached up and touched his cheek, this skin rough from his five o’clock shadow. “Nick, you’ve given me a future I’ve always wanted.”

“What future is that?”

“One with the man I love. One with a man who loves me unconditionally. And you are that man, Nick Rhodes. I want everyone to be as happy as you and I.”

He hauled her close and kissed her. She moaned as desire swarmed to life inside of her.

“I love you, Pam,” Nick said when he let them breathe.

“And I love you, too.”

She settled back in his arms. Pam didn’t want to go back to the day that caused pain for them but something about it what

happened when the advertising agency came to the office stuck in her mind.

“Do you know anything about the advertising executive that you ended up going with?”

“Greta Adamas?”

“Yes, her.”

“Not much. Jeff liked her campaign a lot and, even though I wasn’t part of the final decision, Luc said he only wanted to work with her.” Nick twirled a lock of her hair. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know I just got the sense that there was something between them. I could be wrong, but there was definitely some tension there.”

“Can’t say I noticed anything but you could be right. If she brings him out of his self-imposed prison I won’t be mad.”

Pam pressed a kiss to Nick’s bare chest. “Guess time will tell.”

“Yes it will.”



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Acknowledgments

Writing is tough and there are times when you are ready to give it up. That's when you send out a SOS to friends and they pull you back from the ledge. I have a few of those people in my life. Thanks Kristen for always being at the other end of an email to make me laugh and realize that I can do this writing thing. To Sara and Sasha: our sticker wars are the best.

My Freaky Shey Houston. Goodness girl, I heart you so big! I'm so glad that we connected on Facebook and am so happy that we're friends. I can't wait to experience more freaky fun times with you!

Rachael Botson, you're an absolute joy to know. I'm lucky to have your support and the gorgeous bookmarks you make for me.

To my Ninjas — you truly are the best with your support — read stealthily!

Kat, my website goddess. Quite simply, I would be lost without you. You are always there to tweak my site, help me with promo items. I can't thank you enough for everything you do for me.

Jonathan Marlow, thank you for answering my real estate question, enabling me to come up with a workable solution for this story. You are an amazing father and I know it will all work out for you and you will come out on top.

I can never say thank you enough to Jason and my children for cheering me on, and dealing with me when they talk and I don't hear because I'm immersed in writing my story.

Finally to you, the person who is reading this acknowledgment now. Thank you for picking up my book and reading it — I hope you enjoy the journey I take you on. I love hearing from you.

About the Author

On her very first school report her teacher said, “Nicole likes to tell her own stories”.

It wasn't until after the birth of her daughter and after having fun on a romance community forum that she finally decided to take the plunge and write a book.

Nicole writes sexy contemporary romances, seducing you one kiss at a time as you turn the pages. She enjoys taking two characters and creating unique situations for them.

Apart from writing, Nicole is busy looking after her very own hero — her wonderfully supportive husband — and her two fabulous kids.