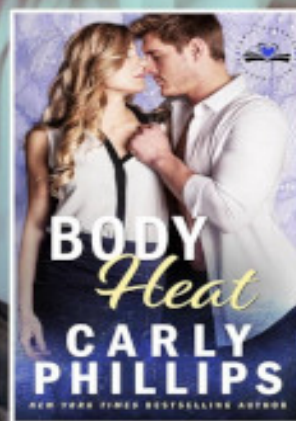




the **SIMPLY** *Series*



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**CARLY
PHILLIPS**

THE SIMPLY SERIES

BOOKS #1-5

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Carly Phillips

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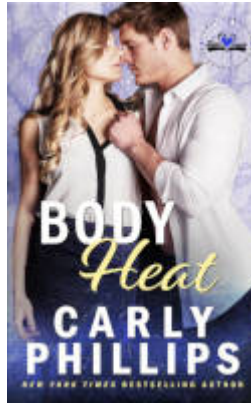
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[Simply Sinful](#)

He's not the man she thought he was. But when danger lurks, he's the man she needs.

Any rookie on the force could verify if Charmed! is a legit etiquette school for businessmen, or...something else. But coming off a wrenching drug bust, Detective Kane McDermott's captain gave him a choice. Take the fluff case, or take enforced time off.

The moment Kane meets Kayla Luck, he's in trouble. She's fierce, keen-eyed intelligence in a body built for sin. And when they touch, the jolt of desire reminds him it's never wise to mix police work with pleasure.

Kayla is used to handling men who are more focused on her curves than her mind. But when her newest client arrives for lessons in foreign language and business etiquette, she's the one who can't tear her eyes off all those muscles wrapped in a sexy, double-breasted suit.

Dinner out leads to a hot night in bed, and Kayla falls hard and fast. Until she learns the business suit hides a badge, and she calls it quits. But Kane's already lost his heart—and discovered she's in danger. And if he can't convince her she's safe with him, he'll lose the woman he loves.

[Simply Scandalous](#)

He runs in high society circles...and he's running circles around her heart.

In retrospect, it was all Gran's fault. Logan Montgomery has found his niche as an assistant district attorney. But Gran just revealed some worrying intel—dear old dad and his political cronies are about to maneuver him into running for mayor.

But Gran has a plan. A pre-emptive strike involving a pretty blonde caterer with supple curves—and a family history literally dripping with scandal. There's just one flaw in his grandmother's scheme: Logan's not a player. And there's a delicious spark of attraction that makes him want to try for something special with Catherine Luck.

It's a mystery to Catherine why Logan, who sits at the very top of the social ladder, would even look twice at someone like her. Maybe he has a thing for disgraced, overworked caterers. But his gentle concern, delivered in that velvety chocolate voice, can't be real and Cat knows better than to mix business with pleasure.

Raw desire and genuine affection unexpectedly tip them into forbidden territory—love. Until Catherine gets a stark reminder that the Montgomerys never do anything without an ulterior motive.

Which means Catherine's luck in love is about to run out...

[Simply Sensual](#)

Do the job. Take the money and run. Until, in a flash, love changes everything.

In retrospect, Ben Callahan should have known this job was trouble.

Way more than his normal P.I. fee and unlimited expenses, just to watch over one woman and report back? Alarm bells should have sent him running back to New York. But with his Mom needing assisted living care, Ben takes Emma Montgomery's tempting offer to watch over her granddaughter.

Then he meets Grace, a golden-haired princess. Gifted, gorgeous, reckless. And a serious threat to his sanity as well as his libido.

Determined to prove she can support herself with her camera, Grace Montgomery hasn't touched her trust fund in months. It's a struggle, but she's free—free of stifling small-town society, free to do what she wants. And right now, she wants to explore her long-repressed sexuality with her hot new neighbor.

As Grace sheds her inhibitions faster than a high-speed shutter, Ben finds himself breaking his own rules for a woman full of unexpected secrets and thousand-watt sensuality. But when Grace discovers who's signing Ben's paycheck, her heart could be too broken for his love to repair.

Body Heat

NYC summer days are hot. Nights are even hotter...

Not much has stirred Detective Jake Lowell's interest since a perp put a bullet in his shoulder, killed his partner, then walked on a technicality. Until a sexy waitress at a tiny neighborhood café catches his eye.

Physical therapy is the last thing on Jake's want-to-do list, but he needs it to get back on the street and track down the killer. But what's a guy to do when he meets his new PT—and it's his smoking hot café angel?

Working two jobs, Brianne Nelson never expected to do more than fantasize about Mr. Tall, Tanned & Gorgeous. But when her new private PT client turns out to be the man who fuels her fantasies, she realizes she's going to be seeing a *lot* more of him—in the flesh—than she bargained for.

It's not long before skin-on-skin contact turns into a hot summer fling. But the killer Jake is after isn't going down without a fight and more than their hearts could get caught in the crossfire...

[Simply Sexy.](#)

It all started with a not-so-innocent sprig of mistletoe...

In retrospect, Rina Lowell should have known that Emma Montgomery's mistletoe was a matchmaking ploy.

Rina is new to Ashford, to her newspaper job, to her whole life. And she can't wait to write "Hot Stuff", a series of columns that will definitively pin down what men really want.

When Emma maneuvers her under that pesky sprig of evergreen with Ashford's prodigal son, Rina can't resist the chance to plant one on that dark-haired, blue-eyed man's

sensual mouth. She never expected that kiss to go down like a shot of fine tequila. The man is perfect for her, or so she thinks.

When his adoptive father Joe falls ill, globetrotting news reporter Colin Lyons doesn't hesitate to drop everything to fly home and take over Joe's baby, the *Ashford Times*. Which, Colin discovers, is veering away from hard news to sexy, smutty fluff. Something he can't let happen.

He's only got until New Year's to save this sinking ship, and to do that, he needs an ally. Rina, with her sparkling brown eyes and frumpy clothes that make his fingers itch to discover what's underneath, is the perfect target to help him. Even if it means the job she loves will be cut in the end.

He never expected one kiss to take his simple plan to save the *Times* and tie it into impossible knots... and possibly cost him the woman he loves.

Note: These titles were originally published in 2000–2002 by Harlequin Temptation, Blaze. It appears here in its original glory, without substantial revision.

A photograph of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace. The man is shirtless, wearing an open white shirt and a blue tie. The woman has blonde hair and is wearing a blue top. They are positioned against a textured, light blue background.

SIMPLY
Sinful
CARLY
PHILLIPS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SIMPLY SINFUL

THE SIMPLY SERIES

BOOK 1

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Carly Phillips

Chapter One

DETECTIVE KANE McDERMOTT peered through the space between the closed curtains in the brownstone's window. He caught a brief glimpse of long, gorgeous, blond hair and a body with enough curves to make even his wary dick take notice. Despite the chill of the cold autumn day, the unexpected jolt of desire kicked in fast, warming him from within.

If he had to wine, dine, and proposition the woman inside, at least he wouldn't be bored. But he still resented the hell out of this assignment. Coming off a tough case, his superior thought he needed a rest. Captain Reid hadn't used the expression *burned out*, but Kane heard the words in his lectures anyway. Kane disagreed. On his last assignment, a drug bust had gone wrong but that didn't mean he needed R&R. Having grown up on the Boston streets, he knew better than anyone when he was in danger of losing his edge. Now wasn't it.

He wished to hell and back the wrong kid hadn't been hit in the crossfire, but he had. And with his own brother's bullet. Kane knew he wasn't at fault but his guilt remained. So did his remorse. Though no one could have anticipated the arrival of the dealer's little brother, Kane would live with the mother's screams for the rest of his life. He'd refused time off—he knew it wouldn't help him forget—so the captain figured Kane might as well pretend he'd taken leave and gave him this ridiculous assignment instead.

Any rookie could verify whether *Charmed!* was a legitimate etiquette school for men or a front for a prostitution ring. As far as he was concerned, any guy who needed lessons in dating was as pathetic as this assignment. What the hell kind of guy needed charm school to make headway with a woman? Especially one who looked like her.

He shook his head. What a waste. Then again, giving lessons to geeks was preferable to any other kind of service she might be performing for her paying customers. Considering she'd worked for her late aunt and uncle when they'd held the reins, she definitely knew the score. Whatever that was.

He'd pulled serious undercover work with drug dealers and pimps, yet here he was gearing up to make his awkward pitch to *Charmed!*'s sexy owner. He still had his doubts he could pull off the act and had a contingency plan in case he blundered. He wouldn't know until he got inside.

He placed his hand on the doorknob. Was she or wasn't she? It was time to find out.



KAYLA LUCK THREW a disgusted glance at the old heater which refused to cooperate with reasoning or common sense. A bead of sweat trickled down her back and she groaned. The cleaning crew had turned up the heater up last night and the brownstone felt like a sauna. The space was quaint, with two levels that were now broiling. Kayla had finally moved the temperature dial but the stupid piece of equipment continued to pump heat.

Between the rising thermostat and the effort she'd exerted trying to fix it, she was beyond uncomfortable. Unable to handle the feeling of her layered clothing, she peeled off her jacket, leaving herself dressed in a silk cami and trousers. When that didn't help, she pulled at the top that had adhered to her skin. Definitely not the way to begin a new class and she hoped all the men had received the cancellation notice.

Kayla had inherited the building and the business from her aunt who'd offered ballroom dancing and dating etiquette lessons. There'd been a time when those kinds of services had been in demand, but for years there had been a steady decline in customers. Though Kayla had ideas on how to modernize, her aunt had remarried last year and brought her new husband in as her partner.

Kayla had given them time to acclimate to working together, intending to approach the newlyweds with her ideas when they returned from vacation, but they'd died before she could talk to them. She swallowed the lump in her throat at the thought of her beloved aunt being gone and turned her focus to something else. Something that would make her smile.

Her sister Catherine had used her share of their inheritance to attend culinary school and Kayla was thrilled she now had the money to follow her dream. Kayla had put off her own future in favor of running her aunt's business and bringing in income. And she intended to keep the business in the black.

Men today didn't need dating lessons, but many executives required instruction on how to conduct themselves in social settings and needed to learn foreign customs when entertaining

international guests. With her language skills, she would add a modern dimension to an old-fashioned business. Ordering off foreign menus would no longer be a challenge for the American executive or traveler. And thanks to her well-targeted on-line advertising, she'd just begun getting calls from the larger downtown corporations with offices overseas.

Instead of giving *class to the heathens*, as her aunt had been fond of saying, *Charmed!* would offer a broader, more modern range of services. When Kayla had inherited the school, the irony wasn't lost on her. The class *whore* with the classless mother, giving *charm* lessons. The memories of being bullied still hurt and gave her an even stronger incentive to upgrade and modernize *Charmed!* until it no longer resembled its roots.

Much as Kayla had done for herself.

She'd grown up on the poor side of an otherwise well-to-do area outside of Boston. While the other kids always seemed to sport designer labels and the latest fashions, she and her sister had worn their clothes until they were threadbare. Problem was, Kayla's figure had developed early, and her clothes never fit properly. The girls treated her like an outsider, and the boys figured if she dressed in tight clothes, she'd wanted to be noticed. By the time she hit high school, there wasn't a guy who hadn't claimed he'd *gotten lucky*. She'd buried herself in her books and told no one except her sister the truth. No one else would have believed her if she had.

Despite the heat, she shivered at the painful memories, then forced them aside. Those days were behind her, and

Charmed! wasn't a joke. It wasn't a dating school for the awkward man. Not anymore. It was a business meeting legitimate needs. She wasn't thrilled with delaying her life, or putting off going back to school to obtain her language degrees. She'd even toyed with the idea of becoming an interpreter, but not at the expense of family. *Charmed!* was a family business, and something Kayla and Catherine held sacred. Antiquated or not, neither she nor her sister had been ready to part with the school. Her aunt's sudden death two months earlier was too fresh and raw.

She grabbed for her pad and pen. The repairman still hadn't returned her call, and she made a note to nudge him every half hour. She had a head for numbers and the ability to memorize whole passages of books at a glance, but if she didn't record the little details, nothing got done.

Her projections indicated *Charmed!* would see a large profit next year, and she'd be able to stop renting the mirrored dance room out to exercise classes. She walked back to the storage room. With classes canceled, she could use the free time to begin going through her late aunt and uncle's books.

But first she needed fresh air. She walked into the outer room, intending to open the doors and windows when the chimes signaled an unexpected visitor had entered.

She glanced up and nearly tripped midstride. She'd heard the expression sucker punched before, but Kayla thought she and her wary heart were immune. Her visitor made her rethink that notion.

From his designer dress shoes to his dark and immaculately groomed hair, the man emanated strength and power cloaked in a double-breasted suit. Her breath caught in her chest. She was grateful she had been too hot and uncomfortable to eat because her stomach churned in an unfamiliar combination of excitement, trepidation, and awe. A wave of heat settled low in her belly that had nothing to do with the broken unit in the back.

She'd wanted to cool off? Not even the spring breeze blowing in behind him would cause her blood to chill now. At a professional glance, he looked every inch the executive she wanted to target with her new business angle. From a personal standpoint, he set her body tingling with one long glance.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

He nodded and offered an awkward smile. “Charmed?” He held out his hand, then seemed to reconsider, then changed his mind again and shoved his hand forward, nearly hitting her in the chest.

She tipped her head to the side, stunned by his awkward manner. “It’s nice to meet you, too.”

He laughed aloud, a sexy, rumbling sound that vibrated inside her. A confident sound at odds with the inept handshake he’d offered. “No, I meant the sign outside said *Charmed!* so I assume I have the right place.” The voice was every bit as sexy as the man.

A renewed surge of warmth trickled through her veins, slow and easy, like warm molasses. She liked the feeling. “That you do. I’m Kayla Luck, the owner.”

She shook his outstretched hand.

His touch was strong and self-assured, so unlike the weak handshake of the men she'd met at the accounting firm where she used to work.

“Glad to meet you, Ms. Luck.” And he began pumping her hand too eagerly. “Or is it Mrs.?” He paused a beat. “I really should have asked; I mean, I have no right to jump to conclusions and insult a lady...”

Unable to comprehend his sudden rambling, she interrupted him. “It’s Ms. or Miss. Your choice.” She eased her hand out of his grip before he yanked her arm out of its socket.

The rough edges of his skin brushed against hers. Despite all logic, she enjoyed the lingering caress.

“No Mrs.,” he mused. “Must be my *lucky* day.” He shook his head and laughed. “That was pathetic. You must hear jokes like that all the time.”

“Too often. What can I...” Kayla caught her slip. “I mean, what can *Charmed!* do for you, Mr...?”

“McDermott. Kane McDermott.”

“Are you here for the wine-tasting class, Mr. McDermott? Because it’s been canceled.”

He wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. “I can see why. It’s a damn furnace in here.”

“Actually it *is* the furnace.”

“Which explains why you’ve stripped for summer before the start of the season.” All traces of awkwardness gone, his

smoky gaze fell on the silk shell that clung to her skin.

Embarrassment nearly suffocated her. She started to cross her arms and stopped, realizing she'd only made an uncomfortable situation worse. Bold admiration lit his chiseled features, the frank look at her breasts common to most men she came in contact with. Throughout her twenty-five years, she'd grown to both know and hate that stark, assessing look. Yet somehow, with his velvet stare now raised and boring into hers, she couldn't take offense.

Even so, she couldn't possibly be interested in a stranger with too many inconsistencies in his character. Awkward one minute, self-assured the next, Kayla couldn't help but wonder who he was.

And what he wanted.

She brazenly looked him over. He might have been prepared to walk into a photo shoot instead of her place of business. His dark hair was full, the bottom curling around his collar. The cut was longer than most nine-to-fivers preferred and added a dangerous edge to his appearance. The hard look in his eyes seemed to verify that impression. The perfectly sculpted features were at odds with the man inside. Mr. Kane McDermott had been around life's many corners more than a few times.

He wasn't the ordinary man who frequented her aunt and uncle's establishment. *Her* establishment, she reminded herself. The man was a paying customer, and that meant she had to quit dissecting him and get down to business.

“Can I get you a cold drink?” she asked. She had bottles of water in the office refrigerator.

He leaned against the wall, one shoulder propped against the scarred wooden paneling. His potent gaze never strayed from hers. “How about I buy you a drink?” he asked in that seductive voice. “I mean...oh, hell. I can’t pull this off.”

“Pull what off? What’s going on?”

“I can’t pretend I’m a guy who can’t get his own woman and needs lessons in how to approach a pretty female.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You think *that’s* the service we offer?”

“*Let her be Charmed!*?” he asked, repeating her aunt’s company slogan. “It was on the website my friend directed me to.”

“I see. Well, we’ve advanced beyond those days. Not that we can’t offer basic etiquette lessons if you need them, but...” His words suddenly penetrated her brain. “What do you mean you can’t *pull this off*? That you can’t *pretend* you’re a geek in need of training?” she asked warily. She’d wondered about his agenda and it wasn’t like her to be sidetracked by a hot guy—which made this one all the more dangerous.

“A friend of mine sent me here. He attended one of your dance classes last year. Your name is too unique for me to be mistaken.”

She narrowed her gaze. “What’s your friend’s name?” Kayla asked.

“John Fredericks. Says he nearly flunked out of Ballroom Dancing.”

She remembered the lessons her aunt had insisted they offer and the man Kane had mentioned. “That’s because he had two left feet and was preoccupied with landing a date for New Year’s Eve.” She couldn’t see that good-natured but shy man as a friend of Kane McDermott’s, but apparently appearances were deceiving. If John and Kane were friends, Kane had just handed her a reference she could trust. “How is John?” she asked.

“His company sent him overseas. He said to ask your aunt for tips on dating French women,” Kane said with a grin. “For the next time he calls.”

Kayla felt a pang of regret. “She’d have been glad to give him advice. She liked John, too.”

“What happened?” Kane asked, his tone now soft. He’d obviously picked up on her past tense mention of her aunt.

“She and my uncle were killed a couple of months ago.”

“Together?” he asked, clearly surprised.

“Yes.” Tears stung behind her eyes, as they did each time she had to speak of the accident and the aunt with whom she’d had so much in common. They shared an above-average IQ as well as a special relationship, due in large part to the fact that her aunt understood the oddity of being too smart.

Kayla shook off the memories and focused on her visitor. “The police said they skidded in the rain and hit a tree.”

“I’m sorry, that must have been rough.”

She nodded. “I didn’t know my uncle well. They’d only been married a little over a year, but at least he made her happy before she—” Kayla stopped, realizing she was confiding in a total stranger.

“I’m really sorry.” He paused. “John will be sorry, too.”

“Thank you.” She lowered her gaze before meeting his stare once more. “But my aunt being gone doesn’t change the facts.”

He propped a hip against the nearby desk. “Which are?”

“You came in here pretending to be something you’re not.”

He flinched. “And that was wrong. But John...he thought we’d hit it off.” He glanced down at his hands.

“Why didn’t you just say that when you came in?” This man was full of contradictions.

“Because you can’t trust someone else’s opinion. Hell, that’s like accepting a blind date. So I...came in here to check you out,” he admitted, not meeting her gaze.

She thought about his reference to ballroom dancing classes and narrowed her gaze. “John must have told you about me a long time ago.” Why was he just walking in here now?

“Why’s that?” he asked.

“Because *Charmed!* rarely gives classes for the dating impaired anymore and they aren’t listed on the website. We concentrate more on the international business arena now.”

He had the grace and manners to look embarrassed. “I knew the minute I saw you I couldn’t pretend to be someone I’m not.”

“And why is that?” she asked, hoping that her cup size hadn’t been what put him off his game. She’d rather their chemistry impact him instead. Because despite his oddities, she was definitely attracted to him.

A smile lifted his full lips. “You’re even more beautiful than I’d hoped,” he said, his sexy gaze sliding over her body.

He was too smooth and too focused on the superficial things about her. So much for her futile hope he’d be different than the average guy.

“But beyond that, if you actually teach all these classes, you possess a wealth of knowledge and, I’m not ashamed to admit, smart women turn me on,” he said.

And that sounded more like a reason she could live with.

“Will you go out with me?” he asked.

She wanted to, but dating a stranger wasn’t a smart move. “I wish I could, but I have to be here for the repairman.” She forced a regretful smile and squelched the female buried inside her who wanted to accept his invitation.

He unbuttoned his suit and slipped the jacket off his broad shoulders before flinging it onto the nearest chair. “It was that or be roasted alive.” He turned back to her. “Now where were we? Oh, yes...you going out with me.”

She opened her mouth to insist she’d made her final decision when her cell phone buzzed. She picked it up,

grateful to discover the repairman returning her call. Gratitude quickly turned to dismay as she listened, thanked him and disconnected the call.

Kane raised his dark eyebrows. “Problem?”

She nodded. “He can’t be here until tomorrow. He hopes.” She plucked at her damp shirt.

“Well then.” He started to unbutton the cuff on his shirt. “We’d better get to work.”

“We?” she asked.

“You and me. I don’t see anyone else volunteering.” His gaze darted around the room. “Do you?”

“No, but...are you an HVAC expert?”

He shook his head. “No. But living in an old apartment, I’ve seen my share of broken heaters. So let’s get going.” With a flip of his wrist, he began rolling up his sleeve.

When the first one was finished, he began on the second, revealing muscular forearms and bronze skin. With her fair complexion, she’d always admired deep-olive coloring, but it was more than his Mediterranean tone that appealed to her. It was one thing to sense this man’s strength, but another to witness the physical evidence of it firsthand.

Kayla’s mouth grew dry, and she grabbed for the bottled water sitting on her desk.

She wet her parched lips before attempting to speak. “Wrench?”

“What?”

She plucked up the tool she'd also deposited on her desk earlier. "I asked if you needed a wrench. To shut off the heat."

"Take it along and we'll see."

She followed him into the back room. He knelt down to examine what she considered a foreign piece of equipment.

"The temperature's already been lowered," he said.

"It was near ninety when I arrived. I turned down the dial, but the heat didn't follow. I guess the cleaning crew turned it on by mistake."

He examined the old heater. "It probably needs to hit its peak before it'll start coming down."

"You mean it's going to get hotter?" she asked, fingering the damp strands stuck against her neck.

"Count on it." He turned, his gaze zeroing in on hers, and the heat in the room seemed to soar.

No man had ever had such a heart-stopping effect on her before. Drawing a deep breath, she wondered how to handle such raw masculinity. She'd made too many mistakes to mess up and be hurt again.

He cleared his throat. "There's another choice. We can hit the emergency switch and hope we don't blow the unit in the process."

She shook her head. "No, thank you. I can't afford *that* kind of repair."

"Then you have no choice but to let it run its course. In the meantime, do you have a bucket?" he asked.

“As a matter of fact...” She walked to the storage closet and retrieved the pail her aunt had used to store cleaning supplies. “Here.” She offered it and he grabbed the handle.

“What about a skate key?” he asked.

She blinked at the strange question. “A what?”

He chuckled. “Never mind.” He reached around and patted the floor surrounding the heater. “Aha.” He held a small, rounded key aloft. Triumph lit eyes that she now realized were stunning—an aqua mix that emphasized more blue than green and turned her already mixed-up insides to pure mush.

She glanced at his find. “Let me guess. A skate key?”

“Sort of. Most of these old units need to be bled at the start of every season, sometimes more often. People familiar with them leave the key in a place they won’t forget. Otherwise you have to go running and hope you can find...”

“The nearest skater?” she asked wryly.

“She’d do in a pinch...if she looked like you.”

A burning flush heated her cheeks. With his stares and compliments, she probably resembled a tomato by now. “Look, Mr. McDermott, I appreciate your help, but you don’t have to flatter me.”

“Do compliments make you uncomfortable, Miss Luck?”

She shrugged, knowing he’d hit a nerve. In her experience, compliments were a means to an end.

“A woman like you should be used to them. I would think you’d take them in stride.”

“Let’s just say, I’d rather get back to the problem at hand,” she said, gesturing toward the heater. “I thought you bled a heater when there was no heat.”

“You do. But you might as well stabilize the system so you don’t have major problems when you turn it on again next winter.” He turned back to the heater, and soon the sound of water running into the bucket filled the otherwise silent room.

After her third trip to empty the water into the bathroom sink, he flipped the key and rose to his feet. “All set.” He wiped his damp hands on his pants, unconcerned with the damage he did to his suit. “As for the unit, give it some time. Chances are it’ll cool off without the help of the repairman.”

“Just clueing me in might have saved me a small fortune. Thanks.”

“Not a problem.” His gaze bored into hers, and a flash of dizziness assaulted her. She only wished she could blame the heat, but knew it was his penetrating stare that unnerved her.

“Reconsider that drink?” he asked.

She started to shake her head. “I...”

“Then I want lessons. And before you say anything, I know you don’t specialize in dating etiquette anymore, but consider this an emergency. I have dinner with my boss tomorrow night, and he plans on bringing his daughter. I don’t want to get involved with her, but I’d like to make a good impression and bow out gracefully at the end.” He paused, then said, “Have dinner with me tonight so you can teach me

the finer points of charm and class.” He grinned and she discovered one dimple in his left cheek.

“I think you have enough of both,” she said wryly.

He shrugged. “So humor me. I’m giving you an excuse to say yes...and you know you want to.” His voice lowered an octave. Husky and seductive, it flowed through her veins.

“And I think you’re taking a lot for granted. How about I make some calls and see if one of my instructors is available to, uh, meet your needs.” She groaned inwardly. It had taken years to learn how to cover her insecurities, yet around Kane McDermott, she became the awkward girl she’d once been.

“I’d rather go with you.” His intense gaze begged her to believe.

Could he possibly be interested in her? Really interested? She shook her head, dismissing the possibility.

“Too bad for me.” Disappointment tinged his voice. “Guess I’ll be going with a stranger tonight.”

She rolled her eyes. “*I’m* a stranger.”

“Funny, but it doesn’t feel that way.” His gaze locked with hers in a meaningful stare she couldn’t escape or mistake. There was a connection between them. They both knew it—just as they both knew he’d changed her mind.

She lowered herself into the swivel chair behind her desk. Leaning across the wooden top, Kane came within kissing breadth of her lips, and she caught an enticing hint of spearmint on his breath. “Are you going to disappoint a customer, Miss Luck?”

“Kayla.” She licked her dry lips.

He raised an eyebrow and straightened to his full height. “It seems I’ve made progress, *Kayla*.”

He most definitely had. “Well, I can’t very well go with you if you’re going to call me Miss Luck all night,” she said.

The flash of white teeth came and went in a quick grin. “I heard about this casual place. I forget the name.” He shrugged on his suit jacket. “I’m from out of town, so I’m not too familiar with the city. I expect to be visiting often, though, because the boss lives here.” His gaze never left hers.

“So it’s a casual dinner?” she asked.

“Yes. You can run through wine ordering, food choices, all the necessary things I’d need to know for dinner with the boss...and I get your company. Do you like baseball?”

She nodded, feeling a little like she’d been blindsided.

“I’ve got tickets for the Red Sox game afterward, and we can go after.”

“Somehow I doubt you need lessons on how to attend a ball game.”

“No, but by then I’m hoping we’ll be past the lesson stage.” He winked and dammit, she nearly swooned. “Sound good?”

She cleared her throat. “Sounds fine.” So fine it scared her.

“We’re all set then.”

She nodded.

“You won’t be disappointed.” His words held a wealth of meaning, and Kayla had the distinct impression this was more than business. That *she* was more than hired help to this extremely sexy man.

He reached out and grabbed her hand. The connection was instant, the knowledge frightening. She feared her deepest thoughts had just been confirmed. He jerked back without warning. Had he experienced the same unnerving reaction?

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a brown, leather wallet, working quickly, as if he suddenly couldn’t wait to be gone. “Do you take American Express or Visa?” he asked.

“Either, but...” What could she say? That the thought of taking money in exchange for an evening in his company seemed wrong?

She glanced at Kane. He’d charmed her despite his initial pretense. Not only did she like him, but she could use an evening out to enjoy herself. With the all-business attitude she’d had lately, she’d barely had time for fun. When was the last time she’d been out with a nice guy? The last time she’d let herself *be* charmed for once? Kane was most definitely good at that.

She bit down on her lower lip and met his gaze, which had darkened to an unreadable blue.

He flipped open his wallet. “I can pay cash if you’d prefer.”

“No.” She couldn’t take money in exchange for a date. No matter how he couched the word, that’s what it was. She

treated him to a genuine smile. “Why don’t we see how things go and we can discuss it? Later.”

“Okay.” He snapped closed the billfold. “I’m staying at the Summit Hotel, and I’ll be in touch, Miss...Kayla.” With a grin, he walked out the door, leaving her to wonder...

Could she really be that...lucky?

Chapter Two

“**Y**OU LOOK SHARP, McDermott.” Whistles and catcalls followed his walk through the station house. Kane ignored the harassment and parked himself in an open chair, kicking his legs out in front of him. He exhaled deep and easy, keeping up a steady beat. Relaxation came, but it was hard-won and destined not to last.

He'd taken one look at that angel-like face and known the geek cover wouldn't work. He'd given it a shot anyway... because it would have been a hell of a lot easier to keep his distance from the woman if he wasn't acting like himself. He was a professional. Attraction was never supposed to come into play.

But he'd never seen eyes so wide-set and green, and he'd damn sure never seen curves like hers anywhere. Desire hadn't hit him so hard or fast since he'd been a teenager.

“Well? Did the McDermott charm do her in?”

At the sound of the commanding voice, Kane lifted his gaze. Since he'd been pulled into the assignment last minute, he hadn't had a chance to go over his cover with Reid. Kane was grateful. “She didn't say no, if that's what you're asking. You get the tickets?”

Reid ran a hand over his balding head. “You're a pain in the ass, McDermott. Yeah, I called my brother-in-law and told him my best detective was into bribery now.”

Kane shrugged. “Like I had a choice? Besides, you’re the one who insisted I take some R&R.”

Reid’s face grew somber. “Don’t try to con me. I’ve known you since you were a smartass in the academy. You watch a kid get killed, and you tell me you don’t need R&R?” Reid snorted. “I haven’t seen you so shaken since your first shot actually hit its target.”

Kane didn’t reply. The captain was right. When he’d been a rookie, Kane had killed a suspect when he’d closed a drug bust. The captain had picked Kane up and taken him home afterward, and, since then, the Reids had become the family Kane insisted he didn’t need.

The captain knew him well. More importantly, he accepted him. Despite Kane’s surly attitude and attempts to remain aloof, Reid pushed anyway, including him on holidays and in family gatherings. After a while, the older man’s persistence had paid off. Kane couldn’t bring himself to insult Reid or his wife by turning them down, though he squelched the small part of him that wanted to enjoy the sense of family they provided.

“At least these tickets will work to our advantage,” Reid said in his raspy voice.

“You really ought to lay off the smokes, Captain.”

Reid scowled at him. “Worried I won’t be around to annoy the shit out of you?” He laughed. “I’m too tough to die.”

“You got that right,” Kane muttered, refusing to admit he cared too much about his boss.

“Thanks to the predicted drop in temperature, the lady should be more than eager to share body heat,” he said, ignoring Kane as usual. “She seem interested?”

Kane folded his arms behind his head and leaned back to ponder the question. The old chair and springs creaked beneath his weight in a familiar song. *Had* Kayla Luck been interested?

“More after I told her I knew Fredericks.” Their tip regarding *Charmed!* had come from a reliable source who’d gotten caught with his pants down. He’d been more than willing to talk in exchange for keeping his escapade out of the headlines.

Reid had gotten a list of *Charmed!*’s *legitimate* clientele and it had taken more than a few interviews to find someone willing to help. Fredericks seemed squeaky-clean and nervous to have his name tainted by scandal. Kane hadn’t trusted the guy to keep quiet should Kayla contact him about his salesman friend, Kane McDermott, so he’d concocted the story about Fredericks being transferred overseas. Fredericks had been jumpy but sincere, and he’d sung Kayla Luck’s virtues, including her honesty.

“At least you landed a winner with the man.” Reid sounded pleased.

Kane nodded in agreement. If Kayla had reacted badly to the name, the plan would have been shot to hell. “I’m good at what I do.”

“Think she’ll take the bait?” Reid asked.

Kane recalled the sultry smile, the soft pout of her lips, and the coyly phrased question. *Why don't we see how things go?* But she'd also been wary of him. "We'll see."

She'd been interested but he'd wanted to keep the fact to himself. The thought caused a steady, pulsing rhythm in his veins. He could deal with a sexual attraction. Her other qualities were another story. A naive innocence lurked beneath the seductive body. She lacked the hard edge he'd expected, the tough facade he'd been prepared to face. Instead, she'd been uncertain and unsure. She might have grown up on the wrong side of the tracks, but life hadn't visibly hardened her—at least, not yet.

Lush curves on the outside and a gentleness on the inside. It was the softness that beckoned to him and that shook him up.

"Either the lady's running more than a charm school or she isn't," the captain said.

Kane shrugged, recalling her uneasiness at dealing with compliments and her unwillingness to accept his initial invitation. An act? A game designed to bait a man, to entice him until they fell into a sweaty tangle between the sheets? Or the ultimate rarity on this planet, an honest soul with nothing to hide? Kane had no idea.

"We'll see."

Captain Reid smacked his hand on the metal desk. "No, *you'll* see, McDermott. Just make sure you pay more attention to the woman than you do to the game."

Kane didn't take offense. The old man's gruff ways had kept Kane going too many times, when he'd watched neighborhood friends overdose or go down on a bust. Reid had had faith in a young kid even when no one else cared enough to bother. He knew Kane's sense of duty was strong.

"After this one, I don't want to see your sorry butt in here until the middle of next week." Reid's voice brooked no argument.

"A good weekend to you, too. Say hi to Marge."

"Do it yourself," Reid grumbled. "She says you don't come by often enough." He turned and strode back into his office.

Kane got his mind back on the case. He let the captain's words about Kayla sink in. Paying attention to her wouldn't be a hardship. In her silk top and pearl earrings, she was a sexy woman any guy would be lucky to claim as his own.

Except a cop whose job it was to take down a prostitution ring...if it existed. Her place could be a front, as his informant claimed. Maybe the sister knew more than Kayla, but according to his files, Catherine Luck had signed over ownership and was more concerned with her education than the school that paid for it.

He swiveled back and forth in his seat. He had a hard time believing the innocence in that green-eyed gaze wasn't real but an act for the customer's benefit. His hands clenched into fists at the thought of her.

Chemistry flared between them hot and strong. Unmistakable. Verbal seduction wouldn't be a problem tonight, but keeping his hands to himself just might be. He shook his head, trying to dislodge any thoughts caused more by emotion than common sense.

Cash in exchange for sex, he reminded himself. Money upfront. Stick to the plan and the answers would follow. And Kane always stuck to the plan.

As a punk kid, he'd followed a different code of conduct than the one he lived by now, but back then, respecting the law on the street had kept him alive. As a cop, he walked the straight and narrow. The rules were different but the reasoning the same. If he followed the rules, he kept his edge honed. Anything less and he didn't deserve his badge.

Kane closed his eyes, and a vision of Kayla danced before them. Between a body made for a man's touch and a heart-shaped face that would test a saint, he had the distinct notion he needed that edge more than ever before.



"IT'S A BASEBALL game, not a formal banquet."

"It's a date, not Chinese food with your sister," Catherine countered. She threw a disgusted glance at Kayla's old sweatshirt and jeans. "Are you trying to turn the man off before he gets to know how disgustingly smart you are?"

Kayla thought back to his references about her classes and how *smart women turned him on*. He couldn't possibly know

that much about her after such a brief meeting. It had to be a lucky guess. “I don’t want to look too eager,” she said.

“More like you don’t want to look too easy.” Her sister grabbed Kayla’s hand. Head held high, Catherine led the way to her bedroom, a short distance down the hall from Kayla’s own. With dramatic flair so opposite to Kayla’s more subdued actions, Catherine flung open the closet door and began riffling through the clothes inside.

“They won’t fit,” Kayla muttered.

“Maybe we don’t share the same bra size, but don’t tell me you don’t steal my clothes every once in a while.”

“Borrow.”

“What’s the difference?” Catherine held up a yellow shirt, made a face, and hung it back on the rack. “I know I swipe yours.” She came out of the small walk-in with a white fitted top and a faded jean jacket. Next came a pair of black denim jeans. “Here. Try these on.”

Kayla glanced at the outfit, more casual than her usual conservative look. Still, when she tried on the clothes, she had to admit she liked what she saw.

Catherine made a show of walking around her twice, hands on her hips in a judgmental pose. “Perfect. Better than all those trousers and silk blouses you wear. So stuffy—even Mama wouldn’t have left the house like that.”

“Mama liked to dress her own way,” Kayla said, thinking of the woman who had raised her girls alone. A woman with a heart of gold, but tarnished luck.

They hadn't had much money, but their mother had always made sure she looked her best before leaving the house. Unfortunately *her best* too often fell short. She looked like what she was: the checkout girl at the local supermarket, an aging woman still attempting to look younger than her years. Until Catherine had taken over clothing shopping, the Luck sisters had usually gone to school looking like mini-clones of their beautiful, but flamboyant mother.

"Men definitely took notice," Catherine said.

"Too bad she never gave them a chance. Maybe things would have been different," Kayla mused.

"You mean maybe Mama wouldn't have died of overwork and a broken heart? No. She chose her life."

Catherine had a point.

"She liked pining for Daddy, that's for sure. You ever wonder if Daddy pined back?" Kayla asked.

Her sister shook her head. "I think one kid scared him to death; two made him worse than a coward."

"Do you really have to sound so...full of hate?" Kayla wrapped her arms around her waist.

"I don't hate him. Actually, I don't feel much about him at all. But truth is truth." Catherine pinned her with her steady gaze. "I don't think all men are like him if that's what you're thinking."

"Not in the 'love 'em and leave 'em' department," Kayla agreed. "But in the 'can't keep their hands to themselves' department, men *are* all the same." After all, her parents had

had Kayla and Catherine within one year of each other. If that wasn't a prime example of too much lovin', as her mother liked to call it, then Kayla didn't know what was.

Catherine lowered herself onto her white lace comforter. "You know, a guy not keeping his hands to himself can be nice."

For someone with Catherine's confidence, maybe. Kayla joined her, staring at her fingers spread over her thighs. "Are you going out tonight?" Kayla asked.

"Clubbing. With Nick."

Nick had been Catherine's best friend for years. Kayla suspected he'd once been in love with her beautiful sister but Cat hadn't been interested and Nick had moved on, apparently content as Cat's best friend. Leaving Catherine alone.

Kayla narrowed her eyes and took in her sister's miniskirt and tights, her stretch top that showed off delicate curves. Catherine didn't have Kayla's lush figure, but she attracted her own share of attention. Kayla admired her sister, but Catherine had her own share of insecurities. She covered them well, but the truth was obvious. Both Luck sisters had been scarred by their childhood experiences.

Each had reacted in a different way. Instead of becoming a social butterfly, Kayla had learned to push men away. Although she had a lingering desire for the traditional white picket fence, happily ever after, she knew better than to believe she'd find it or the perfect man to share her life with.

Catherine placed a sisterly hand over hers. “Maybe you’ve never found the right guy. The one who will put *you* first.”

“You think he exists?” Kayla asked.

Kane immediately came to mind. He was the one man she didn’t want to push away physically or turn off emotionally. The first guy who made her feel special and had her wanting to take chances.

Catherine shrugged. “I don’t know. But if the light in your eyes is any indication, you do. And I’d hate to see you lose that special someone out of fear.”

Unable to control it, Kayla grinned. “He was different and sexy and...”

“And?”

“He listened,” she said, somewhat embarrassed. “He seemed interested but I’ve been out of the game too long to know for sure.”

“You don’t need experience to know if he makes you feel good. This guy could be *it*.”

Kayla had the sense Kane was most definitely *it*. “I don’t really know him,” she reminded her sister.

“But you want to.” Catherine read her mind as she had so many times in the past. “And just wait until he gets a look at you tonight.” Walking back to the closet, Catherine reached inside and tossed something across the room.

Kayla stood before the full-length mirror behind the door. She spun around once more, shocked at the woman whose

reflection she saw there. “I don’t even recognize myself,” she said, as she added the finishing touch, a wide headband that would provide both warmth and style for the night ahead.

“That’s because you’ve been so busy hiding behind conservative clothes and a job that involves geeks not hunks. You’ve just forgotten there’s a woman inside.”

Was Catherine right?

Between her old accounting job and now running her aunt’s business, Kayla had stifled her sense of self. Add to that her deliberate lack of a love life, and things seemed pretty pathetic about now.

Her sister placed her hands on Kayla’s shoulders. “At least this guy has brought my sexy sister out of her shell.” Catherine grinned.

“He’s a customer,” Kayla said. As if that meant anything. As he’d said, the customer thing was an excuse for her to yes to a date without over thinking. It was eerie how well Kane McDermott had understood her.

“Since when do you date a *customer*?”

She met Catherine’s gaze in the mirror. “I don’t,” she admitted.

“I know. And that’s why I think you should go out and *feel* for once. Take things from there.” Catherine plucked at the headband, straightening it to look suitably stylish. “The clothes are just the trappings of freedom. The rest is up to you.”

Catherine turned her toward the bedroom door and steered her into the hall. “I’ll drop you off at the restaurant. It’s on my way and, besides, I want to get a look at this guy firsthand.”

“Checking him out, Mom?”

Catherine shrugged. “We’ve always looked out for each other. No sense stopping now.” She glanced at Kayla. “You think about what I said. You might live to regret it if you don’t.”

Kayla took her sister’s advice, all the way to the outside of the restaurant.

Before he’d left *Charmed!*, she and Kane had exchanged numbers and he’d texted her directions, correctly sensing she wouldn’t have let him pick her up. Too much too soon.

Catherine pulled the car up to the restaurant where Kane waited on the top step, his elbow resting on the brass railing. Irresistible in a black leather jacket, she couldn’t tear her gaze off him.

Catherine’s whistle brought Kayla back down to earth.

“I take it you approve?” Kayla asked.

Catherine answered with a grin.

Drawing a deep breath, Kayla ran her fingers through the waves in her hair and stepped out of the car. Kane was by her side in an instant.

During the brief introductions and small chitchat between Kane and Catherine, Kayla could barely concentrate, her thoughts on Catherine’s earlier words. Was this man, this date,

a not-to-be-missed opportunity? Could he be someone important in her future? Though Kayla wasn't sure, she was about to find out.

And who deserved an honest chance more than Kane McDermott, the first man to excite her and impress her? The first man to look past her appearance and who genuinely seemed to like the woman within.



WITH HIS HAND on her back, Kane steered Kayla out of Fenway Park and into the dimly lit Boston streets. The Sox had won in extra innings, and the woman beside him hadn't uttered a single complaint about sitting through the long game or the continuing drop in temperature. Under ordinary circumstances, he'd call the date a hit, but Kayla was no ordinary woman, any more than she was his real date—a fact he had to keep telling himself.

“Did I mention how much I loved that restaurant?” she asked.

Only about ten times, he thought, wondering why the hell the notion pleased him so much. “The meal or the atmosphere?” he asked.

She laughed, the sound doing more to warm him than his heavy leather jacket. “Both. Wall-to-wall books...” She spread her arms wide, knocking into the people emptying out of the stadium along with them. “Oops.”

Her laughter was contagious, her love of something as simple as books, refreshing.

“But who would have thought of turning a library into a restaurant, and keeping the old volumes on the shelves? How have I lived here for so long and never even known about that place? Where did you find it?”

“I have my sources,” he said, deliberately vague.

“Well, tell them they were right on target.” She laughed again, and this time his stomach twisted with regret. Careful research and discreet questions into her background had revealed the blond bombshell was also an intellectual. Reading was obviously a hobby of hers, one he’d taken advantage of tonight.

The stab of regret took him by surprise. His job had never bothered him before and it shouldn’t now. As part of his assignment, he could just as easily clear her as convict her. So what if he had to dig deep and personal in order to accomplish his goal? But one glance into those trusting eyes turned him inside out. She wouldn’t appreciate the lie. If she was guilty of running a prostitution service, he shouldn’t give a good goddamn. But he did, and the guilt stemmed less from sensing she wasn’t involved and more from caring what she thought of him. That in itself was a first, and Kane didn’t like it one bit.

After an evening in her company, he’d learned plenty. She cared about family, felt things deeply, and had put her dreams on hold for her sister’s future and out of respect for her late aunt. The innocence she projected in both her gaze and her gestures told him more than surveillance ever could, and that innocence spoke to him. Touched him in ways no one ever had, in places he never allowed anyone to reach.

His gut told him she wasn't involved in anything more than running an inherited business. One she at times enjoyed, at others resented. Since gut instinct wasn't admissible in a court of law, he had to rely on his other talents to clear her. Somehow proving her not guilty had taken precedence over making a case against *Charmed!*'s sensual owner.

"Don't ask me why, but I had a feeling you would like that place," he told her.

"You were right."

"I know." Because he was a man who prided himself on instinct. Research may have provided the background, but an hour in her company, and Kane had discovered even more.

All pretense of teaching him the finer points for the so-called dinner with his *boss* forgotten, Kayla had opened up to him. Her father's abandonment had left her hurt and wounded, and the mother she'd loved had been more a child than a useful, guiding parent.

Like Kane, Kayla had grown up on her own. She had few close ties, apart from her sister...also like him. And by the time dinner ended, he understood her. He knew when to flatter and when to back off. He even discovered how to make her feel beautiful without ogling, because the slightest show of interest in her looks led to a hasty retreat. He'd connected with her apart from his assignment, and the thought made him fucking nervous.

As they rounded the next corner and walked down a street nestled between a double row of buildings, a heavy breeze

whipped around them and the temperature seemed to drop even further.

He rubbed his hands together. "I'd kill for a..."

"Cup of hot chocolate covered with whipped cream," Kayla said, finishing his sentence but not the way he'd intended. Scotch or whiskey was what he'd had in mind. Something that burned like hell and shocked his system into remembering he was on assignment and not out with an intelligent, sexy woman. One he wanted to see again and not behind prison walls. And *that* wouldn't be happening.

He needed solid proof to take back to Reid. Time to make his move and get out, Kane thought. They'd both be better off.

He'd gotten nowhere with his subtle questioning earlier, which meant he'd have to take a more direct, *seductive*, approach. He dreaded the idea as much as his overheated body craved it. Not even the sharp wind biting at his face and reaching into his bones numbed the burning heat Kayla aroused inside him.

"I was thinking more along the lines of coffee," he muttered. "But anything hot will do."

"No kidding." She nodded in agreement and clutched at her forearms with her hands.

She was obviously cold but had no intention of voicing a complaint. *Definitely a woman after his own heart*. No, he contradicted himself, not his heart. That he'd walled off years ago. He'd learned early on if he made anything other than his job his priority, he risked losing focus.

As a self-reliant kid, he'd honed the instincts that kept him alive. He'd only asked his uncle for a place to crash in order to avoid social services and foster care. And the man had agreed as long as Kane made himself scarce. Basic survival was what Kane understood best. Sex fell under that heading; caring did not.

But he had a job to do. Time to stop stalling and find out, he thought.

She was cold? The least he could do was warm the lady up. He looked over and her gaze connected with his. Wide-set eyes stared back, and golden strands of windblown hair touched her reddened cheeks. Intense need kicked in strong. He had to taste her. That it might make or break his case had nothing to do with the fierce hunger lashing through him. He cupped his hands over hers, feeling the ice-cold of her skin, and he drew her back into a hidden alley.

The crowds rushed past them, unconcerned with anything except finding warmth. Kane understood that need. He ran his hands up and down her arms and a light tremor shook her.

One step and he'd backed her against a dark brick building. Desire rushed through him the moment his body came into contact with hers.

“Kane?”

He looked into questioning eyes and had no answers. None he could reveal to her and, worse, none he understood himself. Which suited him fine. He didn't need to understand; he needed to feel. Her lips on his, her body, slick and wet, molding around his cock, producing friction so intense it was

unbearable. Not that he'd let things get that far, or if the informant was right, Kayla wouldn't, either, not without payment.

But looking into those trusting eyes, he damn well knew if she called a stop tonight, it would have nothing to do with money. This woman was no prostitute, but he needed proof and to get it, he had to carry things through. One sampling of those full lips and he could attempt to close the deal. Once she backed off, he'd make some excuse and take her home. A cold shower waited for him, and then he'd file his report and forget all about Miss Kayla Luck.

He tightened his grip on her arms. She didn't protest, not when he pulled her toward him and not when his lips came down hard on hers. Her mouth was warm and welcoming and a hint of sweet wine still lingered inside. One taste made him hungry for more than a stolen kiss in a back alley. One sampling set his blood on fire.

The brick wall anchored them and he took advantage, letting his hips grind hard against hers. A sound, half moan, half plea, escaped her throat and desire consumed him.

Kayla leaned her head back against the wall, drawing deep, unsteady breaths. He cupped her chin in his hand and looked into her glazed, green eyes. *He wanted her.* There it was. The stark truth, he thought. No lies, no deception, no *case* hanging between them...unless something she did placed it there.

He'd crossed the line and there was no turning back.

He'd never have believed he'd be so tempted to compromise his principles for a woman, never have believed

he needed one night so badly. She aroused him beyond sanity, beyond reason, and he needed to possess her, all of her.

He traced the line of her jaw, then held her face between his palms. "I want you." His voice rasped in her ear, the words vibrating between them.

Her hands reached for his chest, curling into fists against the heavy jacket. "Why?"

Of all possible replies, that one took him by surprise. So did the fact that he knew exactly what to say. "Not because you're beautiful, even though you are."

Her cheeks turned a shade deeper than before, and he brushed his thumb over her reddened skin. "And not because your body would tempt a saint, even though it would." His other hand brushed the underside of her breast, tracing the rounded, full contours hidden beneath the layers of clothes.

She tipped her head to the side. Her face fit perfectly in his hand. "Then why?" she asked.

"Because you're smart and I respect that, because you're gutsy and I admire that." Her eyes sparkled, glowing with a life of their own at each word he spoke.

Kane shook his head, unable to believe he was taking everything he'd learned about Kayla in order to make his case, and using it to make her his instead.

One night. With every second that passed, he needed that more and more. The light in her eyes, the...acceptance, he thought, struggling for the correct word. He needed everything

she possessed. After taking it, he'd deal with how badly he'd betrayed both his job and himself.

"I had fun with you tonight and everything about you intrigues me. Enough?" he asked too harshly.

A satisfied smile caught hold of her lips. He wanted a taste of that satisfaction but refrained for now. "More than enough." Her arms slipped around his waist.

"I take it that's a yes." His heart beat faster at the thought.

"That's a yes...for the right price," she said coyly.

He froze in place, then forced a smile. He'd taken her out tonight to bait and trap her. He'd gotten temporarily distracted by a rush of hormones, but it seemed he was about to get what he came for.

He ignored the swell of disappointment that came when he looked into those fraudulent green eyes. "And what would that be, Ms. Luck?"

She touched her icicle-like hands to his face and grinned. "Hot chocolate, Kane." She smoothed her fingertips over his brow, and her light laughter caught him by surprise. "What did you *think* I wanted?" she asked.

"I don't know, but you could show me."

Her eyes opened wide before she brushed a warm yet hesitant kiss over his lips. Arousal hit as fast as his sense of relief.

Before he could change his mind, he grabbed her hand and started back down the street. His hotel room, the hotel room

paid for by the department, was a few blocks away.

He'd face himself and the repercussions of his actions tomorrow.

Tonight was about Kayla.

Chapter Three

KAYLA WALKED INTO the recently decorated lobby of the hotel where Kane was staying, trying not to feel like a woman about to embark on a one-night stand. She glanced around at the potted, but obviously fake plants and the bored clerk yawning behind the desk. It was a respectable place, but she wondered how many men brought women to a hotel room for a quick fling?

She stopped halfway to the elevator and grabbed the hard leather of Kane's jacket.

He turned toward her. "Second thoughts?" he asked.

"Just a reality check. I don't know anything about you."

"You know what's important." He brushed a fingertip down her cheek. Her skin tingled and her heart rate soared. "What more is there?" he asked.

"I don't know, maybe you're not really a salesman. Maybe you're a..."

"Serial killer?" He jumped in with a disarming grin.

"Married or involved was more like what I had in mind," she said on a nervous laugh. "But yours is a valid consideration, too."

"Well, I can set your mind at ease on that score. No bodies buried anywhere in my past. No spouses, either, present, ex or intended." He wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulders. Well, it would have been comforting if not for her

body's immediate reaction. Her nipples tightened and dampness pooled between her thighs.

So much had pushed her to this moment. A lifetime of being treated as a sex object and not a person with feelings. Years of ignoring her own desires because she feared picking the wrong man, one who wanted her body but not the whole person. She glanced at Kane. There might never be another man who valued *her*. If he'd been vague about himself, that was okay. He'd be gone too soon for it to matter.

He was unattached and sexy, dynamic...and hers, for the night at least. She smiled at him. "Well, I guess that settles things."

"Does it?" He shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. Tight jeans that molded against muscular thighs and showcased his obvious erection.

She licked her dry lips. "Unless you've changed your mind."

"You were quiet for so long I was about to ask you the same thing."

Kayla drew a deep breath and extended her hand.

A sexy grin edged the corners of his mouth, and he intertwined his fingers in hers. "One stop first." He crossed to the front desk. He handed something to the clerk, whispering too low for her to catch what he said. "Ready?" he asked, turning back toward her.

Her stomach felt as if it hit the floor. "Ready," she murmured.

Everything that came next, the elevator ride and the walk down the dimly lit hall, all passed in a blur. Then she found herself alone with Kane in his hotel room. For a woman with limited experience, she wondered what had possessed her.

She swung around, taking in the clutter. An open briefcase sat on the table, clothes lay scattered around, and an unzipped suitcase had been shoved into the corner. The mess was so like a man...so like Kane.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re trembling.”

She glanced at her surroundings once more. The king-size mattress in the center of the room drew her focus. What awaited her in that bed sent her imagination soaring. Kayla, Kane, hot bodies, tangled sheets...To her shock, her case of nerves calmed as she realized this was exactly where she wanted to be.

She looked at him. “I’m okay now.”

“Kayla...”

“Yes?”

He cleared his throat. “Have you ever done this before?”

She raised her chin at the doubt in his tone. “Lots of times.”

“Bullshit.”

“Fine.” She made for the door before his embarrassing, on-target questions humiliated her further. If her inexperience

showed now, how disappointed would he be later?

She didn't get far. Two steps and he stopped her departure with a firm arm around her waist, yanking her against his lean, hard body. His masculine scent pummeled her nerve endings, enticing her physically, assaulting her already raw senses. Her breasts tingled, her skin sizzled with fire, and that wasn't the worst part. This man had the power to affect her emotions, too.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"My mama always said if you can't do something right, don't bother doing it at all."

"Did I say you did anything wrong?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes and threw the blame squarely on him. "Not me, you."

"I did something wrong. What?"

"You questioned my experience. Not exactly the way to endear yourself to a woman, McDermott." She forced herself to remain stiff and unyielding in his arms, even though she wanted to curl into him and feel his strength flow through her.

His heated breath fanned her neck. His cologne threatened to seduce her and make her forget common sense. She struggled against the seductive pull. "Let me go."

"Not until you answer the question I asked a minute ago, and then I'll explain. If you don't like what you hear, I'll take you home myself. Have you done this before?" he asked again.

“A one-night stand in a stranger’s hotel room? No. Happy now?”

“Not by a long shot. And that wasn’t the question I was asking, and you know it.”

“Okay,” she said, resigned. “Once in my senior year of high school and once more a few years ago.” The first time she’d been young and inexperienced, scared but seduced into believing the guy had wanted her, not just a quickie in the backseat of his car.

He’d gone to great lengths to convince her, and she’d bought his act. Then he’d gone bragging to his friends, and she’d never heard from him again. The second time had been years later. Another mistake, a futile effort to relieve the loneliness in her life.

She resented being forced to relive either time. “You want names and dates, too, Officer, or are the sketchy details enough?”

He jerked back but kept his hand firmly around her waist.

“Well?” she asked when he remained silent. “Are you going to keep grilling me like some cop or let me go home?”

“Neither.”

Kayla straightened as best she could, trying to ignore that her ass was now snuggled firmly against him, his cock hard and insistent.

“Why is this so important?” she asked him.

“You said years.” His hand brushed her hair off her face, and he lay a warm, comforting cheek next to hers. “I want you so badly I can barely stand.” His rough voice shook her body. The truth shook her soul. “If I didn’t ask, if I didn’t know, I’d have hurt you.”

Her cheek remained cushioned next to his. He felt so right. Her stiff muscles relaxed, even as her body remained strung tight and begged for sexual release.

Kane loosened his hold, apparently assured she wouldn’t run, just as someone knocked on the door.

He held her gaze for a long second with a hot look that pulled his features taut and put sparks of need in his eyes. Need *she* inspired. The notion awed her.

“I’ve got it.” He opened the door and waited as a man placed the items from the cart on the only free counterspace available in the room, leaving the cart for them to pull into the hall when they were finished.

Kane tipped him, the man said thank you, and walked out, leaving them alone.

Lifting the silver lid off the plate, Kane revealed two packages of instant hot cocoa mix. Beside them was a large carafe, obviously filled with water.

“You remembered,” she said, both pleased and impressed. This caring man had amazed her yet again.

“When an intelligent woman speaks, I listen. Besides, how could I deny such a simple request? Especially when it will get

me everything I want.” His seductive smile caused her insides to twist into delicious knots only he could undo.

“Had for a cup of hot chocolate.” She couldn’t help but laugh. “I guess I’m easy,” she murmured, rubbing her still-chilled hands against her thighs for warmth. His gaze followed the movement, his eyes darkening with unmistakable need.

“Are you?” He walked to her slowly.

“For you I guess I am,” she murmured.

A pleased grin lifted his lips. His large hands pushed the jacket off her shoulders and it fell to the floor in a heap. He trailed his fingers over the scoop neck of her top and her nipples grew tight, pressing against the confines of her bra.

He slid his hands through her hair, gliding and touching in a soft whisper of movement that grew increasingly harder. The tug at her scalp felt erotic and zaps of need went straight to her core. He lifted the headband off and it landed beside the jacket on the floor, creating a pile of clothing destined to grow. Heat pounded between her thighs, and a trickling liquid warmth followed in its wake.

Being with this man wouldn’t be slow and easy. It wouldn’t be controlled and simple to understand. She didn’t want it to be. Her first step toward recognizing herself as a woman meant accepting what she’d believed impossible. A wild abandon existed in her soul, waiting for the opportunity to be set free.

Other men had touched—and they’d turned her ice-cold. No one else had inspired such gut-wrenching need. But Kane

had seen beyond the packaging to the woman inside, and because he had, Kayla came together at last—body, heart, and soul. She didn't care if she'd only know him one night; she felt so much more. She wanted him and she wouldn't, couldn't restrain the gnawing hunger any longer.

Standing on her tiptoes, she placed a full, openmouthed kiss on his lips.

His body shook, and the tremors vibrated through her as he grabbed her waist and pulled her roughly against him. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

Kayla gathered her courage and repeated his words of earlier that night. "No, but you could show me."



KANE EXPELLED A harsh breath. She'd brought him too close, too fast. He hadn't held back tonight and looking into her clear gaze, he couldn't start now.

He grabbed for her hand and placed it on the front placket of his jeans.

"Oh." Her gasp of surprise was telling.

If she were as smart as she was supposed to be, she'd pull back before things got out of hand. The rational part of him hoped she would. Instead, she cupped him firmly in her palm and molded her fingers to the faded denim, tracing the weight of his arousal pushing restlessly against the restricting denim.

He closed his eyes and tried to think...of sports. Tonight's game, that ought to keep his mind off sex while her hand explored and his body throbbed. Last thing he needed was to

embarrass himself before things even got started. The weight and pressure of her fingers was driving him mad. And then she went to the button on his jeans. Baseball, he reminded himself. Bats, balls, stolen bases, and home runs...Damn, this was a bad idea.

He grabbed for her wrist. "Enough."

"Why?"

He met her startled gaze. "Ever hear of too much too soon?"

Understanding lit her gaze while his traveled the length of her and back again. Large breasts rounded beneath the tight top and her rigid nipples pushed through the thin, white material despite the bra underneath. Her black jeans were fitted, accentuating full hips and generous curves. Kane had had his share of women, and they'd had one thing in common. They spent too much time at the gym trying to be model-thin, or had put themselves on ridiculous diets he'd never understand.

Kayla had eaten what she pleased tonight and enjoyed every mouthful. And he'd enjoyed watching her. He wondered if her sexual appetite was as unbridled.

Twice, and she hadn't been thrilled at the admission. What had those experiences been like for her? His dick still ached from a touch that hadn't been hesitant but...experimental. Despite the body made for sex and sin, this woman was fresh and new.

“I don’t really believe there’s such a thing as too much, do you?”

“Why don’t we find out?”

She touched a soft hand to his cheek, and he knew. She trusted him, yet everything about *them* was a lie. He’d known enough about her going in to wrap her around his finger, and he’d done it easily. He hadn’t counted on being floored himself.

Since she believed he’d be leaving the state after tonight, he could give them both a time to remember. No risk involved for either one. She was too good at chipping away at the rough exterior he’d built and relied upon to survive. If not for the softness in her, if not for the softness she brought out in him, they’d be in a sweaty tangle on the floor by now.

He held his hand toward her. Her fingers twisted in his, he led her to the oversize chair beside the table. He sat down and lowered her into his lap, facing him. “Still cold?”

She turned so she straddled his hips with her own and met his gaze head-on. “Not anymore.” He heard a smoldering heat in her voice. “Or should I say yes so you’ll warm me?”

Her impish grin was at odds with the questions in her eyes. Kane decided to erase those, as well as all rational thought.

He wrapped his hands around her waist. “How about you say nothing at all?” he asked and sealed his mouth to hers.

She tasted as good as before. She made him as hot as before—only faster this time. He pulled her top from her waistband, needing to feel, taste, and savor the sensations only

she aroused. She raised her arms to make his job easier, and before he could blink, he was facing his fantasy.

Ever since stealing a glimpse of Kayla Luck through a glass storefront window, Kane had been waiting for this. He traced the edge of white lace surrounding her plump breasts, feeling her soft flesh beneath his fingertips.

Her chest rose and fell in time to her rapid breathing, but she held his gaze and didn't say a word.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you're beautiful," he said.

Her smile lit up her face. "Don't worry. If I let you get this far, I believe the compliment."

"Unlike this morning." He hated that she didn't trust easily.

She shrugged. "I didn't know you this morning."

"And you do now."

She laughed, and he discovered even her grin made him hard.

Reaching around her, he unhooked the clasps of her bra and pulled the garment off, exposing all of her for view. The blood in his veins pumped fast and furious and he placed a kiss on the distended tip of her nipple.

A strangled sound escaped her lips.

"I guess we're saving the hot chocolate for later. But I am hungry. How about you?" Reaching to his side, he felt beneath

the room service cart left by the hotel staff earlier and came up with a can of whipped cream. “Special request,” he said.

“You think of everything, don’t you?” she asked.

“I try.” He shook the can with one hand.

She was already willing. He also wanted her hot...and wet...and enjoying every moment. She hadn’t done much of that in the past, and he wanted her to remember him even after he was gone. He didn’t want her ever to forget.

With great show and care, he circled her nipple with a generous helping of whipped cream. Her smoldering gaze met his. “Something wrong?” he asked.

“It’s cold.” Laughter and anticipation lit her voice.

“Not for long.” He lifted her breast in his hand, savoring the weight, the feel, the warmth, and then he proceeded to devour his dessert until he was tasting beyond cold and sweet, until he was tasting Kayla.

Unfortunately for him, his plan worked too well. She lost herself in sensation. She moaned aloud; her thighs clenching and unclenching around his. Her hips bucked against him and his coherency vanished. He met her thrusts with unrestrained pumping of his own until he thought he’d come right then.

Lifting her up, he waited only for her to wrap her legs around his hips, and he took the few steps needed. Together they toppled onto the bed. In between spurts of laughter and the mess of the whipped cream, which she attempted to lick from his lips, they managed to stand again and undress.

Kane grabbed for his jeans and pulled a condom out of his wallet, realizing on some subconscious level, he'd been prepared for this. He'd made sure his wallet wasn't empty.

Shaking off the implications, he joined her on top of the mattress. She lay beneath him, naked and ready. *His*. He shook his head to clear that thought, but it remained. He pushed a strand of hair off her cheek, stuck there thanks to leftover whipped cream.

"I never realized sex could be fun," she said, out of breath.

He'd never laughed while doing it, either. "Sweetheart, you haven't seen anything yet." He shifted his weight and slipped his hand between her thighs. She was everything he'd wanted her to be. Warm, slick and, if the sighs greeting his ears were any indication, she was definitely enjoying. He slipped one finger inside her slick heat.

"Kane?" His name came out on a groan.

"What?" Closing his eyes against the tension threatening to burst inside him, he eased his finger out and back in, taking up a slow pumping motion.

"I'd rather you...I mean, we..."

He knew what she meant. But he wasn't ready. He wanted more for her than a fast fuck. More memories. He slipped his finger back in once more.

Suddenly she wrapped her hand around his cock and proceeded to pick up a rhythm, her hand sliding up and down his shaft, moving faster each time, bringing him closer to the brink.

“Point made,” he said, gripping her wrist.

She laughed as he grabbed for a condom but she still tried to grasp and hold onto him. He grabbed her wayward hands and yanked them above her head, holding her wrists with one hand. With the other, he eased himself inside her, trying like hell to keep in mind it had been a long time for her.

Considering how perfect the fit, how intense the emotion she drew from him, this was a first for him as well. Kane held on to rational thought long enough to recognize he’d never felt like this before. Seconds before he climaxed in her arms, he knew he’d never feel like this again.



KANE WOKE TO the sound of rustling clothing. Rolling onto his back, he saw Kayla slipping into her clothes. Last night came back to him in a rush of memory and sensation—because his cock was rock-hard. Despite that he’d slept with her twice, and that the sheets still carried their scent, he wanted her again. Wanted her more than he had the first time.

One glance and he knew she’d planned on sneaking out before he awoke. Something he’d done himself and only now, being on the receiving end, did he realize how low a maneuver that actually was.

She was leaving. Because she was sorry for what happened? Embarrassed and couldn’t face him? Or because, God help him, he’d been nothing more to her than a one-night stand?

He couldn't take the possibility, and in that fleeting second, he wanted more. "Going somewhere?"

She glanced up from buttoning her jeans. Her hair fell around her face in easy waves, surrounding guilt-ridden, embarrassed eyes. "I was just..."

"Leaving?"

"Getting dressed. I would have woken you."

"Bullshit." He rose from the bed naked and her gaze followed him from across the room.

She lifted one shoulder. "I thought a clean break would be best. You're going back to New Hampshire later today anyway, so I figured, this way, no messy goodbyes." She turned a bright, fake smile his way.

Instead of reassuring him, that forced grin pissed him off. As fucking stupid as it was, he'd thought they'd shared something special, yet she'd been about to sneak out without a word.

What was he to her, he wondered. The man who'd slept with her disappeared and the cop he was surfaced as he ran through his agenda and their night together. She hadn't accepted his date until he'd pressured her into it with the lesson pretense. She'd been so hesitant to be with him until he'd reassured her. Had he been her way of breaking her dry spell? Had she used him like he'd used many women before?

He knew he was being an ass but she was the only woman who'd ever slipped past his walls. No one had ever gotten that close before. If anything would kill the edge Reid was so

worried about him keeping, the one that kept him alert and alive, she was it.

And now he was pissed at both himself and at her.

Kane drew a deep breath. It didn't matter why he'd come into her life. The fact remained that he had, and in the process, he'd compromised himself, his principles, his case, and his job. *Not bad for a night's work, McDermott.*

The same part of him that wanted to kick himself for getting in too deep also needed to know. Could it all have been one-sided?

What was he to her? The question resurfaced along with the reason he was supposed to have gone out with her. Find out if her business was a front.

He'd been a quick fuck for her. She'd been a job to him. That was the way it had to be.

He shoved his hand into his pants pockets and fished through his wallet, then turned toward her. "We never agreed on a price, but I'm sure this will cover last night's...*lessons.*" Lessons they hadn't discussed even once.

Still, she might not think she'd *taught* him anything. But she had. A very expensive and painful lesson. He tossed the wad of bills onto the bed.

Don't take the money. His heart seemed to hammer out the words in rapid beats. Furious with himself, he still needed to see her reaction, needed to know what he'd meant to her.

She paused mid-pulling the jean jacket onto her shoulders.

“What...is...that?” she asked, her voice hoarse, her pretty eyes wide in disbelief.

He shrugged. “Before we went out, you said we’d see how things go before we discuss payment.” He thrust his hand toward the bed where the money lay on the mattress.

Glaring.

Harsh.

Wrong.

“That’s for services rendered,” he said, wanting to take back the words as soon as they escaped. Before he’d seen the hurt look cross her face.

Because in his mind, the case had been closed long before he slept with her. He knew she wasn’t a prostitute, knew she had no knowledge of any ring that might exist.

He’d wanted to find distance from his feelings for Kayla Luck and from the horrified look on her face, he’d accomplished his goal.

Chapter Four

KAYLA SHRUGGED HER jacket on and stared at the money on the bed in disbelief. “Payment.” She forced the words from her dry throat.

Things had been unbelievable, or so she’d thought. Special, sensual, incredible, fun—she couldn’t come up with enough adjectives to describe how being with Kane had felt. Because he was leaving, she’d decided to slip out before he awoke. No goodbyes, nor forced smiles. No questions, like *will I see you again?* She’d been foolish enough to hope he’d look her up again on his own, no prompting.

She turned toward the bed. The money marred the mattress where she’d come close to falling hard. For a stranger. Her stomach cramped, and she was reminded of another morning after. *It’s been real, Kayla. Catch you around sometime.* Different man, another notch in some guy’s bedpost. Kane had just been so much better at seducing her into denial before slapping her with reality. Men didn’t want anything real with Kayla Luck. They never had, never would.

She squared her shoulders and forced a brave front. She refused to let him know how deeply he’d wounded her. “You’re right, we never agreed on payment.”

Unable to look into those dark eyes, she kept her gaze trained on a point behind him. “I said we’d see how things went...and...” The green bills caught her eye, mocking the instincts she’d trusted as well as her attempt at composure.

She paused, wanting to slam him, wanting to say last night hadn't been good enough to accept payment in return. But that wasn't her nature; though Catherine might have had a choice word or two for a man who'd crossed her, Kayla was different. She bent and grabbed her bag. Perhaps she no longer trusted her judgment in men, but she respected herself enough to be strong until she walked out that door. No man had the right to treat her like a prostitute.

Straightening, she met Kane's unreadable gaze. "Know what, McDermott? You and your payment can go to hell." She didn't know him well, but she'd learned enough last night to catch a flicker of emotion in his eyes now.

Relief mixed with regret? She shook her head, realizing she'd been searching for something to hold on to despite his blatant insult. Apparently, she harbored unhealthy illusions. For all his suave charm, Kane McDermott was no better than the rest.

Gathering her pride and her jacket, she ran for the door.

Kane didn't try to stop her.



"NO CASH EXCHANGED hands last night. Unless you can claim success, McDermott, I'd say case closed." Reid approached Kane from behind.

Kane eased back in his chair and forced himself to turn and look his superior in the eye. "She's clean, boss."

"Damn." Captain Reid crumpled a sheet of paper and slammed it into the trash. "Waste of manpower," the older man

grumbled.

“Seems like,” Kane agreed.

“Our informant could be blowing smoke, playing both sides for cash...but the teasers he gave us sounded legit. I really believed some of our politicians were frequenting that place on the down low.” The captain paced the short length of Kane’s desk and back again before coming to a halt. “Any chance things happened before Ms. Luck took over?”

Kane shook his head. “Doesn’t seem possible. Not without her knowing. She was around during the aunt and uncle’s days; she helped them out once in a while with classes and handled the books. Now she’s running the place herself. If there was anything going on then or now, she’d know.”

“Any chance she was tipped off, then turned those lovely charms your way?”

“Hell, no.”

“Yeah? Then any chance she got to you last night?” Reid pushed on.

Kane raised an eyebrow. “You mean conned me? Also no. She’s innocent. I’d bet my badge.”

“Really.” The captain smirked before settling himself on the edge of the metal desk. “Now that’s a first.”

“What is? I always trust my instincts,” Kane said.

“But you never put that faith in another human being, especially a lady.” Reid gave him a pointed look. “Until now.” Standing up, he headed for his office.

Direct hit, Kane thought. He couldn't avoid the truth any longer. Couldn't avoid thinking, either, though that was what he'd tried to do since Kayla's abrupt departure this morning.

The captain was right. He *had* put his faith in her, and he'd let down his guard. For one ridiculous moment, he caught a glimpse of a different life than the solitary one he led. He'd been alone so long without a true connection to another person but Kayla had shown him there was more than eating, sleeping, and working. She'd made him feel alive and, foolishly, he'd wanted more. Not that he could have accepted it, considering he was incapable of offering anything substantial in return.

Money in exchange for sex. That was one hell of an offer he'd made. He snorted in disgust. He'd set out to prove she wasn't a call girl and had treated her no better than a whore instead. The wounded look in her eyes hit him harder than when he'd been decked with the butt of a gun. Guilt and regret twisted his insides.

A detective with years of experience questioning suspects, yet he botched the one chance he had with Kayla. In the end, he'd done them both a favor. Interpersonal skills weren't his thing and now she knew it, too. Besides, she was too good at breaching his defenses, something he couldn't afford in his line of work. Letting her go hadn't been easy, but it had been necessary.

“McDermott.”

Kane raised his gaze toward Reid's office. “Yeah, boss?”

The older man waved a sheaf of papers in the air. “Report filed by tonight. Everything gels, case closed.”

“Right.”

“And you look like hell, so get the information uploaded, and remember what I told you—I don’t want to see your sorry ass in here till the middle of next week.”

Kane opted not to argue. His burning eyes told him he could use the sleep.

First things first. He powered on his computer. Typing in the facts would force him to relive last night in all but intimate detail.

He groaned. Those intimate details might not make it into his report, but they were forever etched in his brain. He and Kayla had warmed each other up, and hot chocolate had nothing to do with the heat in the hotel room. Her full body meshed perfectly into his, her slick wetness made for an easy glide home.

Home? He slammed his fists onto the keys. What the hell was he thinking? She’d been a one-night stand, and he should be glad she’d walked out first, pleased he’d ended any soft thoughts she might have entertained about her night with Kane McDermott, New Hampshire salesman.

This whole mess could have been avoided had he listened to his gut. He’d seen too many fellow officers, fellow loners, fail with women. And Kane had one additional strike against him. He didn’t know how to care about anything other than his job.

His father had bailed when Kane was five. His mother died six years later when she walked in front of a city bus with no thought to the son she left behind. Annie McDermott had a brother who disliked kids as much as he liked booze, but an eleven-year-old Kane had talked the old man into a deal. A place to live, enabling him to avoid foster care, in exchange for Kane's promise to raise himself and stay out of the drunken man's way. His uncle upped the ante and mooched his mother's death benefits from the state. Kane considered it a small price to pay for independence.

He'd been on his own for longer than he could remember, and he liked it that way. For some reason, the words didn't bring the comfort they once had. He wished he had something to hit but he began to type instead.



KAYLA DIDN'T WANT to go home and face a grilling from her sister. After sliding into her Uber outside the hotel, she'd stopped at a coffee shop near *Charmed!* before deciding to immerse herself in work. Anything to keep busy and not think. She still had boxes of her aunt's and uncle's personal things stored in the back and, though her sister had promised to help, today was as good a day as any to start rummaging through them herself. But she doubted even work would take her mind off Kane McDermott.

Every stretch and pull of her muscles as she walked reminded her of last night. Her body still tingled in places he'd touched. If she blocked out this morning and focused only on the sensual pleasures he'd given, she became aroused once

more. Apparently, her body was detached from her mind. Either that or she was losing it. The man had offered her money for sex. No matter how special *she* found the night, she'd been alone in her feelings. She thought back and mentally kicked herself for not realizing they hadn't discussed anything about the lessons he'd needed. Apparently his focus had been on taking advantage of her in other ways.

The burgundy overhang of the brownstone storefront loomed ahead, and she sprinted the rest of the way. She jammed the key into the lock, wondering if the sauna had cooled off. If Kane was as good at fixing equipment as he was at seducing women, it would have. She shook her head hard.

She had to admit he wasn't the only one at fault. She'd invested more hopes and dreams in Kane than a one-night stand deserved. He had been an asshole and a cold SOB, yes, but he'd never promised her more than what they'd shared, and that had been spectacular.

She took one step inside and knew the heat had stopped pumping high. No HVAC repairman necessary, which was about the only thing she could thank Mr. McDermott for.

Kayla made her way to the back room. Easing the door open, she groped for the light switch on the wall. She never found it.

Someone grabbed her and jerked her inside. The door behind her slammed shut, closing her in the pitch-black storage room. Before she could react, an arm grabbed her around the neck at the same time a hand clamped over her mouth. She tried to scream and tasted leather.

The more she struggled the tighter the grip became. Fear rose fast and furious inside her, but she listened to instinct and stilled.

“Smart lady. Now listen up.” The gruff male voice sounded in her ear, and she caught a whiff of his breath, a revolting mixture of stale liquor and cigarettes. “Where’s the money?”

She shook her head from side to side. Catching her silent message, he eased the pressure of his hand off her mouth, but the bite of his fingers still stung. “I don’t know...”

He jerked back on his arm, causing a shot of pain in her throat. “Wrong answer.”

Kayla had no idea what he was talking about, but he obviously wouldn’t believe her, and she wanted out of there alive and in one piece. “Okay.” The one word came out on a hoarse croak. She forced a painful swallow. “There’s no money on the premises. I...”

“Kayla?” Catherine’s voice sounded from the outside room. “Are you back there? The light’s on out here and you can’t hide forever. I want *details*.”

Her assailant stiffened and muttered a harsh curse. He released his hold and shoved her hard. She stumbled headfirst into the concrete wall and, with the impact, dropped to the floor. Pain lanced through her skull just as the back door opened enough to show a sliver of light and allow her intruder to disappear, leaving her in darkness again.

“Kayla, I know you’re in...” Catherine swung open the door and hit the switch on the wall, bathing the room in a harsh, bright light. “Oh my God, what happened?”

Lifting her head was an effort, but Kayla managed. She took in the shambles of her once neat storage room and groaned. “He trashed the place.”

“He who? What happened to you?” Her sister bent down beside her.

“I’m okay.”

Catherine narrowed her eyes. “You don’t look it.”

“I’m fine.” The steady pounding in her skull made those words a lie. Fighting the pain, she struggled to stand. A wave of nausea made it an impossible feat.

“Sit.” Catherine eased her back down and propped her against the wall. “I’m calling the police.”

Kayla nodded only to discover even that was a mistake. She closed her eyes. She didn’t know what the intruder wanted, but he’d been convinced he would find it here.

Catherine pulled her cell phone from her purse and made the call, then she knelt down and put a soft hand on Kayla’s shoulder.

“What could he want?” Kayla’s head swam and she couldn’t think anymore.

“Stay here. I’m just going into the bathroom,” Catherine said.

Water sounded and then Catherine returned. “Don’t try to talk. Here.” She placed a wet paper towel on Kayla’s forehead.

The soggy rag dripped water down her face, and Kayla laughed despite the pain and her tears. “You’ll never challenge Florence Nightingale.”

“Maybe not, but we’ve been tending each other’s scrapes for years, and I’m the best you’ve got.” With a forced smile, Catherine balled up the sopping paper and tossed it onto the floor.

She grabbed Kayla’s hand and eased herself beside her, huddling with her sister as they’d done many times as children. Kayla couldn’t stop the uncontrollable urge to unburden herself to her sister—the only person she could trust.

With her head on Catherine’s shoulder, Kayla opened up about last night with Kane, talking until she was talked out.

And Catherine, for once, remained silent, for which Kayla was grateful.

“The police will be here in a few minutes,” Catherine said at last. “And they’ll take care of everything.”



“I ALREADY TOLD you I walked in through the front door, and he jumped me in the back.” Raising her voice caused a set of drums to go off in Kayla’s head. She placed Catherine’s next attempt at first aid—a cold, wet, but thankfully wrung-out rag—against her scalp. She exhaled hard, fighting the nausea.

“The paramedics will be here any second.”

Kayla squinted at the young police officer as he spoke.

“Now back to what happened. He was looking for money, and you claim there is none.” The man stared at Kayla as if he didn’t believe a word she said.

Catherine stepped into the man’s direct line of vision. “Is this your first day on the job? Is that why you can’t see *she’s* the victim? Is this how they train you today, to attack the helpless? Look, buddy, cop or no cop, I want your badge number and then I want your badge.”

Kayla swallowed a groan at her sister’s attitude, yet she couldn’t understand the police treatment, either. Sirens began an insistent wail in the distance. At least she’d get an ice-pack rather than a barrage of questions she was too weak and nauseous to answer.

The officer eased back but not off. He lowered himself until he was at Kayla’s eye level. “Look, the guy trashed the back room and did a number on you. Obviously, he was looking for cash. Why? A little help from you will make things go easier.”

“For who?” Catherine jumped in. “She’s not going to do your job for you, and I want to know why you’ve been grilling her like she’s a criminal instead of helping the victim.”

“I’d like to know the answer to that, too.”

Kayla would recognize that voice anywhere. “Kane.”

He’d come back. A rush of powerful emotions hit her so fast her battered body and foggy mind couldn’t decipher them

now. She pushed herself to a standing position and turned as quickly as the pain in her head would allow.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Catherine asked.

Kayla winced at her sister’s harsh tone. She never should have told Catherine even sketchy information about last night with Kane.

Kayla glanced at him. He stood in the entryway to the back room looking angry and dangerous, displaying the side she’d only glimpsed before. He ignored Catherine but when his gaze lit on hers, his expression softened.

He stepped toward her and held out his arms. She slid into his embrace. A comforting arm settled around her waist while the wall supported her back. “Well, Officer? Since when does the Boston P.D. grill injured victims?” he asked the junior cop.

The young officer flushed red. “I’m sorry, Detective, but...”

“Detective?” Kayla’s body went rigid as shock washed over her.

Kane let out a groan. This wasn’t the way he’d wanted her to find out. He hadn’t *planned* on her discovering his identity at all. But nothing had gone as planned since he’d laid eyes on Kayla Luck.

He’d been halfway to the station house door when the 911 call had come in and the captain had waylaid him in the hall. Concern for Kayla had blocked out common sense, so here he was—with a job to do.

He took in her pale skin, glassy eyes, and the red bruise on her forehead. He'd botched this *case* but no more. He took her arm despite her token resistance.

"Where are you taking her?" Catherine asked.

Kane glanced at the blonde he'd met briefly last night, the one with flashing green eyes who'd just given the junior officer a tongue-lashing. "To the nearest chair. What are you, her sister or her guard dog?"

She opened her mouth but Kayla interrupted first. "Catherine, don't. He's right. If I don't sit I'll be sick."

He muttered a curse, then led her into the outer room.

With her leaning against him for support, Kane was reminded of last night. His body reacted with instant and urgent need. Ignoring her wasn't an option, but acknowledging and distancing himself was.

Kayla accepted his help only until she reached the chair, then jerked out of his grasp and collapsed into the high-backed cushioned seat.

He knelt beside her. "Kayla..."

"What is it, *Detective*?" She spat the word like a curse. Her eyes remained closed, an effective physical barrier. He'd obviously added to the damage he'd already done. Her emotional walls were in place—just like his.

The paramedics came barging through the door, saving him from having to answer. As they examined her, he had time to reflect. He didn't like what he concluded.

He'd put his emotions before his case. Worse, he put this woman at risk. He glanced at Kayla. Bad enough he'd slept with her, but believing for an instant he could have more than one night had been insanity. Foolishness that could only lead to destruction. He'd broken his cardinal rule: he'd gotten involved.

If he'd maintained a distance, he would have been thinking more clearly. He would never have let her walk out the door this morning. Kayla's ignorance about illegal activities at *Charmed!* didn't mean those activities didn't exist. The captain was right. Kayla had gotten to him, and in the process, he'd compromised not only the case but her safety.

"Okay." The paramedic in the blue jacket stood. "Looks like a concussion and some bruising in the neck area."

A quick glance told him Kayla was still leaning back with her eyes closed in the large office chair. Red fingerprints marred the white skin on her throat, and Kane's gut clenched in anger so strong it blinded him. No one had the right to touch her. Forcing his mind to clear, he let his gaze travel downward. She hadn't changed out of last night's clothes. She hadn't yet been home.

Behind her, Kane saw Captain Reid enter the storefront. Kane turned to the paramedic first. "Hospitalization?" he asked.

"She refused, which is fine as long as someone's around to watch over her and bring her in if necessary."

"Someone is," the sister chimed in.

For the moment, Kane ignored her. “Restrictions?” he asked the younger man.

“Complete bed rest, wake her every two hours, check coherence, understanding, pupil dilation...you know the drill.”

“Got it,” Kane said.

“No problem,” the sister retorted, eyeing Kane with a scowl.

With the paramedic gone and the captain getting briefed by the officer who’d arrived first on the scene, Kane turned his focus on Catherine. “You’re Catherine, right?”

“And you’re the dick who used my sister.”

He didn’t see any point in mentioning the *using* had been mutual. Kayla had been dressed and ready to walk out on him first. “You don’t know anything about it.”

“I know enough, and I doubt that official-looking guy in the suit would appreciate that you slept with a...what was Kayla, anyway? A suspect?”

“What makes you think that?”

“The way junior was grilling her.” She jerked her thumb toward the uniformed officer.

“Leave it alone, Catherine,” Kane warned her in a harsh tone.

She placed her hands on her hips. “Because you say so?”

“Because I promise you she won’t get hurt again.” He’d make sure of that.

Catherine narrowed green eyes that reminded him of her sister's. "Prove yourself and we'll see."

He didn't need the aggravation of an overprotective sister at this stage in the investigation, which was by no means over. And yet he couldn't help admiring the fierce way she shielded her sister, and a pang of regret lanced through him. He'd never had anyone to look out for him. "Go check on Kayla," he muttered.

"I'll be watching you, McDermott, if that's even your real name." Catherine returned to her sister's side, and Kane made his way over to Reid.

"Looks like things are heating up," Kane said.

"It looks like a botched robbery," his captain countered. "She walked in too soon."

Kane shook his head, his instincts screaming in protest.

"Nothing taken, nothing missing," the junior officer said. "But the lady claims the assailant was looking for cash she doesn't have."

"The night's take?" Reid asked.

The officer shrugged. "I hadn't gotten that far in my questioning."

Kane pinned him with an accusing glare. "Because you need to work on your technique. Grilling victims like suspects isn't doing your job."

Reid glanced back and forth between the two men, settling his gaze on the uniformed cop. "Get back to work. We'll talk

later.” The younger man took the hint and headed for the room that had been ransacked. “Could be coincidence,” Reid said.

Kane shook his head.

“She help you any?” He pointed to Kayla.

“She still doesn’t know what last night was about.” And he wasn’t looking forward to enlightening her.

“You’re certain she wasn’t tipped off about us and canceled activities last night?”

“Convince yourself. Have a talk with her yourself.”

Reid nodded and walked over to Kayla and her sister. Kane made himself scarce and strolled the perimeter of the small outer room instead. By the time the captain returned, Kane realized Kayla had turned this place into a reflection of herself. Books lined the metal shelving on the back wall, the topics wide and varied.

“You’re right.”

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he turned to his superior. “She’s as much in the dark as we are,” Kane said.

“Seems that way. She’s bright and can hold her own in conversation but if she’s lying about her knowledge, I’d eat my badge, like you said. None of the signs were there. As for the sister, I wouldn’t want to fall into that mouth again, but I doubt she knows anything, either.”

“Kayla’s in danger.” The knowledge sent a flood of emotion shooting through his veins. He welcomed the rush of adrenaline but not the depth of caring she drew from inside

him. But he meant to keep his promise to Catherine. He'd keep her safe.

“That’s debatable. I’m not convinced this was anything more than a bungled job. A druggie wanting cash, hoping for a quick getaway, and coming up empty, maybe,” Reid said.

Kane shook his head. “Put someone on her.”

“Can’t spare more manpower on a hunch, McDermott, not even yours. The most I can give you is an hourly drive-by.”

Kane shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. “Not good enough.”

“It’ll have to be.”

“For you maybe. But I’m taking that R&R you seem to think I need.”

Reid raised an eyebrow. “To do what?”

“Babysit her myself if I have to. Instinct has kept me alive, and I won’t ignore it now.”

“You too personally involved with this one?”

The words hit the intended target, but Kane refused to back down. “No.”

Reid shrugged. “Whatever you say. You’ve got one week, but this is strictly off-duty. What about the sister?”

“I don’t need two targets and, considering she’s not involved in running the business, she’s not in any immediate danger.”

Shoving his hands into his front pants pockets, Reid said, “I agree.”

“So I want her out of the picture.” Kane didn’t need two women to watch out for.

Reid glanced at the two sisters with their heads bent close together, and his chuckle filled the small room. “Good luck,” he said and laughed again.

Kane didn’t know whether the older man referred to Kane’s ability to make Catherine back off or his self-imposed week alone with Kayla. Either way he needed all the luck he could get.

Chapter Five

THE ICE HAD begun to help her head. Even the nausea was no longer as bad. And then Kane spoke. “I’m taking you home.”

His deep voice—still sexy to her ears—penetrated the remaining fuzziness in her brain. Kayla’s stomach revolted at the thought. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Catherine grabbed for the nearest garbage pail, gaining a smile from Kayla despite how lousy she felt.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” Kayla turned on Kane. “I’m not going anywhere with you.” Although her talk with Captain Reid had been enlightening, she still didn’t know enough.

Apparently, Kane’s superior knew nothing about Kane and Kayla’s late-night activities. Unlike other men, he hadn’t been quick to brag that he’d scored with Kayla Luck. She wondered what that meant other than the fact that he didn’t want to jeopardize his career.

The captain had questioned her about her business and clientele but was less than forthcoming about the reasons behind the police interest. He said he’d leave the divulging to his best detective. She suppressed a cynical laugh. Kane was good all right, at more things than just his job.

He crouched down until they were eye level. Razor stubble covered his cheeks, adding to the dangerous edge she’d only imagined before. The musky scent of his skin mixed with

subtle aftershave heightened her awareness and put her senses into overdrive.

He bore no resemblance to the salesman who'd wined and dined her the night before, yet he was still the same man who intrigued her on a primal level. A man she didn't know. Yesterday's clean-cut appearance had obviously been another lie for her benefit. She had the distinct impression she now faced the real Kane McDermott.

She cradled her head in her hands and glared at him.

"You might not like me much right now. Hell, I'm not too thrilled with myself. But you aren't going home alone. It isn't safe."

"I agree," Catherine said. She folded her arms over her chest and waited.

"Would you please find something to do?" Kane muttered. "I'll talk to you later."

Catherine glanced at her sister.

Kayla didn't like it, but she and Kane had unfinished business. "It's okay."

With a nod, her sister headed for the back room.

"She always act like your mother?" he asked.

"Only when I'm being threatened."

"And that's what you think I'm doing?" Despite his behavior, the thought made him laugh.

"I don't know that any more than I know who you really are. Last night was obviously a setup." She ignored the hurt

the knowledge brought. “You’re investigating me and my business. What for?”

His deep inhale warned her she wouldn’t like what came next. “Prostitution.”

Her hand moved of its own volition, cracking across his roughened cheek. Tears quickly followed. She swiped at them with her sleeve, but he’d seen anyway. He didn’t flinch, but in his eyes she viewed the same glimmer of emotion she’d caught last night. He masked it just as fast.

He was good at hiding his feelings and even better at hiding himself.

She swallowed over the painful lump in her throat that threatened to grow larger. Not only had he treated her like a hooker, but he’d *thought* she was one, too. “I didn’t know detectives were into such *hands-on* investigation.”

“Last night had nothing to do with the investigation.”

Kayla folded her arms across her chest and remained silent. Her mama had another expression she’d ingrained into her girls: give a man enough rope, and he’d hang himself with it.

“The date, the setup, the dinner...those were part of the job,” he admitted. “What came after wasn’t.” The subtle darkening of his eyes spoke of sexual heat and need. The softening of his features hinted at something more. “By the time we finished dinner, I knew you were innocent,” he said.

Kayla inhaled. Mama was wrong in this case. Kane wasn’t hanging himself. He’d taken a step toward redemption, not

further condemnation. Yet how could she believe his words when everything that came before had been based on a lie? And what he'd done after had been beyond insulting. It had hurt.

She'd given her body to him in ways that spoke of trust. In time, she could have given her heart. He'd repaid her faith with the deepest violation she could imagine. But she still sensed an innate decency. One she wanted to believe in.

“Do you always offer money to the women you sleep with?” she asked.

Silence greeted her. Apparently, she trod on sacred ground. “How reassuring,” she said dryly. “My sister will take me home.”

“Not unless you want her in the line of fire.” Kane spoke like the cop he was.

“There's no danger.” Kayla swept her hand in the air, gesturing to the expanse of the room. Her head pounded in time to the motion. She winced but continued. “Look around you. No valuables, no merchandise...nothing. The guy didn't find what he was looking for. He won't be back.” Despite the pounding pain, she put all her energy into convincing him so he and his lies would disappear.

He shrugged. “Depends. Is that why you don't have an alarm system here? There's nothing anyone would want?”

She nodded, then regretted the jerky motion. She gripped the armrests of the chair until the dizziness and pounding subsided.

He placed a firm hand on her thigh. He might have meant to steady her, but his touch did more than reassure, it aroused buried feelings as well as sexual need.

“Do you have a burglar alarm at home?” he asked.

She cleared her throat. It still hurt to speak. “Don’t need one. The guy probably thought he’d get money, then he was interrupted. He won’t bother me again.”

“I disagree, and if I’m right and your sister gets hurt, will you be able to live with yourself?”

He’d hit her weakness and obviously knew it. Kayla wouldn’t risk Catherine’s life just to get Kane McDermott out of hers. “You’re an asshole, you know that, Detective? You want to act as my personal home safety system? Fine. Park your car in the driveway and have a blast. Just remember to turn on the heater. I don’t want your death on my conscience.”

“Careful, Kayla,” he said in that husky voice that caused an erotic tingling deep inside. “I might begin to think you care.”

“Fat chance.”

“Same with me hanging out in my car. The paramedics said you vetoed the hospital, so you need someone to watch over you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And you’re offering your services?” The thought of spending any time with this man who pulled her mind, her heart, and her body in opposing directions was impossible.

She didn't trust her response to him, yet she trusted him to keep her safe. The contradiction wasn't lost on her. It was just one of many. "No way are you staying with me."

"You won't put your sister at risk, which leaves you alone. What if the guy shows up again? You were no match for him the first time. What makes you think you'll do a better job injured?"

"Like I said, you're —"

"An asshole. I got it. And I never argued the point."

Kayla saw Captain Reid approach. "I'm through here. Feeling better?" he asked.

"If I don't move," she said wryly.

He turned to Kane. "Remember what I said. Call if things turn serious—and enjoy your time off." The older man walked out into the cold afternoon.

"Time off?"

"Looking after you," Kane said. "And before you give me shit, remember I already won this argument. I'll go square things with Catherine."

She opened her mouth and shut it again. He might have played on every weakness she possessed at the moment, but he was right. Catherine wouldn't leave her for the night unless she knew she had protection. And Kayla wouldn't be comfortable alone in the first floor of the old two-family house in which they lived. She loved the many windows because they let in light, but they left her vulnerable. Besides, she could barely lift her head.

Like it or not, she needed Kane.



“THIS PLACE IS a burglar’s dream,” Kane muttered to himself. He paced the kitchen and small family area of the rented house. One step inside the unprotected home had cemented his decision to stay no matter how high the personal risk. Good thing Catherine had agreed to stay at a friend’s. Kane needed his focus on one Luck woman at a time.

He’d waited outside the bedroom while Kayla changed into a T-shirt he’d found in a drawer filled with satin and lace, scented with the tempting fragrance his body associated with Kayla. Her full breasts and soft flesh were known to him now. Desire and arousal would be his companions as long as he remained in this house.

Apparently, so would longing and misplaced dreams. He’d settled her into bed, a pastel, feminine mass of ruffles and pillows. A safe haven that, like Kayla, reminded him of warmth, home, and a sharing of lives. Things he never had and never would.

She was a luxury he couldn’t afford. They hadn’t just shared quick and easy sex, the kind that left both parties unfulfilled after the initial peak subsided. With Kayla, it was complicated, involved, and made him inefficient in his job—the one area of life he’d always been able to count on before.

He scrounged through the old, wooden kitchen cabinets and found a can of soup. She needed something to eat, and this was about all he was capable of making without turning her

stomach even more. He'd check her again and then fix her a warm meal.

He entered her room and watched her in silence. Eyes closed, pale skin, and blond hair falling over her cheek. She looked like an angel. His angel, he thought and stifled a curse. More softness he didn't need. *Focus on the job, McDermott.* He eased himself to sit beside her on the bed. The mattress shifted under his weight. She rolled toward him and moaned.

The sound twisted his gut. "Are you in pain?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?" Her eyes remained tightly closed, her arms wrapping the down comforter even more tightly around her body.

"I can't give you anything except Tylenol."

"I...took...some." Her teeth began to chatter. "Can you turn up the heat?"

"I already did." He'd anticipated the chills. Once the aftermath of her ordeal hit and her adrenaline levels decreased, he'd expected some reaction.

"Not...working."

"How about a cup of hot soup?"

"Can't sit up."

Kane muttered a prayer for strength and slid beneath the covers. She curled into his waiting warmth. Her soft curves molded against him, and her satisfied sigh echoed in his ears. Two things hit at once. A hot, urgent desire to be inside her, and the need to protect her from further harm.

Reminding himself she needed his body heat and not *him*, he wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair, the only advantage he'd take under the circumstances. "Better?" he asked.

"Much."

Silence settled around them, seeming to bounce off the walls of her room. A sense of contentment followed. Kane fought against it.

Without trying, she wove a spell he didn't understand, made him desire things he couldn't have. He inhaled her fragrant scent and felt himself being pulled deeper.

"I need you." She spoke so softly he had to strain to hear.

"I'm here now." The only promise he was willing to make.



BRIGHT SUNLIGHT SHONE through the bedroom window. Kane groaned and squinted into the glare. "Worse than a damn hangover," he muttered, rolling over and burying his face in his pillow.

As a cop used to undercover work, waking Kayla every two hours hadn't left him irritable and beat. Lying beside her, holding her, and listening to her soft moans each time she moved did him in. The last check had been—he looked at his watch—an hour ago. She'd been light-headed but okay.

"Kayla?" He glanced over to find an empty bed and sat up fast. Throwing off the covers, he walked to the hallway bathroom. The sound of running water greeted him, and he

rolled his eyes at her foolishness. What made her think she could handle a shower alone?

He tried the doorknob and it turned. At least she hadn't locked herself inside. He opened it a sliver. "You okay in there?"

"Not really." Her voice sounded weak.

Kane didn't wait for permission. He barged inside. The bathroom was compact and steam floated around him. The scent of lemons hovered in the air. He ripped aside the shower curtain to find Kayla sitting on the floor of the porcelain tub, her head between her legs.

He slammed his fist against the large faucet and shut the water that had been pelting her body. "Can you lift your head?"

"Not by myself," she said, the words muffled.

He stepped barefoot into the tub, braced his hands beneath her arms, and pulled her into a standing position. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"Taking a shower."

"I noticed."

Droplets of water clung to her bare skin. He had a sudden desire to lick them off one by one. Instead, he pushed her damp hair off her forehead so he could look into her eyes. He never got the chance. She collapsed, unable to stand on her own.

He swore and swung her into his arms, grabbing a towel before making his way back to the bedroom. Her wet skin soaked through the T-shirt and jeans he'd kept on the night before—more as a physical barrier to temptation than for modesty's sake. But barriers meant little when he had Kayla naked and needy in his arms. She clung to him, her head nestled on his shoulder and her wet body snug against him for warmth.

She trusted him. Impossible, he thought. He'd given her no reason. She needed someone and he was available. "You should get dressed." He placed her on the bed and wrapped a towel around her shaking shoulders.

"I just wanted a shower, but..." Her teeth began to chatter.

"You rushed things. Especially on an empty stomach." He rummaged through her drawers again and pushed the most flimsy things aside. She'd need help, and he'd be wrapping a bra around her full breasts. His hands would be too close, his mouth too tempted. He settled on plain white, no frills, things that covered as much as possible. Then he picked a shirt, a man's football jersey. He didn't dwell on where she got it. At least it was large enough to keep him from staring. He was in too deep already.

"Here." He walked back to the bed. She still sat huddled in a tight ball. He worked the shirt over her head. "Raise your arms." She complied and her breasts lifted higher, her darkened nipples inches from his face.

"To serve and protect," he muttered as a reminder.

"What?"

“Nothing.”

“Then stop mumbling. This is embarrassing enough already.” He ditched the bra. Better to get this over with.

She wiggled a bit, and the shirt fell around her generous hips.

“Think you can handle these?” He dangled a pair of briefs from his fingertips.

“Yes.” She blushed scarlet. At least her coloring looked better than before. He turned to give her some privacy. A couple of deep breaths and he had himself under control.

“Thank you, Kane.”

He turned. “No problem.”

She lay propped back against the pillows. Soft hair fell around her face. A yearning gripped his insides hard.

“The steam made me weak,” she said.

“You don’t get out of that bed without my permission.” Finding her on the tub floor had taken years off his life.

A weary frown crossed her lips. “I need sleep.”

“First, you need to eat.”

“Looking out for me, catching me when I fall, cooking my meals...Careful, McDermott, or I might think you care for more than your case.”

He caught the teasing in her voice. “Fat chance.”

She met his gaze. “Same with me following orders.”

The words were stronger than her voice, but he accepted her warning. Once she felt better, Kane would have his hands full keeping her in line and out of harm's way."

His respect for her rose. She'd taken a beating, but she kept pulling herself up. Kayla was a fighter. He liked that about her. She could handle herself, but this wasn't an ordinary situation. When she felt stronger, he'd question her about her aunt and uncle's dealings.

Meanwhile, he wasn't about to lighten the severity of her situation. "You take care of yourself or I'll cuff you to the bed." He gestured to the wrought-iron headboard behind her pillows.

She grinned. "First whipped cream, now bondage. Are you kinky, Detective?"

"Keep that up and you'll find out." The sudden banter and teasing caught him by surprise. So did the vision of her naked, shackled to the bed, eager to play.

Her eyes darkened. He wondered if she was considering the possibilities, then reminded himself he'd had his one night. He refused to take another.

Kane rose. Her fingers around his wrist stopped his escape. Warmth seeped into the places she touched.

"Running away?" she asked.

"Getting you food." Before he drew her down onto the mattress and gave in to misplaced desires. Before he let himself drown in all she had to give.

She released her grip and struggled to a sitting position.
“Okay.”

He raised a suspicious eyebrow.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“You gave in.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I know what’s good for me.”
She grinned. “Besides, we already established I’m easy.”



KANE DISAPPEARED INTO the hall and Kayla leaned back against the pillows with a groan. Sparring with him had sapped what little strength she had left. The dizziness was better, but Kane was right—she needed to eat. Food would give her the energy to get out of this bed, deal with her aunt and uncle’s legacy, and confront Kane, all on her terms.

Kane. What did he want from her? And what did she want from the tough cop? She closed her eyes until he returned.

“Lunch,” he said.

Standing in the doorway, he was the epitome of every fantasy she’d never allowed herself to have. A strong, capable, caring, sexy man...concerned about her.

She glanced at the mug in his hands, pushing herself to a sitting position. “Vegetable?”

“Was there another kind?” he asked wryly. He handed her the white ceramic cup. The steaming mug warmed her hands. She inhaled and the aroma of beef stock and vegetables drifted upward. Her stomach grumbled aloud. He chuckled.

Refusing to be embarrassed, she took a grateful sip before meeting his amused gaze. “Canned soup at its finest.”

Laugh lines formed in attractive crinkles around his eyes. “It’s the closest thing to homemade you’ll get from me. Come on. Drink up.”

She narrowed her gaze. “Do you take such good care of all your assignments, Detective?”

His hand went to her cheek. She felt his touch shoot straight to her heart. “Don’t sell yourself short, Ms. Luck.”

Her cell phone rang and Kayla glanced at the nightstand. Her phone was face down but she had no doubt who was calling. “Catherine thinks she needs to protect me from you.”

“I already reassured her earlier, but apparently she needs proof. Besides, she’s right.” His dark gaze met hers, his barely readable expression revealing hidden knowledge and a deep yearning need.

Her stomach twisted again but hunger wasn’t the cause.

“Better let Catherine know you’re okay, or she’ll be showing up on your doorstep.” He grabbed the cup and placed it on the nightstand before walking toward the door.

She picked up the phone. “I’m fine,” she said without preamble.

“You won’t be if I don’t get my take, and I want the books.”

“Who is this?” She gripped the cell hard.

“Have you forgotten already?” a gravelly voice asked, sending a chill through her bones.

“You attacked me.”

Kane whirled around and stalked back to the bed. A strong, supporting hand cupped her shoulder. When she glanced up, he merely nodded, urging her to keep talking.

“That was just a preview,” the voice on the phone said.

She drew courage from Kane’s presence. “What do you want?”

“For you to stop playing dumb. My share and a resumption of activities.”

“I don’t...”

“You can’t cut my man out, and you can’t run this on your own. Get the money. I’ll be in touch.” He disconnected the call.

“He’s hung up,” Kayla said.

Kane grabbed the phone out of her hand and punched in a succession of numbers, then muttered a curse.

“What?” she asked.

“Untraceable. Probably a burner...” He placed the phone on the nightstand, then turned to Kayla. “What did he say?”

She couldn’t meet his gaze. “Seems you were right. *Charmed!* is a front for something illegal, after all.”

The anger she’d held toward him left in a rush. Fear still pulsed inside her, but she needed answers and knew just where

to find them.

Kayla threw off the sheets. Her head pounded in opposition to the sudden movement, but she forced herself to swing her legs over the side of the bed.

“Hang on.” His hand on her bare thigh stopped her. Blazing heat seared her to the core.

He didn’t speak. Neither did she. Sexual tension crackled in the air between them, fierce and alive. His large hand remained on her bare skin.

“Where are you going?” His roughened voice didn’t surprise her. She’d be shocked if she could speak herself.

“I—” She stopped and cleared her throat. “To the office. There are boxes, things of my aunt’s I haven’t looked through yet.” Not that she believed for a minute that her mother’s sister would be involved in anything as dirty as prostitution. But the fact remained there was obviously much she didn’t know about her newly inherited business.

“I’ll have them brought by along with a change of clothes for myself. We can go through them together.”

Together. The word caused an involuntary shiver. She liked the sound. Too much. But once again he was right. After her pathetic shower attempt, a trip to the office seemed ridiculous.

“Thank you.” She hated ceding control to Kane, but she had no choice for now.

She focused again on his large hand still covering her thigh. His thumb moved back and forth, his finger gliding over her skin. What was meant as comfort her body read as sensual.

The rhythmic motion of his hand released a steady beat between her thighs.

His touch ruled her senses, but she still had presence of mind. He had set her up and used her in the name of his job. For him, it was a professional relationship after all.

She glanced at his taut jaw and his darkened gaze. Or was it more than professional? Her heart kicked into faster speed as the past twenty-four hours came back to her in a rush. The minute he'd slept with her, he'd compromised his job. He'd taken time off to care for her when his boss vetoed protection. He'd talked her sister into spending time with a friend. And he'd crawled into her bed to keep her warm. In Kayla's book, that went beyond police protection.

The answers about *Charmed!* might have to wait, but the ones about Kane would not. "You could have left. Even your boss wouldn't authorize this kind of protection."

His hand stilled and his eyes cleared. "My gut told me the case wasn't over yet."

She swallowed hard and forced herself to continue. She might never get another chance to find out the truth. "And that's the only reason you're here?"

"If I'd trusted my gut instinct I wouldn't have left you alone. You wouldn't have been attacked."

She tilted her head to the side. "So it's guilt."

"Reality," he countered.

"Whatever." Let him think what he chose. Neither answer accounted for the more intimate aspects of their relationship...

like the hard arousal pressed against her belly each time she'd awakened in his arms last night.

“So you're making up for...what?” she asked.

“Sleeping with you made me lose my focus.” His grip on her leg loosened and he stood. “It won't happen again.”

“I see,” she murmured. A mixture of understanding and awe filtered through her. *She'd gotten to him.* She'd penetrated the tough exterior and made Kane McDermott feel. She didn't know what women had come before her, but she doubted he'd ever lost focus because of a night of hot sex.

And hot sex with Kane wasn't enough. The realization came to her as clear and strong as the sunlight streaming through the window. She blinked against the harsh glare. He walked across the room and drew the shades.

Kayla folded her arms over her chest and lay back against the pillows. If she'd gotten to him once, she could do it again. She had as much to prove to Kane as to herself. Her ability to trust her instincts was at stake. She'd read him so wrong that first night. She had to know she was right about him now.

Exhaustion threatened, but she couldn't give in. She intended to test his resolve. He might think he was here as her protector to atone for his sins. He was in for a surprise.

She glanced across the room. He stood, legs braced apart, staring out the space in the blinds. She knew the muscles in those legs, the feel of him pulsing in her hand. She knew how it felt to be comforted and held through the night.

She wanted more from Kane than his guilt-induced protection. She wanted the opportunity to see if they had a chance. To see if this man was the one to breach her walls, and show her men—and relationships—had potential. To do that, she had to get past his barriers.

And Kayla intended to get what she wanted.

Chapter Six

KAYLA SUSPECTED KANE would fight her by erecting barriers so high, she'd have to learn to mountain climb to achieve her goal.

“Kane?” He turned at the sound of his name, his hands tucked in his front jeans pockets.

“Thank you.”

“For?”

“If you'd come over here, I'd tell you.” She couldn't trust herself to stand, and she couldn't talk to him if he stood so far away. She had more than physical barriers to breach. She just hadn't yet learned what the others were.

He walked over and lowered himself onto the bed, causing the mattress to dip beneath his weight. Kayla drew her legs up and scooted closer to the edge. Closer to him.

She placed a hand on his arm. Muscles tightened beneath her fingertips. She didn't loosen her grip. “I appreciate your being here.”

“Why? I lied to you from the second we met.”

She'd expected to have to force truths out of him. Instead, he'd given her the opening she sought. “Because you were doing your job. I realize that now.”

“If I was doing my job, you'd have been protected before you got hurt.”

She laughed but knew better than to shake her head. Eating had helped, but she still felt drumbeats when she moved too fast. “Sometimes we mistake what our jobs are. I remember one night when I was younger. Catherine wanted to go out with her friends. I knew these friends were trouble, that she was headed in the wrong direction. So I snuck into her room and stole her wallet and what little money she had inside. She went anyway, and got caught sneaking out of a restaurant without paying the hefty bill.” Kayla gnawed the inside of her cheek, remembering the night the police officer had brought her sister home.

His strong hand touched her cheek. “What’s your point?” he asked in a gruff voice.

“We raised each other. It was my job to look out for her and I blew it.”

“Was she arrested?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. The owner refused to press charges. He gave her a job washing dishes instead. The point is, I didn’t do my job, but looking back, it wasn’t mine to do. Just like the minute I walked out of that hotel room, I wasn’t yours to look out for anymore.”

He narrowed his gaze. “I agree with you about Catherine. As for me, I was still on a case.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Sleeping with me was work-related?”

“Don’t twist my words,” he said with a wry smile.

“Then let the guilt go.” Kayla couldn’t reach him if he hid behind his job and sense of duty. “Look, when you were a teenager, did you ever get in an argument with your mother, then storm out into the street?”

He met her question with a vacant stare.

Curious, she pushed on. “At that point, there wasn’t anything she could do to stop you from getting into trouble.”

“There wasn’t a damn thing she could have done about anything. She was dead.” His voice sounded distant. As if a robot were speaking.

Her mouth opened and closed again just as fast. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t waste your time feeling sorry for her. She killed herself. Took herself out of the game.”

Leaving her child behind. Kayla knew better than to voice pity for the boy he’d been. She was grateful enough for the revelations. She wasn’t about to discourage them by suffocating him in emotion. “And your father?” she asked.

His shoulders grew stiff. “Took a hike when I was five. Is there a point to all this?”

A smile tipped the edges of her mouth. “There was, but you’ve cut off every one I was about to make.”

Kane let the tension ease. She didn’t treat him with the sad look or pitying expression his friends, teachers, and the authorities had used in his youth. He hadn’t voiced his story again until now, but wasn’t surprised he’d confided in Kayla.

He'd known many women. None affected him on any level other than physical. None attempted to challenge him. He'd met his match, and he respected her for it. Respected her far more than women who played the weak heroine to get his attention and into his bed.

He'd begun having sex early in his teens—too often, he'd come to realize. Later he'd become smarter, more discriminating. Only one thing remained constant. He came and went with no thought to looking back or revealing himself. Not so with Kayla. After all she'd been through—thanks to him—she deserved a little honesty.

But that wasn't the sole reason for his confidences now. He didn't want to think about why he wanted to share the most painful parts of his life with this woman.

She shifted, the movement revealing pale skin and an expanse of thigh that aroused him in an instant.

“My point is you aren't responsible for me,” she said, meeting his gaze.

Primitive possession flooded his system. “The hell I'm not.”

In the face of his roar, she didn't blink.

He admired her spunk. “You're my responsibility at least until this case is over, so let's drop that part of the conversation now.”

“Okay.”

He blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected her to give in without an argument. “So you aren't angry?”

“Not about the initial investigation, no.”

“And what came after?” He’d slept with her and lied while doing it.

“Pheromones,” she explained.

“What?”

“Two people attracted to each other by stimuli they can’t control.” She took her smart explanation seriously and he’d forgotten the intellectual side of this beautiful woman. “A chemical reaction,” she went on. “So if you’re still blaming yourself for losing focus, don’t. I’m equally at fault.”

“Meaning?”

“I wanted you, too.” She fiddled with the hem on her jersey without meeting his gaze.

This was the Kayla he’d first met. The innocent who threatened to chip away at his heart, if he let her.

Which he wouldn’t. But he couldn’t let her last statement go unchallenged. He had to know. *Wanted*, as in past tense?” he asked.

She shrugged and leaned back into the pillows. “Why ask? You’re a man of your word. You said it won’t happen again. Does what I want really matter?”

He could drown in emotion, in her. “Everything you want matters.”

Her expression grew still, then a tear spilled from the corner of one eye. “No one’s ever said that to me. I’m thankful for you, Kane.”

A low growl escaped from his throat. “I don’t want your gratitude.”

“Then what *do* you want?” She did her best to hold in her frustration.

“That’s a loaded question.”

“I know. That’s why I asked.” An impish smile played around her mouth, even as she wiped away a tear.

Kane knew what he wanted. Kayla, soft and giving beneath him. But she was right. He’d laid down the law. *It wouldn’t happen again.* But he knew what she needed—to be reassured that *she* counted. It was the only thing he could offer her.

He looked into her eyes—eyes that displayed her soul and mirrored his need. He braced his hands on either side of her face.

He caressed her cheek, careful to keep her head steady. “Are you sure you want to know what I want?”

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.” She touched a hand to the stubble on his face and ran two delicate fingers down his cheek. “You count, too, Kane. I wonder if anyone’s ever told you that before.”

No one had. No one would again. He leaned over and covered her mouth with his. To block out the truth...and to accept it at the same time. Her lips opened and her tongue sought his, not hesitant but eager. She licked his lips, ran her tongue over his teeth, learning and growing bolder with each taste.

He craved her. She was a drug he couldn't get enough of. He threaded his fingers through her still-damp hair, then eased his lower body over hers. His arms shook with exertion, from the need to keep a safe distance between them, before he lost control and hurt her more.

Her hips jerked upward without warning. She brushed his erection with nothing more than the flimsy cotton he'd found in her drawer. He exhaled a harsh groan and eased himself on top of her, settling himself between her thighs.

It wasn't enough. He was too damn hard. He wanted to rip off those panties and...A soft moan penetrated the haze of desire. He flipped over and off of her fast. Damn, but he'd made a mistake.

It wouldn't happen again. Yeah, right. One battle lost, Kane thought, but the bigger war raged on. He rolled onto his side and glanced over. "Are you okay?"

"Too much too soon," she whispered, echoing words he'd used day one.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her against him. Once again, his need had gotten in the way of common sense. "Get some rest," he said gruffly.

"I'm sorry." Her shoulders remained stiff.

"For?" He worked the muscles beneath his fingers, kneading her soft skin. As a distraction, it didn't work. He had a sexy woman in his arms and his body knew it.

"I'm a lot of things, Kane. But I'm not a tease."

He heard the desperation in her tone. Her need for him to understand. “Did I say you were?”

“No. But I’m sure you’re thinking it.”

He sensed the source of her concern was based in her past and understood. “As a matter of fact, I’m not.”

“Then what are you thinking?” she asked.

That she didn’t need to dig into old insecurities. Not with him. He respected everything about her. “That I pushed myself on a poor, frail, injured woman,” he said with a crooked grin.

She laughed. His attempt to lighten the mood had obviously worked. “No, really.”

“That I wasn’t in the mood anyway.”

This time she treated him to a snort of disbelief. “Seriously.”

“I was thinking,” he said, pausing to smooth her hair and inhale the fragrant scent that was Kayla. “That what just happened...”

“Yes?”

“Was the best almost sex I ever had.” Just being with her was beyond good. Kane accepted how much he needed her, even as he knew he’d ultimately let her go.

No matter what emotion and softness she offered him, he’d take none. But for the duration of the case, he’d protect her with his life.



FRESH FROM AN uneventful shower, Kayla made her way to the family room. Kane sat staring at the boxes she recognized as holding her aunt's things. "I didn't hear the doorbell."

He glanced over his shoulder. "You should be resting."

She scowled. "I slept half the day yesterday and all last night. I'm fine." Or as close to fine as she could be with her attacker's threat still echoing in her brain, her aunt's reputation and her business in jeopardy...and having shared her bed with Kane McDermott for the past dozen hours.

Like her, he'd showered and changed. Judging by his appearance, she realized his clothes must also have arrived with the boxes. She wouldn't be female if she didn't admit she liked what she saw. Faded jeans stretched across his muscular legs. A black Henley covered his broad chest. The detective might not know much about cleaning his clothes, but he knew how to wear them. He just plain looked good.

She walked into her family room and knelt down beside him. Her thigh brushed his, a brief and accidental contact. Her stomach muscles curled into twisted bands of excitement and need. What should have been innocent wasn't.

"You've got some color back in your cheeks," he noted.

And it had nothing to do with good health, she thought wryly. "I feel better. Up to tackling those boxes, anyway." She gestured to the opened cartons spread around the room.

"You showered." He fingered her freshly washed hair.

She grinned. "Even I couldn't share the bed with me a minute longer."

“You should have called me.”

“So you could stand guard outside the bathroom? I’m not an invalid,” she assured him. And she didn’t want him treating her as one. His attention was nice, but she didn’t want his pity.

“I started without you.”

“Find anything interesting?” Her initial inspection of the contents had been cursory at best.

He shook his head. “There’re three huge boxes here.”

“I packed two of those myself. They lived in an apartment, and the landlord wanted it emptied as soon as possible so he could rent it out again. Anyway, Catherine and I gave most of their belongings to the Goodwill. My uncle had a niece who wanted some of his personal things. Catherine and I boxed the rest to go through later.”

“So the crossword puzzles...” His hand settled over the box nearest him.

“Anagrams and things. My aunt loved them. So did my mother. I used to do some when I was younger. I figured maybe I’d get back into them myself one day.” She shrugged. “The other box has knickknacks that have been in my family for years.”

“How old were you when your mother died?”

The question surprised her. It was as unexpected as it was unnecessary. “Didn’t your investigation reveal such a minute detail about my life?” she asked.

“Yes.” He had the grace to look ashamed despite the fact he’d merely been doing his job.

“So why ask?”

“Because I like hearing about you from you.”

She glanced down at her hands. It was her turn to be embarrassed. She’d already forgiven him. She believed what he’d told her earlier—that when he’d slept with her, his job hadn’t been on his mind. It had brought him into her life, but it hadn’t kept him there. When Captain Reid had denied protection, Kane could have walked away. He hadn’t.

“What about the business books?” he asked, obviously noting her silence and respecting her wishes by changing the subject.

“I was twenty, Catherine was twenty-one.” She answered his earlier question. “It was as if Mama chose the optimal time to let herself go. Neither one of us had to face social services or being separated.”

“Wouldn’t your aunt have taken care of you?”

“I suppose, but Mama loved us and wanted the best for both of us. Aunt Charlene never had kids and only related well to me because we both had that—” she tapped her head “—extra intelligence, I *guess* you could call it. But she had a harder time with Catherine because they had less in common.”

“I’m sorry—for both of you.”

She shrugged. “What you lived through was worse.” His eyes grew shuttered. His face cleared of expression, almost as

if a curtain slammed down, closing out any audience to his soul.

She hadn't reached his inner depths yet, but with time and patience, she would. "I have all the books," she said, accepting his parameters. "That's what's so strange. The guy said he wanted the books. But I've been doing them for the past year. Nothing unusual. No extra income, nothing unaccounted for..."

"They stashed the money somewhere."

Although she hadn't reached his emotions, his words tapped into her own. Kayla grabbed his sweatshirt, desperate for him to understand and believe. "*They* didn't stash anything. Whatever my uncle may or may not have been up to, my aunt wasn't into prostitution."

He met her gaze, his eyes darkening to the color of a stormy sea. "That remains to be seen."

"No. My family may not be as fine as some, but I assure you we draw the line at *that*."

"I wasn't accusing her...or you. But the fact remains someone wants something from you...and he doesn't much care how he gets it."

"I know." Just the thought of her attacker's voice sent tremors of fear spiraling through her.

Kane grabbed hold of her wrists. His protective warmth eased the terror. "Nothing will happen to you, but we have to find out who these people are and find the books they're looking for. To put an end to all this once and for all."

All this included them. She could read the truth in his eyes and planned to fight it. She just wasn't sure how.

Needing distance, Kayla placed her hands on her jeans and stood. Kane's gaze followed the movement, his eyes traveling the length of her and back. A sensual gleam lit his expression. Swiping a black, V-neck Lycra top from Catherine's closet had been a good idea for more reasons than warmth. She doubted her own silk blouses would have elicited the same heated response.

Apparently, the trail toward Kane's heart began with sex. Under normal circumstances, Kayla wouldn't offer herself as an object; she'd spent too many years fighting the idea. But Kane was different from other men. For the first time, she intended to use her God-given assets to their best advantage.

"I started with this box," he said. "I figure maybe there's something hidden in one of these puzzle books."

"Like?"

"I don't know yet."

She wanted answers as much as she wanted Kane. Kneeling beside him, each movement she made was deliberate and calculated. She reached inside the large, cardboard carton, bending close enough to smell his cologne and far enough over to give him a glimpse inside her shirt...if he cared to look.

She darted a glance out of the corner of her eye. He didn't notice her watching him. His gaze was glued to her cleavage, his eyes cloudy, his cheekbones pulled tight.

She suppressed a smile. Despite the less than perfect circumstances and the threat hanging over her, she had Detective Kane McDermott just where she wanted him. The last time he'd *lost his focus*, they'd slept together. And she had every intention of making it happen again. Only this time, it wouldn't be just sex. After she coaxed him into opening up to her, she'd engage his emotions, too.

For now, she would tackle what was within her control. She perused each page, smiling as she remembered how both her mother and her aunt would curl up for hours with this pastime. Her mother had been hiding from life. Her aunt had just enjoyed the escape. Kayla shut the paperback and laid it on the floor. "Nothing here."

"The ones I've looked through are all completed. Your aunt was an expert."

Kayla grinned. "Easier to be an expert when you work in pencil. Erase your mistakes, cheat a little by checking the back." She laughed aloud. "Aunt Charlene was pretty good. Mama did more cheating than her sister. She made more mistakes, too."

"And you made none at all?"

"I'm not perfect, Kane."

He raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

She glanced at the book in her hand, one that looked like an old crossword but held precious family memories. "This one's completed, too."

“Let’s cover them all. I don’t want to miss anything important.”

Half an hour later, Kayla wanted to scream. They’d been through more than half the box. The pencil-smudged books were all the same. Most finished, the last few half-finished. She grabbed for the next book in the box. “This is ridiculous.”

“Just keep looking.”

She curled into a more comfortable position, picked up a pencil, and grabbed the next book. This time, she started working the puzzles, much as her aunt had probably done. She chose puzzles and individual questions at random and, just as she suspected, her answers matched Aunt Charlene’s. They would, of course, since her aunt had been as intellectual and meticulous as Kayla was.

Gnawing on the end of the pencil, she tossed the book down and went for the next one. Fifteen minutes and three books later, she began finding mistakes. Obvious ones. Ones her aunt would never have made.

Unless she’d done so on purpose. And considering Kayla had also begun finding a pattern of last names in the puzzles, she suspected these were more than game books. The implication of *that* sent chills crawling along her skin, and she groaned aloud.

“Find something?”

She glanced at Kane, knowing she had to reveal her discovery, hating it at the same time. “Mistakes in the entries, names instead of answers,” she muttered.

He raised an eyebrow. "Let me take a look."

She handed him the two books she'd made headway with, and he scanned the pages along with her notes. "Looks like pay dirt."

She frowned. "Don't sound so pleased."

"It's better than coming up empty."

"What's the date on that first one?" Kayla asked.

"Date?"

"Every book has a handwritten date next to the first puzzle."

"Hadn't noticed," he muttered.

"Marks your progress from month to month, or year to year. Didn't I mention my family was slightly neurotic?"

"No, but you should have. We could have started at the bottom of the box and come up with something sooner. Come on."

"Where?"

"These books need to be decoded, and you need your strength to do it."

"So I can prove my aunt guilty of prostitution and lose my business in the process?" she asked.

Kayla might have been ambivalent about putting her dreams on hold for the sake of the business, but she refused to damage her aunt's reputation to get her life back. Aunt Charlene had been the only person other than Catherine who

understood Kayla and all her emotional insecurities—because she'd suffered much of them herself. Kayla had no intention of betraying her in the worst possible way.

“So we can exonerate her and save *Charmed!*'s reputation through you.” He glanced down at the first book she'd found with any discrepancy. “This dates back eight months. But *Charmed!* had been in business for a little over fifteen years.”

She nodded.

“Your aunt married your uncle a little under a year ago and took him in as a partner almost immediately.”

She didn't question his knowledge. “Yes.” Kayla did the math. “The date on the first book coincides with Charles Bishop's entry into the escort business.” She heard her voice rising in pitch. “Which gives him opportunity.”

“Do you have a reason to suspect the man of anything?”

She shook her head. “Nothing more than sweeping Aunt Charlene off her feet. But the names in these books began around the time he joined the business.”

“Which makes him an equal suspect.” Kane grasped her hand.

He obviously sought to reassure her, but tremors of awareness acted to arouse her instead. He had no right to be so distracting when so much was at stake. “You may have to face the fact that your aunt wasn't an innocent victim,” he said.

She shook her head. “Not without concrete, irrefutable proof.” The kind of proof she intended to get. She didn't want to believe her aunt's husband had betrayed the woman he

claimed to love, but better her uncle be found guilty than her aunt. Kayla believed in Charlene.

Kane nodded. “Okay then. We have our work cut out for us.”

“We? Does that mean you believe me?”

“Yes.”

One little word with a wealth of meaning. She glanced at him for confirmation and found it in the warm blue of his eyes.

“Kayla...” He held his gaze steady with hers. “I believe your faith in your aunt is unshakeable unless we find out otherwise. But I have to reserve judgment until the facts are in.”

Kane the cop, Kayla thought. And that was okay. Because hidden in all that qualification was one unmistakable fact: he believed in her. No one other than Catherine or Aunt Charlene ever had.

She didn’t think. One minute she was standing beside him and the next she’d wrapped her arms around his neck. “Thank you.” She molded her body against his, trying to tell herself it was gratitude. She knew better.

His hands snaked around her waist. If he wanted to push her away, now was the moment, she thought. His grip tightened. The masculine groan and the unmistakable hardness pressing against her told her he wasn’t going anywhere, at least for now.

Another second’s thought and he might back off emotionally. Kayla recognized her one opportunity to reach

inside Kane and make him hers. To do it, she'd have to dig deep inside herself, as well. Take the ultimate risk and defy every principle by which she'd lived so far. She took two steps back. With trembling hands, she reached for the hem of her shirt. She drew it over her head and tossed the garment onto the floor.

Chapter Seven

KANE TOOK IN the vision before him and tried to catch his breath.

Sunlight came in broken waves through the window blinds, bracketing Kayla's incredible body in a blazing glow of light and warmth. She inhaled and her hands shook as she clasped them before her. "Aren't you going to say something?" she asked softly. "*Do...something?*"

He was no saint. He never had been. Faced with Kayla's offering, he couldn't say no. Her body was too tempting, her curves too full, her heart too big. He couldn't turn her away.

"Kane?" Even as she asked, she was reaching upward, wrapping her arms around her shoulders to cover herself. From him.

He muttered a savage curse, grabbing her arms before she blocked his view, pulling her against his straining body. He held her hands against her sides and looked down at the gift he'd been given, if only for one more night.

He traced the black marks on her throat with his hands. "This never should have happened."

"It's not your—"

He cut her words off with his mouth, sealing his lips against hers. He didn't want to hear how she didn't blame him. He didn't want anything except the sound of her soft moans echoing in his ears. He wasn't disappointed.

She responded to his kiss. Her lips softened, her mouth opened, and her tongue darted inside. Wild and unrestrained, she met him move for move. Her back arched, crushing her chest against him until he felt the rasp of tight nipples through the material of his shirt. Too quickly even that barrier became unacceptable.

He yanked the hem, pulled it over his head, then flung it across the room. Only then did he have what he wanted. He and Kayla, skin to skin, her breasts full, flush against him. He exhaled, feeling her supple curves and heat fuse with his. It wasn't enough, for either of them. She moved restlessly, abrading her nipples against his hair-roughened skin. Her fingers gripped his shoulders.

Her nails bit into his flesh and conscious thought intruded. Instead of listening to the pulsing in his groin, he forced himself to think. He couldn't have sex with her again. Not without consequences. Not with this woman. She broke his concentration and destroyed his common sense. He raised his gaze, forced his lips off the soft skin of her cheek. Her green eyes were fogged with need and more. With emotions he couldn't, wouldn't face.

He ran his thumb over her damp lower lip. "No protection, sweetheart." He felt sure she wouldn't test his resolve by coming up with a box of spare condoms in the bathroom vanity.

"Oh." Shock then disappointment flickered in her eyes.

He couldn't stand it. A cold shower would take the edge off his problem, though he knew after last night it wouldn't be

damn near enough. But he couldn't leave her hanging, not when he wanted to satisfy her any and every way he knew how.

He wanted to teach her how good things could be between a man and a woman. She'd had little experience, all of it bad. Even he had hurt her in the end. Not this time. Just this once he could give to her, yet still be able to walk away later.

He reached out and cupped his hand around one full breast, letting his thumb brush in rapid motion over her taut nipple.

Her entire body shook in reaction. Had he ever met a woman so responsive? She exhaled a moan that had his body clenching with need.

“But you said...”

He covered her lips with one finger. “That I didn't have protection, not that we had to stop completely.”

Her eyelids opened wide, comprehension dawning. Before she could answer, he swept her off her feet and laid her down on the couch. At the jarring motion, she groaned aloud. He brushed her hair off her forehead, fingering the still red bruise near her temple. “You okay?” he asked.

“I'd be better if you stopped talking.”

He laughed aloud. Kneeling beside her, he placed his hand the button of her jeans. Kane needed to see her writhe with pleasure in his arms, to watch her climax beneath his hands. He undid the button and began a downward slide of her jeans.

Kayla helped, raising her hips and shimmying out of the denim. This might not be the result she'd planned, but she had

to admit it might be enough. Without realizing it, he'd still given her a measure of control. He seemed more relaxed, less guarded and, best of all, she still had him all to herself.

A phone call to her sister would solve the protection problem later. Catherine wouldn't mind a trip to the drugstore for the right cause.

A rush of cool air accompanied the loss of her jeans, but heat quickly followed when Kane placed his hard, hot hand at the juncture of her thighs, his palm covering her sex. A deep, pulsing rhythm took hold, starting where his hand pressed intimately against her and traveling to every nerve ending her body possessed. She arched into his waiting palm.

"Damn, but you feel good." His roughened voice caused her heart to trip in reaction. "Hot and wet for me."

She forced her eyes open to see his eyelids shut tight and his jaw clenched. He was as affected by them together as she was. Kayla didn't need sex to reach Kane. She could touch him with warmth and intimacy, trust and caring.

She laid her head back against the cushion, prepared to show him how much she trusted him. As he picked up a sensual rhythm, waves of pleasure washed over her, building, then easing up only to rush her again, more insistent than before. The sounds coming from her throat ought to have embarrassed her, but they didn't. Because this was Kane and the only way he would know how she felt, the only way he'd open up in return, was if he *felt* her trust.

The initial hesitancy of their first night together was gone. The soft moans coming from deep within her shook him as

nothing ever had...until her legs relaxed, opening wide, inviting him to continue. Kane sucked in a ragged breath, realizing his mistake. He'd underestimated this woman and her effect on him. Not only was he too damn close himself, but he'd been a fool. He hadn't saved himself by not making love with her. He'd drawn himself in deeper.

He picked up the pace with one hand, easing his finger inside her smooth, wet heat with the other. She gasped aloud. Lowering his head, he drew the tip of her nipple into his mouth and tugged gently with his teeth. That was all it took.

The spasm hit her hard, and she arched off the couch. The clenching and unclenching around his finger hit him even harder. His own body was close to the breaking point, and she hadn't even touched him. He opened his eyes in time to watch her face contort with pleasure *he* gave.

"Kane." His name burst from her lips unexpectedly, and the sound triggered an intense reaction so strong, he could no longer remain in control.

He straddled her until their bodies aligned, grinding himself hard against her, searching for the fulfillment he'd deliberately denied them both. His unexpected climax took him by surprise. Seconds later, Kane eased himself off her. She couldn't take his weight any more than he could handle what he'd just done.

"That was..."

"Don't say it," he muttered. He'd lost control. Around Kayla, it seemed to be a permanent state.

“Incredible.” She turned to her side and gazed up at him with trusting eyes. It was more than he could stand and he started to walk away.

“Don’t!” Her harsh tone startled him. “Don’t you dare walk out on me.”

“You need space.”

“You mean you do.” She dressed in silence before turning back to him. She ran her fingers through her disheveled hair. “The second you drop your guard, you back off.”

He was surprised she read him so well. He shouldn’t be. There’d been a connection between them from the minute they met. He raised his hands in a gesture of defeat.

Kane walked back to where she stood, hands on her hips, her expression guarded. He hated that look when directed at him. “You got me.”

Her dark lashes fluttered upward. “Do I?” she murmured.

He placed his hand around the back of her neck and drew her close. Tasting her lips brought him more pleasure than he could have imagined. Too much and he broke the kiss.

He didn’t pretend to misunderstand her question. “Yeah, you do.”

Light entered into her green eyes. She looked like a starving cat that had finally found a scrap of food and wasn’t about to let go. Of him. Damned if he couldn’t get used to the idea—and that unnerved him.

He grasped her chin between his hands. “But don’t get used to it, sweetheart.” Kane knew he was talking more to himself than to her.

He met her even gaze. The glow in her eyes didn’t fade as he’d expected it to. Kayla had obviously decided to take him on, and that put him on edge. Her next words proved him right.

“You’re used to being alone.”

He couldn’t dispute that remark.

“But you don’t have to be.”

She was wrong. Because alone was safer.

Her hand wandered to the front of his jeans. He was hard again but had no intention of losing control one more time. He reached for her wrist, but instead of pulling her away, he pushed her closer, letting her wrap her fingertips around the heavy bulge in his jeans. He groaned at the absolute perfection he found in her touch.

“Not everyone leaves, Kane.” Her whispered words penetrated his thoughts.

She removed her hand, twisting her fingers together in a nervous gesture that revealed she wasn’t any more comfortable with the dynamic between them than he was. Sexual tension and an emotional pull. They couldn’t deny either. The difference was, she’d obviously decided to push past her barriers in order to reach him.

Which meant he’d made the right decision. Someone had to keep their distance, to make things easier in the end. “Why

don't you go over those books while I jump in the shower?"

"Sounds like a plan," she said.

Kane knew it was merely a temporary reprieve.



KAYLA WALKED INTO her bedroom, pausing at the pile of clothes Kane had left lying in a heap on the floor. She liked the casual familiarity the sight implied. Not that she suffered from any delusions that he intended to be a part of her life. That much was obvious.

But she preferred to cling to the hope of the less obvious. The fact that *she'd* taken control and reached past his defenses. She bent down and picked up his shirt and jeans, clenching Kane's clothing in her hands. By the time the case was over, he'd understand the difference between being a loner by choice—or necessity.

And thanks to Kane, she was becoming a woman in charge of herself, and her life. One who no longer feared her sexuality. This wasn't an experience she could regret, no matter what the outcome. But she'd do everything in her power to direct it in her favor.

She tossed the jeans over her arm, and something fell to the floor with a thud. Kayla bent down to retrieve his wallet, some spare change, and...

"What's this?" Even as her hand grabbed the foil packet and held it up to the light, she knew.

And if Kane went to this much effort to avoid having sex again, to run from the very intimacy that would enable her to

breach his defenses, he had no intention of succumbing. Ever.

She hadn't gotten to him. Not even close. She brushed at her eyes before a tear could fall. When had Kayla Luck *ever* affected a man on any level other than the physical? She should have known better but as always, she had to learn the hard way.

But she had no time for self-pity. She had more important concerns than her love life. Kayla grabbed the five books with possible information and shoved them into an oversize bag. Kane might have directed the course of things so far. But no more. He obviously needed to be shaken up on many different levels.

The mysteries of *Charmed!* had yet to be unraveled. She could do that without Detective McDermott. The sooner she did, the sooner she could get back to the life she knew best. Her life without Kane.

She picked up her cell, called Catherine, and asked her to meet her at her favorite hideaway. As she disconnected the call, the shower shut off. The silence echoed in her ears. In minutes Kane would emerge, his hair damp from the shower, droplets of water on his skin. She ignored the traitorous thudding of her heart, refused to acknowledge the blood pulsing through her veins. Instead, she bolted for the front door without looking back.

✧ ✧ ✧

KANE WALKED OUT of the bathroom, drying his hair as he went. The silence struck him immediately. His nerve endings, honed by years of experience, went on alert. "Kayla?"

No answer. He didn't yell for her again. His gaze traveled her bedroom. The pile of clothes he'd worn earlier was missing, and he realized he heard the hum of the washing machine in the background. But she was gone.

He recalled what happened the last time she'd gone off on her own, and his gut churned. She should have known better than to run off. He should have known better than to trust her now that she was back on her feet. Hell, he should have known better than to trust himself. Kayla distracted him in every way possible.

He stalked through the house, taking in every detail. Nothing was missing except...the books. He now knew exactly where she'd gone, evidence in hand, making herself a walking target.

Kane muttered a savage curse. When he got his hands on her, he'd throttle her. Never mind that what he really wanted to do was throw her onto the bed and finish what he hadn't allowed himself to do before. "Fuck."

He dropped his towel and found a new set of clothes he'd had dropped off, then shoved his feet into his shoes and grabbed for his keys. He had to wrap this case up and get the hell out.

He slid into the car, checked his gun, and pulled his cuffs out of the glove compartment. The woman drove him to distraction. At this point, he'd cuff her to the damn bed if that was what it took to keep her safe.

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THE MUSTY SMELL of old books permeated her nostrils, making Kayla feel safe. She rounded the end of a long aisle and saw Catherine pacing the floor at their meeting place.

She touched her sister on the shoulder. “Hi, Cat.”

Catherine turned. “Thank God you’re okay. That emergency call scared me to death. Where’s your guard dog?” She glanced over Kayla’s shoulder in search of Kane.

Kayla shrugged. “I don’t know and I don’t care.” *Liar.* She cared too much, which was what had gotten her into this mess.

“He let you out alone? After he promised he’d protect you? I should have known the man was low life piece of –.”

“I snuck out,” Kayla said before her sister could get going. “And, if I recall, you liked him well enough the first time you met.”

“That was before he took advantage of my innocent sister.”

“Don’t you think you’re laying it on a little thick, even for you?”

Catherine stepped forward and touched her cheek. “You look like you’ve had your heart trampled and broken. So no, I don’t think I’m overreacting.”

Kayla eased herself into one of the fabric-covered chairs. There weren’t many places in the public library that were comfortable and secluded, but three floors down from the main level, nestled between History and Research, Kayla had carved out her personal space.

“Did you know that men are very literal creatures?” Kayla asked.

“How so?”

“They say what they mean and they mean what they say. If a guy says he doesn’t want to get involved, he doesn’t want to get involved. No hidden agendas exist. There aren’t any fairy-tale endings, and there’s no such thing as the right woman changing a stubborn man’s mind.”

“I’d like to strangle the bastard.”

“Why? He never lied to me. Now sit. We have to talk.” Kayla pointed to the chair across from her. Catherine meant well, but discussing her feelings for Kane was too personal. Kayla wouldn’t divulge details, not even to her concerned sister.

She’d cope and deal with it on her own. “What do you know about *Charmed!*’s less discussed activities?” Kayla asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Look at this.” She dug into her bag and pulled out one of the crossword books she’d taken from the house. “Lists of names, dates...” She fanned the pages for her sister to see.

“Shut the book, Kayla.” The deep voice took her by surprise. A familiar feeling of warmth curled inside her stomach.

“The iceman cometh,” Catherine muttered.

“Shut up.” Kayla and Kane spoke at once.

Instead of being insulted, Catherine merely continued undeterred. “What shouldn’t she tell me?”

“Anything.” Kane’s dark gaze bored into Kayla’s. If he was aware of Catherine as anything other than another body in the library, no one would know. He had eyes only for her and, if the steely glint in them was any indication, he was furious. She could match and best him on that score.

“Keeping secrets, Detective?” Catherine asked.

“None that concern you.” He spoke to Catherine, but his gaze didn’t swerve from hers. The intensity Kayla saw there unnerved her.

Catherine’s stare bounced from Kane to Kayla and back again. Apparently, she sensed the undercurrents running between them because she stood and reached for her purse. “I think that’s my cue.”

Kayla rose. “You don’t need to go.” She could handle Kane without Catherine’s help, but she refused to let him drive her sister off.

“I think I do. As for *Charmed!*, I know less than you. Aunt Charlene thought I was the wild child and rarely confided in me.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Kayla laughed. Catherine never begrudged Kayla her relationship with their aunt. She’d had little in common with the older woman, but Kayla knew in her heart, Aunt Charlene had loved them both. When push came to shove, though, the Luck sisters had relied on each other.

Catherine turned to Kane. “I don’t know what the hell’s going on between you two, but if you hurt my sister, I’ll make you wish you’d never heard the name Luck.”

“I believe it,” Kane muttered.

“You’re letting him run you off?!” Kayla asked, surprised.

Catherine leaned close, her voice low. “I looked into his eyes. The man’s fallen hard. He just doesn’t know it yet. He’ll take care of you.”

“I don’t need him...”

“Yes, you do. You’re not wearing tighter clothes for my benefit; you’re doing it for his. Because you finally trust someone enough to let the real you out.” Catherine gave her a quick hug. “You know where to reach me.”

Kayla squeezed her back. She loved Catherine’s concern as much as she loved her sister—even if she was seeing things between herself and Kane that didn’t exist. Kayla had imagined a depth of caring and a need for love in a man who had none. Catherine had obviously been fooled, too. But her sister meant well. They were family and, in Kayla’s eyes, that meant everything.

Not that a loner like Kane would understand or even care.

She glanced over. He stood off to the side, his rigid body language ensuring no one could mistake him for anything but the solitary human he was.

Despite everything, a huge part of her still wanted to teach him the meaning of belonging. She stifled a harsh laugh, knowing how little he actually desired from her.

She waited until her sister disappeared around the stacks.
“How did you find me?”

“Instinct. You were either here or with your sister. Both happened to be true.”

Kayla latched on to his mention of Catherine. “Cat deserves to know what’s going on, Kane. Keeping her in the dark isn’t your decision to make.”

“No,” he agreed. “It’s yours. The more she knows, the more danger she’ll be in. I have enough trouble keeping tabs on you. I don’t need to add her to my list.”

He took two steps closer. Her personal corner of the library was small. Kane’s presence made it seem even smaller. She inhaled for courage and smelled his masculine scent. Her body reacted, recalling more intimate times between them.

Her brain reminded her *she’d* been intimate. *He’d* been far away. “You can take me off that short list of yours, Detective. I don’t want any more from you than you want from me.”

“In that case, sweetheart, we’re in big trouble.”

Her eyes widened. Her lips parted and her breath caught in a noticeable hitch.

Kane cursed himself because he wanted her more than ever before. He prayed for restraint. “Give me the books,” he said, grasping for a distraction.

She shook her head. “I want to work on turning them into a complete list.”

“So you brought them here.”

“I can concentrate better here.”

Away from you. He didn't have to hear the words to know she meant them. Which was no excuse for reckless behavior. His relief at finding her unharmed warred with his fury at her lack of concern. “You made yourself a walking target.”

“This is a *public* library.”

Kane glanced around the secluded area. He'd walked down three flights of an empty stairwell and wandered around numerous cubicles and stacks before finding the right one. “Looks pretty damn private to me. And you came here alone; our only evidence could easily have been grabbed.”

She cringed.

“Not that I don't think you can decipher these, but I want them in a safe place. I've got a friend at the precinct who's more a bookworm than a cop. He'll cull the information in no time.”

“Fine. They're yours.” She shoved the books at him, hitting him hard in the stomach.

He stifled a grunt.

She grabbed for an oversize bag on the floor. “I'm out of here.”

She took two steps. Kane grasped her by the wrist, pulling her against him. He couldn't let her dictate their next course of action. She had no business on the streets alone, but that wasn't the only reason he wouldn't let her go.

Her silken hair smelled of lemons, her skin fragrant and fresh. He didn't just want to keep her alive. He *needed* to keep her that way.

Because that was how she made him feel.

"Let me go, Kane."

"I can't."

"You already got what you wanted from me."

"You don't believe that."

"I've found a foil packet that says otherwise."

"What the hell are you talking about?" He tensed, unsure of what she meant.

"Don't like being caught? Then you shouldn't have left your clothes in a pile where I'd find them, and I wouldn't have been so quick to help out with the laundry."

"Son of a bitch." His breath rushed out in a hiss. "You're telling me you left the safety of the house, you *risked your life* because..."

"Because I want to control my life." She squared her shoulders. "Besides, I don't want your pity, and that's what you gave me earlier. I came on to you and you didn't want me, but you were too much of a gentleman to admit it and make things more difficult, so you..."

"Back up. You think I don't want you?" The notion was absurd beyond belief. He'd never wanted a woman as badly as he desired Kayla, never let a female get inside and mess with

his head before, and that was telling. She was getting to him, a little at a time, taking control and leaving him with none.

He couldn't let it go on much longer, nor could he allow her to think she meant nothing to him.

He turned her around. She had no choice but to face him. Tilting her head with his hand, he forced her to look him in the eye. Shimmering moisture glistened in hers. Damn. His methods of protection backfired in more ways than one. Instead of shielding her, he'd hurt her once again.

His gut twisted with regret and an unfamiliar sense of longing, of caring. He hadn't distanced himself from Kayla as planned, just the opposite, in fact. He was in way over his head.

Reaching into her pocket, she held a black foil packet aloft, twirling it between her thumb and forefinger. "I think the evidence speaks for itself."

"Circumstantial, sweetheart." He grabbed her free hand, forcing her palm over the strong erection pulsing against the front of his jeans. "Hard evidence says otherwise."

She sucked in a surprised gasp, and Kane watched the play of emotions cross her face. Shock, pleasure, and then ultimately, disbelief. He didn't blame her for fighting the truth. He hadn't given her much of a reason to believe in him. But his body didn't lie and, right now, his cock strained against her hand.

She tilted her head to one side. Though she met his gaze with a steady one of her own, her eyes showed a range of

feeling he wasn't ready to deal with. Wasn't that why he'd left the condom in his pocket to begin with?

"Chemistry, Kane. I read somewhere that men think with their..." Her hand curled around his erection.

He gritted his teeth against the combination of pleasure and agony she caused. "Believe me, sweetheart, I'm not doing much thinking right now."

A heated blush rose to her cheeks. Apparently, his innocent Kayla wasn't as comfortable with this situation as she wanted him to believe.

"You want me."

"You can feel that I do." His voice sounded rough even to his own ears.

"It's not enough." She jerked her hand back to safety, but the evidence of her touch remained.

"I know." And that was the notion that grounded him. She wanted more than sex. He had nothing more to give.

"And this push – pull of yours is getting old." She glared.

He plucked the condom out of her other hand. He'd believed that by not actually sleeping with her, he wouldn't be involved. That by giving her pleasure, he could remain detached. But feeling her wet and warm with his hands, knowing she'd wanted him, had pulled him in. And when he'd gotten out of the shower and thought something had happened to her...

He shook his head. No matter what he felt, Kane knew his limitations. “It’s all I can do.” He turned the foil packet around in his hands. The crinkling sound echoed in the otherwise silent library.

“I know.” She turned a too-bright smile his way. “Well, Detective, at least we both know where we stand.”

Stalemate, Kane thought. In a war that was far from over.

Chapter Eight

THE POLICE STATION was quiet. Kayla followed Kane inside and waited in the hall while he met with Captain Reid. She didn't need to be in the room while the two men talked strategy. Time alone would give her an opportunity to think and come up with a plan of her own. Between the phone call earlier and the lists hidden in the books, the police had an official case, if not specific suspects to go after. Kayla wanted specifics. With or without Kane McDermott, she wanted her life back.

With her headache beginning to ebb, came the ability to think more clearly. Whoever was behind the attack wanted the books and whatever money they thought she had in her possession. Kayla had read enough fiction and nonfiction to know the bad guys were always willing to swap when they were desperate. She held the books; they held important information. By far, hers was more valuable, which gave her the upper hand.

Before she realized what she was doing, she rose to her feet and knocked twice on Captain Reid's door. Without waiting for a response, she let herself inside. "I have the answer."

"I don't recall asking a question." Captain Reid stood from behind the metal desk in the corner.

"Trade-off," she explained. "You know whoever attacked me will call back and when he does, I'll offer him the books."

“In exchange for...?” Captain Reid picked up on her earlier statement.

“Information. I know my aunt was innocent, and I want to prove it.”

“No.”

At the sound of Kane’s voice, Kayla turned. He leaned against an adjoining wall in a deceptively lazy stance. The muscles bunched beneath his shirt, and his jaw was clenched hard. He glared from beneath hooded eyes. She didn’t have to hear him speak to know he wasn’t pleased with her suggestion.

“As long as she’s willing, McDermott, she’s our best option.” The older man gestured to the metal-frame chair. “Have a seat.”

At least Captain Reid hadn’t shot down her idea immediately, despite what Kane wanted. Kayla lowered herself into the chair. “I want my business and my family name cleared.” She needed to feel in control of both herself and her life once more.

Kane shook his head. “Clearing you is my job,” he reminded her. One he hadn’t done a great job of accomplishing so far. But things were heating up and he was ready. No way he’d allow Kayla to set herself up as a target. “Use a drop or a police decoy.”

“In which case we get the errand boy and not the people involved,” the captain said.

“I’ll lean on him,” Kane muttered. “Hard.”

“He’ll talk if he thinks he’s not being threatened.” Kayla spoke up. “And what’s less threatening than a woman he already roughed up?”

Kane didn’t like the enthusiasm in her voice any more than he liked the reminder of the guy’s hands around her neck. He glanced over, taking in her cheeks flushed with excitement and the determination in her green eyes, and stifled a groan. Back on her feet, Kayla Luck was a force to be reckoned with.

What happened to the quiet woman who liked cozy restaurants, a traveling salesman, and books? Even as he wondered, he already knew the answer. She lurked beneath the intriguing woman in form-fitting jeans and a tight, sexy top. A steady rush of adrenaline pumped through his veins. Even this strong-willed version of Kayla excited him in ways he had yet to understand.

He’d never run into a woman who challenged him on so many levels. Who dared to assert her authority at the expense of his own. He might respect her independence, but he’d be damned if he’d let her risk her life to get it back. He shook his head. “No meeting. No way.”

She braced her hands on her legs and jumped up from her seat. “It’s not your decision.” She turned to his superior. “Is it?” she asked Reid.

“Ultimately, no.”

Kane shot daggers at his boss, but the man shrugged his shoulders. “The lady asked a question, McDermott. I’m just answering.”

Kayla's smile widened. "Then I want in."

"What the hell do you mean, *you want in?* This isn't some action movie; it's real life." Exasperated, Kane ran a hand through his hair.

"Right. It's my life, and you guys have shredded it to hell and back. I want to do this."

"There is no *this*." Kane glanced at Captain Reid for backup, certain the older man wouldn't have patience for a civilian plan of action. But he looked more amused than annoyed, which only served to anger Kane more. "No."

"Yes." Kayla folded her arms in front of her.

Despite the serious circumstances, his gaze followed the movement. He took in the press of her forearms against her chest, the rise of her full breasts, visible in the V of her shirt. He knew damn well how that soft flesh felt in his hands, how sweet it tasted in his mouth. He swallowed, but his throat had grown dry.

"Sorry to interrupt this show, but we've got some decisions to make." Reid paced the small area behind his desk. "First, we decipher the books."

"I can do that," Kayla said.

"So can Tucker," Kane muttered.

"Why pull extra manpower on something I can do myself?" Looking too pleased with herself, once again Kayla glanced at the captain for confirmation.

“She’s got a point, McDermott. Besides, with you watching her every minute, what can go wrong?”

Kane hadn’t mentioned to his boss that he’d lost Kayla for one solid hour because of raging hormones and foolish trust. He wasn’t about to do so now.

“And then?” Kayla asked. “What if the guy calls again?”

“I handle it.”

She scowled at Kane.

“We’ll tap your cell and see what turns up,” Reid said.

“The last call came from a burner,” Kane said. He had no doubt the next one would, too.

The captain shrugged. “If he calls, improvise. Go with the moment.” He looked at Kane. “You need backup, let me know.”

In other words, if the opportunity presented itself and Kayla was still willing, *let her in*. Kane grabbed the bag of books in one fist, Kayla’s hand in the other, and headed for the door. He knew damn well his boss had a point. He usually did. Kane respected Reid’s judgment and looked up to the older man, but he disagreed with his call on this one. Violently disagreed. Kayla might be their best option for ending this thing quick, but he didn’t like setting her up as a target. Just the thought made him ice-cold all over.

He picked up his stride. Striding through the precinct, he ignored the stares of the other cops on duty.

“Where are you dragging me?” She stumbled over her feet in an effort to keep up.

Kane slowed his pace. “Home.”

“So you can yell in private?”

There were many things he wanted to do with Kayla. Yelling wasn’t one of them. He stopped midstep and glanced over his shoulder.

She met his gaze with a determined one of her own. “You want an argument, I’m ready. Because you can’t talk me out of this.”

“I don’t want to fight with you, sweetheart.”

She narrowed her eyes in obvious confusion.

“Then what do you want?” Kayla asked.

The scene in the library replayed itself in his mind. She didn’t think he wanted her. He did. With a need so deep and intense it would have scared him, if he were capable of rational thought around her.

He brushed a soft strand of hair off her cheek. Her pupils dilated at the brief contact.

What did he want? The question hovered between them. Kane knew the answer, just as he knew she needed more. But he couldn’t control his need for her any more than he could dictate the outcome of this case. The most he could do was guide things in the direction he wanted and hope for the best.

He turned to Kayla and answered. “I want to finish what we started earlier.”



OF ALL THE arrogant, self-assured, conceited statements, Kane's was at the top of the list. Kayla chopped salad ingredients with more force than necessary, sending tomato juice and seeds flying onto the backsplash against the kitchen wall. *To finish what we started earlier.*

As if she'd allow it without question. Not that she didn't want to sleep with him again. She did. But that was her body talking, not her mind. A ribbon of warmth curled through her stomach each time he walked into the room. What other proof of desire did she need? However, more important things were at stake than raging hormones. Her life, for one. Her business, for another. And, finally, her future.

It came down to a balance of power, Kayla thought. He thought he could control the situation and her. First, by withholding sex. Then, by preventing her from helping to wrap up this mess with *Charmed!* And now, by informing her he intended to pick up where *they'd* left off earlier. More like where *he'd* left off.

Everything with Kane revolved around his choices and his whims. Well, no more. Someone had to show Kane McDermott he couldn't always be in control. He might not like her plan to uncover her uncle's illegal dealings, but his superior obviously had.

Kayla hadn't looked to deliberately thwart Kane, even if that had been the ultimate result. She wasn't trying to be deliberately contrary now, either. But he was about to find out seducing her wasn't as easy as it had been before.

She still wanted to reach him on a deeper level, but she'd been wrong to think sex was the means. He'd ended up taking control of the situation by giving without letting her do the same. The detective was about to discover she had a mind and some requirements of her own first.

She added the salad bowl and tongs to the table, set with two places. "Dinner's ready." She called loudly because he'd been dozing in front of the television set in the family room.

Neither one of them had gotten much sleep last night, and because they wanted to go through the books tonight, they'd agreed to rest for an hour before dinner. Kayla had been too worked up to rest.

Kane walked into the cozy kitchen she'd decorated with her sister. He'd pulled off his Henley earlier. His rumpled T-shirt looked comfortable, slept-in, and extremely sexy. He was a man who wore anything well, and her pulse skyrocketed just having him near. Not a good sign, considering she planned to keep a physical distance.

He paused by one of the empty chairs, taking in the kitchen cluttered with pots, pans, and cooking ingredients. "I thought we were bringing in."

"And I told you I prefer home-cooked to takeout. Have a seat."

He eased himself into the cushioned chair. "You didn't need to cook for me."

She'd wanted to. As much to vent her frustration over his take-charge attitude, as to get back some semblance of

normalcy in her home. She'd also wanted to give Kane a taste of real life, two people sharing a meal and talking over dinner. Since he bolted at the first sign of intimacy, she doubted he'd ever had the experience before.

"I hope you like sirloin." She placed their plates on the table.

He leaned forward in his seat. "This smells great. The last time I had a home-cooked meal was at the captain's house last Christmas."

She could believe that. The man was the ultimate loner. He'd mentioned his mother's suicide but had omitted many details about his father. Kayla didn't think now was the time to ask, but with the right opening, she would.

"I admit I don't have the time to cook all that often, but every once in a while my stomach rebels against takeout. Then I roll up my sleeves and dig in." She cut into her rare steak, and juice oozed onto the plate.

She glanced at him, catching him eyeing her plate in barely hidden disgust. "I made yours well-done." At his raised eyebrows, she grinned. "Educated guess. I couldn't imagine you eating anything that still looked alive."

"Good call." He finished his first taste. "And good steak. So why all the fast food? I'd have thought your sister, the cooking expert, handled kitchen duty."

"When she's around, but her school hours and jobs are pretty irregular, so I'm often on my own. Cooking's not my thing. It's hers."

Kane kicked back in his chair, studying her over steepled fingers. “You’re very different people, that much I realized immediately.”

His lazy gaze zeroed in on hers, causing her body temperature to spiral. The tight top that had felt liberating when she’d chosen it suddenly felt confining. The heat pumping inside her couldn’t be denied or ignored. She wet her dry mouth with a sip of water before attempting to speak. “Cat and I don’t share the same passions, but...”

She didn’t get any further. His eyes darkened and the word *passion* hung heavy in the air between them. Considering she’d seen him in the throes of that particular emotion, Kayla couldn’t mistake the desire reflected in his gaze. Nor did she want to.

She took a bite of her meal but didn’t taste a thing.

He did the same. “Incredible,” he said in a husky voice. He gestured to the food on his plate, but his hooded gaze never wandered from her face.

She felt a burning flush rise to her cheeks. “I thought you were a steak and potatoes kind of guy, so I made...steak and potatoes.” She was rambling because his intense stare awakened her desires for so much more than food. Desires she’d promised herself to control until the time was right.

“You seem to know me pretty well,” he said.

Superficial information, Kayla thought, and it wasn’t enough. She wanted to know more. She shrugged. “Instinct. Something you cops must believe in.”

“It’s kept me alive more than once.”

She smiled. “And now mine is keeping you fed.” She pointed to the meal with her fork. “It’s not gourmet, but it’s decent food.” The time had come to push some barriers. “Mama couldn’t do more than boil a pot of water, but somehow, we did okay. Catherine’s been the cook in the house...ever since the restaurant owner gave her that job to work off the unpaid bill.” She glanced at Kane. “So who did the cooking in your house?”

He speared another piece of meat. “I made sure we didn’t starve; my uncle made sure we weren’t thirsty.”

She blinked, not yet comprehending.

“Alcohol, sweetheart. The man guzzled the stuff whenever he got the chance.” His face was a blank, uncaring mask.

Kayla suspected he wasn’t even aware of the change. He’d had too many years of practice, she thought sadly. “What about your father?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Wouldn’t know. He took a hike when I was five. Just like your old man.”

She nodded. Though she hadn’t known much about Kane’s family history, she’d always sensed he’d grown up on his own. Sensed he, too, knew what it was like to be alone. But she hadn’t realized how very much they had in common.

At least she’d had her aunt and her sister to give her a sense of family, of belonging. He’d had no one. “It wasn’t always easy,” she said. “But we got by.”

“Same here.” Having cleaned his plate when she wasn’t looking, he leaned back in his seat. “Your sister might be the chef in the family, but you’re pretty good yourself.”

Though she appreciated the compliment, she recognized the change of subject for what it was. “Thank you.”

“No sweat.” He rose and began stacking the dishes.

She shook her head. “I’ve got it.”

“No. You take it easy while I finish up in here. We’ve got a long night ahead of us.”

“The books,” she said softly.

His expression darkened. “Yeah, the books.” He turned away.

She followed him to the sink, dishes in hand. His shirt strained against the powerful muscles in his back. They’d once rippled beneath her fingertips. She exhaled a sigh. If by a long night, he meant one fraught with sexual tension, she agreed.

His abrupt turn caught her unaware. Suddenly, she wasn’t faced with the man’s back but his face. His eyes, a turbulent wash of emotions, none of which she could decipher, settled on hers. Razor stubble darkened his cheeks, matching his current mood.

Her fingertips curled around the dish in her hand.

“I want to get one thing straight.” He eased the ceramic plate out of her grip and placed it in the sink behind him.

Nothing stood between herself and Kane, no barrier existed between his magnetic pull and her tempted body.

Without the small dish in her hand, she felt exposed...naked.
“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m here because I have a job to do.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” she muttered.

“But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be here.”

Kayla forced a smile. “You want me. I think we’ve covered this territory before.”

“Yeah, I do. But my job means keeping you safe and, despite what I said earlier, that means keeping my distance.”

“I didn’t know one thing had anything to do with the other.” Just twenty minutes ago, Kayla had listed every reason in her mind why she wouldn’t sleep with Kane again. Hearing him agree with her, however, hadn’t factored into her plan and hurt more than she would have imagined. Now she found herself wanting to argue against her own logic.

This battle of wills they had going was beginning to wear on her. Coupled with the constant sexual pull, the result was a roller-coaster ride of emotions. She wanted the battle to end, but only Kane’s capitulation on all levels could do that. He had to trust in her—he had to trust in himself.

Funny, she thought. For years, she’d lacked similar faith in herself. But a few days with Kane, and she’d begun to regain the inner strength and belief she’d been lacking. He did that for her. And regardless of the outcome of *them*, she could never regret the time they’d shared.

But that didn’t mean she was about to relinquish control.

“One thing has *everything* to do with the other,” he said.

Kayla froze in place. She sensed the import of his statement, understood this was as close a view inside Kane’s mind as she was likely to get. So she listened.

“There’s something in life called an edge...at least there is in my life. Without it, I’m no good as a cop and even worse as a man. Every time I’ve let my guard down in any way, things go wrong.”

The guilt thing again. She shook her head. “You aren’t responsible for what’s happened to me.”

“That’s not what you said earlier.”

“You know that wasn’t what I meant. I wasn’t blaming you.”

“Then maybe you should. Maybe both of you should,” he muttered.

“Who, Kane?” she asked quietly.

He shut his eyes before speaking. Deep grooves formed at the corners, testament to how difficult this upcoming admission would be. “I always came straight home from school. My mother was fragile, and she relied on me walking in the door at the same time every day. Even before my dad took off, routine was important to her. She got up, washed her hands, ate breakfast, washed her hands, watched TV, washed her hands, I came home, she...”

“Washed her hands,” Kayla finished for him.

He met her gaze.

“She sounds obsessive compulsive.”

He shrugged. “I guess she was, but I didn’t know the clinical term back then. She had good days and bad days, up days and down days.” He drew a deep breath. “If I came home from school when I was supposed to, she took her medication on time. And the one day I didn’t...”

She walked in front of a moving bus. Kane didn’t have to speak for Kayla to hear. His body shook in reaction to his unspoken words. She reached out and took his hand, silently offering comfort.

The man shouldered more responsibility than was necessary, more guilt than she’d ever imagined. “You said she had good days and bad days, Kane. Isn’t it possible she didn’t kill herself but got confused, or wasn’t looking? Did she leave a note?”

He shook his head. “Does it really matter? If I’d been home, it wouldn’t have happened.” His warm hand curled around hers. “And if I’d been thinking about my job and not preoccupied with my feelings for you, you wouldn’t have been attacked.”

Kayla tried to sort through his words, to hear past his misplaced guilt. He hadn’t let go of the boy who felt responsible for his only parent. He couldn’t accept it wasn’t an eleven-year-old’s job to be the adult of the household. While growing up, she and Catherine had borne too many adult responsibilities of their own and felt an out-of-proportion responsibility for each other. Kayla could relate to Kane’s life.

The emotional barriers, the distance, and the all-consuming need to control things around him—they all made a strange sort of sense to her now. She wasn't sure she could ever undo the scars embedded in his past, no matter how much she wanted to.

In the library, he'd told her he was doing all he could do. That had to be enough. When the case was over, if he wanted to stay, she'd welcome him with open arms. If he wanted to walk away, she'd let him go.

He deserved to know he had that kind of freedom.

Chapter Nine

HER TOES WERE painted pink. Ridiculous he would notice considering she sat deciphering books that put her life in danger. With all quiet for the moment, Kane leaned back in his seat, enjoying the view.

She chewed on the eraser head of a pencil, her shimmering lips pursed in thought. Maybe he could take just a quick taste. He shook his head, knowing it wouldn't be enough to lessen the constant ache of arousal, nor would it ease the pressure in his chest that had been present since their earlier conversation.

When was the last time he'd thought of his mother, let alone discussed his past aloud? It had been a long time, and he'd never planned to do it again. But if soul-baring had given Kayla an explanation for his reluctance to take things further, dredging up the pain had been worthwhile. She'd spent too many years believing herself unworthy of more than an admiring glance or a groping hand. Better she understand *he* had the problem, not her.

Better he walked away from her knowing he'd given something in return.

"Sullivan, Mark." Her voice brought him back to the present.

"Another big player," Kane said. "He owns real estate all over the city." They'd been at the books over two hours. Rather, she'd been at them.

He'd been watching. The shifting of her legs, drawing his attention to the warm place in between. The animation then the scowl of frustration crossing her face, resulting in a pout of her lips that made him desire more than a simple kiss. All in the name of the case, he reminded himself more than once, trying to push aside the things she made him feel.

The first book contained a list of female names that neither he nor Kayla recognized. The women, Kane assumed, who worked for *Charmed!*'s *side* business. The last few books produced a list of male names as impressive as it was extensive. Where before they only had an informant's tip, they now had probable clients and their call girls. Thanks to Kayla's intelligence and persistence.

As much as he'd fought against letting her handle things, he had to admire the results. He sure as hell admired the woman.

Kane was certain these highly placed, mostly married, men would talk. The more puzzle questions she answered, the longer the list of names had become. They covered all upper-crust walks of life. And none of these men would want the scandal sure to be caused if their private lives were made public.

"I need a break." She stretched her legs out in front of her. Bare feet peeked from beneath narrowed jeans, and she wiggled her toes in a long stretch.

"Put it away for the night. You've still got the end of a concussion and need rest." Something he wouldn't be getting

much of tonight. After spending the evening watching her work, that much he knew for sure.

“Don’t I know it. Besides, except for one last run-through, I think I’m nearly finished.” Her eyelids fluttered closed, shades of exhaustion evident. “But I have to finish tonight.” She grabbed for the first book in their pile, the one that began the list of names, and fanned through. “We have a growing list, but we’re no closer to...Kane?” Her voice rose in excitement.

He sat forward in his seat. “What is it?”

“Major change here. I don’t know why I didn’t notice it before. Look. All the earlier books were done in pencil, right?”

He nodded. Not that he’d have noticed if she hadn’t pointed her family’s quirk out earlier. Experts at crosswords did them in pen with no fear of mistakes.

“But here—there’s a mix of pencil and pen.” She studied the book for a second and grabbed another, glancing through it. “This one, too. Look.”

He was beside her in an instant.

“Here. Black ink instead of pencil. I don’t know why I didn’t notice it first time around.”

“I missed the change, too.” He skimmed the pages of the remaining books. “Same with these.”

“This is it. It’s what I was looking for. It’s my aunt’s clue.”

“What?”

“It was her way of letting us know she wasn’t doing this willingly, Kane. I’d bet my life on it.”

He closed his eyes at the thought. He was getting damn tired of her life being on the line. She didn't need to remind him. "Okay, let's say you're right."

"I *know* I'm right. When the guy grabbed me the other day, he mentioned money, and when he called, he mentioned the books. *These books.*" She drew a deep breath. "Not only do they have the names, which is incriminating enough, but maybe he knew Aunt Charlene was dropping clues."

"Possibly," Kane muttered.

"So tell me why we can't find a trace of the money," she said with frustration.

"There're plenty of places to hide cash without an accountant knowing," he said. "Offshore accounts, for one. Without a number, they're untraceable."

"But this guy seems to believe I know where the money is. Why?"

He shrugged. "Impossible to know what he's thinking. But whoever is involved wants their take. Any clue in those books where the money could be hidden?"

She shook her head. "Just the names. No phone numbers, either, since these are all letter puzzles."

He shrugged. "The money is something we might never find. Unless things unravel well at the end. My guess is the men in those books contacted someone at *Charmed!*, not vice versa. Too risky the other way. Your uncle probably took the calls."

“My uncle?” A grin edged the corners of her luscious mouth. “That means you believe me—Aunt Charlene was being used or threatened.”

“Like I said, anything is possible, sweetheart. But the lists are extensive. At the very least, she knew what was going on.” He hated like hell to remind her, but he didn’t want her hurt more in the end because she hadn’t considered the possibility.

She folded her arms across her chest. “That doesn’t mean she was a willing participant. I think she had no choice.”

Kane didn’t know what to believe other than the fact that Kayla trusted in her aunt. Hell, he didn’t blame her. If he’d had even one person to rely on in his life, he wouldn’t want to give up hope, either.

He glanced at Kayla. He wanted to believe in *her*. But his job required proof. They didn’t know what the change from pencil to pen meant. Maybe they never would.

But she wasn’t ready to count the older woman out. Kane groaned, wishing for her benefit she wasn’t so naive. And yet that was what he loved about her...

Kane coughed.

“Are you okay?”

He forced a nod and mentally changed topics. “Whoever these clients contacted, they probably paid cash; your uncle supplied the women, took his share, and cut his partner in on the rest.”

“The man we want.”

“Or woman,” Kane reminded her. “Remember the Mayflower Madam from years ago? Similar situation.”

“Our guy also wants these books.” She lifted one in her hand.

“Your uncle’s leverage,” Kane said. “With these in his possession, he was guaranteed his take.”

She glanced at her watch. “It’s been hours since the last call.”

“It’s a waiting game. The more time that goes by, the more nervous you’ll get. They hope.”

“Well, they’re right. I’m more than nervous. Just the thought of what could have happened terrifies me.”

“You’ve realized how dangerous it would be to get even more involved.” Fear released its hold. He exhaled a rush of air, the first easy breath since she’d announced her plans in the captain’s office hours earlier. “Don’t worry. Reid won’t mind,” he went on. “We can work around it, use a decoy. Just remember, when he calls, keep him talking. Maybe we can trace it. Agree to a drop, not a face-to-face meeting and—”

“I haven’t changed my mind.” She interrupted his instructions in a soft but determined voice.

“But you just said...”

“I admitted I’m afraid. I’m human. So sue me. But I haven’t changed my mind.”

“If you’re shaky, it’ll show. Things could get messy. Go with your gut.”

“I am, and my gut tells me I have to do this.”

“Dammit, *why?*” He slammed his hand against the end table beside his chair until it rocked on unsteady legs. He’d roared.

She didn’t flinch. Not a sign he was even close to convincing her to opt out.

“Look.” He braced his hands on his thighs and leaned forward in his seat. “There are experienced people to do this for you. No risk. Why not take advantage?”

She ran a hand through her hair. The soft strands fell back around her face, creating a vulnerability he knew was part real, part illusion. This woman was tougher than the softness on the outside revealed. It was just a part of why he was drawn to her.

“It’s my life that’s been turned upside down, and *I* want to be the one to get it back.” She met his gaze. “Like you, I’ve been taking care of myself longer than I can remember. It’s not in me to give up the job to someone else, even when it gets tough.”

“Dangerous,” he countered.

“Whatever.”

“You’d be relinquishing the job to professionals. There’s a difference.”

“Not to me. I gave up a decent job, with a decent salary and dreams of finishing school to run this *family* business. Because, despite it all, I love my family. Now I find out it might be a front for an escort service. Am I the only one who

doesn't miss the irony here? I have to see this through to the end. And I have to clear my aunt's name."

In her voice, Kane heard the same determination he felt on every case. In her eyes, he saw the familiar need to accomplish a goal. He respected it enough to want to know more. "Just what *irony* are you talking about?" he asked quietly.

She rose from the couch and crossed the room until she stood beside him. Her scent worked against his restraint, tantalizing his senses, seducing his soul.

"It's proof," she whispered. Meeting his gaze, she lifted her hand, then let it drift downward, boldly outlining the rounded swell of her breast and the generous curve of her hips. Her nipples pressed taut and rigid beneath the cream-colored T-shirt she'd changed into before dinner.

His mouth grew dry, his palms damp. Wanting Kayla wasn't new. It was as much a part of him as breathing. But right now, it was damned inappropriate. His brain registered the fact his pulsing body seemed determined to ignore.

With great difficulty, and even breathing, willpower won out. "Proof of what?" he asked.

"This." Her hand traced her curves once more. "This is an illusion."

"A beautiful one." One that tormented him on a minute by minute basis.

Thinking back to their first meeting gave him a clue as to what she meant now. He recalled her inability to accept a compliment and her immediate withdrawal whenever he stared

too long, or got too close. He'd gotten past those barriers, but not without effort.

He glanced at the body made for sin. "But it's not what counts," he said.

"You're the first person to recognize that." Appreciation lit her gaze and a warm smile lifted her lips. The knowledge that he could touch her on such a fundamental level pleased him.

"You're the first person to see beyond what I look like. Kids at school lied about sleeping with me and men I've dated thought I'd be easy."

He wanted to kill anyone who'd hurt her.

"It's one thing for me to run a charm school. Another for someone like me to take over what turns out to be an escort service or worse. I mean, look at me. The girl from the wrong side of the tracks, the girl they couldn't vote most likely to do anything, because they believed she already had. Of course, she and her family are behind a prostitution ring," she said with a brittle laugh.

Kane would have liked to go back in time. To beat the living daylights out of anyone who had even looked at her sideways. And if they had the nerve to put a finger on her body, or let her name pass through their lips...then he'd like to...

She reached upward. Her fingertips traced what had to be a scowl creasing his forehead, then she smiled. "Don't look so fierce." Her voice was lighter now. "I grew up hearing it. Words can't hurt me anymore."

Her steady green gaze zeroed in on his. She pinned him in place with a searing look. “But lack of faith in me, in my abilities, can. *You can.*”

He didn’t need an interpreter to understand. He’d just been suckered by the intelligent woman beneath the well-rounded curves. He’d been taken in by the best.

Kane shook his head. He had to admit, he was impressed. He’d never run into someone who could hold their own with him, let alone best him without much effort. He hated and respected her involvement with the case, all at the same time.

Should he continue to fight her determination by opposing her plan, he’d be no better than the bastards who came before him. Men who’d looked at the body and assumed she was easy.

Kane knew better. She challenged him. She intrigued him. And though she’d not only enticed him but seduced him on many levels, Kayla Luck was far from easy.

Caught in a trap of his own making, he had no choice but to support her, back her, and make damn sure he did his job.

No mistakes. No distractions allowed.



HER SHOWER FINISHED, Kayla pattered around the bedroom. The sun had set and only the small light of a lamp illuminated the room. She fluffed her pillows, then sat down on the edge of the mattress. Alone.

Just outside the closed door, she heard Kane prowling around the kitchen. Though she lived with her sister and was

used to the sounds of another person in the house, Kane's presence lent a different feel. Anticipatory. Intimate.

She glanced at her clothing choices for tonight laid out on the bed. On the one hand, the washed football jersey Kane had picked out for her the other day. On the other, a frilly negligee stolen from Catherine's drawer.

Choices. How many times since she'd met Kane had fundamental decisions come down to two drastically different choices? To seduce or not to seduce. To...

The jarring ring of the doorbell startled her. She clipped her damp hair off her forehead, yanked on the lapels of her robe, and started for the door.

She didn't get far before Catherine's voice sounded loud inside the house. "No lectures, Detective. I have a right to clean clothes."

"Ever hear of a washing machine?" Kane asked.

"I'll be out of your hair in less than five minutes." Footsteps sounded in the hall and drew closer. "Make it ten. I want a visit with the prisoner."

Kayla laughed aloud. A talk with her outspoken sister was exactly what she needed, too. Enforced confinement with Kane was getting to her, making her lose perspective. She only hoped a dialogue with her sister didn't complicate things even more.

She opened the door at the same time Catherine pushed from the other side. Her sister stumbled in. "Well." She paused in the doorway. "At least he doesn't keep you locked in."

The sarcasm was for Kane's benefit, Kayla knew. Catherine had already given Kane the Luck seal of approval. Her sister just didn't want the man to get overconfident and cocky. No chance of that, Kayla thought. Cat didn't realize Mr. McDermott didn't want or need to be a part of their little family.

"He couldn't keep me locked in even if he wanted to." She slid the bobby pin out of her hair. "Contingency." Kayla grinned.

"See?" Catherine tilted her head and glanced over her shoulder. "I taught her well, McDermott. If you want her, you'll have to work for it."

Kayla grabbed her sister's wrist and yanked her inside, slamming the door before Kane could reply. "Are you insane?"

"Just keeping him on his toes," Catherine muttered. "Something you should be doing. I come here figuring I'm going to interrupt some hot and heavy sex, and instead I find you in your bedroom, dressed in a ratty robe, and him on the other side of the house, slamming cabinets and muttering to himself." She flopped down on the bed and laid her hand on the mattress.

Kayla cringed as her sister's fingers curled around the silk-and-lace garment she'd borrowed. "Hmm. Now things get interesting. I guess I jumped to conclusions. You don't need my advice after all."

"Wrong," Kayla said. "Get up."

Catherine frowned. “Why? I’m comfortable.”

“Get up.”

She rose and glanced down, then picked up the large shirt she’d sat on seconds before. Her eyes opened wide and she groaned. “Honey, you’ve owned this rag since we were teenagers. It’s fine for hanging around with your sister, but won’t do shit when it comes to seducing a man.”

A vision flooded Kayla’s mind...of wearing that same shirt when Kane kissed her, moved over her, then came as close to burying himself inside her as possible considering the physical barrier their clothing provided. Then came another vision. That of Kane easing himself off her when he remembered she’d been injured and wasn’t ready, of him holding her throughout the night in comfort. This was a man who could make her both writhe in pleasure and relax in contentment. A potent combination.

“Earth to Kayla.” Catherine waved a hand in front of her eyes. “I don’t know where you were, but it’s obvious you’ve made the right choice.” She picked up the black lace garment, dangling it from her fingertips.

Catherine’s style, Kayla thought. Not hers. A smile formed on her lips. She felt it. She welcomed it. Things between herself and Kane were sensual, hot...and honest. She didn’t need sexy clothes to attract his attention. If she’d learned nothing else over the past few days, she’d learned to accept herself—her heart, her mind, and her body.

She had Kane to thank for opening her eyes, for empowering her in ways she’d never been before. If she

wanted to, she was perfectly capable of enticing him on her own—without the teddy. *If she wanted to.*

The issue in question wasn't what she should wear to bed...but whether or not she ought to invite Kane to join her. By virtue of his silence, he'd conceded his end of the power struggle where the case was concerned. He would support her decision to participate in wrapping up the case on *Charmed!* Agreed against his better judgment because he believed in her. But he didn't like it and was concerned about protecting her, about keeping the edge that made him effective as a cop.

She loved him too much to jeopardize his career...their future. *She loved him.* Heaven help her.

Despite all the planning and effort to remain in control where Kane was concerned, she'd failed miserably. She'd fallen in love with the loner detective, which meant she was without a safety net now.

Her entire future hinged on Kane's past. And if things didn't go well when she met with the man who'd attacked her, Kane would hold himself responsible, just as he did with his mother. In that case, Kayla had no doubt he'd walk away without looking back.

She didn't delude herself. She might lose him either way. But she believed in odds, and she intended to stack the deck in her favor. To regain control in whatever way she could. She grabbed the lingerie from her sister.

Catherine smiled wide. "Whew. I feel better." She glanced at her watch. "Five minutes are up. The warden's going to come knocking any minute." Leaning over, she gave Kayla a

quick hug. “I’ll just grab a change of clothes and get out of your way.”

“Take care of yourself. This mess isn’t over yet.”

“I will. You know that. And you do the same.” She walked to the door, pausing to glance over her shoulder. “Let the seduction begin,” she said with a grin.

“Bye,” Kayla muttered.

The door shut behind her sister and Kayla glanced at the garment in her hand, fingering the luxurious silk before burying it in the back of her dresser drawer.

She didn’t need clothes to seduce the man, but she intended to do everything in her power to make him realize what he’d be giving up should he decide to walk away.



KANE COULDN’T HANG out in the kitchen for the rest of the night. Besides, it wasn’t doing him any good. He had sat through Kayla’s shower. Listened to the pulsing, pounding rhythm of the water while his body throbbed to the same beat.

He’d envisioned the stream of water sluicing over her curves, the droplets clinging to her skin. He braced his hands on the counter and exhaled a groan.

“Something wrong?”

His insides twisted even more at the sound of her husky voice. He turned. Kane didn’t know what he expected. A sexy siren, a vixen to match the arousing voice? He could have handled her, and in an absurd way, she would have been

preferable to the down-to-earth woman facing him now. The old football jersey wasn't sexy, but it had its own share of memories. The faded sweats were far from revealing, but the effect on him was the same.

She looked warm and welcoming.

He *felt* warm and welcomed. Two sensations he'd never experienced before, at least not in conjunction with a woman. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I live here," she said wryly. "And I was cold after my shower. I figured something hot to drink would take care of that."

She joined him by the counter. The lemony scent of her shampoo clung to her hair, bringing temptation to life. "Coffee?" he asked.

She shook her head. Damp strands of blond hair clung to her cheek. God, he wanted her. "Tea?" he managed to say.

Her smile caused a tightening in his gut.

"Not what I had in mind," she said.

"What then?"

Without answering, she reached for the handle on the cabinet behind him. Her arm brushed his shoulder. The heat struck hard and hot, where it counted most. Her touch was electric. He inhaled and counted to five until a semblance of control returned.

"Hot chocolate always seems to do the trick...when I'm cold." Her voice had dropped an octave. The husky sound

turned the knot in his stomach even tighter.

She met his gaze. In her eyes he saw a deadly combination of uncertainty and longing. Kane had been around long enough to know when he was being set up, that she was grasping to regain control. But Kayla's seduction, or attempted seduction, wasn't like any other. It was an endearing mixture of innocence and sensuality. One he couldn't withstand no matter how much he needed to.

He'd already drawn the line and Kayla knew it. He was certain she'd respect his decision to keep his distance, if only because he'd agreed to her participating with Reid on closing the case. But she was playing a dangerous game with him now, tempting him, hoping he'd give in...wondering how far he'd let her go before backing off.

He wasn't sure himself. Around Kayla, his self-control was minimal. His only choice was to turn the tables and hope she chose to retreat first, instead of advance.

He stepped toward the refrigerator to her left. "Would you like some whipped cream on top? I seem to remember you enjoy it." Reaching for the handle, he brushed his forearm across her breasts. The barrier of her clothing might as well have been nonexistent as the hardened peaks of her nipples rasped across his bare skin.

She exhaled a slow moan. He gritted his teeth against the arousing sound and the pleasurable feel of her breasts against his arm. His jeans, already too snug, were now damned uncomfortable. He turned toward her, trapping her between him and the counter. Her body heat called to his, her scent

beckoned to him. Kane wondered when he'd begun to enjoy torturing himself without mercy.

He glanced down. She gripped the sides of the instant cocoa mix, denting the box with her grip. At least she was affected, too.

He leaned forward. "Whipped cream, Kayla?" Her eyes darkened, remembrance and desire flickering in the depths.

"I..." She swallowed hard. "I don't keep any around. It's fattening, and I have to draw the line somewhere, I mean there's only so much indulgence a person can take and..."

"Tell me about it," he muttered. Kane reached out and eased the box from her hands. Her breathing now came in shallow, uneven gasps. He wasn't doing too well himself, but damned if he'd let desire rule his head.

"Relax, sweetheart." He touched her reddened cheek with his palm. She tipped her head into the cradle of his hand. Such an innocent gesture. One that nearly sent him spiraling.

He inhaled hard and fast. "You look flushed. Is your head okay? Maybe your blood sugar dropped. Have a seat and I'll make you something to drink." He wrapped an arm around her waist and led her to the nearest chair. It had been too long since she'd taken any kind of break.

Having changed the subject, he exhaled. His breathing came easier, but not much, considering her soft curves now molded against him...and he was strung tighter than ever.

She stopped short of sitting down. "I'm not thirsty anymore. I think I'll just go to bed, instead." He released his

next breath in a whoosh of air. She'd accepted his boundaries. He wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight, but at least he remained in control.

She stepped backward, tilting her head until she looked him in the eye. "Ready?"

"For?" he asked warily.

"Bed. Aren't you going to join me?"

He muttered a curse. Where this woman was concerned, control was a goddamn illusion.

"I'll take the couch." He crossed his arms and waited.

Kayla shot him an amused glance, aware that Kane was edgy and uncomfortable. And it was thanks to her...and the idea of sleeping with her. Amazing.

When in her life had she had the ability to put a man like Kane on the spot? When had she ever made any man feel awkward? Maybe it was an ability she'd always had but never had the courage to explore before. With Kane, she was secure enough. Comfortable enough. She liked that feeling.

Almost as much as she liked him. A smile formed on her lips. "Go ahead, sleep on the couch. But I should tell you, it's lumpy and uncomfortable. You won't get much sleep out there."

"What makes you think I'll get any sleep in there, with you?" He gestured toward the hallway and her bedroom.

"Because I'm tired, still injured, like you said." She slicked her hair behind her ear. "And besides, I don't recall

inviting you to do anything else besides sleep.”

His eyes darkened under lowered lids. “You invite a man into your bed, sweetheart, you better be prepared for anything.” Need echoed in his voice.

Her knees went weak and her insides turned to jelly. Another second and her mind would follow. Reaching out, Kayla grasped his hand, intertwining their fingers together. His skin felt rough and warm against her palm; his hand felt right in hers.

She’d grown up feeling as if she had to fight for everything that mattered, from her mother’s attention to accepting the adult she’d become. Even a business she’d legitimately inherited had turned into a struggle she might not win. Nothing had come easily, some things not at all.

But Kane, her love for this man, mattered more than anything else ever had. She’d fight for it, so that when the end came, she’d have no regrets. She tugged lightly on his hand.

“Don’t do this.” His voice held a ragged warning.

She refused to listen. “I’ve got used to sleeping in your arms, Kane. Is that so much to ask?”

Chapter Ten

THE CLOCK ON the nightstand read midnight. Kane glanced at the woman lying beside him. Her even breathing told him she was asleep. Damned if he could say the same. How could he when lying beside Kayla, taking in her scent, and sharing body heat had begun to feel familiar? To feel right?

Add to that the fact that she wanted him, too, and nothing was stopping him from waking her up by easing himself inside her. Nothing except his own damn sense of right and wrong. Control was no longer an issue. Kayla's feelings were.

As soon as this case ended, he was history. So why hurt her more than he already had? Rolling to the side, he levered himself to a sitting position. The bedsprings creaked beneath his weight as he stood. Kayla didn't move.

He walked to the window and rolled open the blinds. A full moon lit the night sky, and its glow streamed into the room.

"Kane?" The rustle of sheets followed the sound of her voice.

He turned. "I didn't mean to wake you." Or maybe he had. He'd begun to hate being alone with only his thoughts for company.

She turned back the covers on his side. "Come back to bed."

Did she know what she was asking? His body churned with need. If he climbed beside her, it wouldn't be for

sleeping.

She curled her legs beneath her. “I’ll tell you a bedtime story.” Humor tinged her voice as she patted the sheets with one hand.

How could he resist an offer like that? He eased himself next to her, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and she settled against his side. “What was your favorite?” he asked. “‘Sleeping Beauty?’ ‘Cinderella?’” He named fairy tales he’d only heard of. He sure as hell hadn’t been on the receiving end of those stories while growing up.

“‘The Ugly Duckling,’” she murmured.

He tangled his fingers in the long strands of her hair. “I should have known.”

She yawned. The vibration caused his body to come alive. “Why’s that?” she asked.

“Because, like that duckling, you turned into a beautiful swan.”

She shook her head.

“Yes.” He rolled onto his side so he could face her, then cupped her cheek in his hand. “You’re beautiful.”

“No, I’m...”

“Yes, you are. Now say, ‘Thank you, Kane.’”

Even in the muted light, he could see the blush stain her cheeks. “Thank you, Kane.”

He grinned. “Call that lesson number one on how to accept a compliment.”

“I didn’t know I needed lessons.”

She did. Desperately. She’d made progress since they’d met, but she wasn’t there yet. Maybe one day she’d stop fumbling over the subject of her looks or her body. But he wouldn’t be around to see it...which meant someone else would.

Was that what he was doing? Kane wondered. Priming her for the day when the right guy came along? That was a thought worth blocking out, and he knew just how to accomplish his goal.

Leaning over, he brushed a kiss over her lips. He wanted to tune out his thoughts and black out the future. He wanted a harsh, demanding kiss that wouldn’t let him think or feel. Unfortunately for him, Kayla wasn’t cooperating.

She was kissing him, but setting her own pace and speed. The control issue had returned and it was all hers. Light kisses on his mouth and delicate whispers of her tongue over his lips let her tease, play, and arouse. But worse, gave him time to think. About how much he wanted her, desired her, and how great his need for this woman always seemed to be.

Her hands splayed against his chest. The warmth of her fingertips penetrated his skin. Heat of a different kind pounded inside him, insistent, demanding release.

“Kane.” Her lips moved against his.

He traced the line of her jaw with his tongue, ending by tugging on her delicate earlobe with his teeth.

She moaned aloud and her fingertips curled into his chest.
“Kane, no.”

“No?”

“No.”

Kayla lay back against her pillow, out of breath and obviously out of her mind. What other explanation could there be for stopping him, when she wanted him inside her more than she wanted her next breath?

She could deal with not sleeping with him because she couldn't handle the regret he would feel afterward, once he'd given in to emotion and lost his focus once more.

He exhaled a groan and rolled over to lie beside her. His muscular leg straddled hers, and through the cotton briefs, his rock-hard arousal pressed hot and heavy against her thigh.

Her stomach muscles clenched with desire while the dampness between her legs begged her to reconsider. She couldn't. She had too much respect for him to change her mind.

“You said you wanted to keep your distance.” She used his own words as a deliberate barrier between them. She hadn't meant to play the role of a tease; rather, she was gambling for her future.

“Guess I changed my mind.”

“Your hormones did. Your mind, your heart...” She tapped lightly against his chest. “Those things haven't changed.”

He let out a harsh groan. “Can’t argue with reason,” he muttered.

“Guess not.”. Though she’d wanted him to do just that.

He stretched an arm around her and she curled into him. “It’s okay, Kane.”

“What is?”

“I stopped before you did something *you* would regret, but you have to know...it’s not something *I* would regret.”

“Are you saying you changed your mind?” His hands tangled in her hair. It was a habit of his, she realized, one she enjoyed. The erotic tugging against her scalp turned her on.

No doubt that’s what he intended. “No, I haven’t changed my mind. I’m still respecting your original decision. But I want you to know something else.” She paused, in the space of a heartbeat. “I don’t expect anything from you. When this is over, you can walk away without looking back. I won’t stop you.”

Her cell phone chime shattered the ensuing silence and spared him having to answer. She glanced from the digital clock she still kept around to the phone laying face down, as usual. “No one I know would call at this hour.” The persistent sound continued.

He clenched his jaw. “Answer it.”

She picked up the cell. “Hello?”

“I’m through playing games, lady.”

Her hand went to the bruises on her neck. “Is that what you were doing?”

Silence greeted her and she looked at Kane.

“Keep him talking,” he mouthed and edged closer.

“I...I have something you want,” she said into the phone.

“You ready to start up again?” the man asked, sounding relieved.

The question startled her. She hadn’t expected him to make that kind of suggestion. She avoided answering. “I’m ready to turn over whatever I have to...Who did you say you work for again?”

His gravelly laugh sent chills racing through her.

“Lady, I’m no dummy. My mother’s sick. She wants the crosswords your aunt used to do. The ones she bragged about. I’m sure they’ll keep a sick, old lady busy.”

Kayla swallowed hard. “I have them.”

“Tomorrow, noon. Ditch the boyfriend and be at The Silver Café,” he said and disconnected the call.

“Not enough time,” Kane muttered.

“I tried.”

“I know.” He eased the cell out of her hand. Her fingers ached and she realized she’d been gripping her phone way too hard. Just like the fear that gripped her heart. But she could handle this. She had to handle this.

“What else did he say?” Kane caught her shoulders with both hands.

His touch steadied her. She forced even breaths into her lungs and replayed the conversation in her mind. “He knows about the crosswords, that my aunt was responsible for those. And he wants to meet tomorrow, at...at...” Realization dawned. “He’s been following me.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He wants to meet at the restaurant you took me to. That’s not a coincidence. I’ve never been there before you. I didn’t even know the place existed. He said to ditch you and show up alone. How does he know about you? How long has this guy been watching me?” Her voice rose along with her hysteria.

“Kayla.” Kane shook her gently. “Hey. He’s just trying to rattle you.”

“Well, he’s done a good job.”

“Then back out. No one would blame you, and I sure as hell would welcome it.”

“You know I can’t.” She met his gaze.

“Then don’t let him win. Don’t let him make you think you aren’t safe.” He drew her into his arms. His warmth enveloped her; his strength supported her. “Because you are.”



KANE DIDN’T KNOW how long he held her. Only that at some point, they lay down on the bed until her breathing steadied and relaxed. The first time he tried to untangle their legs, she

resisted. He must have dozed off because the sun now shone through the window where moonlight had been.

He called Reid from the kitchen. His boss answered on the first ring. “Meeting’s on,” Kane told him. “Noon today.” Kane didn’t like it, but he had no choice.

He’d given up all leverage where Kayla was concerned. She’d cut him loose and he hadn’t argued. Even if the phone call hadn’t interrupted them last night, he wouldn’t have fought her. She’d given him his freedom, something he’d had anyway, but for some reason, she thought he needed her permission to walk away.

She’d been clear on that point. She didn’t want anything from him. Though it was exactly what he needed to rid himself of any unwanted guilt, the thought rankled. *Why the hell didn’t she want more?* And why the hell did he care?

“Hey, McDermott. You wake me up to breathe into the phone, or you want to discuss backup?” Reid’s voice brought him back to the present.

Focus. A little after noon today, he’d have that ability back and more time than he knew what to do with.

“Yeah, boss.” Kane gave details about Kayla’s phone conversation. “The meeting is at the same place the department sprung for dinner at the other night. It’s crowded at lunchtime, so I’d just have some well-dressed undercover cops drop in for a meal and make sure I’m in the booth behind them.”

“No deal. If he followed her the night you two did the town, he’ll spot you in a second.”

The captain was right, but damned if he could just send Kayla off on her own. “Either I’m there, or the meeting’s off.”

Reid should have come down hard on him for asserting authority. He didn’t. His harsh laugh echoed in his ear. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were after my job, McDermott.”

“I’d rather rot than sit behind a desk,” Kane muttered.

Reid laughed again. “Okay, just keep out of sight. Make sure she hands over the books and opts out of the partnership. He takes them; we move in. That’s it.”

“I’ll coach her. She won’t even breathe at the wrong time.”

“Yeah, I trust you to be on top of things. Are you ready to end this?” Reid asked.

Kane knew the older man meant more than the case. He’d switched into paternal mode. Reid didn’t do it often, but Kane appreciated the attempt. Too bad he didn’t have an answer that would satisfy either one of them right now.



KAYLA FISHED THROUGH her closet for the third time. Silk blouses, linen slacks, and sensible pumps. Had she really expected the contents to change just because she had? Even during the days she’d worked nine-to-five as an accountant, wearing corporate suits and stuffy blouses, she hadn’t altered her wardrobe on weekends or days off. She was lucky she

owned even one pair of jeans, considering she'd had no desire to wear them.

Until Kane.

There was no way she wanted to walk out of this house looking like the woman he'd met three days earlier. Not when she felt so different inside. Raiding Catherine's closet was the only solution. A few trips to her sister's room and she'd made her decision. She pulled a pair of black thigh high boots over tight leggings, then eased another of Cat's V-necked tops, this one a light pink, over her head. Cleavage she was used to hiding was visible. Enough to be presentable not classless.

Glancing in the mirror, she ran her fingers through her hair, when she caught sight of Kane standing guard in the doorway.

"Ready for action. How do I look?" She turned toward him.

His scowl spoke for him. "This isn't a date. What the hell do you think you're doing, dressing like that?"

She recognized his roar. She'd gotten to him on some level that made him uncomfortable. Mission accomplished, she thought, and smiled. "I'll take that as a compliment. So you like it?" She smoothed the fitted top over her hips.

"Damn right I like it. You look great." His smoky gaze lit on hers.

Her grin widened. "Thank you, Kane," she said with a deliberate lilt to her voice.

The tension eased and he smiled back. "So the files were right. You are a quick learner."

“I’m the best.”

“I know that,” he muttered. “Now take it off.”

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t want to arouse the guy; you want him in and out as fast as possible. You want to convince him you want out of the business, not that you’re looking to be hooked up with his next client.”

“It’s an outfit most women wear every day.”

“You’re not most women,” he muttered. “Now do this one thing for me. You don’t want *that* kind of reaction from the guy.”

“I didn’t think.” Not about anyone’s reaction to her outfit but Kane’s, and she’d already gotten what she wanted.

“That’s the point. You’re taking this whole meeting too damn lightly.”

“If you’re talking about the clothes, I’ll change.” Kayla wasn’t one to argue with reason, no matter how bossy the command sounded.

Besides, this was her golden opportunity. Her one chance to have Kane see he could be emotionally involved without harmful or, worse, fatal repercussions. Everything rode on this meeting turning out as planned. She would follow his advice, but she would also show him that she could stand on her own.

“But if you’re talking about attitude, you ought to take a lesson. Will obsessing over the meeting change the outcome? You prepped me and I’m ready. I’ll be mic’d, and I know

you'll be as close as possible. I'll be surrounded by protection."

"And you don't move from your seat. Either he wants the books or he doesn't. You got that?"

"Considering you told me at least ten times, how could I forget? Relax, Kane. Take a lesson from me." After her initial panic last night, she'd realized nothing would alter fate... whatever it held. Somehow, the knowledge eased her fear and helped her remain calm. "I can't control the future," she told him. "But I can enjoy *now*."

He threaded his fingers through hers. The comfort she found in his touch amazed her, as did the strength of her feelings. She'd only known him a short time, but it was enough.

"Is that what you're doing?" he asked. "Enjoying now?"

"What else?"

"Changing before my eyes." He tugged on her hand and she drew closer. Their bodies aligned until she felt his weight and heat pressed intimately against her. His arms wrapped around her waist, moving her into the V of his legs. His erection hardened and grew against her stomach. A harsh groan escaped his lips, telling her he was unbearably aroused.

At that moment, she knew she could have one last time with him.

His hips jerked forward, and she swallowed a moan. She licked her dry lips. "You tempt me, Kane."

“Only fair since you drive me out of my mind.” His lips lowered, capturing hers. This kiss wasn’t urgent and out of control; it wasn’t slow and determined with seduction as the result. His tongue delved and played inside her mouth, devouring, arousing...remembering for the future.

Kayla had no doubt. In Kane’s mind, this was goodbye.



SHE ORDERED A drink from the waiter, as planned. Kane breathed a sigh of relief. He’d heard her loud and clear through the mic she wore. Now he settled in to wait.

Five after twelve, and the lunch crowd had all taken their seats, fellow cops with big appetites and good instincts. He’d still rather be inside himself rather than listening from the manager’s office just outside the dining-room entrance.

“It’s time.” A male voice interrupted Kane’s train of thought.

“Actually past time. I’ve been waiting since twelve, like you said.” The edge in Kayla’s voice was unmistakable. *Relax, sweetheart.*

“Change of plans. I can’t stay long.”

“Too bad,” Kayla said. “I...I just ordered a drink, and I was hoping you’d join me.”

Perfect, Kane thought. Keep him talking and keep him in the restaurant.

“Not that you don’t tempt me, honey. You do. Hell, with a body like yours you’d tempt a monk, but I’m in a rush, so...

maybe some other time.”

“That might be possible if I wanted to continue the business—which I don’t.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Like I told you on the phone, my mother’s sick and I want some of your aunt’s crossword books to keep her busy.”

Damn. The guy suspected a trap. Kane hoped like hell Kayla stuck to the plan. “Give him what he wants,” he muttered.

“You know, my aunt was really into these books. I’d hate to just give them to someone who didn’t appreciate them the way she did. I’m sure you understand.”

Kane could practically see her batting those big, green eyes for effect...at the same guy who’d wrapped his arm around her neck without a second thought.

He exhaled a groan. Though she was doing a great job of attempting to exonerate her aunt, and things seemed to be going smoothly, this whole mess couldn’t be over soon enough to suit him.

“Your aunt liked to play games,” the man muttered. “And apparently it runs in the family. My mother’s not too sick to play them herself.”

“Well, good. Just tell me how involved my aunt was in those games, and you can take the books back to your sick mother...with my best wishes for a speedy recovery.”

“Not here. I’ve got a car waiting outside. You walk me to it, and I’ll tell you all about how much my mother and your

aunt had in common.”

Remember the plan, Kane thought. Hand him the books and sit tight. Given no choice, a smart middleman would take them and run. Kane had already promised Kayla they’d lean hard on this guy and anyone else he ratted out to discover the extent of her aunt’s involvement. She didn’t have to jeopardize her life for her aunt’s reputation.

“I’m sure you can make the time for one drink.” Her voice was practically a purr by now. Only Kane recognized the hint of desperation and fear within.

“Not a chance. Let’s go.”

“Hand him the books,” Kane muttered through clenched teeth. Instead, he heard the slide of a chair against the floor.

“Just let me grab my bag,” she murmured.

Kane slammed his hand hard against the wall, ignoring the immediate swelling caused by the impact against concrete. Sweat began a steady trickle down his back.

He wanted to run into the hall and tackle her to the ground to stop her. But then he’d blow the case for sure. There were strategically placed cops outside; she’d be fine.

She’d be fine. Memories welled up inside him fast and furious.

The guys had wanted to shoot hoops after school. Kane couldn’t because he had to get home to his mother. “One game, McDermott. Ten minutes. No big deal.” He’d never said yes before, but the guys were insistent. Ten minutes turned to

thirty, then an hour passed. Kane hit the streets at a dead run. She'd be fine, he'd told himself. She'd be fine.

“There’s the car. Now I’ll take the books.” The man’s voice snapped Kane out from the grip of old memories.

“Fine. But I’m done. I have nothing to do with this end of the business. I want to be left alone.”

That’s a girl. Too late for Kane’s peace of mind; she was out there with less coverage than before. But at least she was sticking to the rest of the rules he’d laid out while he was taping her mic in earlier.

Now if the guy would just attempt a clean break, and if Kane’s people could move in, they’d be all set. If, if, if... Dammit, why couldn’t she have stayed inside?

“That’s a dangerous proposition. Just ask your aunt...” The man’s laughter mixed with the hacking cough of a longtime smoker. “That’s right, you can’t and you want to know why? She never wanted to be involved and look what happened to her.”

“It wasn’t an accident.” The horror in Kayla’s voice caused Kane’s heart to twist into a tight knot.

Kane shook his head, feeling her pain like his own. *You were right all along about your aunt’s innocence, sweetheart.* And Kane should have trusted her gut instinct as much as he trusted his own. Because he l...

A car horn blared in the distance, and her attacker’s voice sounded next. “I didn’t say that, but if thinking it keeps you in line, I’m all for it. Now hand over the books.”

“You killed Aunt Charlene.” Shock tinged Kayla’s voice.

Dammit, hand over the books.

“The books, lady.”

“Ouch! Okay. You’re hurting me,! Here.”

A loud, masculine grunt followed. Kane recalled Kayla nearly doubling him over with the same books and couldn’t suppress a half-laugh, half-groan at her unmitigated gall.

Without warning, the sound of a lone gunshot rang out, shocking him as it echoed in his ears. Kane bolted for the door without looking back.

Chapter Eleven

“**Y**OU DON’T SHOOT when a civilian’s involved.” Kane’s shout reverberated through the air, stopping passersby on the street.

“You do when there’s a safe shot,” the rookie retorted.

“Didn’t you learn anything at the academy? There is no such thing, and I’ll make sure you have plenty of time to remember that while you’re walking the beat for the next month.”

Kayla cringed from her perch on the curb where she’d fallen. Some trigger-happy cop had decided to take out the suspect when he’d tried to drag her into the car along with him. She supposed she should be grateful, but from the anger in Kane’s voice, she knew they’d both be paying for the foreseeable future. If Kane even stuck around that long, now that they had the guy in custody.

The rookie had hit the man in the leg, and he’d dropped hard, his weight taking her down with him. Now he lay moaning in pain, surrounded by police.

“And you.” Kane rounded the circle of cops, his attention now fully focused on her.

The adrenaline rush from seeing him was much more potent than anything that had come before. His intense gaze settled on her face, and her heart rate kicked into high gear.

“I thought I told you to stay put. To make sure you didn’t leave the restaurant. But following orders isn’t in your

vocabulary, is it?” He loomed over her. Big, powerful, and sexy, despite his all-encompassing anger.

Her fingertips curled around the curb, and the rough concrete bit into her skin. “Not when I’m stranded on my own and forced to improvise. He said move; I moved. I didn’t think...”

His jaw clenched in a gesture she’d come to recognize, one that signaled the calm before the proverbial storm. “You’re damn right you didn’t think. You didn’t think he’d grab you, didn’t think he’d try to drag you into his car, didn’t think some rookie looking for a promotion would see his chance and fire.”

She’d put herself in danger while he was powerless to stop it...just like with his mother. Kayla realized the foundation of his anger way too late to prevent the flood of emotion she’d inadvertently unleashed. The yelling came from deep concern, and fear of reliving his painful past.

“I’m not hurt, Kane.”

“But you had to push him,” he continued as if he hadn’t heard. He probably hadn’t. “You had to know about your aunt. You couldn’t trust me to do my job...” His voice trailed off and he paused, shaking his head. “It’s not like I gave you any damn reason to.”

She trusted him, all right. With her life and with her heart. But he wouldn’t believe her any more than he’d want to hear the truth. Because Kane was only concerned with his job, not with emotions he hadn’t asked her to feel for him. This turn of events hadn’t helped. In fact, that rookie had probably shot her happy ending to hell and back.

Kane had wanted a neat wrap-up, no problems, no proof that he'd let his feelings sway his judgment in any way. Life had just thrown the unexpected in his path. He'd have to deal with that, Kayla thought. The man had emotions and it was past time he got in touch with them.

She quickly cataloged her body, and not finding any overt injuries, she levered herself to a standing position. Unexpected pain shot through her ankle when she put pressure on her foot. She forced what she hoped was an easy smile. "I'm fine."

His hand reached out to stroke her cheek. Spiraling dizziness assaulted her. Not from the shock of the past few minutes, but from his heated touch and the caring it implied.

"You just winced." His husky voice shook her composure. Could she dare hope he wouldn't be able to walk away?

"Did I? I didn't realize. That guy weighed a ton, and I took the brunt of his fall. Look, Captain Reid's here," she said, hoping to distract him so she could walk the kinks out of her ankle.

Kane placed his hand on the small of her back, waiting for her to precede him. She drew a deep breath and took her first step. Her ankle buckled beneath her.

His muttered curse coincided with the sudden weightless sensation of being swept off her feet.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting you the hell out of here."

She gripped his shoulders with both hands and held on tight. Hard muscles flexed beneath her fingertips, and an

accompanying rhythm began to hum inside her as well. She couldn't suppress a shiver of desire. "Put me down and let me walk on my own. This is humiliating." And arousing. And it felt way too good for something destined to end.

"McDermott." The older man walked toward them.

"Captain."

"Anything you need from her you've got recorded. She'll be down tomorrow to make a statement," Kane said.

Reid nodded. If Kayla wasn't mistaken, an amused smirk clung to the edge of his mouth.

Embarrassment flooded her. She could only imagine the shade of pink that probably washed over her cheeks. "I can walk," she muttered in Kane's ear.

"You heard the lady."

Kane let out a low growl. "She's got a choice. X-rays at the hospital or ice at home until I know if there's swelling."

Though she should be used to it, Kayla bristled at his take-charge attitude. Still, a tiny part of her reveled in the attention, probably because there wouldn't be much more in her future.

Her heart clenched in denial. "I'll take the ice at home." At the very least, their goodbye would be in private.



KAYLA'S FREEZER LOOKED about as empty as Kane's apartment. The place he called home. The place he'd be returning to tonight, alone. He slammed the door closed hard.

“Don’t take your anger out on the appliances. I can’t afford new ones,” Kayla yelled from the couch in the next room.

“I can’t find an ice pack,” he called back.

“That’s because, despite how many times I’ve been hurt this week alone, we’re not accident-prone around here. There are plastic bags in the top drawer. You can put some ice cubes in there.”

He popped freshly made cubes into the clear bag and joined her in the room she called the *family* room. Ridiculous word, he thought. It conjured images he wanted to run from. Visions of sitting beside Kayla in comfortable silence, of bodies entangled, and of confidences.

Leaving her wouldn’t be easy, but he had no choice. She deserved better than him and, Lord knew, he didn’t deserve her.

She’d propped her ankle on a double set of pillows. After checking out the swelling, he realized it wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d first thought. A bad twist or sprain at the very worst. Still, a little first aid couldn’t hurt, so he laid the ice on her elevated foot.

A shudder rippled through her.

“Cold?” he asked.

She nodded.

He could warm her. The thought hovered unspoken, but the need to act on it was clear. Selfish, but clear. One minute he was kneeling on the floor by the couch, the next he was

lying prone beside her—and not easily. The narrow cushions weren't made for two.

“It's cramped, but I like it,” she said.

He'd been around her long enough to recognize the sensual undertone. The unintentional but blatant desire in her voice touched something inside him, probably because he recognized the same longing in himself.

“I'm warmer now,” she murmured.

“I know.” Shared body heat had never felt so good. Her breath blew softly against his cheek, and the swell of her breast pressed against his arm.

Before he could enjoy the sensation, his weight began a slow descent off the sofa's edge. He caught himself before falling and jerked his hips back onto the couch.

Her husky laugh reverberated through his already tight body. “Your choice, Kane.”

He respected her for that. The days of power plays were over. He hadn't planned a return to this house, but then he hadn't counted on things happening the way they had. In the split second before he'd hit the street, he'd had a flash of Kayla lying sprawled on the pavement covered with blood. A scene he'd seen once before with a different end. She was alive, though, and offering herself to him.

A blatant invitation he could accept or decline. An invitation with no strings attached, because as she'd so boldly told him, she didn't expect anything in return. Selfish bastard that he was, he couldn't turn her down. He needed her too

much. One last battle lost before he waged his final campaign. He glanced toward the front door, knowing his last battle was one he could not let himself lose.

Before gravity could pull him back toward the floor, he shifted his weight so his legs straddled her hips. The weight of him pushed against the V of her legs with unmistakable pressure, and she moaned her pleasure. The sound twisted his insides into coiled knots only she could undo.

He reached for the buttons on the prim and proper shirt she'd changed into earlier at his urging. She'd already removed the mic on the way home. Keeping his eyes on the road had been damned near impossible, but he'd managed. Barely.

He worked at the buttons with shaking hands, reminiscent of his first attempt as a teenager in the backseat of an old beat-up thing his uncle had called a car. The only difference was this wasn't nerves causing the problem, but overwhelming desire that could no longer be restrained.

"The hell with this," he muttered. He grabbed the sides of her shirt in each hand and pulled.

Little pearl-like things popped and scattered in myriad directions. Kayla gasped. Kane looked down, and his breath caught in his throat. Her cleavage swelled above the lace border of her bra, while her nipples stood erect against the white material. He brushed each distended peak with his thumbs. She sucked in a ragged breath, and her hips jerked involuntarily beneath him.

Catching him by surprise, she reached out and grabbed his shirt in her fists, pulling him down and easing him over her. He didn't wait for her next move, but captured her mouth in a kiss as possessive as it was desperate. And wasn't that what he was? What he'd been since the day he'd met Kayla Luck? Desperate for her love and acceptance, knowing he could take neither?

Her rounded breasts pressed flush against his chest, molding to his body as if she were made to lie against him like this, be with him like this, forever. Before he could react to that thought, she kissed him back, her tongue sweeping inside his mouth in an act of possession all her own. She did what nothing else could—she distracted him, stopped the thoughts rolling in his head that told him he had to leave, until he could think of nothing but her. Until he was filled with her feel, her touch, her scent.

Her lower body mimicked the slick motion of her tongue as she writhed in frustration against the barrier of clothing still separating them. Her fingers, still gripping his shirt, curled tighter and pinched his skin. Without warning, her body began a violent trembling. She was obviously near the edge, as desperate as he was to join together on one last ride.

“Kane.” She spoke his name into his mouth.

“Hmm.” He raised his head and stared into the gorgeous, green eyes that would stay with him always. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“My foot's numb.”

“Huh?” That was the last thing he'd expected to hear.

“The ice. Get it off my foot,” she said with a frustrated laugh, shaking her injured leg in an obvious effort to dislodge the pack. “Please.”

He grabbed for the plastic bag with one hand.

“*Ahh.*” She drew the word out in a long, satisfied sigh.

He laughed. “And here I thought it was *my* place to make you sigh with pleasure...but if it’s ice that works for you...” He opened the zipped seal and reached inside. “Far be it from me to deny you.” He held one melting ice cube over her chest.

Her eyes opened wide and watched as he traced the outline of lace with the cold block of ice. He eased the cube back and forth, pausing only when water accumulated to lick the droplets from her soft skin. Her eyes glazed with pleasure and need. The sounds coming from the back of her throat aroused him like nothing else could. His body screamed in taut agony, begging for release.

She grabbed for his shirt, this time pulling the edge from the waistband of his jeans. He helped her pull the shirt over his head and toss it onto the floor. But when she made a grab for his zipper-fly, Kane paused. He wanted to let her continue. He wanted to shuck his jeans, remove hers, and finish what he’d just begun.

But that was the point. He’d just begun. If this was their final time together, he wanted it to last.

His fingers were damp with water, and a small cube remained in his hand. He traced her full lips, easing his finger inside her mouth and leaving the ice on her tongue. The kiss

that followed was erotic and hot, a mixture of ice-cold and Kayla's warmth. He nearly came right then.

But the bag wasn't empty. With the last ice cube, he went back to the drawing board. He cupped her full breast in one hand and followed the pattern on the lace cup with the other. She groaned, then laid her head back on the couch in obvious submission. He took his sweet time, circled her breast with excruciating slowness. Each turn brought him closer to his goal, to the hardened peak at the center. At that last touch, her back arched and only his hips kept her anchored in place.

She raised her head and met his gaze. "Games are over, Kane."

"Believe me, I'm not playing any..."

"Yes, you are..." She licked her damp lips with her tongue. "And they're finished. Not that I'm not enjoying them, but control time is over."

He shouldn't be surprised she knew his intentions before he'd even figured them out himself. She read him well; she always had. Right now, he didn't care and wasn't about to argue. He wanted her so badly he shook with it; he needed her so much he ached.

At that moment, Kane knew, he'd probably ache for the rest of his life. But not Kayla. She'd get over this, get over him. Not a thought he wanted to entertain now.

He paused only to remove the last articles of clothing that separated them, then swung one leg over her already parted legs. His touch found her damp and wet, waiting only for him.

Bracing his hands on her outer thighs, Kane drove himself home.



HER SKIN WAS still tingling from where the ice had touched her flesh. Her heart was still beating in overtime from the intensity she'd found in his arms. Kane had done everything she'd dreamed of, and some things she hadn't.

He'd lost control. Ceded a part of himself to her in passion. How ironic that in the giving, Kayla knew she'd lost him.

They dressed in silence, like the two strangers they'd once been, not the friends and lovers they'd become. But she'd made a promise, and she intended to hold herself to it. *I don't expect anything from you. When this is over, you can walk away without looking back. I won't stop you.* Time to respect her own words...even if her heart was breaking.

He pulled his shirt over his head and tucked it into his jeans. The rasp of the zipper echoed in the awkward silence.

He turned toward her. "If the ankle swells, you'll call..."

"I'll call a doctor," she reassured him. If he was going to leave, the least he could do was get out quick.

He nodded. "Good. You can use ice tonight..." His voice trailed off. Just the mention of the everyday item caused ripples of sensual awareness to prickle over her skin. Kayla rubbed her hands up and down her arms, but the chill remained. She supposed she'd have to get used to the feeling.

She rose from the couch, careful to keep the pressure off her injured foot. She wanted to face Kane for the last time

standing and poised, not hobbling like an invalid. He was great at caring for the needy. The last thing she wanted was to be the victim who needed his protection once more.

The many facets of Kane McDermott made sense to her now. Not that the knowledge could change things.

In Kane's mind, each case brought the chance to redeem himself for failing his mother, for failing himself. Remain in control, don't lose focus—those were his mottos. And most especially, don't give anything up emotionally...because if he did, he risked repeating the past. If he loved, he risked losing again. Kane had been closed up for too long to take that kind of risk now.

Kayla knew it from firsthand experience. Each time he opened up, the old fear gripped him and he shut down again. She glanced at the rigid set of his jaw. He'd already done it now.

She couldn't fight the past for him. She'd just come through fighting her own. As a result, she had no choice but to let him go.

“Don't forget to come down tomorrow and make your statement.”

She sucked in a harsh breath. She'd forgotten she wasn't through dealing with Kane on all levels yet.

His expression softened. “I'll be making mine tonight, and I'll be off all next week. Reid will take good care of you.”

Obviously, he'd read her mind. She shrugged. “Whatever. If *you're* finished taking care of me, would you mind just...”

She gestured to the door, an excuse to swallow the lump in her throat. “Just go, Kane. It won’t get any easier.”

His curt nod was abrupt, his features schooled into that damned unreadable mask he’d perfected over the years. If only she hadn’t seen him laughing...or in the throes of passion... she might not hurt so badly right now.

He stood beside her. His hand reached out to touch her cheek. “If you need anything...”

She drew a deep breath. His unique scent enveloped her, making her feel warm and cherished. An illusion, she reminded herself. “I won’t.”

He nodded and withdrew his hand. His gaze met hers once more before he turned and headed for the door. The bleakness she glimpsed in his eyes betrayed him, but she knew better than to think he’d act on his feelings.

“Bye, Kane.”

The door closed behind him. A silent goodbye. She had to admit, the man was good. Too good, she thought and turned to clean up the remnants of living with Kane McDermott.



“IT’S BEEN A week since we swept the underworld,” Reid said. The older man rounded Kane’s desk and took a seat across the way. “And what a week it’s been.” He kicked his feet on top of the aging, dented metal and exhaled a grunt of satisfaction.

“You always were modest, boss.” But in this case, Reid’s pride was understandable. For all Kane’s concern over Kayla’s welfare, not once had he considered the possibility that

Charmed! had been tied to organized crime. No one had. The signs weren't there.

But Kayla's uncle had been a small-time operator looking to make it with the big boys. He'd taken all the risk and cut them in on a huge profit in the hopes of proving his loyalty. He hadn't counted on his wife, Kayla's aunt, getting cold feet. She'd threatened to turn over the books she'd been keeping as insurance to the police. As a result, they'd both been killed. The remaining key players in the scheme had counted on the very thing Kayla despised. They figured the bimbo niece in need of cash would play ball, and business would continue as usual.

She'd been in more danger than anyone understood at the time. The realization still had the power to churn Kane's gut and turn him ice-cold. The thought of Kayla haunted him twenty-four hours a day. Erotic dreams caused tossing and turning at night, and softer memories left him unfocused during the day.

"Let me gloat, McDermott."

Kane shifted his attention back to his boss.

"After all these years, I've earned it. I'm this close to retirement..." Reid gestured with one hand. "And I never figured on going out on a case this big."

Kane laughed at the excitement in his superior's voice. "As soon as he heard the words *murder charge*, our pal spilled names, dates, hits—cases we never thought we'd solve and guys we never thought we'd nail."

Reid grinned. “Amazing what the promise of the Witness Protection Program will do to a guy’s sense of loyalty.”

“He was loyal,” Kane countered. “To number one.”

“And what about you?”

Kane stood, shoving his seat backward so hard the chair hit the wall. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? You’re questioning *my* loyalty?”

Reid didn’t flinch. “Not to the department, no. But to yourself? Yes.”

Kane groaned and eased himself back into his chair. Father-mode had obviously kicked in again. “Tell you what. You worry about retiring on a high, and I’ll worry about myself.”

“Will you? I don’t think you’ve given a crap about yourself since the day your mother walked in front of a moving bus.”

Kane didn’t question where he’d gotten the information. His life was an open record to those who needed to know. But Kane never spoke of his past aloud. Not to anyone...except Kayla.

Reid might have taken a fatherly interest in Kane, but Kane had never confided personal specifics in return. “If you were anyone else, I’d take a swing for you bringing that up,” he muttered.

Kane wanted to walk out but since he’d had been a walking, miserable, bleary-eyed son of a bitch. He figured

hearing Reid out couldn't hurt. Hell, at this point, it just might help.

"Have you seen her?" Reid asked.

"Who?"

The captain rose from his seat. "Know what, McDermott? I have to meet the D.A. for lunch, and I don't have the time to play who's dumber with you. You want to live life alone, the way you have been, go right ahead. You want to let her walk out of your bed and into someone else's..."

"Hey!"

"Hey, what? I just told you I'm through playing who's dumber. You win that award hands down anyway." Reid braced his hands on the desk. "The lady makes you a human being."

Kane rolled his eyes. "Go play footsie with the D.A. I don't need this crap."

"No, but you need *her*." Reid straightened. "By the way, you did a hell of a job on this case, Kane." The older man's voice softened. "You called it as something before even I believed the lady needed protection; you kept her safe and coached her good. I'm proud of you, son."

Kane's mouth grew dry. Before he could answer, Reid disappeared out the station door.

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CLOSED. KAYLA FLIPPED the sign on the inside of the door so the word faced the busy street. *Charmed!* was no more. Kayla and

Catherine had sold the business.

“What next?” Catherine asked.

“Beats me. Your tuition is paid in full for the year, so that’s not a concern,” Kayla said.

Catherine frowned. “It is to me. If I’d known back in September how this would turn out...”

“You’d have taken the money anyway,” Kayla insisted. “Don’t worry. I have a career to fall back on. Now you will, too.”

“Accounting?” Catherine scowled. “How can you even consider going back to number crunching after all the changes and excitement in your life?”

“Excitement is overrated,” Kayla said wryly. Excitement meant Kane, and he was gone. Time to move on, she thought, no matter how difficult. Despite how it sounded to her sister, Kayla didn’t intend to fall back into old Kayla mode. Not for long, anyway. “Accounting is practical and it’ll pay the bills.”

“The sale of the business will pay the biggest bills until we get back on our feet. Accounting isn’t you. It’s the woman you were before all this.” Catherine swept her arm around, gesturing to the expanse of the room. “It’s the woman who wore trousers and buttoned-to-the-collar silk blouses...” Catherine’s voice trailed off as she caught sight of Kayla’s outfit and winced.

The black knit slacks and the light blue silk top had been the least offensive things in her closet. “I own one pair of jeans and they were dirty. Cut me some slack.”

“Only if you go shopping, and soon.”

“When I can afford it,” Kayla reminded her overindulgent sister. They might have made a small profit on the notorious business, but there were loans, bills, and other necessities that made frivolous spending impossible.

“I can take a leave of absence from school; we can get back next semester’s tuition...”

“Not a chance. You’ll finish.”

Silence reigned for all of thirty seconds. “Okay. I’ll cook, you’ll count, until the school year is finished. Then we switch. I make the money; you go back to school.”

Kayla shook her head. “School, books, language degrees... I’m tired of those things. I just didn’t realize it until...” *Kane*.

Her sister smiled and tilted her head in a sympathetic gesture Kayla recognized immediately.

“Don’t worry about me, Cat. I’ll be fine.”

“I know. And as long as you’re free for the foreseeable future, I have an idea I want to run by you. For a new business. A catering business. We’ll start small and offer every kind of service imaginable—decorations, hors d’oeuvres, serving, catering, party-planning—we can use what’s left of the money for start-up costs.” She paused for breath. “And eventually I’ll get to use my cooking skills full time while your talent for organization will keep the business going. We’ll target small parties at first, and then try for the bigger clients once we establish a reputation. I thought...”

“Slow down,” Kayla said, laughing at her sister’s enthusiasm, though she had to admit she liked the idea of planning parties instead of crunching numbers. “It sounds ambitious...”

“But you love it. And get this name. *Pot Luck*.” Catherine emphasized each word with her hands. “Slogan, We Meet Your Every Need.”

Kayla rolled her eyes. “I think our family’s already been down that route.”

“Nothing wrong with capitalizing on innuendo and imagination. We weren’t involved. Hell, you made headlines bringing down the mob.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

Catherine grinned. “Yeah. But I made you smile for the first time all week—since that lousy son of a bitch betrayed my faith in him and walked out.”

“He did what he had to do.” Kane hadn’t gotten past losing his mother or his supposed role in her death. Kayla had spent much of the last week on the Internet researching psychology books on suicide, the people who remained, and guilt complexes. Many of the articles she’d read described Kane’s withdrawal and resulting pain perfectly.

The knowledge didn’t take away her regret or loneliness, but it did help her to understand the man she’d loved and lost. Kane had never let go of his guilt, anger, and fear. He probably never would.

“You’re too forgiving.” Catherine picked up the letter opener on the desk. “Personally I’d like to slit his throat...or that other part of his anatomy. The only part he was thinking with when he...”

“Enough. He doesn’t deserve it. I’m dealing without Kane just fine.”

“Say that enough times and maybe I’ll believe it. Better yet, maybe you’ll believe it. He hurt you, and you have to acknowledge that. At the very least, vent and you’ll feel better.”

“Is that why you’re twirling a letter opener in your hand and issuing empty threats against Kane? To get me in touch with my feelings?”

Catherine grinned. “Whatever works.”

The bells over the shop door tinkled, distracting her attention. Sunlight gleamed through the doorway and the front windows, blinding in its intensity.

“Afternoon, ladies.”

Kayla shut her eyes against the harsh glare...and the sound of the deep, familiar voice. She was dreaming again, just as she had been last night, awakening with her clothing damp with sweat, her thighs tingling from an erotic, sexy dream starring...

“Isn’t someone going to speak?” Kane asked.

“You’d better be here to grovel because I’m not about to let you hurt her again.”

“Good to see you, too, Catherine.”

At the sound of their bickering, Kayla opened her eyes.

Kane stood inside, leaning against the bookshelves on the side wall, out of the sun’s glare. He’d entered, but his wary expression told her he was by no means sure of his welcome. He might be uncertain, but he wasn’t unsure. Power and sexuality oozed from every delectable inch of him.

His penetrating stare shifted from Catherine to Kayla. “Do you want me to leave?” he asked in a controlled voice.

Her heart squeezed tight in her chest. Of course, she didn’t want him to leave. Yet how could she subject herself to any more pain? Whether she heard what he had to say now, or asked him to leave later, the result would be the same. He’d pick up and go. His intentions had always been clear. She’d just been too stubborn to heed them.

Kayla exhaled, knowing she had no choice. She loved him enough to hear him out, even if it was just department business that brought him. The thought nearly suffocated her.

She turned to her sister. “Catherine, I think you should go.”

Catherine shrugged and headed for the desk chair where she’d deposited her coat. “Your choice. I just hope he proves himself worth it.”

Kane glanced over her sister’s head to meet Kayla’s gaze. “Is she going to be this tough for the rest of my life?” he asked, a grin edging his mouth.

She wanted to kiss him. She wanted him to leave before he could hurt her even more. Her hands squeezed into fists at her

sides. “Probably.”

Catherine grabbed her shoulder bag. She shot a glance at Kayla before zeroing in on Kane. “You think this is tough, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

“Goodbye, Catherine.” Kayla urged her sister out with her tone of voice.

“I’m going. But you do realize this is getting to be a habit. Him showing up, you kicking me out, him showing up...” Despite Catherine’s warning, laughter tinged her voice. Even the tougher Luck sister had a soft spot for Kane McDermott. It didn’t bode well for Kayla.

Catherine eased past Kane, slipping beneath his arm and out the door, still muttering aloud the entire time.

“She means well,” Kayla said.

“I know. Do you stick up for me the same way when I’m out of earshot?” he asked.

She licked her dry lips, barely able to speak now that they were alone. “A bad habit of mine.”

“What is?”

“Sticking up for people I lo...” No. She couldn’t lay her heart out for him to trample once more. “What do you want from me, Kane? I made my statement, the captain’s filled me in on all I need to know, and we said our goodbyes.” She nearly choked on the word.

“Well, that’s the thing. We didn’t—say our goodbyes, that is.”

“I don’t like games.”

“Believe me, sweetheart, this is no game. Think back. You said goodbye; I didn’t.”

“Is that why you came back? To make sure I knew the score? I’m not stupid, Detective.”

His gaze darkened. “I never thought you were.”

She knew that. Kane, of all people, had given her intelligence due respect. Lashing out was the only way she knew to protect herself from what was to come. She just wished she knew exactly what that was.

“I just don’t need the word spelled out to know you aren’t coming back, that I shouldn’t expect anything from you in the future.” Her breath caught in her throat, and she had to pause for air until the ability to speak without showcasing her emotions returned. She’d never felt more fragile. “We already covered everything important.”

“Not quite everything.” He stepped toward her, determined, sexy, and sure. Just as he had been the first time, when her life had changed forever.

He grasped her hand and held on tight. He might as well have gripped her heart in his fist. “Did you ever think I didn’t say *goodbye* because I didn’t mean it?” he asked.

Frustration filled her. She’d had enough of double-talk, word games, and drawing out the inevitable pain. “Just like you didn’t say I love you because you don’t?” She regretted the impulsive, straight-talking words the minute they left her mouth, but once spoken, the truth lay between them.

She tried to jerk her hand free, but he held on with an iron grip. Ignoring his heat was impossible. As always, it elicited an answering liquid warmth inside of her.

She resented the easy hold he had over her, the way he could make her react despite her better judgment. She sighed. “Look, I accepted your limitations, Kane. Now accept mine. You know how I feel about you, so please respect me enough to...”

“Explain?”

“I have a pretty good handle on the whys. I’d rather you just left me alone. It’s better for both of us. I know for sure you feel the same way.”

“That’s what I thought. What I kept telling myself, even as I walked out your front door. But it’s not true. I’m a better man with you by my side...and I’d like to think the reverse is true.”

His sheepish grin gave rise to spiraling hope deep inside her. Foolish hope. But he had come back. And that was more than she’d ever thought possible.

“And even if you’re better off without me, I’m selfish enough to ask you to stay with me anyway.”

Kayla’s heartbeat tripled and she could barely catch her breath. Kane had never spoken beyond the present before, and that was promising. But many other words had been spoken, too.

“What about your edge?” she asked carefully, working hard to bank her hope and her emotions. “You said I distract

you...I threaten your ability to be the best cop, the best man, you can be.”

“I was wrong. *You* make me be the best I can be.” His fingers tightened around hers. “You were right. I’ve been hanging on to a lot of old guilt, trying to atone with each new case, and making sure I remained miserable in the process.”

She glanced at his strained expression, a result of facing his past and baring his soul. For her. “She was your mother. She wouldn’t have wanted that, Kane.”

He nodded. Kane had told himself the same thing. “I know that now.” Reid’s unwavering faith in him over the years had finally sunk into his thick skull.

The older man had been right. He’d stopped feeling the day his mother walked in front of that bus. And he hadn’t started again until he’d walked in this front door for the first time.

“I haven’t given you much reason to believe this, but you’re wrong.” He looked into liquid green eyes and, for the first time, let himself hope for the future. “I didn’t say I love you—not because I don’t, but because I was afraid I didn’t deserve you.”

“And now?” A pink flush stained her cheeks.

“I still don’t deserve you, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let you go.”

“There’s that control thing again,” she said with a laugh.

Her huge smile eased the tightening in his chest he’d been living with all week. The tightening in other areas, too, Kayla

would ease that as well.

“I might let you get away with it this time.” She braced her hands on his shoulders. “But you have to say the words, Kane.”

He met her gaze head-on. “I love you,” he said.

The future suddenly loomed wide before her, full of possibilities. She’d invested all her hopes in this man, and he’d come through. She planned to repay the gift with a lifetime of love and acceptance.

She threw herself against his chest, crushing her breasts against him. He inhaled her lemony scent and groaned aloud. “I could get used to this,” he said and laughed.

“You’d better, because now that I’ve got you, I’m not letting you go, either.”

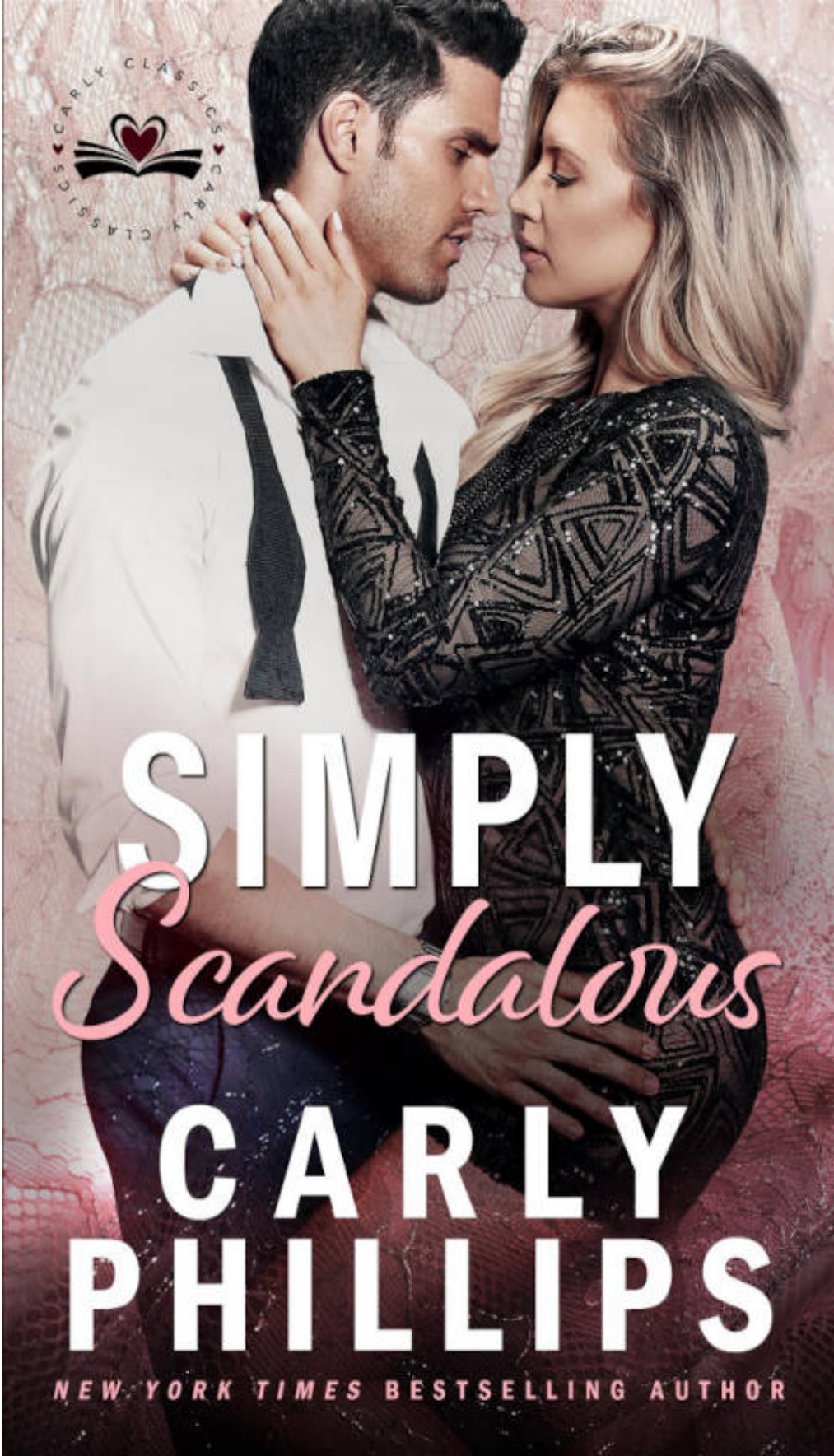
“I’m glad to hear that.”

Her hands slipped downward and into the back pockets of his old jeans. She gripped him hard in both hands.

“I hope you’re thinking what I’m thinking,” Kane said. “Because, otherwise, you’re playing with fire.”

Her soft laugh inflamed his desire. “Want to get lucky, Detective?”

Those were the last words spoken between them for a good, long while.



SIMPLY
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**CARLY
PHILLIPS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SIMPLY SCANDALOUS

THE SIMPLY SERIES

BOOK 2

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Carly Phillips

Chapter One

“**T**ARGET AT ONE o’clock.”

Logan Montgomery listened to his eighty-year-old grandmother and groaned. “You’ve been watching James Bond again, Gran.”

“Just Sean Connery. There’s nothing wrong with Daniel Craig, mind you. I wouldn’t kick him out of my bed.”

“*Gran!*” Startled, Logan shot a glance at his grandmother.

An impish gleam lit her knowing gaze. She’d learned to use shock value to her advantage, he thought wryly. “I think that’s enough.”

“You never used to be a prude.”

He stifled a laugh and chose to warn the irrepressible older woman instead. “And you never used to go so far. Better watch yourself.”

The white-haired woman gave an unrefined, unladylike snort. “If you aren’t careful, you’ll end up a stuffed shirt like your father.”

“With your influence? Not a chance.” He drank from a glass of hundred-dollar champagne, tasting bubbles and little else. Damn waste of money. A cold beer would taste a hell of a lot better, especially on such an unusually hot and balmy May afternoon. “So, tell me why you summoned me to the annual Garden Gala.”

He'd hoped he could ignore the formal invitation, hand-delivered to his house as it had been hand-delivered to dozens of others. Although the Garden Gala was as much a part of Montgomery tradition as baseball was a part of spring, Logan didn't feel the same sense of anticipation for this event. His grandmother, Emma, was a different story. He adored her.

"Because of her." His grandmother waved a wrinkled finger in front of his eyes. "Over there by the dogwood tree. She catered this whole party herself. Talent personified."

Logan narrowed his gaze. He couldn't see much besides the overwhelming sea of floral prints on the female guests and the stark black-and-white uniforms worn by the help. "All I see is a bunch of penguins," Logan muttered.

"I believe servers are the proper term," Emma said.

"Couldn't you get the judge to relax the dress code, for God's sake? These poor people look like they're attending a formal wedding, not serving cocktails on a spring day."

He liked parties as much as the next guy, but this uptight excuse for a gathering wasn't the way he'd choose to spend a Saturday afternoon.

"Your father has his *standards*," Emma said in her haughtiest voice, in imitation of her son, Judge Montgomery. "He believes the help should dress as such. Ridiculous," she muttered. "The man ought to come into the twenty-first century. Anyway, enough about Edgar for now. Look around. What else do you see?"

Logan took two steps to the right so he could see around a ridiculous-looking parasol held by one of his mother's friends to protect her skin from the nonexistent sun and impending rain.

"Well?" A bony elbow nudged Logan in the ribs.

He looked once more and was rewarded by what he saw at the elaborate bar set up in front of the pool house on the perfectly manicured lawn—a delectable-looking creature in uniform. She stepped around the bar and into full view. The clouds had begun rolling in, but this woman radiated pure sunshine. Not even the standard server uniform looked ordinary on her supple curves.

She reached over to clean the bar of used glasses, and Logan was treated to a backside view that was just as enticing. Black sneakers, obviously worn for comfort, and black tights with a vertical seam ran up the length of her well-toned legs. As she reached forward to sweep the top of the bar with a damp rag, the hem on her black miniskirt inched higher. He stepped closer in time to catch a hint of lace peeking beneath the black hem. Interest replaced curiosity and the temperature outside hitched up a notch. So did strategic body parts. He stuck one finger inside the constricting collar of his white shirt, giving himself some breathing room.

She rose to her full height, which wasn't much. Petite, with blond hair pinned on top of her head, she couldn't have been more than five foot three. Considering he had one sister who had traipsed more friends through the house than he could

count on both hands, Logan considered himself an expert on all things female.

And this female intrigued him. His gaze traveled over her form-fitting white blouse, which was buttoned to her chin but failed to hide well-rounded breasts, lingered on the belt cinched over a small waist, and settled on the white socks pulled over the sheer stockings. She wasn't a typical server by any means.

Didn't matter if he looked from the bottom up or the top down, he liked what he saw. A smile edged the corners of his mouth.

“Quit drooling and tell me what you see.”

“A damn sexy penguin,” he muttered.

“Call her what you want,” Emma said. “She's the solution to your problems.”

“Didn't know I had any.” Another glance as she swung back around the bar and he grinned. If he had a problem, he sure wouldn't mind this woman being the answer.

“Do you want to put an end to Montgomery expectations, or do you want your parents and their big-money friends to keep hounding you to run for public office? No peace, no quiet. And bye-bye low-profile job at the public defender's office. Once next Saturday is over, your life will be out of your hands.”

“You don't have to sound like you're enjoying this,” Logan muttered. But instinct told him his grandmother wasn't just trying to shock him now. Emma had lived in this

mausoleum along with both of Logan's parents. She was privy to details Logan wasn't and shared that information willingly. He turned his attention back to the older woman.

"You can keep telling them no thank you." She patted her perfect bun into place as she spoke. Not even the humidity touched Emma's coiffure. "But your daddy's been stubborn as a mule and insistent on having his own way since he was in dirty diapers."

He stifled the urge to laugh again. She didn't need an audience. "You've really got to watch your mouth."

"Nonsense. Age gives me the right to say and do whatever youth prevented me from saying or doing. The expression is young and stupid, not old and stupid."

Logan grinned. "I know now why Dad wants you in a home." He gazed at the outspoken woman who had given him and his sister their only source of love and affection growing up. In their best interests, she'd undermined his parents' efforts at making their children clones of their own public-perfect selves. She'd accomplished her goal with his sister.

But with Logan, the only son, things had been more difficult. Though he'd traveled his own path, many of his choices—college, law school, and his stint as district attorney—had paralleled his father's.

No one believed he intended to chart his own destiny. Not even the past two years spent working at the public defender's office swayed his family's beliefs. To all the Montgomerys, Logan was the next generation, destined to follow in past footsteps.

Except to his beloved grandmother. To Emma, Logan was the grandson she'd raised, a man with his own beliefs. He turned his attention back to what she'd said minutes earlier. "Okay, let me have it. What's happening on Saturday?" he asked.

"I thought you'd never ask." She nudged Logan, urging him to walk with her.

Resigned, he followed the sound of the crinkling taffeta of her long day-dress until she reached her destination. Emma gestured across the patio to where his father was holding court. "In one week, your father and his conservative cronies plan on announcing your candidacy for mayor of our fair city. Hampshire needs some young blood and you've been handpicked. Perfect son of the esteemed Montgomery family on his first stepping-stone to even higher office."

"Never happen," he said.

"That's right, and I'll tell you why. We're going to publicly disgrace you. Free you to live life outside the realm."

He drew a deep breath and forcibly stopped himself from rolling his eyes at her theatrics. "I don't need scandal to free myself from the family. They can talk politics until doomsday, but without a willing candidate, they've got nothing." And Logan was completely unwilling.

"You drove all the way out to Hampshire, so at least hear me out."

As usual, the older woman had a point. Besides, he had no place else to be, and the view from this angle was good.

Logan folded his arms over his chest. “You mentioned a plan,” he prodded. “So, how can she save me?” He pointed to the blonde across the way.

Emma nodded. “You need a public trashing, and who better to ruin your reputation than a woman born into poverty with a family history of prostitution behind her?”

He choked on champagne bubbles. “You’re exaggerating.” He glanced at Emma’s target.

She’d left the covering of the bar and now tread with a light step, gliding among the guests, talking quietly with the workers serving hors d’oeuvres. Her air of authority set her apart from the others. So did the miniskirt she wore in place of the black pants favored by the rest of the servers. A black bow tie nestled below her chin, accentuating her heart-shaped face. How had he missed that before?

“She owns Pot Luck, the caterers. She doesn’t attend every event her company caters, but I insisted she run this one.”

“Of course you did,” he muttered.

“She’s a woman after my own heart. Remember the charm school the cops closed down last year?”

“Vaguely. I was out of state.” He’d graduated from Columbia Law School and snagged a job at the Manhattan district attorney’s office, working there until Emma’s mild heart attack this past year brought him home. He wanted more time with his family. Other than his sister, Grace, with whom he’d shared an apartment in Manhattan, Emma was the only family who counted.

“Well, she and her sister,” Emma said, pointing to the caterer, “inherited that business. Turns out the previous owner, her uncle, was operating a call-girl service in disguise.”

“But she wasn’t involved.”

“Well, no, but it’s family scandal. And to make things even better, she used to work for them when she was in college.” His grandmother clapped her hands in growing excitement.

“She was a *prostitute*?”

“Bite your slandering tongue. She taught classes for the testosterone-impaired. All on the up-and-up. But think of your parents’ reaction if you brought home a woman whose family had dabbled in prostitution. A woman who instructed the single man on how to score.”

Certain she had done no such thing, Logan refused to touch that outrageous comment. “I don’t bring women home,” he said instead.

Why should he? His parents would take it as a sign the prodigal son was ready to settle down. Logan couldn’t say he wasn’t itching for steady companionship. He was. He couldn’t say he didn’t long for someone to come home to at the end of the day. He wanted that, too. But he’d yet to meet a woman who interested him enough to forsake all others, let alone one he could imagine looking at across the dinner table each and every night for the rest of his natural life.

“You would if you met the right one,” his grandmother said with a gleam in her eyes that alarmed him.

The old lady had an agenda. Logan only wished he knew more. Just because Emma was admitting her scheme aloud didn't mean she was revealing all.

He knew her too well to be anywhere near complacent, but he decided to humor her for now. "My social life is plenty full, Gran. Too full to settle for just one woman."

His social life was full, all right. Full of renovation and restoration. Logan was busy, just not playing the field. But a white lie wouldn't hurt anyone, least of all Emma, who needed to believe Logan was happy and on the lookout for the future Mrs. Montgomery.

While he met, dated, and appreciated women as much as any man, he didn't see a long-term relationship in his future. The women he met at the P.D.'s office and the opposing counsel he ran into around the courthouse cared more for what the Montgomery name could do for them than in Logan himself. Same for the women in his parents' illustrious social circle. They sought only to marry and keep their steady income streaming in. All were disappointed and disinterested once they discovered Logan lived off his salary and kept himself isolated from the family legacy.

A marriage for the sake of appearances, like the one his parents shared, didn't interest him. No one benefited from a loveless union—especially not the requisite number of children, born only for show. Children raised by servants and ignored by their parents.

"Open your eyes, son. You never know what's in front of you. Now, as I was saying about your father and his mayoral

ideas. If making your point in private doesn't work, we can always resort to the headlines. 'Judge Montgomery's Son Dating Ex-Hooker.' Not that I'm in favor of that approach, mind you—Catherine deserves better." She pointed to the woman in the corner.

At least now she had a name. He'd need one if he wanted to get to know her better.

"You know how the papers exaggerate about sex," Emma said. "You'll be a dropout candidate before you know it."

He let out a groan. Humoring her was getting more difficult.

"I can see you're interested. So, go for it with Cat and get caught. My money says the embarrassment will be enough. Your father will call off the campaign."

Logan shook his head. "You really do have an overactive imagination. There's no reason to go that far. A press conference minus the candidate will take care of any expectations."

"And how would that affect your job at the public defender's office? I happen to know it's a first step toward opening your own law office down on the docks."

"Both are my business, and as much as I appreciate your concern, I can handle my life without help."

As if on cue, a large hand slapped Logan on the shoulder. "Good to see you, son. I knew you wouldn't miss a chance to mingle with your supporters."

In a move she'd perfected over the years, his grandmother raised an eyebrow and nodded her head as if to say, *I told you so*.

He met his father's gaze. "Of course not. These people are very important." To Emma, Logan added silently, which was the only reason he'd chosen to attend.

His father puffed out his chest and beamed, obviously misconstruing Logan's agreement. Logan didn't bother to explain. The judge would never listen.

"I'm glad you agree. Now, you've got to learn the art of working a room," Edgar said.

"What room?" Logan asked, deliberately playing dumb. He glanced at the sky and the clouds that had been steadily rolling in. "I thought this was an outdoor garden party, not a political fund-raiser."

"I like your sense of humor, son."

Behind the judge's back, Emma caught Logan's attention with a wave. She rolled her eyes and they shared a silent laugh at the judge's single-mindedness.

"Glad you're amused," Logan muttered.

"Yes, but you know as well as I do that behind every event there is a purpose," the older man said. "The fact that you showed up for this is telling." He adjusted the lapels of his jacket.

Logan waited a beat before walking around and placing an arm around his grandmother's shoulder. "The only thing my appearance should tell you is I wouldn't miss one of Emma's

extravaganzas. Beyond that, I have no purpose or hidden agenda.”

He gave the older woman a loving squeeze. Her frailty stunned him for a moment before he reassured himself. Behind the aging body lay an agile mind and a generous spirit.

“I promised him a good time, something you’ve never learned how to have.” An irreverent gleam sparkled in the older woman’s gaze.

The judge shot his mother a warning look then faced Logan once more. “We need to talk.”

Logan studied his father. With his dark double-breasted suit and air of authority, Judge Montgomery appeared every inch the man in control of his domain. Too bad for him Logan no longer lived within that realm, nor could he be manipulated. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

The judge shook his head. “I want what’s best for you, son, and that means putting you in public office.”

“Placing me in office is what’s best for *you*. You want me to carry on the political tradition. I want to live my own life.”

“You’re young.” He clapped Logan on the shoulder. “You’ll come around.”

Logan raised an eyebrow. “You’re probably right. After all, I bought my house even after you put a down payment on a penthouse apartment in Boston. I took the P.D.’s job even after you pulled strings at Fitch and Fitzwater, the leading firm downtown.” He shrugged. “I suppose if you hold your breath long enough, I might come around after all.”

Edgar narrowed his eyes. “This is your influence,” the judge said to his mother.

“If so, I’m proud of him. And you should be, too,” Emma said. “Shame on you, Edgar. I raised you better than this.”

“Logan, see to it your grandmother gets some rest. She’s cranky. We’ll talk more later.” He issued his commands, and without awaiting a response, he turned and strode toward his guests.

“He’s determined,” Emma said.

“I’m more so.” But Logan was also tired of the battle. A part of him wished he didn’t have to fight his father for every step he took in his own life.

“Still think you don’t need my help?” Emma asked.

“I love you for your concern, but I can handle the judge alone.”

“But her kind of help would be so much more fun,” his grandmother said, her gaze shifting from his.

Logan followed her glance at the woman standing on a chair, adjusting a speaker, and he had to agree. Still, no matter how tempting, he wouldn’t use an innocent woman as a pawn in his family’s game.

But that didn’t mean he couldn’t pursue this attraction and get to know her for his own reasons. As Emma had probably predicted, she fascinated him in a way few women did, and he wanted to know why. He placed the champagne glass down on a passing server’s tray.

“I’m here if you need backup,” Emma said.

He kissed the older woman’s weathered cheek. “I’m sure I can handle it,” he said wryly. He glanced across the lawn to where Catherine had settled back into bartender mode.

She handled the bottles and glasses with ease. Logan grinned at the sight. One of the cocktail servers paused and whispered something in her ear. Catherine bolted from behind the bar and headed toward the house. Without her presence, the bar loomed as empty and boring as the party had minutes earlier.

Logan sighed, seeing opportunity vanish at least for the moment.

“She’s got the goodies,” Emma said. “She’ll be back.”

“I believe drinks or liquor are the politically correct terms these days.” He couldn’t help but needle his grandmother.

His gaze followed Catherine’s retreating form. The well-shaped bottom and trim waist were a sight to behold before she disappeared inside the open French doors.

Emma cleared her throat. “From your perspective, I’d say she’s got the goodies,” she said with a laugh.

He chuckled. “I’d say you were right.”



A SEXY MAN had been watching Catherine for the last fifteen minutes. He had dark hair, model-like looks, and a penetrating stare that made her muscles weak and her heart flutter. She couldn’t imagine what sparked his interest when there were

dozens of other women at the party, female guests dressed in silky dresses and flowing chiffon skirts, beautiful women with perfectly manicured nails and hair straight from the beauty salon.

Catherine's sneakers—comfortable shoes for a day of working on her feet—squeaked as she crossed the gleaming marble floors. She cringed and kept going. Years had passed since she had felt this... inadequate, she thought, coming up with the right word. She glanced down at her working outfit, the same one she wore to any party her company catered. Instead of feeling comfortable in her own skin, she felt out of place and transported back in time to when she and her sister had been the Luck girls from the wrong side of the tracks.

Catherine shook her head and raised her chin a notch. There was no sense denying it. The rich were different. But Catherine had worked too hard and come too far to let insecurities hit her now. She'd survive this party. As long as the threatening rain held off... and her chef didn't bail.

She and her company, Pot Luck, couldn't afford the disaster. With Kayla, her business partner and sister, pregnant and under doctor's orders to stay in bed, Catherine was handling more than usual. Between doing the food prep work for today, substituting as bartender, overseeing along with her manager, and planning upcoming bookings, Catherine was overworked and stressed. As soon as the temperature warmed, people clamored to organize outdoor events, and Pot Luck was booked solid.

She couldn't complain about being busy, but she did long for future days when all they would have to cater were full-scale parties like this one. But for now, Pot Luck accommodated any request—from complete party packages, to hors d'oeuvres only, to simple decorations and party favors. Someday, once their reputation was more firmly established and the bank account posted a hefty surplus, they could be more discriminating—and Catherine could make more use of her culinary background as well. After this event, someday could arrive faster than she'd ever imagined.

The Montgomery party had been a coup and Catherine had no problem with rearranging her schedule to accommodate Emma Montgomery. Success here would mean referrals to the wealthiest people and most prestigious companies in Hampshire. She wouldn't allow anything to ruin this chance, especially not a temperamental chef who was her oldest friend.

She entered the state-of-the-art kitchen where stainless steel and chrome gleamed from every corner of the room. “Nick, you're a hit!” Catherine made her way around a long center island and placed a kiss on his clean-shaven cheek.

“The duck isn't cold.” He whacked at a large chunk of meat with a knife.

“I never said it was. The guests love the hors d'oeuvres. They're going to spread your name from here to downtown Boston.”

Another loud whack sounded against the cutting board. “I'm already famous in Boston. I don't need to take abuse because your servers can't get in here fast enough to bring out

hot food.” Beneath his anger and frustration, she recognized the concern and warning. Someone had been complaining about the temperature of the food. She cringed. She’d take care of her lazy servers, but first, she had to calm the chef.

Catherine glanced at his exaggerated pout. She’d grown up with Nick. She knew when to worry and when a word or two would smooth things over. She snuck a peek inside the large oven and inhaled an enticing aroma. “This smells heavenly. I don’t know another chef who can create the way you do.” She returned to his side. “The food is *almost* as good-looking as you are.”

The knife slammed into the wooden board again and he glanced up, dark eyes narrowed. “Don’t try to flatter me, Cat. It won’t work.” His gaze settled on her for the first time, and he touched her cheek with one hand. “You’re red.”

“The day is so overcast I forgot the sunscreen.” Catherine shrugged. “Besides, we can’t all bronze like you.”

“You’re fair. You ought to be more careful.”

She rolled her eyes. For as far back as she could remember, Nick had looked out for her. He had classic Mediterranean looks and most women would have snatched him up at the slightest chance. Not Catherine. Lovers came and went; best friends were for life. “If you’re so worried about me, stop yelling at my people.”

“They’re incompetent.”

“I’ll talk to them. I promise.”

“It’s a start. What’s going on out there? Is Mr. Right mingling among the guests?”

“Back off, Nick. Just because you’re engaged doesn’t mean everyone else wants the same thing.” Catherine had no desire to have this conversation with Nick yet again. “Look, the bartender never showed. I’m already pulling double duty and I can’t afford to have the servers leave in tears. Now, will you lay off my staff?”

He raised an eyebrow. “If you promise to use this party as an opportunity. There are men out there, Cat. All types of men. Tall and thin, fat and balding, rich and richer. Take your pick.”

A sexy stranger with dark hair and compelling eyes filled her mind. She pushed the thought aside. Before she’d entered this immense house filled with elegant women, she’d believed herself over the painful memories associated with her lower-class upbringing. Just working this party, being surrounded by delicate perfection, brought the painful memories back full-force.

Sexual attraction from across a crowded room meant nothing when she and the stranger were obviously worlds apart. “You know the guests here are way out of my league,” she told her friend.

“Only because *you* think so, not because it’s true. You spend too much time alone.”

Catherine shrugged. “At least the company’s good.”

Nick groaned.

“Is it my fault every guy I’ve dated isn’t *the one*?” Catherine had yet to meet a man worth risking her heart for. Despite what Nick thought, she certainly wouldn’t find him here.

“You walk away before any guy can prove himself. Take me, for instance.”

She rolled her eyes. “I turned you down when we were sixteen and you survived.” She glanced at her watch. “I promise nothing else will leave this kitchen cold. Back off my workers?”

“Consider opening your eyes to the men out there,” he countered.

“I’ll consider it,” she lied. “You’re a prince,” she called over her shoulder, adjusting her bow tie as she ran out of the kitchen.

She darted back outside, dismayed to find the clouds darker and heavier than five minutes before. The storm was rolling in faster than predicted. Winded from her sprint out of the kitchen, she rested her hands on the bar and closed her eyes. She inhaled deeply, then exhaled, searching for calm. Too much hinged on getting through the rest of the afternoon without mishap.

“So, tell me what put the frown on that beautiful face.”

She’d never heard that voice before, but her body reacted instantly. She knew who it belonged to. She just didn’t know how in the world to handle him.

Chapter Two

CATHERINE FOUND HERSELF staring into brown eyes the color of her morning coffee—after she'd added the cream. She forced a confident smile. "What can I get for you?" she asked.

"The specialty of the house. What's yours?" A sexy, near-perfect grin blindsided her, and her breath caught in a hitch.

Heavy awareness pulsed through her veins, a delicious accompaniment to the steady beat of the music in the background. Catherine wondered just how many women this man charmed with his good looks alone. Enough to make him dangerous, she thought.

He wore an expensive suit and when those eyes captured hers, they didn't let go. Not even loud laughter from across the expanse of the outdoors caused his gaze to slide from hers.

She narrowed her eyes to gauge his preference, but she wasn't a bartender by trade. She was merely substituting for her absent employee. Glancing at this man, she couldn't begin to guess his drink of choice. And though she could offer an interesting mix of cocktails, the general requests here had been for champagne or Mimosas, and somehow, she couldn't see him as a delicate-drink kind of guy. "Why don't you tell me what you had in mind?"

He leaned closer, elbows propped on the edge of the bar. His cologne smelled masculine and expensive, a sensual combination that reminded her of spice, temptation—and

trouble. “Something to cool me down and take the edge off the heat,” he said.

The clouds had darkened to a stormy gray and a heavy breeze had already begun blowing off the nearby ocean, cutting back on the mugginess and heat. Catherine recognized his words for the come-on they were. Though she wanted to be flattered, she couldn't help but be disappointed as well.

“A splash of cold water would work just fine,” she muttered. His eyes darkened subtly, and she was appalled to realize she'd spoken the words out loud.

He grinned. “I could think of plenty of things that would work better.”

He was too confident... too sexy. For all her bravado, Catherine wasn't as secure in herself as she liked the world to believe. Life's harsh realities had taught her not to trust in much—especially a tempting man who had charm and knew how to use it.

She glanced at him warily, deciding not to play. “Then how about a cold beer instead?”

His smile widened. “Now you're talking.” He walked around the corner of the bar, seating himself on a stool—too close to Catherine's small workspace. The width of a bar top separated them, but it wasn't much and certainly not enough. And with servers walking around passing out champagne off their trays, the line for drinks had dwindled. She hadn't had a stray passerby in at least half an hour. They were alone.

She reached for one of the eclectic brews handpicked by Judge Montgomery for the occasion and poured the man his drink. Placing the glass on a cocktail napkin, she slid the beer toward him.

“Join me?” he asked.

“I’m working,” she said as she wiped down the already-shiny Lucite bar with a damp rag.

“I’ll clear it with the management.”

“*I’m* the management, and I don’t mix business and pleasure.” Especially not when the risk would be greater than the pleasure... and if her tingling nerves and rising anticipation were any indications, she could just imagine how great the pleasure would be.

“Miss... Scotch and soda, if I may interrupt.” The voice came from the opposite end of the bar.

Catherine grabbed onto the excuse and headed for the waiting guest. While she worked, she felt *his* heavy gaze burn right through her. Then, noticing a problem across the lawn, Catherine ran to avert a disaster between her server and an intoxicated guest. She was used to the role of overseer and referee. But between the impending rain and the need for things to go well, this party had her completely stressed out.

To make matters worse, Judge Montgomery waylaid her on her way back to the bar. Though Emma led Catherine to believe she was in charge, her son left no doubt *he* was paying the bills. And he insisted that the servers needed to circulate

more and that she shouldn't be fraternizing with the guests. Catherine had to swallow her pride as well as her comeback.

She saw no point in informing the man who would pay for this event that *his* guest had come on to her. He wouldn't believe her if she had. Instead, she escaped, and got hold of her assistant to warn her to have a quick talk with all the help. Then she ran toward the bar. One thing she knew—she'd be happy when this day was over.

When she returned, her visitor sat in his same spot, arms folded across his broad chest. "You need a break," he informed her, a scowl on his face. Unfortunately, it didn't do a thing to detract from his good looks.

"A break doesn't fit into my schedule."

"You've had an overwhelming day." He darted a glance to where she'd had her discussion with the host of the party. Emma might have employed her services, but Catherine had little doubt it was Judge Montgomery who held court over the world around him.

Her companion then patted a barstool beside him. "Take a seat and pour your heart out," he said. "I'm a good listener." What looked like genuine concern etched his handsome features.

If she let him, he could seduce her with that concern. No doubt that was his goal, yet her body temperature inched higher despite his calculated manners. Or was it his warmth and seductive voice that heated her inside and out? "I think you have our roles reversed. *I'm* the bartender who's supposed to have the friendly ear."

He reached out, touching the silver earrings dangling from her ear. “But I’m not the one in need of a shoulder.”

It was eerie how well he read her, Catherine thought. His strong hand heated her skin. She was in danger of sensual overload. Catherine shut her eyes against the tremor of awareness shooting through her veins. He affected her on more than the physical plane and that made the dynamics between them even more explosive.

She paused a beat. “I appreciate the thought, but I shouldn’t fraternize with the guests.”

“You’re doing a great job here. I wouldn’t let anything—or anyone—get to you,” he said.

Obviously, he understood little about pleasing an employer and paying the bills.

“You’re too old not to realize we all answer to a higher authority,” she said wryly.

“But only when the authority is full of truth and honesty, not hot air,” he said and grinned.

Catherine laughed despite herself. Judge Montgomery had made his displeasure clear. Catherine not only wanted success today, but she also wanted referrals galore. That wouldn’t be happening if she spent the afternoon being verbally seduced by a sexy man way out of her league.

“I’m here to work,” she reminded him.

“You know this party’s a success. Ignore the man,” he suggested. “Why let him tell you what to do?”

“Because he signs my paycheck. Besides,” Catherine said, arching her eyebrow, “he told me to stay away from *you*. That’s got to be good advice.”

He shook his head. “Cynical is sad.”

He spoke as if he’d read behind the words to her philosophy on life, love, and dating. “It’s honest. The only way I know how to be.”

Dark eyes met hers. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he murmured.

He spoke sexy words laced with innuendo, Catherine reminded herself. Nothing more. She tipped her head back to meet his gaze. His nearly black hair had been slicked off his forehead in the latest style. Money and class. He possessed them both.

Behind him milled beautifully dressed women, who were immaculately and properly groomed for the world he inhabited. She wondered why this man had chosen to hang out at the bar with her. He wouldn’t be interested in a woman way out of his social class with a shady family history.

She didn’t know what he wanted, but she suspected he found her an interesting diversion. The thought tapped into her deepest fear—that not only was she like her mother, but she’d end up like her as well. Her mother had overdressed, overdone, and had always fallen short. She’d always been a woman with two daughters and too many responsibilities. A woman alone.

Feeling out of place here didn’t help her frame of mind and it merely heightened a fear Catherine normally suppressed.

Unlike the wealthy Montgomerys, the Luck family had barely made ends meet and had lived on shop specials. And that was when things were good.

Although she lived a world apart from her roots, Catherine wasn't foolish enough to think a woman who once wore hand-me-downs and had lived in the poorer sections of Boston had anything in common with this elegant and sexy man.

"Well, if you won't unburden yourself, we can go back to you doing your job. Another drink?" he asked. "Mine's gone flat." His deep voice vibrated too close to her ear. An unexpected tremor of excitement shimmied throughout her body.

"So has your routine," she said and grinned.

"Listen to the woman, sonny boy," Emma Montgomery said in her cultured voice.

"Go away. You're ruining my attempt at convincing the lady to give me a chance."

"Sounded to me like you were failing miserably."

Catherine laughed aloud.

"Eavesdroppers don't get the whole story. She was on the verge of agreeing to go for a drink when the party ended."

"I was?"

He stretched his arm over the back of the chair.

"You were." His fingertips brushed her shoulder and she trembled. One drink. She met his heavy gaze and wondered, why not?

“I always knew my grandson had good taste.”

She stilled, her gaze darting between the two. It was one thing to have a drink with a good-looking guy, another to form illusions about a man who belonged to a family as wealthy as his. They would never accept her. Not on a bet. Not even if Emma Montgomery demanded it... and Catherine couldn't help doubting whether Emma would be as gracious toward Catherine regarding her grandson as she had been regarding business. She now understood Judge Montgomery's stern warning and obvious disdain. He didn't want her anywhere near his son.

Emma patted her hand. “Lovely party, Catherine. You exceeded my expectations.”

A little while ago, Catherine would have agreed. After the last ten minutes, she had to wonder. And if there was anything Catherine hated, it was self-doubt and pity. She had to get away from these people before she lost the one thing she treasured: her faith in herself. Hard-won faith.

She swallowed over the lump in her throat and glanced at her watch. Almost over. “I have to get back to work.”

“You mean you don't want my company after all?” His eyes clouded. A wounded little boy look graced his chiseled features. If she wasn't careful, she'd believe she'd hurt his feelings. But the most she'd possibly offended was his pride. Protecting her heart was worth the sacrifice.

She watched Emma Montgomery's retreating, regal form. His grandmother. Catherine shook her head, disappointed. She

turned back to the privileged son. “I’m not sure what you’re after, but I can’t provide it.”

“Cut me some slack. Company’s all I’m looking for. *Your* company.”

She narrowed her eyes and she tried to gauge his sincerity. His gaze, once steady on her face, had slipped to her thigh. She glanced down. The hem of her miniskirt had bent up, exposing an expanse of skin hidden beneath the sheer black stockings. It wasn’t much, but she’d revealed more than she’d wanted Prince Charming to see.

Company, her ass. She looked like an easy mark. Regret surged through her—it wasn’t strong enough to douse the flame of desire he’d ignited, but she wasn’t about to get burned. Or let him see he’d flustered her.

She left the skirt hem alone. “Sorry, I have other plans.”

He shrugged and raised his hands in a gesture of defeat. “Okay. But you can’t deny me another drink.”

Because she was being paid to do the honors. She didn’t appreciate the reminder. She shrugged. “I can’t discriminate. It’s my job.”

“You wound me.”

“You’ll live.” She sounded too breathless for her own liking. Yet he was right. She couldn’t turn him away. Worse, she didn’t want to.

But the sooner she gave him his drink, the sooner he’d be on his way. He wouldn’t hang around her the rest of the

afternoon being shot down. No matter how much she wished otherwise. “Okay, hotshot, tell me what I can get you.”



LOGAN DOUBTED SHE wanted to hear his real desire. Especially since it involved them both in a horizontal position with their naked bodies crushed together in a sweaty tangle beneath the sheets. Or in the pool cabana behind the bar.

“Hurry up. I need to refill the serving trays with champagne,” she whispered.

Her warm breath tickled his ear. Her scent, an intoxicating Oriental blend of spices, heated the rest of his senses. The mix of perfumes emanating from the guests had grown heavy hours ago, hanging on the damp, humid air. But Catherine’s stood out, sexy and unique, like the lady herself.

His gaze dropped to her thigh. When she’d bristled the first time, he’d promised himself he wouldn’t look again. But the hint of skin and the promise of what lay beneath was too much for a man to take.

She headed behind the bar to obvious safety. Tapping her fingers impatiently against the top, she said, “I’m waiting.”

“Patience,” he murmured. “I want to make sure I get what I want.” He had one shot at capturing her interest, at making her want to get to know him as badly as he wanted to know her.

“More likely you want an excuse to linger. What I don’t know is why.” Her green eyes shimmered with curiosity.

Which, Logan decided, was better than disgust or disinterest. He wanted to linger, all right. To sit here and drink in her blond beauty and sassy mouth. Logan eyed her warily, then reminded himself she may be female, but she wasn't a mind reader.

She might sense that he wanted more than her company—and she was right. But as much as he desired her, it was too soon for that to be an issue.

He'd have to take it slow. "What I want is something special," he said thinking aloud. "More than a plain old beer." He glanced down at her hands, noticing the blunt nails and clear polish for the first time. No fancy frills, colors, or artifice to this woman, he thought, and was more than pleased. He leaned over the edge of the bar. "I want you to create magic," he said in a deep voice he barely recognized.

"You're too old to believe in magic, buster."

If the magic had left her life, he wanted to be the one to restore her faith. Bizarre how quickly she'd gotten to him, but after years of bland women and uninteresting relationships, Logan recognized a gem when he saw one.

"I'm old enough to know what I want, but not too old for you."

"Want to bet?"

"I'm a gambling man." He reached out and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. The tiny silver pendants hanging from her earlobe were intriguing. A delicate

contrast to her sharp tongue and prickly exterior. He lowered his hand, letting his fingers trail down her soft cheek.

She sucked in a startled breath, then coughed into her hand. “Don’t read too much into that. I swallowed wrong.”

He laughed. “You’re hell on a man’s ego.” Not that he believed her professed disinterest. The rapid flutter of a pulse beating in her neck and the flush of pink that stained her neck and cheeks betrayed her.

“All in a day’s work.” She smiled.

The flash of white teeth revealed two dimples on either side of her luscious lips. He vowed to taste that smile before the night was out.

“Speak or go away,” Catherine said. “What do you want, Mr. Montgomery?”

Time was running out. He glanced into her eyes before leaning close and whispering in her ear.



To MAKE YOUR dreams come true.

A thrill spun its way through her veins. At least fifty guests and party favors later and she still couldn’t suppress the tremor of excitement Logan’s words brought. Thanks to his husky tone, she knew what he desired, but the sincerity in his eyes made her want to believe he meant more than a cheap fling. Yet after those heart-stealing words, he’d stood, reminded her she had other guests waiting, and left, walking through the double doors and into the Montgomery mansion. He’d never looked back.

Her instincts had been right. He'd seen her as an interesting diversion. When she hadn't proved easy, he couldn't be bothered with the chase. She shrugged. No big deal. Hadn't she already backed off herself?

So why was the disappointment so lingering?

She had no doubt Logan Montgomery was a man capable of fulfilling every fantasy she'd imagined—and some she probably hadn't. Just the thought of him made her body hum with a sexual awareness she couldn't mistake. Oh, he'd be good and she'd enjoy herself, but this was a man capable of getting inside her soul.

They weren't meant to happen. Not without someone getting hurt. She being the someone who came to mind. One reckless night wasn't worth a sacrifice in self-worth.

And he obviously wasn't interested in pursuing more.

Over the next hour, the clouds darkened, and the guests began a slow trickling out of the estate. The budget on this party had enabled her to splurge on everything—including cleanup—and the crew was waiting to take over. The woman they'd hired as manager would supervise the next shift. By this evening, no remnants of the party would remain. Catherine had no reason to stay.

She edged past the few remaining guests and slipped into the wide entryway that led to the coatroom in the foyer. Yellow and white satin wrapped around the circular staircase in the corner and draped like border paper high on the walls. More than once, she cringed as her sneakered feet squeaked against the freshly waxed marble floor. She entered the closet

that was larger than the room she'd shared with her sister growing up and hit the light switch on the wall.

Despite the ominous clouds, the day had started off with potential and the closet was empty of jackets and coats. Catherine's rain slicker, brought more out of foresight than need, stood out in the empty room.

“Gran!”

Catherine turned at the sound of the deep, compelling voice in time to see Logan glance inside the walk-in closet. “Gran!” he called once more. “Is that you?”

“Not unless this party has aged me more than I thought,” Catherine said from the back recesses of the room.

He continued his path straight toward her. “Not a chance.” His gaze settled on her face, intense and focused. “Beauty and a smart mouth—you're a lethal combination.”

She chose to detour around that remark. “I thought you already left.” She curled her hand around the soft plastic of her coat as if a solid grip would keep her safe from her rioting hormones and a sexy man.

“Keeping tabs on me?” he asked with a cocky grin.

“Guest awareness is part of my job.”

“Seems to me hiding behind your job is part of your job.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” she asked, although she already knew. Logan had obviously seen through her feigned disinterest.

He walked up beside her. His masculine scent tantalized and seduced. A swirling ribbon of desire unfurled in her belly and reached straight to her core.

“I meant every time I try to get close, you scurry behind the job description. Do I scare you, Cat?” His voice lowered a dangerous, seductive octave.

His gaze never wavered. Warm eyes she could drown in locked and held with hers. Did he scare her? More than he could imagine.

“Because that’s the last thing I want.”

“Then what do you want, Mr. Montgomery?”

He laughed deep in his throat. “Semantics won’t keep me at a distance. It’s Logan.”

“I...”

“Say it.”

She licked her dry lips. His gaze followed the movement. “Logan,” she murmured more to appease him than to become more intimate.

“Nice. Now, as I was saying... I want to erase that cynicism from those beautiful green eyes. I want to make your dreams come true.”

His words struck Catherine in her heart. Unfortunately, she still didn’t believe he saw her as more than an interesting diversion from the more cultured, more beautifully dressed women at the party. Women who would trip over themselves

for a chance at landing one of the state's most eligible bachelors.

“You want a good time,” she said.

He had the audacity to grin. “That, too.”

She wanted to give in to that handsome face and easy smile, which meant she had to get out of here, to her empty apartment where safety and reality would reassert themselves.

“Logan,” she said, not wanting to give him further reason to believe he affected her. “I think...”

A loud thud cut her off as the closet door slammed shut behind them. She jumped at the unexpected sound.

“Hold that thought.” He touched her lips with one finger. Heat traveled between her mouth and his skin.

A shiver took hold. Desire? Fear? Probably both. Though she liked to flirt, she'd never reacted to a man with such carnal, sensual awareness before.

Before she could think further, he strode to the door and jiggled the door handle. The muted sound of metal hitting the marble floor sounded from outside. He muttered a curse.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing as long as you aren't claustrophobic.” He held the doorknob aloft in his hand. “Looks like the old lady has her own agenda. Not that I mind.”

An uncomfortable feeling arose in the pit of her stomach. “What are you saying?” She eyed the doorknob he held onto and shook her head.

He banged on the door with his fist. “Open up, Gran.”

“What’s your hurry?” Emma called out. “The company’s good, and the way things look, you’ve got plenty of time. I’ve got to find someone in this house who understands hardware. I think I did serious damage.” The click of heels on the floor sounded as she walked away.

“She didn’t,” Catherine said, glaring at the door through narrowed eyes. She wasn’t claustrophobic, but she disliked the feeling of being trapped. Especially with this man.

“She did.” Logan shrugged. “Sorry. She tends to get carried away.”

“*She?*”

“You wouldn’t be suggesting I set you up?” Disbelief and humor lit his gaze. “I’m interested, not desperate. I can get my woman without Gran’s help.”

“*Your woman?*” She swallowed a laugh. “That has a Neanderthal sound to it.”

He shrugged. “I kind of liked it.”

“You would. So, how about breaking down the door, Tarzan?”

“If I give it a shot, will you have that drink with me?”

“You wouldn’t stoop to using your grandmother but bribery is okay?”

“Is that a yes?”

She believed he had nothing to do with their current predicament. The eccentric older woman would definitely pull

a stunt like this. The only question was why. Emma certainly couldn't think Catherine was an acceptable choice for her grandson nor could she believe Logan incapable of getting his own dates.

Speaking of dates, she had a decision to make. The closet, which had seemed so large when she'd first entered, was shrinking by the minute. She couldn't breathe without inhaling the scent of spice and man, an erotic combination that stole her breath and threatened to take her sanity next. One drink in a public place was much safer than hanging out alone with him now.

She glanced at his handsome face and forced a casual shrug. "One drink," she agreed.

She hoped she didn't live to regret those two little words.

Chapter Three

RELIEF AT HER acceptance warred with the steady beat of desire pounding inside him. “Should I be flattered that you accepted?” Logan asked. “Or insulted you want out of here so badly?”

“Neither. I accepted because I’m thirsty. Now, give it your best shot.”

He wouldn’t have an inflated ego as long as Catherine was around. Logan was honest enough to admit he wanted her by his side for awhile. Long enough to get to know the cautious woman with the sassy mouth.

He needed time, but time freely given, not under duress. He eyed the door and slugged it as hard as he could with his shoulder. His bad shoulder. Hell, after years of college baseball, both shoulders were bad, and this one rebelled against his attempted escape. It rolled in the socket and he groaned in pain.

Catherine was by his side in an instant. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault,” he muttered through gritted teeth. He counted to ten and waited for the pain to subside. Since it often popped out in his sleep, Logan was used to the routine. Slowly, the shoulder numbed as the pain eased.

Soft hands reached for his collar. Logan let her slip the jacket off his shoulders. If she wanted to play nurse, he’d let her. He wasn’t proud that he was taking advantage of her

concern, but he doubted he'd have a better chance to catch her with her guard down.

She lowered herself to the floor, her back propped against the wall. "Sit."

Logan lowered himself beside her.

She turned and began working the sore muscles in his arm with her fingertips. The pressure felt so good he groaned in relief. "That feels great. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now, tell me how we ended up like this. What made you think Emma was in here?" Catherine asked.

He leaned his head backward and focused on the rhythmic motion of her fingers pressing through his shirt and into his skin. "The cocktail server who said, 'Your grandmother is waiting for you in the coat closet.' Nothing unusual or sinister about that..." Her fingers pushed deep and eased off, caressed and massaged the sore muscle. "Unless you know my grandmother. Mmm. A little deeper."

She complied. Those fingers worked magic and Logan found himself seduced... by her scent, her touch, by her.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much." As close to perfect as he could get without lying naked beside her.

"Someone should come looking for us any minute," she said.

"If you believe that, you don't know my grandmother."

“Maybe, but there’re plenty of people out there who can handle something as simple as a broken doorknob. The cleaning crew will have no problem fixing the handle.”

“Assuming she asks them to or brings their attention to us, which is doubtful.” He rolled his head to the side and met her gaze. Desire shimmered in her eyes, just as it pummeled inside of him. “We’ve got time.”

“People might want drinks,” she said, but the protest sounded weak.

“Something tells me Emma’s handling things as we speak. Besides, the party was winding down, with the judge holding court, reminding them about the formal breakfast he’s holding in the morning.”

Logan knew this because he’d spent a ridiculous amount of time assuring his father he would *not* be at the affair, he would *not* meet with future supporters, and he most certainly would *not* be at the press announcement next Saturday. He’d have preferred to be in the thick of the party watching Catherine. Instead, he’d been beating his head against a brick wall, just as he had too often as a child.

And from the stubborn glint in the judge’s eye, he hadn’t accepted Logan’s words. Too bad. The older man couldn’t say he hadn’t been warned.

“You always call your father *the judge*?” she asked.

When he called him anything at all, Logan thought. “That’s what he is.”

“He’s also your parent.”

“Who thinks he rules everyone the same way he does his courtroom.”

“And I always thought any father would be preferable to none at all.”

So, she had no father in her life. Some more insight. He stored the knowledge, sensing it was an important facet of Catherine’s nature, a way to breach her defenses.

“Not always. Don’t get me wrong, he’s been there for us... as long as we toe the line.” That was about to change. Edgar Montgomery might have put up with his son’s erratic behavior, as he called it, but only because he believed he’d gain what he wanted in the end. It wouldn’t happen this time, which just might cause the ultimate family rift.

“Who’s us?” Catherine asked.

“Me and my sister, Grace.”

“I have a sister, too. So, tell me what it was like growing up here.” She made a grandiose gesture with one arm. Obviously, *here* meant the Montgomery Estate.

As a general rule, Logan didn’t choose to remember his childhood. He’d already divulged more in this one conversation than he had in the past thirty-one years. Along with the memories came an attached fear he would end up as alone as his old man. No matter how many people his father invited into his home, no matter that his wife trailed his every move, the judge was like an island. He allowed people to get near but never close. Not even his children.

For Catherine, a woman who eyed him and his wealth with obvious suspicion, Logan would dig deep and be honest. “It was lonely,” he admitted.

“That’s sad.” Her hand curled around his and her head eased onto his shoulder.

Stunned, Logan glanced down at their intertwined hands. She’d reached out to him. With the simple truth, he’d begun breaching her well-built defenses. Money and status didn’t impress her.

Honesty did. His respect for Catherine rose.

Pulling herself up to her knees, Catherine faced him, eyes wide, her expression curious. “How could you be lonely with so many people around?” she asked.

“Because no one bothered with us kids... except my grandmother.”

Her smile wrapped around his heart. “I like her.”

“So do I.” And he supposed he owed his grandmother for arranging this get-to-know-you session with Catherine, but he’d still give the old lady a blistering lecture for meddling in his life.

Not that it would do any good.

“So, tell me how you met my grandmother,” he said.

“At a fundraiser we catered in Boston. She wanted more hors d’oeuvres and snuck into the kitchen to get them.”

He burst out laughing. “That sounds like Emma.”

Catherine grinned. “I caught her and we started talking. Next thing I knew, she’d hired me for the Garden Gala.”

He glanced at Catherine and realized he was extremely glad he’d come. “When she’s not meddling, my grandmother is one smart lady.”

“Because she locked us in here?”

“Because she obviously likes you... and so do I.” His gaze locked with hers. Sensual awareness pulsed thick around them.

He cupped his palms around her cheeks, bringing her within kissing distance... and waited. One hint of refusal and he’d let her go. She shook her head and disappointment welled inside him.

He lowered his hands. Her sudden grip on his wrists stopped him. “Don’t.”

“Don’t kiss you or don’t pull away? Because I don’t play games, Cat. I want you and I know you want me.” The sudden hitch in her breathing proved him right.

“What I want and what’s good for me are two different things,” she whispered.

His mouth brushed hers, deliberately light and excruciatingly slow. He simply tasted her without pushing for more. Her fingers curled into his wrists and a purr escaped her lips. Cat, he thought, recalling his grandmother’s use of the endearment, had just earned her nickname.

His restraint was rewarded. She never broke the kiss or the momentum building between them. With this woman, only

patience would get him what he desired—and he believed she was worth it.



CATHERINE LET SENSATION take over. Logan's lips were firm, his touch gentle. His scent enticed her, and his kiss held checked passion along with a respect she'd rarely felt from a man. Beneath the gentleness was a longing she felt, too. As a ribbon of desire coiled tight in her belly, the need to be with him overwhelmed her.

Without warning, the clatter of metal startled her, and she jumped back, breaking their passionate kiss. One that never should have happened. She burrowed into his white shirt, unwilling to face him just yet.

“Sounds like we're being rescued,” he said.

“Sounds like.” She forced herself to move. Ignoring the steady pounding of her heart, she stood, refusing to meet his gaze. She'd lost her head, succumbed to desire, and Lord only knew what would have happened if they hadn't been rescued.

She started for the door but his light touch on her back stopped her. “You didn't do anything wrong, Cat.”

“Who said I did?” she asked defensively. “One kiss isn't such a big deal.”

He raised an eyebrow. “One kiss?”

“Unless you can't count.”

A slight grin tugged at his lips. “Neither one of us came up for air, so I'll give you that one.”

Heat rose to her cheeks. “A real gentleman wouldn’t have mentioned that.”

“Whoever said I was a gentleman?” He touched the pad of his thumb to her lower lip.

Her entire body shook in reaction. She wrapped her arms around her waist, but the effort at self-protection came too late.

“I started it, Cat, and I wish I could say I was sorry. But I won’t.”

With that statement, he preceded her to the door. She stared at his retreating back and wondered how things had gotten so out of hand. She glanced down at her shaking hands and closed her eyes against the unfulfilled sexual energy still pulsing through her.

She wished lust was all she felt for Logan Montgomery.

Sex was purely physical and easy to leave behind. Logan wasn’t. She’d seen the real man beneath the power suit and playboy charm. She’d caught a glimpse of a lonely little boy growing up in a mausoleum, much like she’d been a lonely child in a tenement apartment. Class differences had vanished. To make matters worse, she’d discovered she liked him. Really liked him. Somewhere between walking into this closet and walking out, *he* had begun to matter. Knowing the inevitable conclusion, the truth chilled her deep inside.

She stared beyond Logan’s broad shoulders to the closet door and listened to the sounds of rescue. Seconds later, the hinges were off and the entire door had been removed. Without glancing in his direction again, she slid past him and

headed for safety. The bright glare of the crystal chandelier hit her hard and she blinked until her eyes adjusted.

Catherine glanced around.

“She wouldn’t dare show her face now,” Logan’s voice sounded from behind her.

It didn’t surprise her that he’d read her mind.

“Gran’s probably upstairs hiding,” he said.

While he turned to thank their rescuers—the cleaning crew, as she had predicted—she pulled herself together. By the time he’d returned to her, she was composed again. Until she caught a glimpse of the makeup stain on the once-white collar of his dress shirt.

She cleared her throat. “Well.”

He grinned. “Well.”

“Goodbye.” Feeling ridiculous, she held out her hand.

His warm fingers wrapped around hers. “Not so fast, Cat.” Her heart tripped at the shortened name. “You’re forgetting something,” he said.

“Such as?”

“You owe me a drink, and I’d have sworn you were a woman of your word.”

Bantering and sparring. Now she was back on familiar ground. Her tension eased. “You didn’t get us out of there,” she reminded him.

“And I didn’t have to. I said I’d give that door a shot and I did.” He rubbed his shoulder as a reminder and a blatant attempt to induce guilt.

He was right. Semantics, as he’d called them earlier, had indeed tripped her up. She owed him one drink, but thank the good Lord, it wouldn’t be now. At least she’d have a chance to regroup and firmly remind herself that whatever was going on between them was just a fluke.

She glanced down at her work uniform. “I’d rather not go anywhere dressed like this.”

“You look good to me.” Warm eyes met hers and he extended his hand. “Come with me. You can trust me, Cat.”

She stared into those seductive brown eyes. Trust him? She nearly laughed aloud. Hadn’t her father said the same thing to her mother the night before he’d walked out for good? If Catherine agreed, would she end up seduced and abandoned the next day? And why was a tiny voice in her head shouting this man was worth the risk?

What was it about good-looking men that made them think they could have the world at their feet with raw sex appeal alone? She eyed him warily. “I can’t go anywhere with you. The company van is parked outside—I can’t leave it here.”

“Bet you it’s not. Double or nothing. If I’m wrong, you’re free to go. If I’m right, it’s drinks *and dinner*.”

She had him this time. “That’s a safe enough bet.” She patted the outside pockets of her black skirt, then dipped her

hand inside. She dangled the van's keys in midair. Five more minutes in his company then she'd be on her way home.

Later, she'd deal with the lingering disappointment and sexual humming that still teased her senses. Later, she'd ponder the unfairness of fate throwing a perfect man into her less-than-perfect life.

Later. When she was alone.

"Truck or no truck. Time to find out." Logan reached out. He made a grab for the keys but captured her hand instead.

His fingers wrapped around hers. Warm and trusting. The words came to her in a rush. She shook her head. Sexual awareness had to be short-circuiting her brain. Why else would a woman who'd promised herself she wouldn't fall into a man's trap be thinking warm and fuzzy thoughts about someone so far out of reach?

She followed him through the house and finally outside. The rain, which had held off for the duration of the party, had released itself at last. Logan wrapped his arm securely around her back as he led her toward the back of the house where the cars were parked. She resented his easy manner and the bond he'd managed to cement with her in so short a time. Because truck or no truck, a man from Logan Montgomery's world wouldn't want any more from Catherine Luck than a fast tumble and a quick goodbye.

◇ ◇ ◇

LOGAN TURNED UP the heat in the Jeep. Catherine sat in the seat beside him, her slicker wrapped tightly around her. She stared

out the window into the night. The rain had picked up a furious pace, splattering the windshield so hard and fast even the wipers couldn't keep up. Logan was forced to squint to see beyond the steadily falling sheets.

Silence still reigned beside him. He glanced to his right. "Being mad isn't going to help."

"I'm not mad. I'm furious."

"At?"

"Your grandmother, to start. My manager, to finish."

"You heard the staff. Emma assured them you'd taken a tour of the house and she'd promised you a ride home, which I'm providing... just as she'd planned," he muttered under his breath.

What he didn't need right now was a meddling grandmother with her own agenda. Not when this woman trusted so little as it was. He wanted her to take him in, into her confidence... into her bed.

Man, was he in trouble.

"So, this detour wasn't on the agenda?" she asked.

"There was no agenda, at least not on my part." And no more games, either. As much as he wanted more time with her, she obviously preferred to go home. Alone. Only a dick would force his attentions on an unwilling woman.

He gripped the steering wheel between his fists as he fought increasingly deep puddles of rain on the otherwise slick

roads, then slowed the car down even more. “Which way?” he asked.

“You ought to know.”

He eased the vehicle over to the shoulder and draped one arm over the wheel. “I’m taking you home, Cat.”

Quiet enveloped them once more.

She met his gaze, surprise etched in her features. “Why?”

“You’re obviously not here willingly. I thought you’d relax, but I was wrong. I wouldn’t want to force you to spend any more time in my company than is absolutely necessary.”

She eyed him warily, disbelief emanating from her in waves. “Are you always such a gentleman, or is this an act for my benefit?”

He shrugged. “Are you always such a cynic about people’s motives?”

“Answering a question with a question,” she said. “A cop or a lawyer?”

“Lawyer, and we’re sharks by reputation, so don’t go getting any soft ideas about me.” He’d never been a lapdog for any woman before, and though he’d probably roll over and beg for her, he wasn’t about to admit that aloud. Just the thought had him squirming in his seat.

She laughed. “There are a lot of words I’d use to describe you, Logan Montgomery, and soft isn’t one of them.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he muttered. With every inhale of her subtle scent, his pants grew tighter.

A fierce blush stained her cheeks. He liked the feminine side that showed her vulnerability. Damn. He had to get the hell out of here. “Like I said earlier, I’m interested, not desperate.”

The low murmur of voices in the background reminded him the radio was on and he raised the volume a couple of notches. Just in time, he caught the weather report warning of flash floods and dangerous wind and lightning, especially near the ocean.

He lowered the radio. “Directions?” he prodded, wanting to get her home safely.

The crisp ping of rain hitting the windshield sounded around them, proof that, for once, the weatherman was on target. If they didn’t get going soon, the driving would be even more treacherous than it already was. Even if he got her home, wherever home was, he wouldn’t make it back again.

He glanced at her wary expression and doubted she would offer her hospitality. Not that he blamed her. After his grandmother’s shenanigans, Catherine probably wouldn’t even lend the use of her floor as a makeshift bed. He’d be forced to take a motel room he preferred not to waste his money on.

Living off his salary as a public defender hadn’t been a problem until he’d decided to buy and renovate his new home—make that his old home that needed extensive work. The solitude and view of the ocean made living on a shoestring budget worthwhile. No way he’d sacrifice his independence by living off the trust set up for him as a child.

He glanced at his passenger. “I’d like to get you home dry and in one piece, Cat.”

She sighed, but the beginnings of an unexpected smile fought its way to her lips. “What’s so amusing?” he asked.

“You make it extremely hard to dislike you.”

He reached out and stroked his hand down her soft cheek. “That wasn’t my point... but I can’t say I’m disappointed.”



CATHERINE CURLED HER knees onto the seat as she studied the man beside her. She’d thought him charming, but that was an understatement. Appealing might be a better word. He knew how to turn a situation to his advantage without making her feel as if she’d been manipulated. Just when she’d gathered her defenses against his polished charm and good looks, he struck with deadly accuracy. He acted out of respect for her well-being and concern for her wishes. She still wasn’t sure she could trust him. Worse, she wasn’t sure she could trust herself.

He eased the car back onto the wet road. “So, where do you live, anyway?” he asked.

“Downtown Boston.”

He groaned. “That’s nearly an hour from here.”

“That’s why I’d planned on staying at my sister’s tonight.”

The car ahead of them made a sudden stop and he swerved to avoid hitting the vehicle. The Jeep hydroplaned across the slick roads, nearly sending them into a skid. She gripped the

dashboard with both hands. He swore under his breath, then maneuvered them back with more skill than she would have possessed. “You okay?” he asked.

“Fine.” She let out a shaky breath. No way they’d make it as far as her sister’s house—a good half hour from here, Catherine thought. Not in this weather.

She bit the inside of her cheek. Why was fate conspiring to keep her with a man who was so obviously wrong for her? Though he’d breached her reserve, she had lived long enough to understand there were still social classes that couldn’t be crossed into.

“My place is ten minutes from here. How far is your sister’s?” Logan asked.

“Too far,” she muttered.

He raised an eyebrow while keeping his gaze on the road. “My place it is.”

Catherine remained silent. There wasn’t much to say. She’d take a look at his expensive house and valuable accessories and know for certain they had nothing in common besides lust. He’d realize the same thing.

“Where are we headed, exactly?” she asked.

“A small cottage on the beach. Another couple of minutes tops.”

“Small cottage?” She laughed aloud. “I can’t wait to see it.” Catherine eased back in her seat, anticipation warring with apprehension. As much as she couldn’t help but look forward to the few more hours they’d share, she knew one glimpse at

his *small cottage* would cement the truth in her mind. They didn't stand a chance.

They made the rest of the trip in silence. Catherine didn't want to risk another near-accident by distracting Logan, and he seemed engrossed in his driving. He pulled onto a private driveway that ran parallel to the beach. At the far end stood a true beachfront home.

A Cape-styled cottage, it boasted typical New England charm with a single peak and ample windows but was smaller than Catherine had imagined. Much smaller, especially when compared with the Montgomery Estate.

He slowed the car to a stop and shut the ignition. Without the sound of the engine, the rain pelted loud and clear against the windshield.

"It's humble but it's home."

A traditional Cape home right on the ocean, it was cozy and comforting, tempting and alluring. Like the man himself. She barely knew him, but she sensed she was in deep. She let out a long breath. *Catherine Ann, you are probably in big trouble.*

"Like it?" he asked.

"It's incredible," she murmured.

Logan glanced up toward the black sky and torrential sheets of rain. "I hope you mean it..." His potent gaze strayed to hers. "Because if the rain keeps up at this pace, we could be stranded. Beach roads flood pretty quickly around here."

“I could think of worse things,” she said, her voice unusually thick. She bit down on her lower lip. Temptation to turn the radio back on warred with the desire to close off the outside world for as long as she could. Even if she did hear the weather report again, nothing would change whether they’d be stranded together or not.

Fate had just handed over her heart’s secret desire. A night alone with Logan Montgomery—if she was brave enough to take it. She shut her eyes and listened to the heavy sound of the rain beating against the windshield in cadence to the rapid pounding of her heart. In time to the building crescendo of need inside her.

A crash of thunder startled her, and she jumped in her seat. From their parked position far from the house, Catherine had a good view of the ocean and the waves crashing fast and furious against the shore. Having grown up in the city and with little time for trips to the beach, the notion of the undertow had always both frightened and intrigued her.

The angry waves rolled forward onto the sand, then retreated without warning. Sort of like the ebb and flow of desire between a man and a woman, she thought, and a violent tremor shook her body.

He placed a warm hand on her shoulder. “You okay?” he asked.

He obviously meant to reassure, but his touch had the opposite effect and sent her senses soaring. She needed to get out of this car and make a grab for sanity. “Can you pull a little closer?” she asked.

“I wish.” He slung one arm over the back of her seat. “Here, we’re on paved road. Beyond us is mud.”

She followed his gaze and stared out the window. Although visibility was awful, she realized he was right. “Okay. I’m a good sport. They say rainwater’s good for the skin and fresh air is even better for the soul. And besides, I’m wearing sneakers.”

He grinned. “That’s the spirit. I’d offer to race you, but the terrain can get pretty slippery when wet.” He got out of the car and came around her side to help her out. She held onto his hand. “Ready?” he asked.

Another crash of thunder broke the monotony of the rain and was followed by an unexpected flash of lightning. Her heart leaped in her chest. “I’m ready.”

The run for the house wasn’t easy. She slogged through puddles, slipped on mud, and held onto Logan’s hand, nearly taking him down more than once. The rain poured on them hard and left them soaked. But by the time they reached the house, Catherine wasn’t miserable—she was laughing.

Just before Logan put the key into the lock, he paused and met her gaze. An unexpected, electrical connection sizzled between them, and in that moment, Catherine knew.

Trouble waited just inside the door.

Chapter Four

THE STORM RAGING outside was nothing compared to the one wreaking havoc inside of Catherine. She stepped inside the house and found both a haven from the rain and a look into Logan's soul.

“Hang on a second. I'll be right back.” He left Catherine standing in a warm and cozy den.

The room, like the house, offered a reflection of the man. The scarred, wood-paneled walls were as masculine as Logan, as welcoming as his personality. A beat-up brown leather sofa and old wood furniture lent a comfortable charm to the rustic interior of the house.

Although she lived in a one-bedroom apartment, she and Logan obviously shared a deep longing for hearth and home because the warm brown tones and coziness in many ways matched her personal taste and style. In fact, any one of her animal-print area rugs, throw blankets, or pillows would add spice and a bit of life to the already near-perfect atmosphere.

No formal entryways, marble floors, or crystal chandeliers in this home. And judging from the relaxed atmosphere, that's what it was—a home, lacking in the luxury known and loved by the rest of the Montgomery clan. What kind of statement did Logan think he was making living in a place like this? Was he being deliberately contrary toward his family, or did he genuinely love the smell of the ocean and the cabin's earthy appeal?

She couldn't help but wonder what his family thought of his place of residence. She'd bet very few family dinners were held here, and the thought made her sad. Though she hadn't had a traditional upbringing either, she'd sensed Logan longed for one the same way she did.

"Towel?" He reappeared with two in his hand.

"Thanks." He tossed one her way. Catherine peeled off her slicker and glanced around for a closet or someplace to put her jacket.

"I'll take it," he said, then hung her coat on a wooden coat stand already laden with more jackets than it could probably handle. "Easier than tossing them on the couch," he said with a grin.

A smile tugged at her lips. "You're a man. I'm amazed they make it as far as a coat hook."

"You shouldn't stereotype someone before you get to know them," he said, warm humor in his voice. "They might just end up surprising you."

Was he throwing out a challenge, waiting for her to back away? If so, he'd be disappointed. She'd come this far, and Catherine intended to see things through, wherever they led. She wasn't sure when her decision had been made, but a rush of excitement flooded her veins.

She licked her dry lips. "So, you're neat. I'm impressed," she murmured.

"I should hope so," he said in a deep voice. "Besides, some things just weren't permitted while I was growing up. Leaving

a trail of clothes behind me was one of them.” He shrugged. “Old habits die hard, I guess.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t have help to pick up after you.”

“Of course, I did. But one hit upside the head by Emma and I was cured of that nasty habit for life.”

The vision was absurd, yet Catherine believed him. Emma spoke her mind and got what she wanted. A tremor rippled through her as she realized the implications—Logan had been raised by his grandmother. He, too, spoke his mind. And she sensed he also got what he wanted.

“Besides,” he said, “Emma was right.” The light and laughter in his eyes spoke of his love for his grandmother and Catherine’s respect for Logan grew. How could she not like a man with the ability to laugh at himself? A man who humored an old woman and wasn’t ashamed to let his love for her shine through.

“The help had their hands full catering to my parents. They didn’t need two spoiled kids added to the mix.”

“So, you also aren’t afraid to admit when you’re wrong.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I told you, I’m unique,” he said with a grin. “And about me being wrong? It doesn’t happen all that often.”

“Arrogance is a male quality I’ve come across often.”

“I said I was unique, but I never denied being male.”

As if she needed any reminders. Catherine gripped the soft towel tightly in her hand. “Emma kept you grounded, didn’t

she?" she asked, deliberately changing the subject.

"You bet she did," he said, drying his hair as he spoke. When he finished, he draped the towel over his broad shoulders.

That simple gesture was all it took to bring her reaction to him flooding back. His tie hung loosely around his neck and he'd opened the restricting collar of his shirt. His hair, damp and disheveled, created a rumpled appearance, making him look even sexier than he had earlier. Catherine hadn't thought he could get any better. She'd been wrong.

Her gaze locked with his. Those dark, compelling eyes lingered on her in what felt like a heated caress. Yet he hadn't lifted a hand, hadn't touched any part of her body. It was only a matter of time.

Silence grew thick around them, but she couldn't bring herself to glance away. Just looking at Logan caused a fluttering sensation in her stomach and a delicious throbbing need between her thighs. He stepped closer and her pulse kicked into high gear. Her heart rate soared. His steady gaze never veered from hers as he eased the towel out of her shaking hands and walked around until he stood behind her.

She could no longer see him, but she couldn't mistake his presence. His body heat melded with hers and his breathing became a sexy, seductive hum in her ear. Without warning, the warm towel draped over her head and his strong hands began a rhythmic motion as he dried her hair and kneaded her scalp. Unable to help herself, she closed her eyes and leaned back into the hard planes of his chest.

No sooner did she shut her eyes than her other senses took over. The sound of the rain beating against the house in torrential, windswept sheets sounded loud in her ears. Or was it her heartbeat she heard so strongly? The need she felt was stronger than anything she'd experienced before.

Sensation took over. The light tugging at her scalp found an answering pull in other areas of her body. His arms rested on her shoulders, his hands worked at her hair—and her breasts grew heavy as an erotic pull began deep in her stomach, sending shock waves deeper, lower...

A purring noise startled her out of her sensual daydream and Catherine was shocked to realize the sound had come from her. An unexpected crack of thunder followed, and she jumped back, out of his reach.

Her heart beat fast and furious. It wasn't fear of the storm driving her now but unbounded desire. She shook with unrestrained need. A need so strong it both consumed and unnerved her. "I can take it from here," she said.

"Suit yourself, but first..." He reached for the end of the towel. His ragged breathing gave her a sense of comfort. The desire wasn't one-sided. He wiped down her face with gentle pats that shouldn't have felt sexy but did.

"Mascara," he explained, revealing black stains on the pale towel.

"Oh." She bit down on her lower lip. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." As his darkened gaze met hers, Catherine knew exactly what he meant.

“Why don’t you get out of those wet clothes?” he asked.

She tipped her head to one side. “Don’t you think you’re rushing things?”

He grinned. “I didn’t say *I’d* get you out of those clothes, though I could be persuaded.”

“You’re bad,” she said, unable to hold back the laughter.

“Care to find out just how bad?” Before she could formulate a comeback, he reached for her hand. “Come on. Those clothes are wet and you must be freezing. I’m sure I can scrounge up a pair of drawstring sweats for you.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

Five minutes later, she found herself alone in a small bathroom with an old-fashioned tub and an even older shower. Dry clothes sat on the vanity. Logan’s clothes.

She picked up the soft sweats and held them to her face. She breathed in deeply. The clothes smelled clean and fresh but they also held the slightest hint of Logan’s scent. Catherine didn’t know if the masculine scent was real or existed only in her imagination, but it didn’t matter. The sensual aura of spicy aftershave affected her either way.

She was in his home, wearing his clothes, and allowing herself to be emotionally seduced—as much by his contradictions as by the man himself. Nothing was as it should be.

Logan wasn’t as artificial and stuffy as the Montgomery name and tradition dictated he ought to be. He shouldn’t be interested in a woman outside his world, yet after seeing his

home, Catherine wasn't sure *what* world Logan inhabited. Which meant she wasn't sure what kind of allure she held for him. At this point, she could almost believe in impossible dreams.

Dangerous, she thought. But so very tempting.

She flipped on the shower faucets. Time for grounding herself. He might live here, but given the luxury with which he'd grown up and the people with whom he was raised, he had to have an ulterior motive, one that might just include her. And even if he was sincere, the novelty of a woman like Catherine would wear off fast for a man with the name Montgomery.

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THE SHOWER WATER sounded unnaturally loud in the small cottage. Logan should have been surprised he could distinguish the shower noise over the pounding wind and rain outside. He wasn't. Not when Catherine was in the next room, water running down her supple curves. He braced his hands against the kitchen counter, lowered his head, and let out a slow groan.

He'd had his hands in her hair and she'd sighed like he was inside her body. She was so responsive to the simplest touch, it was enough to drive him mad. She was also losing her inhibitions around him. But he had to take it slow to avoid losing any headway he'd made.

The shower water stopped, leaving him in silence. He had the whole night ahead of him to win her trust... and maybe more. A lot more, he hoped. But her trust was more important

than getting her into bed. And that in itself was a warning he knew he'd better heed.

“Hi,” Catherine said.

“Hi, yourself.” Logan turned from where he'd been scrounging through the refrigerator and his breath caught in his throat.

Blond hair that had been tied up in a knot above her head now curled in damp strands around her makeup-free face. Her skin was nearly flawless, fair and translucent, touched by an endearing pink flush on her cheeks. The curves that had been so obvious earlier were now hidden by soft cotton. She'd had to roll the sleeves more than a few times and the elastic bottom of each pant leg. The effect was a startling blend of sweetness and vulnerability, two words he hadn't associated with this woman before now.

He'd seen her dressed for work. He'd seen her wet and disheveled from a run in the rain. And though he'd found her more desirable with each transformation, this one left him speechless. Because the soft and approachable woman wearing *his* clothes, standing in *his* kitchen, touched his heart.

“Can I help?” she asked. “I know my way around the kitchen.”

“I think you proved that at the party earlier,” he said, studying her. “You're special, Cat. Or you wouldn't be here.”

A blush rose to her cheeks. “Cut that out before you embarrass me.”

“A woman who doesn’t go looking for compliments. Now that’s unusual.”

She shrugged. “Sounds to me like you know the wrong women.”

“But at least I’ve found the right one. Now, I know catering is your business. How did you get the hands-on experience behind the scenes as well?”

She pushed up the rolled sleeves only to have them fall down again. “I have years of restaurant experience behind me, and I’m not talking just washing dishes.”

“We have all night for you to fill me in. Why don’t you sit and let me handle things?”

Catherine shrugged and headed for a chair by the kitchen table. “You can cook. I’m impressed.”

“I hate to disillusion you, but I have no choice.” He reached inside the refrigerator and came out with a covered casserole dish. “This lasagna is the best Emma’s chef can prepare,” he said with a laugh.

Catherine laid a hand over her heart. “You’re destroying my fantasies.”

He shook his head, then walked over to where she sat. Bracing his hands on the arms of her chair, he leaned so close he could taste her—if he chose. Sensing she was not yet ready, he refrained. “I’m not going to destroy your fantasies, Cat. I’m going to make them come true.”

Before she could blink, he rose and strode back to the lasagna on the counter. Distance gave him a chance to cool off

before he acted against common sense and blew things for sure.

“At least you have Emma. She makes sure you don’t starve,” Catherine said.

“Embarrassing to admit, but yes. What do you know about the public defender’s office hours?” he asked as he took the foil wrap off the casserole dish.

“Not much.”

“Then let me fill you in.” Details of his own life might encourage her to reveal facts of her own, and Logan wanted to know everything about her. “I’m on call three nights a week and one weekend a month for courtroom duty. When I’m not there or at the office, I’m bringing home files to work on. There’s not much free time for cooking, and I like to eat.” He shrugged. “I may turn my back on plenty of Montgomery family rituals, but I’d never turn away a free meal,” he said with a grin.

“I’ll remember that.” An intriguing gleam lit her green eyes. She rested her chin on her hands. “It’s nice you have Emma to look out for you.”

“You’re right.” He placed the casserole inside the microwave, his only concession to new appliances when he’d moved in.

“So, with hours like that, tell me why you’d choose the public defender’s office.”

“As opposed to some high-powered law firm in Boston?” he asked, the edge in his voice unmistakable. “One that helps

institutions, not people? One the judge handpicked based on reputation?” His father would have pulled whatever strings possible to settle Logan into a position of power and prestige, regardless of what Logan wanted out of his life and career. As a result, Logan couldn’t hide the disgust he felt for the direction the judge wanted his son’s career to take.

At his biting tone, she stiffened in her chair. “I meant as opposed to single practice, or in-house counsel. Or maybe setting up a stand on the street and giving advice out for a quarter. Clearly I hit a nerve.”

“In a word, yes.” He cursed his inability to cover his frustration with his father and hated that he’d taken it out on her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to take my issues with my father out on you.”

Her expression softened. “I didn’t mean to tread on sensitive ground. Or to insult you. I’m just surprised at the road you’ve taken.”

“Tell me something. What’s the real reason my career choice surprises you? Is it because you can’t picture me helping the downtrodden or because anyone with the name Montgomery should be a self-serving snob?” He joined her at the wooden table.

Reaching his hand across the Formica top, he opened his fist palm-upward in a silent signal for her to place her hand in his. “I wouldn’t judge you based on appearances,” he said.

“And you’d appreciate it if I did the same for you.” A whisper of a smile touched her lips. “I think you caught me revealing my bias against the upper class.”

“Instead of judging me based on what you know about me.”

She glanced at his hand extended in invitation. “But I hardly know you.”

“Oh, I think you do.” He kept his palm faceup and never let his gaze stray from hers. “Trust *me*.”

She hesitated. To Logan, those seconds felt like an eternity, until finally, she joined her hand with his.

Soft and smooth, her skin felt like silk to his touch. Enjoying the feel of her, he brushed his thumb over the pulse point in her wrist. She merely stared, her eyes glittering like emeralds as she waited for his next move.

“So, tell me about yourself.”

She blinked, obviously startled by his question.

But Logan had his reasons. He didn't plan on wasting one minute of the time he had her to himself. “Why don't you start with your family?” he asked when she didn't answer right away.

She shrugged. “Not much to tell. Like you, I have a sister. We share the running of the business, but right now, she's pregnant and on bed rest. She's married to an arrogant cop.” Her grin was at odds with her choice of words. Obviously, she didn't dislike the man as much as she proclaimed.

“Anyone else?”

She shook her head. “My mom died years ago, and Dad walked out when we were young. I don't even remember him.

And then I had an aunt and uncle but they..." Catherine paused, and Logan sensed she was debating revealing her family history. "They died last year."

He didn't blame her for keeping quiet. Emma's revelations about her uncle probably weren't something Catherine considered first-date conversation. He wasn't bothered. She'd have plenty of time to learn to trust and confide in him.

"That's a lot of loss," he said.

She shrugged. "It's life."

He wondered how much of that cavalier attitude had been shaped by necessity, how much by being so alone. "Is your sister older or younger?"

"Kayla's younger by only ten months but she's the more centered sister."

He narrowed his eyes. Logan didn't like the hint of self-criticism in her words. "Something tells me you're not giving yourself enough credit."

She cocked her head to the side. "I think I know myself better than you."

He glanced down at the hand he still held in his. He turned her hand palm upward and traced the fine lines in her skin. A subtle tremor shot through her and her body visibly shook in reaction.

He smiled, pleased. "Maybe so. But I'd like to know you as well as you know yourself. And I just watched you cater an entire party under stressful conditions—successfully, I might

add. So, putting yourself second to your sister doesn't cut it for me."

"There's a difference between putting yourself second and knowing your strengths and weaknesses. The only way to be successful in life is to know yourself. Inside and out."

"You impress me, Ms. Luck."

She grinned. "Thank you, Mr. Montgomery."

"It's Logan, remember?"

Catherine remembered. Every minute inside that closet was etched in her memory. She licked her dry lips, and his gaze followed the unconscious movement.

"Now, care to tell me why a party that had the guests raving had you so uptight?"



CATHERINE'S EMOTIONS WARRED inside her. Pleasure that Logan approved of her job performance fought with wariness of his motives for complimenting her. Alone in his house, seduction couldn't be far from his mind. Heaven knows it wasn't far from hers.

He held her hand in a gentle yet strong and self-assured grip. That light touch alone sent her senses soaring. "I cater parties for a living. This one wasn't any more stressful than most."

As a master of the flippant comeback, Catherine found herself at a sudden loss. She'd never been so flustered before, which said much about her growing feelings for Logan. She

didn't like lying to him, and yet she couldn't bring herself to admit his father's disapproval had tainted an otherwise successful day. Or that she feared he'd blacklist her company instead of recommending it.

"I don't believe you."

A grin caught hold despite her negative thoughts. "I didn't think you would. But I do appreciate your faith in me—I mean, my abilities."

"Easy to have faith when it's been earned."

His cell phone rang, saving her from having to answer. Logan shot her a regretful look before easing his hand from hers. She felt the glide of his rougher skin as it slid away, and she most definitely felt the loss.

He walked across the room, a confidence to his stride that would be hard to miss. Catherine sighed. He was a man with presence and enough sex appeal to make a woman feel alive. Cherished.

He picked his cell on the third ring. "Hello." He hesitated a beat. "Yes, Gran, I got Cat home fine." He paused. "Whose home?" Logan glanced at her and winked. "Whose home do you think?" he asked. "Don't worry, okay? She's home safe and sound. We both are."

Catherine listened as Logan humored his grandmother while protecting her privacy. She appreciated his discretion and almost envied him the older woman's strength and love. She'd never had someone that stable to rely on unless she

counted her sister. Catherine smiled. At least she could always count on Kayla.

“No, I don’t want to talk to the judge.” Logan’s voice drew her back to the present. “Gran? I said no. Tell him... Hello, Dad.”

Catherine stifled a groan. The last thing she needed was a reminder of their differences, not when they seemed so minimal when they were together. His father, the infamous Judge Montgomery, managed to make her feel insecure by his very presence in Logan’s life.

“No. No breakfast tomorrow. I won’t be hungry.”

Catherine had to laugh.

“Running for mayor? I plan to be too worn out to run anywhere tomorrow. I have to go... No. I’m hanging up now. Bye.” Logan looked at the screen and disconnected the call before his father could possibly respond.

He met Catherine’s gaze with an amused one of his own. “Emma’s golden rule. If you tell someone you’re hanging up, they haven’t been hung up on,” he explained with a grin.

“I suppose I should remember that.”

“Might come in handy sometime,” he agreed.

“Your grandmother is a piece of work.” Still, Catherine couldn’t help but like the older woman. The more she learned about Logan’s childhood and his relationship with Emma, the more her respect for the woman grew. If Logan was a decent man, and Catherine sensed the answer was a resounding yes, then Emma deserved the credit.

Logan nodded. “She likes to think so. Keeps her young and healthy in here.” He tapped his head. “And keeps me on my toes.”

Catherine agreed with him there. “She locked us in the coat closet. I’d say you have your hands full staying one step ahead of her.”

“Sometimes it’s not worth the effort. After all, she got the upper hand today, and look where it got us.” His heavy-lidded gaze strayed to hers. His eyes held warmth and a signal she couldn’t possibly mistake.

“And where would that be?”

“Alone, together, if you want us to be.”

So, the next move was up to her. She shouldn’t be surprised. Logan had been a gentleman from the first moment they’d met. He wouldn’t stop just because he had her alone in his home. If anything, in the past couple of hours he’d become more sensitive to her feelings.

He offered Catherine many things she’d never received before—respect, admiration, and a sense of acceptance. That he desired her went without saying. That he’d let her control what, if anything, happened between them put him in a class by himself.

She chuckled. He already was.

“The choice is yours, Cat.” His husky voice was deep and warm, comforting like a friend and seductive like a lover’s caress. She shivered at the thought.

Silence stretched between them until she couldn't stand the strain. There was nothing holding Catherine back from being with Logan except...

The loud beeps of the microwave announced that dinner was ready—and saved Catherine from herself, at least for now.

Chapter Five

CATHERINE SAT ON the couch browsing social media on her phone. The backside of the den had many windows, offering a magnificent view of the ocean. The sound of the steady rain along with that of the waves crashing onto shore and rolling back again sent her senses reeling. She'd always loved the rain and the heavy rhythmic sounds.

She closed her eyes and the sounds became even stronger; so did the pulsing within her. Her desire for Logan couldn't be denied. She squeezed her legs tight and rolling waves of pleasure crested and ebbed, just like the water on the beach. Just like the pleasure she'd find by being with Logan, his body inside hers, finding the perfect rhythm, rocking together until the crescendo became the ultimate peak of pleasure.

She forced her eyes open and realized she was shaking with need. A glance back toward the kitchen told her she was still alone. Considering she could bring herself to the edge with daydreams of the man, Catherine knew she was in trouble. Better to concentrate on dessert, she thought. The edible kind.

Logan had promised to cook his favorite dessert, one that was handmade, not prepared by Emma's chef. But he wouldn't let her watch. By the time she'd exhausted her Facebook feed, Catherine had cooled her body off to a respectable level. But she couldn't stand to be alone with her erotic thoughts anymore.

She tiptoed to the kitchen and peeked inside. The room itself was old, the appliances dated, but the dark wood cabinets had appeal and potential, and she was sure they'd be gorgeous once they were refinished as Logan planned. He pattered around the kitchen, muttering aloud. She couldn't catch a glimpse of what he was making, and to walk inside would be to risk getting caught.

She took one silent step backward when an unexpected flash of lightning flickered from the windows behind her, followed by the loudest crash of thunder yet.

Startled, Catherine shrieked and Logan whirled around.

He raised an amused eyebrow. "Don't tell me. You're afraid of the storm and came seeking comfort."

She rolled her eyes, knowing she'd been had. "I give. You caught me red-handed."

"You're a bad girl, Cat. Now, turn around and wait in the den. I'll be out in a second. Surely you can wait that long?" he asked with a charming grin.

"I'll manage somehow." She shook her head. "Me, banished from the kitchen. Who'd ever believe it," she muttered.

His cell rang. "Can you grab that?" he asked before she'd headed into the other room.

She picked up his cell on the counter. "Logan Montgomery's cabin on the ocean. Who may I say is calling?"

Emma's distinctive chuckle was her immediate response. "*She's home safe and sound,*" Emma said in a baritone

imitation of Logan. “Did he really think I’d buy that line? His father may fall for that dry wit, but no way can he get anything past me.”

Catherine laughed, surprisingly not the least bit embarrassed to be caught by Emma at Logan’s place. “I *am* home safe and sound. It’s just not my home.”

“Minor point. At least you’re dry and out of the storm.”

“I’m out of the closet, too, no thanks to you.”

Emma made a *tsking* sound. “They don’t make those doorknobs like they used to. The sucker just came off in my hand. Imagine that.”

Logan glanced at her. “Keep Emma on the phone. I have a few words to say on that subject, too,” he said.

“Emma? Logan would like to speak to...”

“My weekly card game awaits. I have to run.”

“But...”

“I’m hanging up now,” Emma said before doing just that.

Catherine stared at the cell in her hand, then glanced up at Logan. “Weekly card game?” she asked. “On the same night as a huge party? Doesn’t seem plausible to me.”

He placed the tray down by the fireplace. “Solitaire on the iPad I bought her,” he explained and rolled his eyes, laughter dancing in his gaze. “She’s a master at avoidance. Ready for dessert?” he asked, picking up a tray.

“Ready to sample your culinary talents, you mean?” They walked to the den and Catherine sat on her knees as Logan

moved the tray to a low table by the couch.

She leaned forward and glanced at two glass holders containing what looked like... She leaned closer and sniffed. “Chocolate pudding?” she asked.

“Only *the* best chocolate pudding you’ve ever had.” He dipped a spoon into the creamy dessert and held it out for her to taste.

She opened her mouth and Logan placed the spoon inside, his gaze never leaving her lips. Catherine’s body heated up all over again. She closed her eyes and swallowed the delicious chocolate confection.

“Yum.” She opened her eyes to find Logan still staring. His intensity had her shaking with need and anticipation all over again. She licked her lips, tasting the chocolate again. “Jell-O brand?” she asked, searching for ordinary conversation to calm down her body.

He placed a hand over his heart. “Would I serve such an extraordinary woman such an ordinary dessert? You wound me. Hell, you don’t give me enough credit, Cat.” He hesitated only an instant before caving. “It’s Jell-O,” he muttered.

She grinned. “It’s my absolute favorite dessert, too. When I was in culinary school, they used to tease me all the time that for someone with the ability to whip up the most intricate desserts, I had the taste of a peasant.”

“Did you just say culinary school?”

She grinned. “Yup.”

“I made Jell-O instant pudding for an expert?”

“Don’t worry. I know this was last minute and nothing’s easier than milk and mix from a box. I don’t expect anything like tiramisu until the second date, at least.” She glanced over. “What’s the matter? You look green.”

“Wounded is more like it. My ego is a fragile thing.”

She laughed and finished off her pudding in a couple of healthy spoonfuls. “That was *the* best pudding I’ve ever eaten. I don’t think even chocolate mousse can compare.” Giggling, Catherine continued. “Your talent in the kitchen is unsurpassed. I—”

He cut her off by swiping a finger across her lips. His touch was electric and her laughter came to a sudden halt.

“You had pudding on your lips. See?” He held up his chocolate-smearred finger.

She nodded, unable to speak, somehow knowing what would happen next. He met her gaze. His brown eyes, the color of the rich pudding, glittered with desire.

“Want to finish it off?” he asked.

Drawn by his compelling gaze, lured by the depth of his voice and the sizzling desire burning between them, Catherine leaned forward. She never wavered, never let her gaze veer from his, as her lips closed over his finger. Chocolate mixed with the salty taste of his skin as she licked and finished off the last of the pudding.

Long after he should have pulled back, his finger remained, and he traced the outline of her lips. “Better than licking the bowl, huh?” he asked.

“Much,” she whispered. He’d removed his hand, but she didn’t know if she could say any more. Her lips tingled. So did her body. Even her breasts had pulled into tight peaks that longed for Logan’s touch.

She wondered if he could read her mind. If he knew how much she wanted him. If he reached out and cupped her breasts in his hand, she wouldn’t mind. Right now, she’d welcome any touch he offered, anything to soothe the raging need he’d inspired.

She drew a deep breath. “I really should clean up.”

“Running away?” he asked, his breathing as ragged as hers.

“Taking a time-out.”

He leaned back, resting against his palms. His gaze never wavered. “Just don’t take too long.”



CATHERINE ENTERED THE family room in time to see Logan stoking the wood in the fireplace. He fed the flames, much the same way the desire raged between them, begging to be fueled with more than just a caress.

Since he’d cooked, the least she could do was clean up. He hadn’t liked it, but she’d insisted because it was the polite thing to do and because she’d needed distance from his magnetic appeal. The mindless work of washing dishes should have helped. After all, she understood the grind of dishwashing better than most.

When she was sixteen, she'd begun hanging out with the wrong crowd—an excuse to stay out of the empty, lonely apartment where they lived. Kayla did the same, but she'd been smart enough even then to choose the public library as a place to hide. Catherine hadn't, and as a result, one night she and her so-called friends had gone out for dinner to a restaurant not one of them could afford. Although Catherine hadn't known it at the time, the other kids had thought it would be a blast to sneak out without paying the bill. Thanks to Kayla's well-meaning concern, that night Catherine had been minus her wallet since her sister thought it would keep her from going out and hanging with the friends Kayla didn't like. She'd been wrong.

Catherine had gone anyway, then hesitated a second too long when it was time to get out of there. She'd been the only one with any sense of guilt—and the only one who'd gotten caught. A local cop had brought her home, and she'd spent the rest of her summer washing dishes in the restaurant kitchen. She was lucky she hadn't spent the night in jail.

She'd always be grateful to the restaurant owner. Not because he hadn't pressed charges but because he'd turned her life around. He was responsible for her interest in cooking and catering. He'd given her a job and the safe, welcoming haven she'd never had.

Catherine smiled at the memory. She hadn't thought of Otto and his wife in years. Obviously, Logan's closeness with his grandmother brought out the better memories of her childhood. They weren't all bad, as she sometimes thought. Even dishwashing had its good points. But, apparently, the

mindless work hadn't given her the distance or perspective she'd hoped for tonight because her body was still wound tight.

She glanced at Logan in silence. He'd showered and changed while she was in the kitchen. The intriguing muscles in his back rippled beneath a soft cotton T-shirt and his broad shoulders flexed with each poke of the fire.

She wanted to feel the ripple of those muscles beneath her fingertips, to pull his shirt off and plaster her body against his and let the heat of his skin brand her as his own. Catherine bit down on her lower lip. She was in deep.

The thought gave her little comfort. "I'm back."

He glanced over his shoulder. "I'll be done in a second."

She walked toward the welcoming fire and took a seat on the floor in front of the couch. "Fire in the spring?" she asked.

"Why not? If you want something, why not make it happen?"

"Next thing I know you'll tell me you can make it snow in summer," she mused.

He laughed. "You don't make anything easy, do you?"

"Would it be worth it if I did?"

"Touché." He groaned and shifted his attention to the fire. "This is just one of the perks of living by the water." He stood, hands on his thighs as he rose to his feet. "Since it's always cooler here you can take advantage of the nighttime chill... or the daytime heat."

His darkened gaze met hers. There was no chill in the air now and the fire had nothing to do with the heat arcing between them.

“Music?” he asked.

She nodded. “Something quiet. Mellow.” Without thought, she reached for her head and began a steady massaging of her temples.

“Something wrong?” He came up beside her.

“Just a slight headache. Postparty letdown,” she explained. “I get one after every big event.”

“Release of the stress you claimed you didn’t have,” he said with a grin.

“Exactly.”

He picked up his cell and fiddled with the music app until mellow jazz music surrounded them.

Logan came up behind her and eased himself onto the floor. “Is the music okay?” he asked.

“It’s wonderful.” The low strains were soothing. Between the party today and the sexual tension throbbing inside her, she was wound tight. His choice in music was the perfect antidote for her stress and she felt the tension in her shoulders and back begin to ease.

“And the head? How’s that?”

“Hurts,” she admitted.

He settled himself back against the couch and motioned for her to sit between his legs. “Lucky for you I have just the

cure.” His darkened gaze met hers. “Come here, Cat.”

She didn’t hesitate. How could she?

Logan was a man who inspired trust and *she trusted him*. It wasn’t like her to invest so much faith in a man she’d just met, and the notion scared her. The only way to get through this was to hang on to her heart—and she sensed that wouldn’t be as easy as she hoped.

Catherine drew a deep breath and maneuvered herself until she sat in the V of his legs. His warm, solid strength surrounded her, and when his hands wrapped around her waist to better position her, a shot of fire sizzled through her veins.

“Relax. Your headache won’t go away if you’re still tense.”

“Keep your hands there and I can guarantee you relaxing’s the last thing I’ll do.”

He chuckled, his warm breath fanning her neck. “Now, hang on.” He released his hold on her waist, giving her a chance to breathe easy once more. Then he curled his legs beneath him until he sat cross-legged. “Lie back,” he instructed. “Head here.” He patted the welcoming space between his knees.

She eyed him warily but eased her body down until she lay back and propped her head in his lap.

“Okay, now close your eyes.”

The last glimpse she got before she shut her eyes was Logan staring down at her with a heart-stopping grin.

“Now, breathe deeply and listen to the sound of the fire.” As if on cue, the fire began to snap and crackle, sounding louder in the small room. The scent of burning wood filled her nose. And with every breath she took, another muscle in her body seemed to relax and the warmth of the fire seeped inside her. Or maybe it was Logan’s body heat she felt pulsing through her veins. He’d begun to massage her temples with his fingers in soft, gentle motions.

“Now hear the rhythm of the rain.”

She did. All night the storm outside had matched the one raging inside her. “Mmm. Don’t stop.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He chuckled and the sound reached straight down to her toes.

“So, tell me how you discovered this... cure,” she said, keeping her eyes shut.

“Old childhood lesson.” His fingers still worked magic as he spoke. A gentle pressure on her temples, a soft tugging of her scalp. His touch felt wickedly good.

“What do you mean?”

“My sister suffers from migraines. She has since we were kids. She’d get through the weekends fine because my parents were never around, but weekdays were different.”

“How so?”

His fingertips moved from the sides to the front of her forehead as he continued to massage. “Weekends they traveled. During the week they were home. Or at least in the

state. If they weren't, they'd just come back late and wake us with the arguments they thought no one heard."

Growing up, she'd always had the misconception that money would make things better. She was older and wiser now, but it still hurt to hear that Logan hadn't had an ideal childhood either.

"That must have been tough."

"Harder for Grace, really. She'd sneak into my room and most times her head was killing her. Stress-induced," he said, the edge in his tone unmistakable.

His obvious love for his sibling was also unmistakable, and that was something Catherine could relate to. He claimed to be unaffected by the fighting. She didn't believe him.

"How come they never separated?" she asked.

"Family motto—Montgomerys don't divorce, they endure."

"I thought the wealthy didn't *fight*, they endured," she said lightly, trying to lift the mood that had settled over him thanks to painful memories.

"That motto holds true only in public. For all the money it cost to build the mansion, the walls are incredibly thin."

"So, it was you and Grace who did the enduring."

"Yeah. I'd rub her forehead until she fell asleep," he said softly.

His actions toward his sister told Catherine what kind of man Logan really was. "I hope she appreciated you," she

murmured.

“She did, does.”

“I know I do.” Another sigh escaped her lips as the gentle pressure of his fingers hit a particularly sensitive spot.

Whatever magic Logan performed for his little sister was brotherly and done out of love. What he did to Catherine was more erotic than fraternal. It was sensual and intimate, and she knew seduction was the goal. And she wanted to give in. She had until tomorrow before she had to walk out of this cabin and face the harsh light of day.

Forcing her heavy eyelids open, she glanced up at Logan, wanting to know more about him. “Where is Grace now?”

“Living in a loft in N.Y.C., taking pictures to her heart’s content, and avoiding commitment for fear of ending up like our parents.” He laughed but there was no pleasure in the sound. “She’s living off her trust, figuring Mother and the judge owe her for all the misery she lived through.”

“Is that how you feel?”

He shook his head. “Actually, I live off my salary and not a penny more. If I touch my trust, I give up control of my life, something I’m not willing to do. And I think Grace would be happier if she did the same.” He smiled then, a slow, easy grin that threw Catherine’s pulse into high gear and sent out warning signals to every part of her body that wanted to listen.

Judging by her rapid heartbeat, uneven breathing, and curling warmth in her belly, no part of her but her brain was paying attention. Even her more rational self desired to give in

to Logan's easy charm and sex appeal, to his understanding nature and giving soul.

“But Grace and her life is another issue for another day. This night belongs to us, Cat. If you want it to.” He paused a beat. “The choice is yours.”

She sat up too fast and had to wait for the rush of dizziness to subside. When it did, she realized her headache had fled with it. The man definitely had magic hands. The thought caused a delicious curling in the pit of her stomach.

“Feel better?” he asked.

“Much.” She sat up on her knees and faced him. “But I suspect that was the point.”

“Meaning?”

“You can't seduce a woman if she's going to use a headache as an excuse.”

His dark eyes met hers. “I see. And you just admitted yours was gone.”

“Completely,” she said, the yearning inside her building to unbearable proportions.

The fury of the fire and the driving rain had nothing on the flames burning inside her. But she couldn't help but wonder...

Would one night be enough?

Chapter Six

CATHERINE RAISED HER head and contemplated the importance of the next few moments. Logan was leaving it up to her to decide whether they would sleep together. Her body said yes, but her mind wasn't sure.

“Whatever you need to know, ask now,” he said.

She grinned. “So, you're a mind reader as well as an expert masseur?”

“I already told you, I'm a man of many talents. Now, quit stalling.”

Silence followed. Silence in which no sound but the rain came between them. “There *is* one thing I'd like to get clear first.”

“I'm safe,” he assured her.

She shook her head. “You're the last thing from safe I can imagine. That storm and those cresting waves have less risk than you. But I understand, and thank you. I am, too, by the way, though that's not what I wanted to know.”

“I was afraid of that. What is it?” he asked, twirling a strand of her hair around his finger.

“It's not that I'm asking for promises or anything...”

He stroked a rough hand down her cheek. The caress gave life to a swirling need that pulled her in deeper.

“Then what do you want?”

She shrugged. “To know this means more to you than a one-night stand.” She met his gaze with a determined one of her own. She wouldn’t apologize for her needs.

He treated her to a lazy smile. “Trust me,” he said in a husky voice. “It means more. I respect you too much to sleep with you and never call again.”

“Now there’s a line if I ever heard one.” Yet she couldn’t help but smile in return. “So, what you’re saying is when this is over, you’ll call me?” she asked, forcing lightness and humor into her voice.

He nodded. “Soon.”

A smile twitched at her lips. “Is that the typical guy version of *soon*?”

His smile vanished, to be replaced by an intense but equally sexy look that set her nerve endings on fire. “It’s the Logan Montgomery version of soon.”

In the silence that followed, Catherine realized she couldn’t ask for anything more. Either she trusted him, or she didn’t. And she wouldn’t be here if her faith was lacking.

Drawing a deep breath, she met his gaze. “You aren’t going to draw this out much longer, are you?” she asked at last.



LOGAN EXHALED THE breath he hadn’t been aware of holding. For a minute there, he’d thought she would bolt. *I’m not asking for promises.* Little did she know he’d have made them

willingly. But she had more guts than he'd given her credit for since she hadn't walked out on him yet.

His heart beat rapidly against his chest. Without waiting another second, he swept her into his arms and walked over to the row of windows overlooking the ocean. *His* ocean, *his* beach, the scene that meant so much to him because it represented *his* life. All things he wanted to share with Catherine.

She locked her arms around his neck.

"Take a look," he said.

Turning her head, she glanced out the window. As he inhaled the scent of her hair, his body tightened even more.

"This must be some view on a clear day."

"It's the best."

"It's not so bad now, either." Her eyelids fluttered closed and she tightened her arms around his neck more securely. "You know, all night I've been listening to the sound of the rain."

So had he. The elements wreaking havoc outside matched the thundering yearning inside his soul. And against his chest, her heartbeat picked up speed, joining his in the same rapid rhythm.

"I live in a one-bedroom apartment. Sometimes, if I'm really lucky and listen extra hard, I'll catch the storm echoing in the night. Otherwise, it gets lost in the blare of car horns and noise."

“I take it you aren’t afraid of thunderstorms?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’m one of the strange people in the world who loves the rain.”

He closed his eyes and pictured her lying alone in her bed, naked on top of the covers, listening to the pulsing, pounding water beating against the window.

“Don’t you?” she asked.

He forced his heavy eyelids open. “Don’t I what?”

“Love the rain? You’d have to in order to live in a house with all these windows.”

“Storms have a beauty all their own.” And so did she.

“You have the added bonus of the ocean. The waves pounding against the shore. It’s electric,” she murmured.

“Erotic,” he muttered. He lowered her to the floor slowly, then followed her, feeling her breasts crush against him and the hard peaks of her nipples grazed his chest.

He held her gaze fast as their bodies collided, aching and straining with a need that had yet to be met. “God, you feel good.” He gripped her waist tighter.

Her assent came out more like a purr of contentment.

He drove his fingers through her hair. “What do you want?” he asked, resisting the urge to taste her lips until he’d heard her say she felt the same things he did.

Her hands gripped his shoulders until her fingernails bit through the T-shirt and into his skin. “I want to feel you inside

me, driving me to the edge as hard and as fast as the rain outside. I want...”

Logan didn't wait to hear more. He brought his lips down hard on hers, tasting her, drinking her, needing everything she was willing to give. And her moan of assent told him she'd desired it, too.

The music had finished sometime before, and with the storm as their only backdrop, his lips never moved from hers, never letting his body leave her warmth. He hadn't meant for things to get so out of hand so quickly, but the tempest of desire swirling inside him wouldn't be denied.

Catherine's lower body arched against him, begging, pleading for more. He reached for the bottom of her shirt and sent it flying across the room.

He glanced down and sucked in a deep breath. Rounded mounds of flesh strained upward over delicate peach lace. Her nipples pushed taut and hard against their confinement. The hint of lace he'd seen earlier hadn't done justice to what lay beneath.

He drew in an unsteady breath, then traced the scalloped edging over one breast before lowering his mouth and capturing one of the teasing nipples with his mouth.

Her breath caught, her back arched again, and she moaned aloud with pleasure. He couldn't mistake that her body wanted him.

Threading his hand through her feather-soft hair, he brought their faces within inches of each other.

She cupped his face in her hands and covered his lips with hers.

The kiss didn't start out slow. With the desire building all evening, their need was too urgent to contain. Her lips were soft and warm as they opened for his searching tongue, and he swept inside, finding heaven. And as he'd known all along, one taste wasn't enough.

Gripping her bare waist in his hands, he pulled her closer, wanting to feel her heated skin against his, but his T-shirt prevented him from getting as close as he wanted.

"Here," she whispered. "Let me."

Logan sat back and she pulled his T-shirt out of the waistband of his jeans and eased it over his head. Her soft fingers grazed the skin on his chest. She laughed softly and he knew she'd done it on purpose.

"Tease."

She clucked her tongue. "That's not a nice thing to say. I thought you were raised better than that," she said with a grin. "Besides, it's only true if I don't plan to follow through." She ran her hands up his side, letting her thumbs graze his nipples. "And you know I do."

He let out a rush of air. The way she could make his body react with a simple touch defied logic. His erection strained against the rough denim, harder and more insistent with each passing second. He had to regain a semblance of control, and to do that, he needed to be *in* control.

“I’m not sure I like that grin on your face,” Catherine said warily.

“And I’m just as sure you’re going to love it.” With steady fingers considering the circumstances, Logan yanked on the drawstring of her sweats and watched with pleasure as he discarded the loose cotton material. The lacy briefs matched the bra. The tiny scrap of peach material and the hint of what lay beneath made his mouth run dry.

So much for being in control, he thought wryly. But she trusted him, something he didn’t take lightly. Logan rose to his feet, and before she could question him, he helped Catherine up and swept her into his arms again.

“You really shouldn’t make a habit of this. You’ll spoil me.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” he asked.

She laughed. “So, what are you doing this time?” she asked, then bit down lightly on his earlobe.

The pull went straight to his already hard cock and he groaned. “I’m sweeping you off your feet.” He tried to ignore the feel of her luscious body molded to his or else he might have come right then, something neither one of them would appreciate. But her soft skin, rounded curves, and body heat tested his strength.

She rolled her eyes. “I guess I should have told you the first time I don’t believe in Prince Charming.”

Although her eyes danced with delight, he recognized the sad truth behind her words.

“Then I guess it’s up to me to prove you wrong.” Before she could respond, he set her down on the couch and knelt down between her legs.



CATHERINE KNEW HIS intent. And suddenly she wasn’t so brave anymore. “You know, Logan...”

His hands reached for and cupped her thighs. The heated warmth shot straight upward. “Somehow I don’t think Prince Charming... had this in mind.”

“You know, Cat...” He paused and treated her to a sexy grin. “I’m not sure you’ll want to be arguing with me right now.” As he spoke, his palms moved forward and his fingers inched higher until they’d reached the edge of her panties.

She let out a whoosh of air. All rational thought and the desire to speak fled at his touch. All she could do was feel. The glide of her nearly bare flesh against the leather couch as he pulled her downward. The heated, wet sensation of his tongue on her skin. And the white-hot darts of fire and need pricking at her with growing intensity. Everything he did felt right and good.

And when he licked her through the flimsy triangle of fabric, she welcomed the madness that engulfed her. Her remaining inhibitions fled as if they’d never been. She gave herself up to the long, slow strokes of his tongue that alternated with short, teasing flickers and left her wanting and begging for more.

Without her consent, her hips bucked upward from the cushioned couch. He slipped her panties down and she raised her hips to help him, anything to satisfy the aching need. He seemed to understand. After tossing her undergarments onto the floor, he returned to her and eased his finger inside. She could feel herself clenching around him. One finger slipped in and out while his thumb worked her clit. The tremors began in small waves and continued until they engulfed her in heated convulsions.

And still, it wasn't enough. She wanted him with her, inside her, and along for the glorious ride. She needed to see him lose control just as she had. She had to know she affected him on a level beyond the physical.

With difficulty, Catherine lifted her head off the couch and gazed into his eyes. Desire flared in the brown depths, deeper and darker than anything she'd seen there before.

He rose to his feet. Placing his hands beneath her arms, he helped her rise.

He rubbed his thumb over her still damp lower lip. "I want more, Cat."

"Me, too."

"Still don't believe in Prince Charming?" he asked, turning his attention to the swell of her breast, outlining the scalloped edging of her bra.

"I don't think... what you did qualifies as something Prince Charming would do." Not that she believed in fairytales.

“And why’s that?”

“Because as incredible as it was, it’s something that’s happened during one night of hot sex. Prince Charming, by definition, is a long-term kinda guy.” Now, where had *that* come from? The last thing Catherine wanted was for him to run far and fast. Or send her packing. She glanced out the window into the stormy night. Especially when hse had nowhere to go.

He cupped her cheek in his hand. “We could have more than one night,” he said in a gruff voice.

She couldn’t believe him any more than she believed in the tooth fairy. Her baby teeth hadn’t even gotten her a penny growing up. Neither would useless wishes now. “We’re worlds apart,” she reminded him.

His arm gestured around the cottage she’d grown to love in such a short time. “You call this worlds apart?”

Catherine opened her mouth to argue and couldn’t. Though the judge’s disapproval lingered in the back of her mind, she pushed it aside. Logan was his own man. He couldn’t live in this house, work for the public defender, live off his own salary, and be anything else.

If he said they had a chance, she could believbe him. After all, how could she get hurt by class differences when he didn’t live them or believe in them?

She wasn’t one to give her faith or her heart easily, but Logan made it seem so simple. She reached for him then,

gripping his waist in her hands. Trouble didn't begin to describe what she'd gotten herself into.

She glanced into Logan's warm eyes and couldn't give him anything less than the truth. "I call this making my dreams come true."

With a harsh groan, he swept her off her feet again, only this time she didn't argue and she found herself lying on the rug in front of the fireplace. He removed his jeans, revealing box briefs with his thick erection prominent. Broad shoulders, flat stomach, and bronzed skin, he was a perfect male specimen down to the bulge she couldn't possibly ignore even if she wanted to.

He placed his fingers into the waistband and never taking his gaze from hers, he drew them down until he was naked, then kicked them off. Soon he stretched out beside her.

His hard cock pressed against her thigh and the warmth of shared body heat was sweeter and hotter than the blazing fire he'd created. If this was what it felt like to *believe there existed a chance for them*, and she was suddenly glad she'd opened her mind to the possibility.



"I'VE ONLY JUST begun," Logan lay beside Catherine, his hand on her breast as he discovered her skin was softer, her body warmer than he'd imagined.

"To what?" she asked.

"To make those dreams of yours come true."

"You make me think anything's possible," she murmured.

“That’s because it is,” he told her.

He switched positions, easing himself over her until he lay on top. His arms prevented his weight from crushing her, but their lower bodies fit perfectly. His erection, hot and heavy, settled between the V of her legs.

Her eyelids fluttered shut and a soft moan escaped her lips. Logan nearly came right then, but somehow, he didn’t think that’s what she had in mind. Besides, he’d promised to make *her* dreams come true. His be damned.

With one hand, he cupped her breast. She fit perfectly in his hand. Her skin was supple, in direct contrast to the rigid nipple pressing into his palm. Logan kneaded her waiting flesh, savoring the fullness nestled in his hand. With his thumb and forefinger, he teased her taut nipple, plucking, rolling, and flicking the erect nub until she writhed beneath him.

He glanced at her face. Green eyes stared back at him. He placed a kiss on her upturned nose and then did the same to the tip of her breast.

“Who’s the tease now?” she asked in a husky voice.

He answered by running his tongue in a circle around the white skin on her breast, coming to a halt only after flicking the tight nipple with his tongue. He raised his head and grinned. “Complaining?” he asked.

“Only that you’re not inside me already.”

“That’s not a complaint, it’s a request.”

A soft smile played on her lips. “Take it any way you want,” she said on a soft sigh. Her hips jerked upward,

whether on purpose or an involuntary response to pure desire, Logan didn't know. Nor did he care.

He just knew the time was right. He transferred his attention from her breasts to the warm, place between her legs. He wasn't surprised to find her wet with desire, hot with the same aching need that burned inside of him. It was the same need that had flared into an inferno within him the second he'd laid eyes on the beautiful bartender. Logan's gut told him he wouldn't be satisfied with just one night. Even if his body were to be sated for the moment, he *knew* he would crave more of her.

He separated them long enough to reach for his jeans and the condom he'd shoved into the pocket earlier, just in case. In case he was lucky enough to have one time with this one woman.

Unable to wait another second, he thrust into her slick heat, hard and demanding, letting her know exactly what she did to him.



FILLED AND FULFILLED. Catherine wondered if she'd ever understood the distinction before. Logan grasped her hands and intertwined their fingers together above her head. The uniting motion ground their bodies together until they weren't just joined, they were one. Thoughts like that could only lead to pain and disaster, yet with Logan staring into her eyes, she couldn't think negative thoughts.

She couldn't think at all. His lips covered hers in a kiss as hot and promising as the heat engulfing their bodies. Between

them, they began a grinding, rocking motion that was sweeter than it was fast, more reverent than it was frenzied. If Catherine had made love before, she couldn't recall. Because anything less than this was sex, and this was so much more.

He released her hands and braced his on either side of her shoulders. "Look at me."

She did and saw a raw need so deep, so exposed, she was swept away by it. Words failed her but emotion didn't. He'd drawn her in, deep and fast.

With every gliding motion, he came fuller and deeper inside her. The tip of him was smooth, but with every thrust, she felt the rougher ridges and the friction was almost unbearable.

Her eyelids fluttered shut. He kissed each until they opened again and then he began a rhythm unlike anything she'd experienced before. Sleek and measured one minute, he created an agony so prolonged and exquisite she wanted to cry out for harder, faster, pounding thrusts. But when he answered her silent plea, her body built toward completion too fast and she missed the drawn-out intimacy they'd just shared.

Just when she was about to topple over the precipice, he slowed the pace once more until her body begged for completion. But Logan was in control and he wasn't giving in. Wasn't letting it happen fast and easy. Wasn't letting this be an experience she'd put behind her anytime soon.

The fast and furious pace slowed. "Open your eyes."

She hadn't realized she'd closed them. "What do you want from me?" she asked him.

"Everything." And then he thrust so deep she was sure they'd been joined for eternity. He moved inside her and she raised her hips, allowing him even fuller and deeper access, heightening her pleasure.

Catherine couldn't look away from his deep, compelling gaze. No doubt that was his intent, and the crescendo came without warning, a tidal wave beyond her control.



THE AFTERSHOCKS STILL rippled through Logan's system. He doubted he'd ever breathe normally again. He rolled to his side and glanced at Cat, who looked as sated as he was. Her cheeks were flushed pink, her green eyes were still heavy-lidded, and her breathing still sounded rapid and shallow.

He stretched his arms overhead. Huge strategic mistake, he discovered immediately. Catherine rolled onto her back, away from physical contact. That cleared his mind at once.

If she needed distance, he respected that. But not until she understood a few things. He'd never lost himself with someone before and he'd have bet she felt the same. He closed the gap between them and wrapped his arm back around her.

She didn't pull away but instead surprised him by curling into him. "That was incredible," he whispered in her ear.

"Mind-blowing," she agreed.

He hoped she was referring to the emotion involved as much as the act itself. He waited a beat but she didn't speak.

Apparently, she needed space. Her next words confirmed it.

“It’s getting cold in here, don’t you think?”

“I’m pretty warm myself.” He nuzzled the side of her neck.

Her laugh sounded more relaxed. “You know what I mean.”

He did. Once she drew his attention to it, the crackle of the fireplace called to him. “Tell you what. Let me put out the fire and we can move to the bedroom.”

He held his breath. After the intimacy they’d shared, now wasn’t the time for her to be claiming the couch for the night.

She nodded. “Sounds good.”

Giving her some distance and privacy, Logan rose first and grabbed for his jeans before kneeling by the fire. It wasn’t easy, knowing she was undressed behind him, but somehow, he managed. He sensed she needed a combination of space and reassurance. Just one of the many things he liked about Catherine was her honest responses.

But he knew, given the chance, she’d run from what they shared instead of facing it. He’d finally found the one woman who liked everything in his life that was real and nothing that was related to the Montgomery wealth or status.

If he had his say, she wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

Chapter Seven

CATHERINE WOKE TO the sun streaming in through the window. Logan's window, Logan's room. She glanced over, but his side of the bed was empty. She heard the sound of the shower and lay back against the pillows. Every pull of her muscles reminded her of last night. And, Catherine admitted to herself, she felt good.

At first, she'd been afraid of the aftermath, afraid he'd find himself with a woman he'd had enough of. But when she'd rolled away, giving him the option of space, he'd rejected it. Everything before and since had been like a dream.

She'd been so depleted she barely remembered making her way from the den to the bedroom, and after he'd returned from putting out the fire, she'd curled into his warmth and fallen fast asleep.

There hadn't been time nor energy for second thoughts then, but she had plenty of opportunity now. Yet the one thing she couldn't do was regret her night with Logan. He'd been a generous and giving lover, attuned to her wants, her needs, and her feelings. But it did figure.

The only one-night stand in her life and she had to pick the wrong man. Oh, he was the right man in every way—just not for her. She was petrified their worlds would collide and destroy what they had shared.

The jarring ring of her cell shattered her thoughts. Good thing since she didn't like the direction they were taking. She

glanced at the screen to see Emma's name and she reached for the phone. "Hi, Emma."

"Too tired for an amusing greeting. That must be a good sign."

Catherine laid her head against the pillow. It was no wonder Logan gave up trying to control the older woman. She probably had more stamina and antics up her sleeve than the two of them put together.

"So glad you recognized my voice, dear." Catherine didn't bother to remind her that her name had popped up on Catherine's cell. "Long nights can sometimes cloud the brain. How are you feeling this morning?" Emma asked.

She refused to succumb to the bait. "Just fine. And you?"

"Just fine means my grandson's technique needs work."

Catherine choked at Emma's blunt statement and a heated flush rose up her naked body. Logan's technique had been beyond amazing, not that it was any of his grandmother's business.

Catherine wondered how long it had been since anyone had given Emma a run for her money. She adored the older woman, but a lesson was in order.

"You know, you're right," Catherine said. "Maybe it was the long drive or the run through the rain, but he just wasn't up to what I'm sure is his normal... potency."

Emma coughed. And Catherine realized the bathroom door had already opened, in time for Logan to have caught the end of the conversation. He stood by the bed, his jeans riding low

on his narrow waist, a towel hanging over his shoulders, and an eyebrow raised in blatant disbelief.

“Emma,” Catherine mouthed, pointing to the phone.

Logan placed a finger over his lips and motioned for Catherine to hand him the cell. She nodded and did as he asked. He hit the speaker button.

“You do realize sometimes men aren’t up to snuff their first time with a woman, but I’m sure it’ll get better, dear.”

Catherine couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing.

Emma sniffed. “I know you’re there, Logan, and speakerphones are so rude. Have I taught you nothing about class and refinement?”

It was Logan’s turn to laugh. “Everything I learned, I learned from you. Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s rude to pry?”

“I was just having a nice conversation with Catherine, wasn’t I, dear?”

Catherine bit down on her lower lip. “Yes, ma’am. But you should know I stayed because of the storm. Nothing happened last night.” She crossed her fingers behind her back as she spoke.

Logan’s steamy gaze met hers. “Liar,” he mouthed as he lowered himself beside her on the bed.

The distinct masculine scent of spicy soap and aftershave aroused her in an instant. She pulled the sheet up around her,

but the effort was too little too late. He'd already seen it all—and more.

“Well, of course, nothing happened. I raised my grandson to be a gentleman. And you're every inch the perfect lady. For *him*,” Emma added. “Now, I've got to run. I'm hanging up now, bye.”

Logan hit end on Cat's cell and they both laughed aloud.

“I wonder if she learned her lesson,” Catherine asked.

“Doubtful. You wouldn't believe the last plan she had in mind for us.”

“Us?”

He nodded. “Emma had a plan before there even was an *us*. She was born to scheme.”

Catherine grinned. “Apparently so. But she also had a strong influence on your life and your character.”

“Tell me how you figured that out,” he said wryly.

“Well, aside from the obvious, I'm observant.” She glanced around her again at the room in which *the* Logan Montgomery, bachelor, lived.

“Almost everything here is your distinctive personality. The wood furniture is old but masculine, like the brown and tan color scheme. The wood's not polished, it's worn and comfortable. But there are items in here that you'd never have chosen on your own. Touches I'd bet Emma supplied.”

He grinned, obviously amused. “Such as?”

“Well, there are the little things. That throw rug by the bed? It adds warmth to the room. The tray with your keys on the nightstand? I bet you’d just toss your keys on the dresser. You’d never think of buying a pewter tray. And those antique books and the shiny marble bookends? A gift,” Catherine said, fairly certain she was correct.

At least, she hoped she was. She preferred to believe his grandmother had supplied the decorative touches than to think he made a habit of bringing women to his cottage on the water.

“You’re partially right. Emma bought the rug and the antique books.”

“And the rest?” she asked, holding her breath.

“A beautiful woman with too much money to spend supplied the bookends and the pewter tray.”

A twisting jealousy churned Catherine’s stomach and she didn’t like the feeling. “Well, she’s got good taste,” she admitted grudgingly.

“She should. Her feisty grandmother taught her everything about having a decorative eye. Grace was a fast learner,” he said, laughing.

“You’re a jerk.”

He eased himself beside her. The mattress dipped beneath his weight. Before she could think, he leaned forward and brushed a warm kiss over her lips. “But I’m a lovable one.”

He was right. “You’re an arrogant jerk,” she said, refusing to let his ego swell.

“So Grace says.”

“How often do you see her?” Catherine asked.

“Not enough. But we check in once a week, usually Sunday nights. I like to make sure she’s not getting into trouble, and she likes to keep up on life in Hampshire. Even if she won’t admit it out loud, she misses her friends here. She even misses certain members of the family.”

“You and Emma.” It wasn’t a difficult guess for Catherine.

“And Mother. Believe it or not, she and Grace have this bond. It’s Dad she can’t stand to be around.”

“Maybe she’ll come home one day.”

He shrugged. “A lot of things would have to change.” His gaze met hers, zeroing in and not letting go. “But you never know. Miracles do happen.”

A tingling sensation took hold, and Catherine breathed deeply. His potent scent made her stomach curl in response. “What time is it?” she asked.

“Ten.”

“Wow!”

“I take it you’re not used to sleeping in?”

“What can I say? You wore me out.”

He grinned. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Reaching behind her, she grabbed for her pillow and playfully hit him on the shoulder. “You would.”

“I also kept my first promise.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And what would that be?”

“Since it’s morning, we’ve had more than one night.” His boyish grin disarmed her defenses.

For a woman who didn’t believe in much, he was awfully close to making her believe in the promises he made. *We could have more than one night, Cat.* The man believed in miracles. How could she discount that?

But her mother had trusted her father’s promise that he’d stick around—and he had, long enough to make two children as soon as biologically possible before disappearing for good. Logan wasn’t a man like her father. Thanks to his grandmother, he was grounded in reality. Any man willing to take on the commitment of a mortgage and a run-down house knew how to settle down and grow roots.

Not that she was foolish enough to expect anything long-term from Logan Montgomery. Or so she told herself. But Catherine feared if she spent much more time with him, she’d begin wanting just that.

“The sun’s out,” she said inanely. “I really do need to get to my sister’s.” Out of here. Back to reality. Where her practical sister and her know-it-all cop husband could give her a good mental shake and remind her why she *could not* believe in the fantasy she had begun to weave.

“I was thinking we’d go out for breakfast and I could drop you off after.”

Catherine bit down on her lower lip. She’d regret this later, but he deserved something kind from her. “Tell you what.

Give me a few minutes to shower and I'll fix you something here. Then you can take me to Kayla's."

"That sounds good." He leaned closer. His lips were in kissing distance again and she waited. "But the cupboards are bare," he said softly.

"I wish we were." She bit her tongue the minute the words escaped her lips. "I mean, that's too bad."

He grinned. "Not really. This way I get a rain check."

Catherine opened her mouth to argue and this time he sealed his mouth over hers, cutting her off.

At least for now.



AFTER FOLLOWING CATHERINE'S directions, Logan pulled up in front of a quaint house painted in a light shade of gray. The sun bathed the home in light, now that the rain and clouds of the day had dissipated. The half-hour drive had passed quickly. Cat had talked during the entire trip and Logan now knew all about her sister, Kayla, her husband, and their soon-to-be expanded family.

Catherine obviously loved her sister, and despite her complaining, he sensed she liked her sister's husband. He also believed Catherine rambled out of nervousness because she didn't want to discuss the possibility of seeing each other again.

She didn't believe they had any sort of future, and Logan intended to prove her wrong.

In Catherine, he detected a deep sense of longing for the hearth-and-home type of life her sister now had, even if she'd never admit it aloud. He recognized Catherine's yearnings because they echoed needs and desires he never realized he'd had. Until Catherine.

"Well, we're here."

Resting his arm over the steering wheel, he turned to look at her. "Yes, we are." He noticed her hand on the door handle and grinned.

"Going somewhere, Cat?"

Her blush would have charmed him if she hadn't already had him well in her grip. "Inside?" she said.

"Without a word?" Teasing her came naturally, if only because she took it so well.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"Say so long," he instructed her.

She shook her head. "I have no idea why I let you fluster me," she muttered. "No one flusters me. Not even Nick."

"Who's Nick?" he asked, hating the sound of another man's name on her lips.

"My chef. And close friend. We went to culinary school together. He's been teasing me since he was shorter than me, and after I kicked him in the shins the first time..."

"He never tried it again?"

Catherine laughed. "Of course, he did."

“And this Nick. He’s a...”

“Friend,” she said softly and seriously as if reading the tone in his voice. “An engaged friend. He hasn’t made a move since we were kids.”

He met her steady gaze and knew he’d been right. She’d understood and sought to reassure.

He appreciated her for that. He’d never succumbed to jealousy before but wasn’t surprised his first time involved Catherine Luck because no woman had ever affected him the way she had.

She uncrossed her legs. “Goodbye, Logan.” She looked away, and before he realized her intent, had pulled on the door handle.

“Cat, wait.”

She released it and turned. Her green eyes were suspiciously damp. “What?”

“Goodbye’s too final.” Myriad words were on the tip of his tongue, but goodbye wasn’t one of them. She’d be seeing him again, whether she believed it or not.

She drew a deep breath. “It was fun, but...”

“It was more than that.”

She shook her head. “It can’t be.”

“Why? Because my name’s Montgomery?”

“That’s one reason.”



CATHERINE DIDN'T DARE name anymore. Otherwise, she'd risk admitting her real feelings and the fact that she was dangerously close to falling in love with a man she'd just met.

Love at first sight didn't exist. Once she got out of this car, she'd remember that.

"This is the modern world. Class differences don't exist."

Tell it to the judge, she thought but refused to utter the words aloud. Logan had gone so far out of his way to distance himself from his family and their way of life that Catherine knew he believed what he said. He just didn't realize what would happen when two worlds like theirs collided.

Besides, she had no doubt that once he got back home, all she'd be to him was a distant memory. "Can't we just say it's been fun..."

"And I'll see you around?" he jumped in, finishing for her.

"Something like that."

He grinned, and she knew she'd dug herself in deep. "Sounds good to me. I'll pick you up Friday. We'll have dinner in Boston before driving back to the beach. Maybe this time the weather will be nice, and I'll get to show you some of the more special spots hidden away from prying eyes."

He'd gotten the best of her and he knew it. "You're too literal," she told him.

"I'm honest," he shot back. "And you led me to believe you valued that quality."

"I do," she whispered.

Nothing like her own words to sway a wary heart, Catherine thought. Unsure of what else to say, she gripped the door handle tighter.

“Then believe me when I say I want to see you again. There’s something too strong between us to just let it go.”

Her heart began a rapid, pounding beat inside her chest. He was good with words—hers, his, it didn’t matter—because he was even better at getting past her defenses and making her believe in the impossible.

She glanced outside and saw her sister’s husband, Kane, walk out the front door. Probably making a routine check on a suspicious car in front of his house, Catherine thought wryly.

She had no desire to introduce these two men and endure Kane the detective’s probing questions later. “I have to go.”

“Friday?” he asked. “You owe me breakfast,” he said when she remained silent.

She gazed into his eyes. His honest eyes. She’d opened up to him, and she trusted him. The only person she was fighting here was herself.

A smile tugged at her lips.

“You’re wearing my favorite sweats and I’d like to collect them in person.”

He was persistent, she’d give him that. He had no way of knowing she’d already made up her mind.

“Call me,” she said, and before he could respond, she opened the door and slipped out of the car, slamming it behind

her.

“Ball’s in your court,” she murmured aloud.

If he was truly interested, he’d have to make the effort. She wasn’t coy nor was she playing hard to get. She just wanted to know he was serious before she allowed herself to get in any deeper.

Problem was that Catherine was in way over her head already.



“*THE* LOGAN MONTGOMERY? You slept with *the* Logan Montgomery?” Kayla’s voice seemed unnaturally loud in the small bedroom.

Catherine cringed. “Would you stop saying it like that? And what do you mean *the* Logan Montgomery?”

Her sister reached for her phone lying on a table beside the bed. She opened the screen and began to scroll through a news app. “It’s in here somewhere. On the front page of TMZ...”

“Hold on.” Her sister was beyond intelligent. She read fiction, literature, and medical journals, but...“You’re reading gossip columns? Stop the world, I want to get off.”

A red blush stained Kayla’s fair skin. “Ever since the doctor said bed rest, I feel trapped. I go through books like they were water. I’ll read anything, including online sites about celebrities,” she admitted.

Catherine sat on the edge of the bed and patted her sister’s hand. “What’s it like to live in the common world?” she

teased. Kayla was smarter than any person had a right to be and she had an incredible memory. Although she had access to the Internet, she loved the library and could spend hours reading material of interest to no one else in the world.

“Very funny. Aha. Here it is. Take a look.”

Knowing she wouldn't like what she saw, Catherine accepted the cell anyway and found herself face-to-face with a close-up shot of Logan, taken at yesterday's Garden Gala. Even at a distance, his good looks were enough to take her breath away. But the memories of their intimate moments, the sound of his deep voice, his warm hands on her body, *him* inside her... They were enough to melt her heart.

“Read the article,” Kayla said.

Catherine shifted her attention again. “Favorite Hampshire son, Logan Montgomery, scion of Judge Edgar Montgomery and his wife, Annette, is rumored to be ready to announce his candidacy for mayor of Hampshire. Although the delectable bachelor firmly denied the story, Judge Montgomery told this reporter to stay tuned—as if any of us need an additional reason to keep an eye on this perfect specimen. Too bad for us single working girls, he's destined to be snapped up by...”

Catherine tossed Kayla's cell on the bed. “I can't read any more of this.”

“Oh, my God! You've fallen in love with him. In one night?!” Kayla eyed her through narrowed eyes.

Catherine shook her head. No way she'd admit those feelings, not even to herself. She couldn't leave herself that

exposed, open, raw... “What am I going to do?” she wailed and tossed herself across the foot of Kayla’s bed.

“You could start by cleaning yourself up.”

Catherine rolled over and glared at her brother-in-law who stood in the doorway.

“Go away,” the sisters said at the same time.

“You know you only say that when she’s around,” Kane said to his wife.

Catherine grinned. “At least I make you suffer, too, McDermott.”

“Before you two get started, can I get a word in?” Kayla asked.

Catherine sighed. She’d met Kane right after he’d slept with and used her sister. At least that’s what Catherine had believed, and though Kane had proven himself since, the sparring and bickering from the early days remained a part of their relationship. Catherine held a grudging respect for the detective—stemming from his devotion to her sister—though she’d never admit it aloud.

“Go ahead,” Catherine said to her sister.

Kayla turned to her husband. “Cat needs a place to think...”

“I do?”

“And she’s going to be staying here until she settles some things.”

“She is?” Kane asked. From the narrowing of his eyes, the thought didn’t please him.

Catherine grinned. “I am,” she said and folded her arms across her chest. Until Kayla said the words, Catherine hadn’t realized how badly she needed her sister’s advice or how much she didn’t want to be alone with her thoughts.

She glanced at Kayla, tucked safely under the covers, her large stomach protruding through the sheet. She was due in a matter of weeks and there was no place else Catherine wanted to be when the baby came.

Kane walked over to his wife’s side. “Don’t you have work at home?” he asked Catherine.

“I can drive home, get my laptop and play catch up from here. No parties until next weekend. Our new manager is handling Saturday’s affair. I’ve got Sunday. So, it looks like I’m here to stay.”

“Swell,” he muttered, only to be greeted by Kayla’s narrowed gaze. “I mean, make yourself at home. But no redecorating while you’re here.”

“A man who doesn’t like animal prints has a fundamental problem relating to life,” Catherine told him. “They add warmth...”

“That’s what live pets are for,” Kane muttered.

“All my accessories are fake. I’m a strong believer in animal rights. But if it’s a pet you want, I can stop by the pound...”

“I’m leaving,” he said to both sisters.

Catherine grinned. “That was the plan. But seriously, Kane, thanks for the place to stay.”

“You’re welcome.” He graced Catherine with a genuine smile.

“I appreciate it. I could really use the company,” Kayla said. “And I love you.”

Catherine smiled. “Love you too, sis.”

“Stay as long as you want. Just keep out of my way,” Kane muttered.

“He doesn’t mean that,” Kayla assured her.

“Sure, I do, sweetheart... when I’m alone with you,” he said in a deeper tone, one a husband reserved for his wife.

To Catherine’s surprise, a pang of envy darted through her heart. She’d spent a lot of time with Kayla and Kane, happily married couple. Through Thanksgiving, Christmas, and other assorted holidays, Catherine was thrilled her sister had found love, and acceptance despite Kane’s outwardly surly attitude.

But she’d never envied what Kayla and Kane shared. Never thought she wanted it for herself.

Until now.

Until Logan.

Hampshire’s favorite son.

The delectable bachelor destined to marry wealthy and within his class, she thought, recalling the final words of the article. The words she couldn’t bear to read aloud.

Chapter Eight

LUNCHTIME ON MONDAY, Logan found a private spot in the courthouse and pulled his cell from his pocket. From the minute he'd arrived at the office this morning, his boss had him at his beck and call, covering an important case for a hospitalized co-worker, when the judge refused to grant a postponement.

He'd put Catherine's number into his Favorites and he tapped the phone app, then her name. Anticipation kicked in only to listen to incessant ringing before her voicemail picked up. He muttered a curse. His only break for the day that would give him free time away from the client, and Catherine wasn't answering.

"Montgomery, Judge wants you in his chambers. Seems your client's causing trouble again," the bailiff called from across the hall.

Logan groaned, ended the call before he could leave a message and ran down the hall.

Sometimes priorities sucked, he thought.



HIDING OUT WASN'T smart. It didn't say much for her ability to cope. But then, Catherine didn't want to cope. She wanted to forget. That she'd slept with Logan. And that he hadn't gotten in touch.

She'd arrived at Kayla's on Sunday and today was Tuesday. So what if she hadn't told him where to reach her?

He was a lawyer. A smart guy. If he'd wanted to find her, he could. Easily.

As much as she'd told herself not to expect anything, that she didn't want anything, his silence hurt anyway. Because despite all the truths Catherine knew in her mind, her heart wanted to believe she was different, special. Not just a cheap and easy fling.

She wanted to forget, and catering to her pregnant sister would help her do just that.

Plus, it would allow Kane to leave the house without worrying that he'd left Kayla alone. It was the least she could do in exchange for invading his space and their privacy. She carried a tray of food upstairs and knocked on the bedroom door.

"If it's more muffins, I'm stuffed."

"Cinnamon French toast," Catherine called back and kicked open the door with the toe of her foot.

Kayla propped herself up in bed.

"I made it just the way you like. A few raisins, a touch of low-calorie syrup..."

"Cat, sit down."

After placing the tray on the dresser, she joined her sister. "I'm sitting. What's wrong? Is it the baby?" She glanced at Kayla's stomach and was rewarded by a jolt of movement under the sheet. "Active little guy."

"Or girl. Listen to me. About all this... food."

“I’ve been cleaning the kitchen, I swear. And I’m freezing the casseroles. You and Kane will have enough food to get you through the...”

“The first decade of this child’s life. Catherine, slow it down. I know you better than anyone. You only cook like a demon when you’re upset. It’s been two days and you haven’t mentioned him, but you’ve barely left the kitchen.”

“Him who?” she asked, avoiding her sister’s gaze.

Kayla rolled her eyes. “You know stress isn’t good for the baby.” She patted her stomach. “And worrying about you is stressful. Now, stop playing dumb and tell me what gives.”

Trust Kayla to hit her in the heart. Catherine eased herself down on the bed. “Remember when we were kids? And Christmas came? All the kids on the block got tons of gifts. Even if it was a used bike or a hand-me-down doll, they got wrapped gifts under the tree and Santa came.”

“But not for us,” Kayla said softly.

“Right. How many birthday wishes and Christmas lists did I waste asking for my daddy to come home?”

“I’m not sure. You never said it out loud. You swore it never bothered you the way it bothered me. And I should have sensed that it did.”

Catherine shook her head. “There you go again, taking responsibility for things you can’t control. If I didn’t admit it, I didn’t *want* you to know.”

As she met her sister’s gaze, Kayla motioned for her to continue.

Catherine bit her lip. “It took me a while, but after the first couple of years, I caught on. He wasn’t coming back... and I stopped believing.”

“In more than just Santa Claus,” Kayla said.

Catherine nodded. “And then I met Logan. I knew we were from different worlds. I knew I was just an interesting diversion. And yet...” To her horror, tears filled her eyes and she brushed them away with the back of her hand.

“You believed in him.” Kayla frowned. “He could just be busy with work.”

On call three nights a week and one weekend a month...
“It doesn’t take long to call or text.” To find out *where* to pick her up on Friday. For the date that wasn’t going to happen.

The ring of the doorbell cut off her train of thought. “Expecting company?” she asked her sister.

“Could be Kane’s boss’s wife. I mean, old boss. He retired last year. She stops by every week with... more food,” Kayla said with a groan.

“I’ll get it. Just remember, no one cooks like me.” Catherine forced humor and lightness into her voice as she walked out of the bedroom and headed for the door.

If Catherine was going to stay, she needed to give her sister support and not stress. Neither one of the sisters knew how to turn off their motherly instincts toward the other. They were too deeply ingrained for too many years.

On the other side of the door was a deliveryman and not the captain’s wife as Kayla had predicted.

“Delivery for Catherine Luck.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That’s strange.”

He shrugged. “Are you her? I need a signature.”

Catherine scrawled her name and accepted the small box covered in plain brown paper wrap. Turning the square box over, she found the familiar return address, written in an unfamiliar scrawl.

She’d never seen his handwriting, she realized. How many other things didn’t she know about Logan Montgomery? Too many. And yet the small box that fit into her hand filled those gaps until they didn’t seem to matter.

As she tore into the paper, Catherine hoped with everything in her that it wasn’t an illusion.



LOGAN TOSSED HIS keys onto the metal desk, kicked aside the garbage can, and unloaded armfuls of folders onto the floor. His desk was piled high with files and paperwork that ought to keep him busy straight through next year. He muttered a curse. Add to that Tuesday night calendar where he represented whatever case came onto the docket and the result had been no time to himself.

Zero time to sleep... or to get in touch with Cat. After the closeness they’d shared, what he had to say couldn’t be summed up in a brief text or a short voicemail, and that was all the time he’d had, considering he’d been handed this case cold on Monday morning.

The burning desire to see her again was all-encompassing. Everything about her appealed to him. Her allure... her uncertainty.

He'd promised to call her "soon." That was Saturday. He'd dropped her off on Sunday. And here it was Tuesday night. "Son of a bitch." She was going to write him off and think he'd blown her off.

A firm hand smacked him on the side of the head. "Didn't I bring you up better than to curse like that?" his grandmother asked.

He stared at the open door she'd barged through without warning. "And don't manners dictate you knock?"

"Why should I? Door's open."

He placed the phone on the desk, rose, and walked around to his grandmother. "Good to see you, Gran. You're always welcome. You know that." He kissed her weathered cheek, wondering why she would show up at his office at this hour of the night.

"Of course, I do. But it wouldn't matter if I wasn't. We need to talk." The gleam in her eyes intrigued him as much as it disturbed. She was up to something again.

"How'd you get here?" he asked.

She let out a long-suffering sigh. "I let Ralph drive me. Though I still say that DMV person was wrong and I am not a hazard on the road." She sniffed.

He'd never let her know that after she'd backed over her prized roses in the driveway, *he'd* pulled strings to make sure

she had an eye exam and didn't get her license renewed. He wanted her to live as long as possible. "Well, I'm glad you were prudent, anyway," he said, knowing she still snuck a drive or two when she could get away with it.

"Like I had a choice. Your father would call the cops on me. His own mother. Imagine that."

"Imagine." He grinned. "I have to call Cat first and then we can talk."

She glanced warily at his cell. "Talk to me first. Call later," she said, sounding panicked. "I haven't eaten. Let's go to that fancy place downstairs."

"That fancy place is a bar."

"Sounds good. Let's go." She yanked his arm. For a frail-looking woman, she had almost superhuman strength. Although he could argue with her, he had no desire to make his first call to Catherine with an audience present and he knew damn well he'd never get Emma to wait outside. Better to feed her and send her on her way. *Then* he'd call Catherine and leave a message if he had to.

He managed to grab his folders and stuff them into his briefcase before Emma herded him out the door. Five minutes later, he and his grandmother were seated in a sports bar in the same building as his office.

"Want to see a menu?" he asked her, calling the server over at the same time.

She shook her head. Not a strand of white hair fell from her perfect bun. She hadn't changed since he was a kid. And

he loved her for it, even if there were times—like now—when she confounded him.

“Whatever you’re having is fine with me,” she said.

He rolled his eyes. “Beer, and I thought you hadn’t eaten.”

She fidgeted in her seat. “I lost my appetite.”

“Two beers,” he said to the server.

“Be right back.”

Logan leaned back in his seat and glanced around the crowded bar. “Okay, you’ve got me in a public place where I can’t make a scene. What’s going on?”

“You are good.”

The server returned and placed two bottles and their glasses down onto the table.

“I’ll take mine straight up,” Emma said.

He swallowed a laugh.

“You might want to do the same,” she said without cracking a smile.

His urge to laugh ceased as he digested her warning. He handed her one bottle, grabbed the other for himself, and took a large gulp, refusing to comment when she did the same. The sight was absurd but no doubt that was her intention. Get him in a public place, keep him off guard, and drop her bomb, whatever it was.

The cold, wet brew didn’t ease the dryness in his mouth. “Now, tell me what’s going on.”

“What? I can’t stop by to visit my favorite grandson?”

“I’m your only grandson. Now talk.”

She sighed. “You’re working hard?” she asked.

“It’s been a hectic week.”

“And it’s barely begun. No time for play?” she asked.

“You keeping tabs on me, Gran?”

“I have to hunt you down at your office at ten o’clock... it speaks for itself.” She tilted her head to the side. “The women in your life can’t be too understanding if you’re so out of touch.”

There are no women in my life, he almost said. It was his standard response to Emma’s not-so-subtle prying. But he caught himself because they both knew this time, it would be a lie.

As much as he valued his privacy, he wouldn’t mind unloading on his grandmother. She understood him better than anyone else and already knew he was interested in Cat. More importantly, she liked Cat, too.

He leaned forward. “I’m not sure how she feels about me right now. I haven’t had a minute’s free time to get in touch.”

Emma made a chiding, clucking sound with her tongue. “You know what they say about all work and no play. You ought to go find Catherine and have a good time with her. Relieve some of that tension you’re carrying around with you.”

He had no patience for her prying or the way she spoke of Cat as if she meant nothing more to him than a good time in bed. He shook his head. “You cut that out, now,” he warned his grandmother.

She clapped her weathered hands together. “Thank goodness.”

“Thank goodness what? Someone other than the judge is finally censoring your language?”

“Logan, I raised you, I love you, but you can be thick as a milkshake sometimes. Thank goodness you’re looking out for Catherine. If you don’t let me talk like that about her, I picked right, and *it’s* finally happened.”

“Your train of thought boggles the mind,” he muttered. “But I’ll bite. What’s finally happened?”

“You’ve fallen hard. I knew you would. Now, here’s the plan.” She talked fast, probably before he could interrupt. “When I realized you were tied up for two days, I took a few liberties.”

He shook his head. She was a whirlwind, and right now, his life was caught dead smack in the middle. Which reminded him. “We still haven’t talked about the closet incident.”

“Oh, I thought you and Catherine already taught me a lesson,” she muttered.

“So, you didn’t like being on the receiving end, did you? Now listen and understand. Much as I appreciate your intentions, your... meddling can’t go on. I’m thirty-one years old, Gran. Would you take it personally if I said butt out?”

“Of course not. But it’s too late for that. You need the scoop and I’m here to give it to you.”

“And I’m here listening.”

“You said at the party you wanted to make Catherine’s dreams come true. And before you ask how I know, I accidentally left the intercom on by the pool house where the bar was located,” she said, unable to meet his gaze.

He blinked hard. “You’re telling me you sat in the house and listened?” he asked, buying himself time to swallow his anger.

“Yes,” she admitted with embarrassment and shame in her tone.

Emma wasn’t malicious nor did she ever mean any harm. But the knowledge didn’t help right now. He closed his eyes and counted to ten, attempting to control his frustration.

The penalty for murder in this state wasn’t pretty, and even though this could be considered justifiable homicide, the jury might take exception to the fact that he’d strangled his eighty-year-old grandmother.

“I only needed to know if I chose right,” she said by way of explanation. “If you two hit it off. Heaven knows you’d never tell me the truth.”

“Only because you react... like this.” He balled his hands into tight fists. The thought of her invading his and Catherine’s privacy had him seeing red. “You might mean well, but you passed the bounds of common decency this time.”

“Actually, I know that, and I’m sorry.” She bowed her head. “But that heart attack scared me to death. Well, not literally, thank goodness, but it meant I had to see you settled down and happy before I passed on. Went to the great beyond. Well, you know what I mean.”

He did. And he understood. Her heart attack had taken years off his life as well. And the reason he let her get away with so much interfering was because he loved her and was grateful she was still around to meddle in his life.

But she couldn’t go to these extremes, not when Catherine was involved. “I already told you I won’t use Cat in any scheme to stop the judge. You should be ashamed of yourself. You claim to like this woman and you set her up, plan to use her...”

Emma rose to her feet, indignation in her posture and a determined look on her face. “I did no such thing.”

“Sit down, Gran.”

She lowered herself back into the booth.

“Well, I set her up with you, if that’s what you mean. But you should be grateful. As for using her, can I help it if her background will infuriate your father and thwart his mayoral plans? But that has nothing to do with why I brought you to the party. I wanted you to meet her. Period.”

“And if we didn’t hit it off?”

“I’d have backed off,” she said with the utmost sincerity.

Logan ran a hand through his hair. If the past two days of work hadn’t been enough, he now had this to contend with.

“Then do it. Now.” He imposed as much authority into his tone as possible without being disrespectful to the woman he loved.

She patted his hand, much as she’d done when he was a child. Through the years, the gesture had been oddly comforting. But now it made him wary, and her next words proved his instincts were on target.

“There’s just one more tiny little thing.”



“IT’S ROMANTIC, CAT.” Kayla beamed, and it wasn’t just the glow of pregnancy lighting her features.

Catherine knew her sister was thrilled by Logan’s daily gifts. No more than she was herself. She stared down at the three gifts laid out on the bed, finding herself at an uncustomary loss for words. Logan did that to her, she thought, warmth spreading through her.

She shook her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You wanted sincerity. Looks like he’s given it to you.”

Catherine nodded. A different box had arrived every day. A box of fairy dust on Tuesday. The card read, “To Make Your Dreams Come True.”

On Wednesday, a snow globe. To an outside observer, the gift held little meaning. But the scene inside depicted canoeing on the Charles River—and a gentle shake showered the boats in falling snow. Snow in the summertime. And she remembered the words on the card: “Miracles Do Happen.”

He was her miracle, and she was enveloped by the aching desire to feel his arms around her. Oh, he was good. The right gifts, the right words. A subtle, mental seduction, she thought. Did a man go to those lengths for one more night of sex?

Making love, her heart said. And that's where they were headed if she went with him tonight. The third gift that arrived this morning was proof of that. He'd sent a playlist to her phone. The jazz music from the night they'd spent in each other's arms and a text: "Until We Can Be Together Again."

She touched her music app and a different desire kicked in this time. The need to have this music, *their* music, filling her ears at the same time he filled her body. A shot of desire rocked her hard, and she wrapped her arms around her stomach to stop the trembling.

"Cat? Cat? Are you okay?"

"What?" Her sister came into focus. "Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

"Where did you disappear to?"

"I'm sorry. I just don't know what to think. These gifts are..."

"Sweet? Thoughtful? Stop trying to put a word on it and go with what you feel."

Catherine laughed. "I remember telling you to do just that before your first date with Kane."

Kayla grinned. "And look where it got me." She spread her hands across her large stomach.

“If you’re trying to scare me, you’re doing a good job.” But Catherine couldn’t deny the thought of being Logan’s wife, having his babies, held a strange appeal considering the short time in which they’d known each other.

She shouldn’t rush things. He wanted another night. Never had the long-term future been mentioned.

“Oh, come on,” her sister said. “Tell me you don’t want this.” She spread her arms out in a broad sweep. “The husband, the love, the security... the house, the kids...”

“The dog and the white picket fence? Get real, Kayla. This is me we’re talking about, not you. I don’t inspire a man to thoughts of permanence.” Of course, she’d never considered a future with any of the men she’d met, either. Until now.

“Oh, and you think I did? Before Kane, what did I ever get out of a guy except it’s been fun, see you around sometime? Why don’t you believe that one person exists who was meant for you? That you deserve it all?” Kayla asked, pure frustration in her voice.

“Because I’m not an incurable romantic like you. And even if I was, we’re talking about *Logan Montgomery* here. You didn’t see that house. I’m sorry, that mansion. The coat closet was bigger than our room growing up.”

“So? You said his house was your dream cottage. And before you start in, I have an answer for every argument you can throw out.”

“Except this one. Can you see me as the mayor’s wife?” Catherine stood and gestured to her outfit, the clothes she’d

picked up from her apartment the other day. With a white T-shirt, black jeans, and leopard-print sandals on her feet, she wasn't exactly the demure type.

"I can see you as the mayor's unique wife, yes. I can also see you adapting. But as I recall, Logan denied the rumors. Instead, he's pursuing you. He's obviously not concerned about these things. Why are you? The past is behind us. You're more than worthy of him... unless you're looking for an excuse to steer clear," Kayla guessed with dead-on accuracy.

"Would you please have this baby already so you'll have something else to worry about besides me?" Catherine muttered.

"I could have ten kids and I'd still worry about you."

"I know." Tears filled her eyes. Without Kayla, she'd have no one.

She told herself she wasn't foolish enough to believe Logan was in it for the long haul. She glanced at his thoughtful, sentimental gifts. No matter how much her heart disagreed.

Chapter Nine

CATHERINE DIDN'T HAVE to wonder what she wanted from Logan. He'd made certain of that.

She wanted *him*.

Every gift, with every note, had led her to that conclusion. When all her thoughts were consumed with him, what else could she possibly desire? She shook the globe and watched the snow shimmer and fall on the summertime scene.

And after listening to the low strains of jazz all afternoon, her heart throbbed in time to its beat, and her body yearned for his touch. She was beginning to believe he was right and that they had a chance.

He hadn't called. No doubt that, too, was calculated to heighten her sense of anticipation. It worked. By the time the doorbell rang, Catherine didn't care about backgrounds, class, money... or anything except being with him again. Because not only had he seduced her, but he'd also chipped away at the wall she'd erected to keep him at arm's length. He'd reached her heart—from a distance, at that. Heaven help her now that he was here.

Kane beat her to the door. His and Logan's greetings bought her time to calm her raging nerves. By the time she made her way downstairs, the two men were deep in conversation. They'd probably discovered they had the law in common, even if Logan did work to spring the men Kane put

behind bars. Good thing they worked in separate jurisdictions, Catherine thought wryly.

She caught sight of him the second her feet hit the floor of the small entryway. She took in his dark denim jeans, an olive green shirt pulled taut over his broad shoulders, day-old razor stubble, and nearly lost it right then. His penetrating gaze met hers, deep and knowing. He looked at her as if he could read minds, as if he knew her most secret desire.

He held her gaze and winked. Catherine drew a deep, shuddering breath. Because she saw it in his eyes. His feelings mirrored her own.

Although he continued to talk to Kane, Logan held one hand out toward her. No sooner had she come within touching distance than he snagged her hand and linked their arms together, drawing her close. His skin was warm, his touch possessive and welcoming. She thought she'd calmed the flutters in her stomach, but they returned full force.

She'd never had a father to greet her dates and she felt twice as ridiculous now at the thought of making small talk with Logan and Kane. She cleared her throat. "So. I see you two have met."

Kane nodded. Logan opened his mouth to speak.

"But we haven't." Kayla's voice sounded from the top of the stairs and cut him off.

"You're supposed to be in bed," Kane growled, but Catherine heard the affection laced with concern in his tone.

“And I suppose one of you was going to bring Mr. Montgomery up to meet me?” Kayla asked, knowing neither Catherine nor Kane would have done any such thing.

“It’s Logan. And it’s nice to meet you, Kayla.” Logan grinned. He couldn’t mistake the resemblance between the sisters despite Kayla’s obviously fuller and very pregnant form.

“And now you can get back in bed,” Kane ordered. He turned to Logan. “Doctor’s orders,” he explained.

“No, your orders. You know darn well he said it’s safe for the baby to come any day and I can switch to restricted activity.”

Kane held out his hand and Logan shook it. “Nice to meet you, Montgomery. I’m going to carry my wife back to bed.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Kayla called back.

Catherine’s laughter sounded in Logan’s ear, as sexy and arousing as he’d remembered. Obviously, she was used to this byplay. Logan wasn’t. Not once had he seen his parents so obviously happy together.

But he had that chance for himself. Thanks to Catherine, they had that chance—to see where this thing between them led.

Before Kane hit the top step, he called out, “Montgomery.”

Logan glanced up.

“Hurt my sister-in-law and you answer to me.” Seconds later, Kane had swept his very pregnant wife off her feet and

into his arms. As they disappeared down the hall, a door slammed shut behind them.

Logan understood Kane's warning. He accepted it without malice. But he doubted Catherine would appreciate her brother-in-law's interference. Yet when he met her gaze, instead of anger, he saw wonder and disbelief.

"I thought he put up with me for Kayla's sake," she murmured in answer to his unspoken question.

Her reaction hit him in the gut. Had she always felt so alone? He knew the answer because he often felt the same. One more thing they had in common. One more thing he wanted to change in her life.

Without thinking, he pulled her into his arms. "There you go again, selling yourself short. I won't have it, Cat."

"What *will* you have, Logan?" Her eyes glittered with pleasure.

Pleasure he wanted to increase. "You." His hands moved and cupped her waist. Because her ruffled shirt ended at the waistband of her fitted black pants, his hands gripped bare skin. Logan let out a slow groan.

She sucked in an answering breath before meeting his gaze. "Say that again."

He glanced into her green eyes and recognized her need to be reassured. Their week apart had worried him, and he saw now he'd been right to be concerned. He curled a strand of her hair around his finger and tugged lightly. "I want you, Cat. All of you."

She sighed softly. The sound went straight to his groin, stopping first to wrap itself around his heart. She surprised him by moving closer. Their lower bodies collided and a shaft of white heat shot through him, hard and fast. No way could she mistake his body's reaction.

He glanced at her, expecting to see remnants of self-doubt in her gaze. He saw only clear certainty. Unabashed desire.

For him.

He'd never been more relieved. When Emma had informed him she'd sent Catherine a gift—fairy dust, of all things—he'd nearly had a coronary. Of all the corny, harebrained schemes, with this one, Emma had outdone herself. But, as she'd informed him, he could spend his time yelling or pick up the ball she'd dropped and run with it.

He still wasn't taking his grandmother's calls and was barely speaking to her, but he'd chosen to run with it. Once his eighty-year-old spitfire interfered, what else could he do?

Catherine wasn't one for expensive gifts or flowers. She wasn't impressed with money or material things. Honesty had reached her once before, during the closet episode. He hadn't forgotten that.

When he'd left her at her sister's, she'd been wary and skittish. If he wanted to reach her again, he had to sway her mind first. Her body he had no trouble with, he thought wryly. So, taking quick breaks from work, he'd come up with the other two gifts, choosing to let his words speak for him.

Apparently, he'd been on target, he thought as her hands pulled his shirt out of his jeans and her palms splayed against his back.

"I think we ought to move this someplace else," he said, and she nodded.

Heartened, he asked, "Are you ready to let yourself believe in possibilities?" Because he didn't want just another night with regrets in the morning.

The week without her had been hell. And if this thing between them had happened fast, he was willing to let it take the lead. He'd had too many other weak imitations of what he and Catherine shared not to recognize its potential.

But she had to be open to the future, too. He couldn't pursue this alone. He held her and waited.

"I believe in you," she admitted, her heart in her eyes.

He'd be a fool not to know what the admission cost her. And it deserved one from him in return. "I was thinking we could go home."

She tilted her head back to meet his gaze. He kissed each eyelid and then her upturned nose. "My home," he added. "And there's something I want you to know. You're the only woman I've ever brought there, Cat."

Before she could answer, he brushed a kiss over her soft lips. He meant to reassure, but the fire flared fast and without warning. Breaking contact wasn't easy, but he managed.

She let out a shaky laugh. "You do have a way with words, Mr. Montgomery."

“I do, don’t I?” he said with a grin. “Now, let’s go.”



THE COTTAGE LOOMED in the distance, as warm and welcoming as she’d remembered it. Logan pulled in front of the small house and cut the engine. With the sun setting behind them, Catherine followed him inside. Desire throbbed inside her as fast as her rapidly beating heart. But the one thing she was aware of was a sense of belonging.

Deprived and lost were the only words Catherine could think of to describe how she’d felt the week without Logan. She’d known him one day. It felt like a lifetime, maybe because he’d used that week wisely, to build faith. Trust. Longing.

The minute the door to the cottage slammed closed behind him, all those feelings came rushing to the surface. She wasn’t sure who turned first, who reached for whom first. It didn’t matter because his arms were around her and his mouth came down hard on hers. She welcomed the firmness of his lips and the sweeping thrusts of his tongue because she’d been deprived for too long.

She ran her fingers through his hair, holding his head, silently pleading with him not to stop. Not to leave her. He groaned and pulled her closer, aligning their bodies so she could feel him, hard and full, throbbing against her. Liquid heat pooled inside her and trickled between her legs.

She whimpered and he moved his hand and cupped her intimately, knowing and anticipating her need. “Logan.” Somehow, she found the strength to separate their lips.

With an agonized groan, he met her gaze. But he didn't move his hand and his thumb rubbed in lazy circles over the soft denim covering her until her breath came in shallow gasps and the dampness increased.

“What is it, Cat? Tell me what you want.”

She wanted the ache to ease. The throbbing to stop. And she never wanted it to end.

She wanted him.

She tipped her head back and realized she was braced against the wall, her legs bracketed between his strong thighs. He stared back at her with a heavy-lidded gaze. “Talk to me,” he murmured.

But one of his fingers was tracing her lips and the sensation was both sensual and hypnotic. Clearing her mind wasn't easy. She wasn't even sure why she needed to, but it had to do with explanations and what he thought of her. “I don't... I mean, I'm not usually so...” Her voice trailed off as his wet finger moved from her lips to her jaw, to her collarbone, settling finally in the soft V of her top, enfolded in layers of ruffles.

His gaze never left hers and that same finger pushed down on the elastic, exposing her breast to his heated gaze. Her stomach muscles contracted with need and her nipples tightened at the first rush of cool air.

He sucked in a ragged breath that matched one of her own. “It's never been like this for me, either,” he muttered.

Was that what she'd been about to say? She wasn't sure and it didn't matter. Not when he was right. When everything was so right.

And that was the problem. Nothing had ever felt so good, so perfect... so meant to be. How was that possible? Life didn't work that way. It didn't give something so wonderful, not without taking away in return.

"Don't think, Cat. Not now." He cupped her chin in his hand and tilted her head for a gentle kiss. A hard, demanding one would have been more welcome. She could have handled want. Sweetness and understanding might be her undoing.

After her lifelong protests and years of disbelief, she felt herself being swept away, succumbing to the fantasy. The one she'd buried and the one he wove. The happily ever after one. She shivered in outright fear.

He grabbed her shoulders for support. "We'll talk all you want. Later."

After he'd bonded them together again, Logan thought. After he'd reminded her of how good they could be—if only she'd let herself believe.

Her sigh was one of acceptance. He knew because she leaned toward him, not away. Because her hips bucked against his painful erection. And because she leaned forward and whispered, "Yes," in his ear.

Only then did he let himself look down at her full breast filling his hand. "You're not wearing a bra," he muttered. Her breast, heavy and hot, filled his palm.

A warm flush rose to her cheeks. “It’s not like you can see anything through the ruffles.”

He grinned. “But I’ve gotten way past the ruffles.” He brushed his thumb over one tight peak and felt the pull straight down to his own groin. He dipped his head for a taste.

Her unique scent filled him as he pulled the tight bud into his mouth. He flicked and teased with his tongue, then his teeth, until her hips rocked so insistently against him, *he* was in danger of losing control. Beyond thought or reason, he reached for her snap, and somehow, he remembered to grab for protection. Then between the two of them, her pants hit the floor, then his, and their underwear followed.

He turned and grabbed for her once more. He lifted her. “Wrap your legs around me, sweetheart.” She did, and as he lowered her onto his waiting erection, her body took him deep inside.

He’d known she was wet and hot, but the glide into her slick heat was as easy as it was sweet. A muffled sound broke through his ecstasy. He opened his eyes in time to catch a lone tear drip down her cheek. He recoiled immediately and tried to back off. “I’m hurting you.”

She shook her head. “Not the way you mean,” she whispered. “It’s a good hurt.”

The constricting in his chest eased. Her legs grasped him tighter and her wet muscles contracted around him. He let out a groan. “Baby, I know what you mean.”

He met her gaze, grateful to see her smiling this time. Leaning forward, he licked the salty tear off her cheek. The motion had the effect of grinding their lower bodies together. The wave crested and eased. Her soft sigh told him she'd felt it, too.

“Logan?”

“Hmm?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“Any slower and I might have to strangle you.”

“You have to admit, it's a helluva way to go.”

She yanked back on his hair and he grinned.

“Easy, babe.” But despite his soothing words, his body was hammering for release. And she'd just given him the okay.

What came next defied anything in his experience. He'd meant to move but she beat him to it, and what he'd expected to be an in and out satisfying of their bodies turned into a rocking, twisting motion that had the effect of drawing him into her, body, heart, and soul. The tempo increased, and she bucked and undulated against him and he against her until the swaying and twisting had his body reaching... cresting... peaking on a wave of something so strong, so deep, everything inside him was swept away.

◇ ◇ ◇

WHEN HAD SHE fallen asleep? Catherine blinked into the sunshine streaming through the open blinds. She stretched and felt the protest in muscles she'd overused last night. It felt decadent to wake up in Logan's bed after the endless hours they'd passed here. It felt even better to be entangled in his

arms. He'd tossed one leg over hers as if to lock her in place. She laughed. It wasn't as if she was going anywhere, she thought. Not until noon when she had to head home and get ready for the party Pot Luck was supplying the decorations for tomorrow. As parties went, this one was simple because it just required setup.

“Something funny?” Logan asked.

“You're up.”

He grasped her hand and edged it downward. “In more ways than one.”

His deep voice wrapped around her. “You're bad,” she murmured.

“And you love it.” In one smooth motion, he rolled over her, bracing his weight on both hands.

She loved... Oh, no. No way. Not so soon. Not now. Not this man. She scrambled to get away, but his lower body held her fast. And the more she squirmed the more their bodies connected. The more his solid erection pressed tight against her. Hot, pulsing, liquid heat spread through her.

“Stop squirming, Cat.” His voice was deadly serious. “Now, before something happens you obviously don't want, why don't you tell me what has you spooked?”

She stopped, then shook her head. She may have bared her body to this man but no way would she bare her soul. She couldn't give him that kind of power over her.

“Okay, how about I tell you what has me spooked. You can go next.”

“Sounds fair.” And it would give her time to regain her equilibrium and come up with something else to tell him. Anything was better than the truth.

What a joke. Catherine Luck, daughter of a supermarket clerk and a man she didn’t even remember, in love with Logan Montgomery, son of the most powerful judge and family in the state. If she wasn’t careful, the hysterical laughter she felt bubbling to the surface would turn into buckets of tears. And Catherine never cried. Not since the Christmas she’d realized Santa was a fraud and her father was never coming back.

“Look at me.”

She forced herself to gaze into his handsome face. The only way to conquer her fears was to overcome them. She’d done it before, she could do it now. The smile she faked was more difficult. “Okay, you go first.”

“You’re running from me. No matter how deep I dig, no matter how honest I am or how much of me I reveal, you run the other way.”

She couldn’t deny it. Not only did he open up verbally, but he didn’t hold back when they were in bed, either. Catherine had limited experience. But even if her sexual past was uneventful, she was smart enough not to think that an earth-shattering experience between the sheets had any meaning outside the bedroom. Her mother had done that. Head over heels in love with a man who wanted her in bed and no place else.

She shook her head. That wouldn’t be her fate.

“I’m not running from you, Logan. I’m...” She thought of everything she could say and opted for the truth. “I’m running from the result.”

He rolled to his side. “Back to that again, are we? The differences? The idea that we won’t last?”

She couldn’t deny that, either. “Yes.”

“Okay, we’ll play it your way. One day at a time. It works, it works. It doesn’t, it doesn’t. That make you feel any better?”

His compelling eyes stared into hers.

“No,” she admitted.

“Good.” He treated her to a heart-stopping grin. “That tells me you care.”

“I do,” she said softly.

His gaze softened. “There’s something to be said for that honesty of yours.”

“And any man who can send the gifts you did deserves at least that in return. You care about my dreams, Logan.” And it may not last forever, but it certainly touched her heart, Catherine thought.

His gaze darted away from hers. She couldn’t read his expression, but he was uncomfortable, and that wasn’t like him. “What is it?”

“I do care about your dreams. Don’t ever think I don’t. But...”

“But?”

He ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. “Hell, do you think a guy would send you fairy dust?” he muttered.

“You didn’t?”

He shook his head, and she felt her heart squeeze tighter. “The globe—the snow in the summer?” she asked.

“That was me. So was the music. And the notes that came with both.”

The constricting pain in her chest loosened. “But the fairy dust?”

He rolled his eyes, then covered them with one arm. “Emma,” he muttered. “And if you have any sympathy for me, you won’t ask how she knew us so well.”

Catherine nodded. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know that herself. “So, she wants us together?” she asked.

“It would seem so.”

That was a piece of this puzzle that hadn’t made sense to her from the beginning. Why would Emma Montgomery, no matter how eccentric or outlandish, seek out a woman like Catherine for her beloved grandson?

Catherine had done well for herself. She didn’t deny that; in fact, she was proud of all she’d accomplished. But she knew good and well where she came from. And she certainly knew her family wasn’t the type to gain points with the illustrious Montgomerys. Forgetting that she came from the wrong side of the tracks, she knew only too well that the recent past hadn’t been kind to the Luck family, either.

Not only had her aunt married a man with mob ties, but he'd dabbled in prostitution. To make matters worse, they'd been killed and left their charm school—a front for her uncle's prostitution ring—to Kayla and Catherine. And the entire sordid story had played out in the papers and the online gossip columns. There was no way anyone who lived in the state of Massachusetts and was breathing at the time would have missed the juicy tidbits in the news.

Logan hadn't mentioned it, but maybe he was just being the gentleman he'd been raised to be. And as long as he didn't see fit to mention it, she didn't plan on discussing that bit of family humiliation, either.

"I don't get it," she said aloud.

He ran his hands through her hair. As always, the light tug on her scalp sent her senses soaring.

"Don't get why she'd like you?" he asked.

She didn't want to have this conversation. "I'm a likable person," she said lightly. "I can just think of more suitable women she should be throwing you together with. I couldn't name any of them, of course—I don't run in those circles. But it doesn't make sense that she'd go to all that effort to matchmake between us."

"It makes perfect sense to me." His warm breath tickled her cheek. "We make perfect sense to me."

Since she'd seen so much of Emma in Logan—his charm, his personality, his determination to do his own thing—

Catherine could almost believe Emma, too, found them a perfect match.

His cheek rested against hers. A silly little thing, but just feeling him that close caused an answering need to soar through her. And when he spoke about them as if there were no barriers, no constraints... She wanted so badly to give in to his seductive words and unspoken promises. Without realizing it, she rolled closer, until their bodies aligned once more.

“Your turn, Cat.” His voice was a hoarse command. And she felt him hard against her.

He wanted her. She wanted him. What was stopping them?

“Tell me what’s bothering you,” he said.

Catherine smiled. It wasn’t difficult considering Logan was gazing into her eyes with genuine concern. How could she not have fallen hard?

But she knew what was stopping them, and it was plain old common sense. Hers. Just because she’d fallen didn’t mean she had to let him know it. “Nothing’s bothering me except that I’m starving.”

“I don’t believe you,” he whispered in her ear. “But I’m hungry, too.”

“Good. Then lie back and relax and let me do all the work. I promised, remember?”

“Only if you promise to take a walk with me afterward. I want to walk on the beach with you. And I want you to talk to me.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Montgomery.”

He grinned. “It’s part of my charm.”

He was charming, all right. But during the time she’d known him, she’d learned a little bit about semantics and wordplay. He said he wanted her to talk to him. She’d agreed.

But it didn’t mean she had to tell him what was in her heart.

Chapter Ten

LOGAN LOCKED THEIR hands together and led her onto the beach. The sand was still damp from the early morning and felt cold and wet beneath his feet—unlike his body, which was hot and bothered. She'd satisfied his hunger for food, but not for her.

Catherine had whipped up a meal unlike any he'd ever had. He was impressed not only with her talent and ability to make a feast out of the meager offerings in his kitchen but with the pure enjoyment the task gave her. This wasn't a woman who demanded to be waited on or who expected maid service just because his last name was Montgomery.

“So, tell me about your plans to run for mayor,” Catherine said.

“What makes you think I'd run?”

“I heard you mention something about it when your father picked up the phone last week, and I read it online,” she admitted.

He stopped walking. Catherine kept on going until his resolve and his firm pull on her hand stopped her. She turned back to face him.

“How do you feel about that?” He didn't mean to hedge, but he needed to know what she was thinking. He studied her but had a difficult time reading her neutral expression. He let the silent moment go on.

The roar of the waves crashed in the background. The light breeze blew her hair around her face and carried with it the scent of saltwater from the ocean. He inhaled deeply. In this spot, he'd found the sense of peace that had eluded him all his life, so buying the house had been the logical thing to do.

When Catherine's wide green eyes met his gaze, the same feeling enveloped him, and he knew. In this woman, he'd found that same elusive contentment. She, too, brought him peace.

She shrugged. "What you do—whether you run for mayor or not—is none of my business." But the intense look in her eyes was at odds with her words.

"Let's get something straight. From this moment on, if it involves me, it involves you. That's what *us* means." He tugged on her hand and drew her against him.

Her full breasts pressed against his bare chest and he let out a groan. Thanks to the ample privacy the beach house afforded, neither one of them was fully dressed. His cutoff shorts were his only concession to clothing, while she wore one of his oxford shirts and the skimpy underwear he'd peeled off her the night before. Taking advantage, he slipped his hands beneath the shirt and laid his palms on the soft skin of her back.

"Us," she murmured. "I do like the sound of that. You make life sound so simple."

"That's because it is. But for the record, I'm not running for office. It isn't me."

She smiled. “I happen to think you’d do a great job, but I agree.” Her hand reached up, and she brushed his hair off his forehead.

The simple gesture, sweet in its simplicity, was oddly sensual, too. His body, already on edge, stirred to life.

“The stuffy public image of a politician isn’t you.”

“I’m glad you know me so well. If only my father did, too, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation,” he muttered. But Judge Montgomery had never known his only son except as an extension of himself. He’d never even bothered to try.

And it hurt. The same part of Logan that rebelled against the family dictates also longed for a normal father-son relationship. One he’d never have.

“I take it you’ve told him?” Catherine asked.

“Over and over. He won’t accept it, which means he continues with his own agenda. At least until I come up with a way to stop him.”

“You want him to accept more than your decision not to run for mayor, don’t you?” she asked. The light breeze blew her hair into her face and she held it back with one hand.

“You know that I do. I suppose it’s human to want parental approval.”

“It’s not just that. You’ve accomplished so much with your life that you’ve earned that approval. Unfortunately, he’s withholding it because your needs don’t meet his needs. It’s sad, really. And you’re both missing out.”

“You’re perceptive. Anyone ever tell you that before?”

She shrugged. “Not really. I think it’s just because I’ve come to know you so well that I can read your feelings.”

He grinned. “So, I’ve accomplished a lot in a short time.”

She rolled her eyes. “Leave it to you to make this about us. Now, what about your mother?” Catherine asked. “Can she be counted on to bridge this gap? Did you ever take your case to her?”

He shook his head, amazed he’d never thought of it before. “For so long I’ve seen her as an extension of the judge, the one who carries out his wishes in public. But really, I don’t know much about them or their marriage in the past few years.” And though he rarely allowed himself to dwell on his lack of family life, he did miss things about his mother.

She lifted her shoulders. “Maybe it’s time you learned.”

“You’re a wise woman, Catherine Luck.”

“An even wiser woman once told me that women are smarter than men and I shouldn’t ever forget it. Perhaps I’ve just proven her right,” she said with a grin.

“If it’s Emma you’re talking about, please don’t ever give her the satisfaction of letting her know she’s right about anything. She’ll be impossible to handle.”

Catherine laughed. “She already is. And maybe if you get things resolved through your mother, you can get Grace to come home.” She touched his cheek. “Because I know you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

He grasped her wrist and looked down at her solemn face. She cared about him and his family. And he cared about her.

“Yes. And I’d like to know what’s going on in that head of yours even more.”

She wrapped her free hand around his waist. “Nothing worth discussing, I swear.”

“Trust me, sweetheart.”

“This has nothing to do with trust. And just so you know, it’s not that I don’t trust you.”

“I know. You don’t trust life not to throw you a curve.”

A grin tugged at her lips, making him want to lay claim to that luscious mouth. “You’re beginning to know me very well, too,” she said.

“I’m glad.” They’d gotten far enough for now. He glanced out over the ocean. Deep blue for as far as the eye could see until in the distance the horizon appeared, a sky of light blue and cotton puffs of clouds. “Have you ever seen a place that offered pure peace?” he asked, hoping she’d see his haven as he did.

She tipped her head to get a better view. “It’s beautiful here. Not just the water, but the cottage, and the silence. It’s bliss,” she murmured.

He nuzzled the soft skin of her neck. “So are you.” And he wanted as much time with her as he could get before her work intruded. He glanced at his watch. “It’s nearly ten. We have an hour before I have to drive you back.”

He slid his hands from her back and cupped her unrestrained breasts in his hands. Their fullness and weight pressed against his palms.

She swallowed a moan. “An hour. That’s a long time.”

He dipped his head and caught her mouth with his for a long, mind-drugging kiss. As his tongue swept inside, his hands caressed her breasts and rubbed circles around her taut nipples. Without warning, her hips bucked against his, teasing his straining erection and testing his tenuous restraint.

Coming up for air wasn’t easy, but he managed. He had to if he wanted to get her back to the house. “I’m not sure an hour’s going to cut it. Not with what I have in mind.”

Her already-flushed face deepened a shade and her eyes glazed over with desire. She looked like a woman who’d been kissed hard and loved well. Meanwhile, he felt like a man on the edge, who hadn’t had nearly enough.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked.

He grabbed for her hand. “Race me back to the house and you’ll find out.”



SHE MUST BE out of her mind. This man who held her hand so tightly, who cherished her with his gaze, his touch, his words... She trusted him. And if her mother had believed in her father... Well, Thomas Luck wasn’t anything like Logan Montgomery. Her father wasn’t a hardworking, loyal, upstanding kind of guy. No one was more distrustful than the

Luck sisters, but even Kayla had ultimately believed in a man. In love. In the future.

Maybe it was time Catherine did the same.

She ran with Logan down the long stretch of beach. The wind whipped through her hair and she inhaled the tang of saltwater with every breath. Now that she'd opened both her heart and her mind to the possibilities, everything before her looked fresh and new.

By the time they reached the house, Catherine was out of breath and laughing hard. Her laughter died quickly when she caught sight of the fire still burning in Logan's gaze. The intensity was catching, and a blaze erupted deep inside her. Her heart began a steady pounding, one that echoed in her ears.

“Cat.” His voice was a deep, husky rumble.

He grabbed her around her waist, hiking the oxford shirt up around her thighs. Laughing, she reached for him with one hand—and then a flash went off in front of her eyes. They weren't alone.

“What the hell?” Logan reacted first and shoved her behind him, blocking her from view. Considering her state of undress, she appreciated his chivalry, but the picture had been taken and his gesture came too late.

“Mr. Montgomery, I'm here to meet you and your supporters as you announce your candidacy for mayor of Hampshire.” The female reporter glanced at her watch. “I thought the press conference was set for ten, but...”

“Press conference?” Catherine asked, stepping out from behind the shield of Logan’s body.

“Yes. Judge Montgomery said it was at ten, though I may be mistaken.”

“Would it matter?” Logan muttered. “You just got your scoop.”

Catherine yanked down on the hem of Logan’s shirt. It barely covered her thighs and she’d never felt so vulnerable and exposed.

“You said this press conference was planned?” Even as she asked the question, her heart turned ice cold.

“For the past week,” the reporter said. “And you are...?”

“Find out on your own,” Logan said, then turned to Catherine. “Let’s go inside. We need to talk.”

She would have swallowed but her mouth was dry. “I’m not sure there’s anything to say,” she told him.

“Can we discuss this in private?” He gestured toward the eager reporter and her camera-toting sidekick.

Without glancing in their direction, she walked ahead of him and headed for the safety of the house. No sooner had he closed the door behind them than he grabbed for her hand. “Cat...”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Touch you or explain?”

She turned to face him.

Perhaps he read her emotions on her face because he'd schooled his own expression into an unreadable mask. "I take it the answer is both." Pain and betrayal flashed in his eyes because she wouldn't give him the opportunity to set things right.

"I'm not sure an explanation would make any difference," she said. He'd never know the answer hurt her as much as it obviously hurt him. And her heart, which had been as warm as the sunshine, was now frozen solid.

This type of life wasn't something she understood nor did she think she could get used to being in the public eye. Hounded by the press. Caught in varying states of undress and embarrassment.

"Well, tough, because you're going to listen. After all that's passed between us you owe me that."

She nodded. "I'm listening."

"The way I see things, the judge orchestrated a meeting here because he knew I wouldn't show up at *his* designated spot. Since he knows nothing about you—us—I don't see this as anything more than a very bad coincidence."

Logan's worst nightmare, actually, but Catherine didn't seem as if she'd be receptive to his feelings at the moment. Not when her own were so obviously hurt and raw. He felt for her, but he also had a heart, and by ignoring his attempt to explain, she was trampling on it.

She sighed and tugged on the bottom of her shirt. He couldn't begin to imagine her humiliation. Because of him.

Hell, he'd dig into his trust fund if money would prevent that picture from being published. But it wouldn't. Good press was worth more to the vultures out there than cold, hard cash.

"I can see your father's manipulation in all this and I'm sorry he's still trying to control you." Pain still danced in her eyes along with what looked like resignation. "But I'm not sure I can stick around and be fodder for the media." She glanced down at her bare legs, and he remembered her shirt hiked over her panties at the time the photo was taken. He shuddered at her humiliation.

"Cat..."

"I also think I see your grandmother's hand. She locked us in a closet and she sent me things calculated to make me fall in l... to make me fall for you."

He raised an eyebrow at her near slip. Now *that* was something he wanted to pursue further. So was his grandmother's possible role. The fact that Emma had suggested this very scenario wasn't lost on Logan.

But he wasn't willing to give up on Emma yet. "I admit she had her own agenda. I even mentioned it to you the other day. But setting you up was never part of her plan."

For all her faults, the older woman had a huge heart and she obviously cared for Catherine. Logan had no choice but to take a leap of faith and believe in Emma's integrity. Otherwise, every good thing about his childhood and his life had been based on yet another illusion.

Catherine wrapped her arms around her waist. “Whether it’s Emma or your father who called out the press, it doesn’t matter. I just want out of here before this becomes a media circus.”

He muttered a curse, unsure what her feelings were behind the wall she’d erected. He didn’t have time to find out because she was right. He had to get her out of here and fast.

A glance out the window revealed a black sedan pulling into the graveled, unpaved space in front of his house. As usual, the older man’s appearance was timely as well as unwelcome. Logan rubbed his hand over his eyes and groaned.

He hoped this glance at his reality gave the judge a much-needed eye-opener. He’d certainly gotten one. For all his talk of being his own man, he was still having his strings pulled like a damned marionette.

But it would stop. Today.

Anger and frustration pulsed through him, as strong as the desire he’d been feeling minutes earlier. The last thing he wanted to do was give Catherine a way out of his life. But he owed it to her. If he wanted any shot of winning back the heart he’d worked so hard to reach, he had to let her go now.

He grabbed the keys to his truck he’d left hanging on a hook in the front hall. “I’m parked just outside the door. Walk out and don’t talk to anyone. Don’t answer any questions. Just jump into the car, circle around whoever else has arrived, and keep driving.”

Her sad eyes met his. “Thank you.”

Why did those two little words sound so much like goodbye? He glanced at her parted lips and the need for one last taste zipped through him.

He reached for her, grabbed her forearms, and pulled her close. She didn't draw back, but the playfulness was gone. So was the unguarded look. Instead of her heart in her eyes, she now had it firmly under lock and key.

A loud pounding sounded on the door. Logan lowered his head and brushed his mouth over her lips. She tasted sweet and a renewed desire to reclaim his life—and her—surged through him. She sighed and he deepened the kiss, sweeping his tongue inside. The knock came again, louder this time.

She jumped backward. He didn't blame her but still held her tight. "I open the door, you slip by him and keep going. Got it?"

She nodded.

"This isn't over, Cat. *We* aren't over."

"You're too much of an idealist," she murmured, touching his cheek.

He shook his head, reaching for the door at the same time. "I'm a realist, and when this is over, you'll be part of my reality." He turned the knob. "Now go."

He opened the door, expecting her to duck past the judge without a word. Instead, she paused in front of him.

"Hello, Judge Montgomery."

His father looked flustered for a moment as his gaze darted from Catherine to the waiting reporters. “Miss...”

“Luck. Catherine Luck.”

Logan wasn't concerned that she'd given the judge her name. The media would print it anyway. But he grimaced in disgust at his father's snobbery. She'd catered a party in his house, and the judge, master of working a room, couldn't be bothered to remember her name. But now he would. Logan had a hunch after today Catherine Luck was a name Judge Edgar Montgomery would never forget.

She held out her hand, and after a brief hesitation, the judge accepted her greeting. “Do I know you?”

“I catered your party last week,” she reminded him.

Logan saw the curiosity in his father's eyes turn into blatant disapproval. “Emma hired you,” he said. “But I recall having a conversation with you about fraternizing with the guests.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I don't have to ask what you're doing here now,” he said with scorn.

Logan was tempted to jump in and protect her, but he sensed if he violated her sense of confidence, she'd never forgive him. Hell, he was lucky if she'd talk to him again either way.

Her gaze never wavered from his father's. To Catherine's credit, considering she wore nothing but his oxford shirt, she

held her own with the man who intimidated even those who knew him best.

“No, you don’t. But since I’m not on your payroll anymore, there’s really not much you can say. But I would like to tell you one thing before I go.”

“Catherine, you don’t have to put up with this in my house.”

“No, I don’t.” She smiled at him, but there was no joy in the gesture. “Just call this my parting gift.” She turned back to the judge. “The more you try to control the people you love, the farther away they’ll run.” Cat cleared her throat. “Sir.”

Before his father could register her words, she ducked past him. By the time he’d begun to react, Cat had hit the open button on the remote control and ducked safely inside the Jeep.

Pride along with regret swelled inside him as Logan watched the media frenzy that followed her departure. Controlling his anger at his father wasn’t easy and he took a minute to center himself.

“Luck,” the judge muttered. “I remember that name. Big news around every state courthouse. She’s got spunk and attitude. Not surprising given her roots, but admirable just the same.” He met Logan’s gaze. “Now, would you care to tell me what’s going on between the two of you? And how you intend to explain it to the media?”

Anger seethed beneath the surface, but Logan took his lead from Cat. He had to maintain control. Judge Montgomery never lost his cool. Determination and an air of authority

would get Logan further than losing his temper, something he'd learned as a child. The best way to reach the man was to meet him on a level playing field. Humor and dry sarcasm weren't going to cut it anymore. The plain, honest facts were.

On his own time, Logan turned to his father. "I have nothing to explain to the vultures out there. Or to you. I don't know what it's going to take to convince you that I call the shots in my life. And in my house." He drew a deep breath. "And I resent like hell the way you spoke to the woman I love."

The judge shook his head. "I don't understand you, son. You're young and I can see her appeal, much as I hate to admit it. But you don't throw away your life for love. It doesn't exist. An equal partnership does. And that's what a political man needs. A woman capable of looking good and standing by her man. No scandals involved."

Logan raised an eyebrow. "I'm not a political man. I never will be. Do you hear what I'm saying? You can't keep circling the issue. I'm not running for mayor. And I'm not going to take a job at a high-powered firm, or move into a luxury building or, worse, back into the mansion."

His father let out a long-suffering sigh. "You choose to live in this... shack. Your mother and I have accepted it. Obviously, we have no choice. But just because you live below your means doesn't mean you have to consort with lower-class women, too."

Now, he'd gone too far. Logan clenched his fists, unwilling to listen to his father insult a woman he didn't know. *His*

woman, Logan thought, and it was time the judge understood that.

“Listen to me, because I’m only going to say this once. You will not insult the woman I plan to marry. Do you understand? She’s going to be your daughter-in-law. Accept her or walk out of my life because, on that score, there’s no compromise.” Logan’s head throbbed in time to his words. He didn’t care how short a time he’d known Cat. She was it for him.

For all their posturing and arguing, there’d never been a time when he’d completely removed himself from his family. Physically, yes, he’d moved out. Mentally, he was on his own. But emotionally, he’d clung to the hope that one day he’d have the solid family he’d always wanted.

His father grew pale beneath his golfing tan. He grabbed for the wall behind him for support and Logan reached for his father. “Dad?” He’d never had cause to question his father’s health before and fear paralleled his anger.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” His father regained his composure quickly as well as his angry pallor. “The woman ingratiated herself with a senile old woman so she could end up exactly where she is now. In your bed.”

Disappointment and regret lanced through Logan. His father would never see the truth any more than he would accept what was important in life. “Goodbye, Dad.”

“Son, consider your future. You don’t have to ruin your life just to thwart me. *Think*. Family unity is important. I know that. Why do you think I found a way to use your... lifestyle to

our advantage? This photo opportunity would have set you up as the Montgomery who relates to the common man. As usual, you destroyed my efforts. But I tried. You need to do the same.”

Logan shook his head. “If family unity is so important to you, *you* do the thinking. Think about everything I said here today because I meant it. Give up the need to control me and accept my life. Accept Catherine.”

The judge grunted. “Her appeal will wear thin,” he said, but for the first time, he didn’t sound so certain.

“Never.”

“You have too much of your grandmother in you,” he muttered. “You realize you have the media waiting. What do you intend to tell them?”

“The truth.”

Without another word, Edgar walked out the door.

Logan shook his head. He wished things could be different, but he couldn’t dwell on it now. He had a life to reclaim as his own. By the time he was through, who Logan Montgomery was and where he was headed would be clear to everyone.

Including Catherine.

Chapter Eleven

CATHERINE'S HEAD HURT and she could say for certain it was from stress. Along with her assistants, she'd spent the afternoon creating centerpieces for the next day's party. The small studio she and Kayla had rented for Pot Luck's place of business was filled to bursting. All that work should have left her spent, especially since she'd gotten little sleep the night before.

Her body still tingled in the places Logan had touched. She shivered at the memory, then decided she obviously wasn't exhausted enough if she had the ability to think about, let alone react to, the thought of making love with Logan.

Determined to forget, Catherine retrieved the flour and then pulled the milk and eggs out of the refrigerator. Sugar and water came next. After this morning's nightmare with the media, she was so worked up, she would probably end up with enough food to feed the entire apartment building. She'd settle for feeding Nick and his fiancée who lived across the hall.

She began mixing the ingredients with a wire whisk and a harder hand than necessary. Never mind that Nick's crepes could put hers to shame, enthusiasm and surplus energy had to count for something.

The ring of her cell didn't startle her. She'd been getting calls every thirty minutes for the better part of the evening. Logan had called five times so far, according to her cell. She'd listened to his concerned message once. She didn't want to speak to Logan and she wasn't ready to hear his voice again.

Not until the embarrassment faded. Not until she could understand how a family could set each other up and not care about the outcome. She and Logan had never seriously discussed the future, but even if they had, Catherine didn't know if she could accept living in a fishbowl, never certain when the next incident would spring up to humiliate her. The only positive thing about today was her confrontation with Judge Montgomery. At least she'd left him feeling like his equal, not just the hired help he'd demeaned at the party last week.

She continued mixing the batter, slowly adding more milk. She already had the fresh blueberry sauce sitting in a bowl beside the cooktop, ready to go. She wiped her itchy nose with the back of her hand and wondered what her mama would say if she knew Catherine had willingly walked away from the man she loved. *You'd be a fool to let that man go, Catherine Ann.*

Of course, Mama had lived and died by that particular axiom, Catherine thought. And she refused to become a replica of her mother, pretending to be better than she was and pining for a man she couldn't have. Or in this case, *shouldn't* have. It all amounted to the same thing. Logan Montgomery meant pain and heartache.

The sound of the doorbell came as a welcome reprieve from being alone with her thoughts. She swung the door open wide. "Your stomach is huge, Nick. I said I'd call when the crepes were..." Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of her visitor. "Logan."

“Obviously, you were expecting someone else. Sorry to disappoint you.”

He could never disappoint her. Even with two days’ razor stubble and a weariness etched into his eyes she’d never seen before, he was still the answer to her every dream. Too bad she’d been brought crashing into reality, or she’d be more receptive to the fantasy. “What can I do for you?” she asked.

He propped one arm on the door frame. “Let me in, for starters.”

She drew a deep breath, unsure if she wanted him to enter. At least in her apartment, there were no memories of him besides the ones she conjured in her head.

“You have my car so I had to pay for a cab ride out here. You wouldn’t turn away a poor working man, now would you?” he asked, a charming but wary grin on his face.

Nick would have driven his car back tomorrow, but she doubted Logan wanted to hear Nick’s name mentioned right now. She also doubted he’d accept his car keys at the door and be on his way. Her best bet was to stay composed and detached. Get him in and out—of her apartment as well as her life, no matter how much the thought hurt. “Come on in.”

She stepped aside, and as he passed her, she caught a whiff of his distinctive scent and her knees nearly buckled under her. So much for remaining detached. She wondered if she could pull off the composed and aloof routine. She doubted it.

He walked into her small living area and glanced around at her furniture. Dressed in a black polo shirt and jeans, he

looked at home in her cozy apartment. And that was the last thing she wanted him to be.

He appraised the room from top to bottom before focusing his attention on her living room carpet, one of her favorite furnishings. He raised an eyebrow at the leopard-patterned area rug covering the hardwood floor. No way he'd understand her love of animal prints.

“It'd go well in the cottage,” he said.

Her heart nearly stopped beating. “What do you want from me? Don't you think today's proven just how impossible this is?” She gestured back and forth between the two of them, keeping a physical distance.

He closed that fast and she found herself surrounded by his masculine presence. Reaching out, his finger brushed at her nose. “Flour?” he asked.

She nodded, trying not to acknowledge how much that simple gesture affected her. Self-conscious now, she rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. “I'm making crepes.”

“Sounds delicious.” His stomach rumbled and she laughed.

“Sounds more like you're hungry,” she said.

He grinned. “So, feed me.”

Without another word, she walked over to the pass-through area between her walk-in kitchen and the living room. “I hope you're not starving because I don't have much,” she warned him. She was due for a supermarket run. Her cupboards were almost bare except for junk food and the standard things she kept for elaborate baking.

“Whatever you’ve got is okay by me.” He made himself at home, sitting on one of her barstools that doubled as her kitchen chairs.

She sighed and decided junk food would do just fine. She dug into her cabinets, grabbed her only choice, and headed back to Logan. “Here you go, eat up.” She tossed a bag of potato chips at him.

He shrugged. “Love them.”

“Figures,” she muttered aloud.

He took the tie off the bag and held it toward her. “Want some?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you.”

“Then don’t let me keep you.” He popped a chip into his mouth, then gestured toward her baking ingredients. “I’d love to watch.”

She sighed and glanced at the batter, which still needed thinning.

“You shouldn’t have had to go through what happened this morning,” he said.

The sudden change of subject caught her off guard. She glanced at his serious expression, not sure what to say in return.

“I don’t know if the picture will hit the news or not,” he said when she remained silent.

“What you can’t control, you ignore.” Or tried to. She’d spent the afternoon trying to come to terms with the fact that

she'd be plastered all over the Internet. "Any chance they'll bury the story?" she asked.

"Doubtful. And I wish it hadn't happened."

She met his gaze. "Maybe so, but did it accomplish your goal?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "You can't believe I had anything to do with that press conference."

She shook her head. If there was anything in life she was certain of, it was Logan's integrity. "Of course not." She wrapped her hand tight around the whisk. The edges of metal bit into her skin. "But can you deny that getting caught half-naked with the woman of the day will help derail your father's campaign?"

She held her breath, waiting for his answer. As if whatever he said would change what had happened, what was or wasn't meant to be.

"I wish I could."

And she wished he'd denied that she was his woman of the moment and felt let down that he hadn't. What a bundle of contradictions she'd become, Catherine thought. Pushing him away with one breath, wishing he'd come back with the next. Never in her life had she been at such loose ends, so confused over her feelings.

No, that was wrong, she amended. She was quite certain of her feelings. She loved a man she couldn't have.

"So, how did your father take the news that there wouldn't be a run for mayor?" she asked.

No way Logan would repeat the judge's tirade. Logan grunted. "Not well."

He took another potato chip in hand. "As usual, I disappointed him." And as usual, Logan felt the same swell of disappointment in his father because they couldn't find any common ground, and this time, the rift would be permanent.

"I'm sorry." She'd braced her hands against the counter and studied him. "Will he get over it?" she asked.

Logan shrugged. "I really couldn't tell you."

"But you want him to, don't you? You'd like to be some sort of family?"

"Not if the judge is going to act like a pompous, overbearing..."

"No cursing in my kitchen," she said before he could get his next words out.

He laughed. "You know me too well. But yes, if there was a way to come to an understanding without compromising my life, I'd take it."

"Then try with your mother. You never know."

Logan nodded slowly. Catherine was right. He hadn't exhausted every avenue toward peace. When his father had turned pale and grabbed for the wall, Logan realized how badly he'd wanted the judge to come around. The idea of losing him permanently had frightened him. But the older man had recovered quickly, both his pallor and his temper.

He crunched on a chip. Catherine was busy stirring and ignoring him. He dug into the bag once more, thinking as he ate. Until he'd told his father he intended to marry Catherine, he hadn't realized that was exactly what he planned. In his gut, he'd known it all along.

Not that she'd take well to the idea. Not yet. She needed time, which was fine since it would give him more time to get to know her as well.

Without warning, Catherine reached through the pass-through and touched his arm. Her soft gaze settled on his. "Family's family. Don't you think your mother would want to help you and your father reach a compromise?"

After the way his father had treated Cat, he was amazed she could still push for him. But she had no father to speak of and less family than he did. She obviously felt the loss and wanted to prevent him from suffering the same emptiness. Emptiness he wanted to fill for her.

And he would, his family be damned.

"I'll think about everything you said. But unless he stops interfering in my life, there can't be any compromise. Now, can we stop talking about a mayoral race that isn't happening?"

She shook her head. "I thought we were talking about your need for family."

He met her gaze and his mouth twisted into a smile. "I guess we were." He propped his elbows on the bleached wood counter. "So, let's talk about us."

Her reluctant grin pleased him. “You never give up, do you?” she asked.

“Nope.” And he wouldn’t. Not until she looked at him with trust and love shining in those green eyes.

He’d put the old man in his place. Regaining Catherine’s trust couldn’t be nearly as tough—as long as no other outside forces interfered again.



CATHERINE GLANCED AT Logan and shook her head. It wasn’t fair, that charm and charisma he possessed. He could twist her around his finger so easily. Too easily, she thought with chagrin. She spun the whisk back and forth between her palms.

“So, tell me why you’re so afraid to let yourself go, Cat.”

She was suddenly grateful she had something to do with her hands and began beating the mixture in the bowl without meeting his gaze. “Because I can’t. Did I tell you my father ran out on my mother?” she asked, unsure why she was revealing such personal information, why she’d chosen this particular time.

She’d never discussed her childhood with anyone but Kayla. Yet with Logan, it seemed right.

He leaned forward in his seat. “You alluded to it.”

“Well, he took off on her and two kids.”

“And you think any guy you’ll get involved with will do the same?”

She shook her head. “It’s not that. But life comes with obstacles. It doesn’t matter if you’re poor and have a hard time paying the bills or the happiest couple with everything in common, life will throw you a curve.”

She shrugged, finding the explanation more difficult than she thought. She took some time to compose her thoughts and he seemed to understand, granting her the silence she needed. Another special thing about Logan was his ability to listen and the comfortable silences they were able to fall into together.

She shook her head. She was supposed to be explaining their obstacles, not finding things they had in common. “If you’re different people to start with, or have problems on the horizon, you’ve already got the deck stacked against you.” She let out a heartfelt sigh. “*We* have the deck stacked against us.”

On the surface, Logan supposed her explanation made sense. To her at least.

He didn’t agree. They had more in common than she wanted to admit, and few problems on the horizon that he could see. He’d already taken care of the biggest one. If his father had to choose between his beliefs and his son, he’d choose his pompous ideals. It hurt, but Logan had already accepted that reality many times in the past.

So, now his family didn’t stand in their way. Nothing did but Catherine herself. She had her reasoning all twisted around so that she believed she had logic on her side. But the core of her fear lay in being abandoned. And because of their differences, she probably thought the risk of him leaving her was too high for her to take a chance on.

He met her green-eyed gaze and held it fast. “The deck’s only stacked against us if you choose to believe it is.”

“Are we back to dreams again?”

He shook his head. “We’re back to reality. To the fact that, yes, life can intrude on the best of couples. But if they work hard enough, if they stick together, they get through it together.”

He wondered if she was really listening and realized her eyes remained steady on his. They were suspiciously damp. She was more than paying attention. She was digesting his words. He’d give her a few minutes in peaceful silence to take his words to heart.

Her fingers toyed with a tiny pendant at the end of a gold chain, drawing his attention to the pale skin visible between the open collar of the blouse she wore rolled up at the sleeves. The gap in the cleavage wasn’t something he could ignore, though he’d been trying for the past half hour.

What he felt for Catherine was greater than lust, even if his growing desire and overwhelming need to make love to her on the flour-coated kitchen counter threatened to make that statement a lie. And he intended to prove it to her.

Before he acted on need and not common sense, Logan rose to his feet. He had to get the hell out of here and home to an ice-cold shower. He doubted even the hour ride back to the beach would cool his desire.

He’d said what he’d come to say. He’d leave her alone with her thoughts and trust she’d come to have faith in him.

“You’re leaving?” Her voice broke the silence.

“I’d better. You have to work in the morning.”

She nodded, then headed out of the kitchen. She grabbed his keys from a side table and met him on his walk to the door. “Logan, you’ve been...”

“Don’t say it.”

She tipped her head to the side. “Why not?” she asked. Her nose crinkled in confusion. “You have no idea what I was about to say.”

“Right. And I’d like to leave it that way.” Before she tried for goodbye, see you sometime, or some other lame line he didn’t want to hear. He dug his hands into his front jeans pocket, slipping his fingers onto the twister from the chips he’d stuck inside. “But I do want to give you something before I go.”

She shook her head. “I can’t take anything from you.”

He grinned. “Sure, you can.” He pulled out the tie, then opened his hand palm-up and revealed his gift. He couldn’t have planned it better if he’d tried.

Jewels and money would turn Catherine off. He had a hunch this small gesture would mean much more.

“What’s that?” As she asked, her lips curved and it took all his self-control not to kiss her senseless.

“My ring,” he said and grinned. “Want to go steady?”

Catherine looked down at cookie twister in his hand. “What are you doing?”

“Hold out you hand.”

She did as he asked and he twisted the tie around her finger, nice and tight.

“It’s my ring,” he said, a grin on his handsome face.

If Catherine’s heart hadn’t already belonged to Logan Montgomery, it would now. Such a small token that meant so much. A gift from his heart.

How could she not accept it? How could she deny her own heart any longer, let alone his? She curled her fingers tight instead of taking it off like he probably thought she’d do.

His gaze followed the movement. “I’ll be calling you,” he said in a husky voice. “Later tonight.”

Her stomach coiled into a tight knot. “What if I said don’t go?” She reached out for his hand, locking their fingers together.

His touch was hot, his gaze hotter. “Then I’d ask if you were certain.”

That she wanted to be with him? Without a doubt. Certain she was doing the right thing? Well, maybe it was time to take that leap of faith. “I am.”

He cupped her cheeks in his hands and lowered his head, meeting her lips with his. The warmth and tenderness in his touch caused a spiraling heat and a tidal wave of emotion to surge through her. Desire and the urge to have him inside her rose as fast as her remaining doubts fled.

When she reached for the button on his jeans, he stopped her. “I didn’t come here for this.”

If his breathing hadn’t been ragged and his expression tortured—if she didn’t feel the hard, heavy press of his erection where their bodies met—she might have felt embarrassed or vulnerable. But Logan obviously wasn’t saying he didn’t want her.

“Are you afraid you’ll take advantage of me? I know what I want,” she said quietly. “I want *you*.” Her rapidly beating heart and the sudden liquid rush of desire attested to that.

“No more than I want you.”

“Then there’s no problem.”

He groaned and touched his forehead to hers. “Desire’s never been a problem between us. Sex has never been the issue.”

Afraid she knew where this was leading, Catherine merely sighed. The man could probably see inside her soul. She had no doubt her feelings were mirrored in her face. There was little she could hide from him anymore and even less she wanted to. She waited for him to continue.

“We could make love now and there’d still be your fears to deal with in the morning. You admitted as much tonight.”

“Is that what we’d be doing? Making love?” She hated the raw tone in her voice.

With that one question, she’d not only bared her soul but her heart. By avoiding the issue of her fears, she’d set them squarely between them. She’d never trusted anyone not to

trample her heart before, and by doing so now, she'd given Logan power that was frightening.

He caressed her cheek with his thumb. "We've never done anything *but* make love, Cat."

Her breath caught in her throat as emotion warred with sexual need. Her heart felt full to bursting. So did her body because a throbbing, aching need had overtaken it.

"But we aren't going to do it tonight."

Despite her body's protest to his words, she smiled. "You're a gentleman, Logan Montgomery."

"A damned uncomfortable one," he muttered, and she couldn't help but laugh. "What can I say? My grandmother raised me right." He grinned, but she saw the same strain in his expression she felt herself.

"Yes, she did." Catherine twisted the tie on her finger.

"Did you ever go steady before?" he asked.

"Not since high school." And not all that often, she realized, thinking back to those days. She hadn't wanted anyone to get that close, to see where and how her family lived.

"What do you remember most? And I'm not talking about making out in the back seat of some guy's car."

She raised an eyebrow. "Logan Montgomery threatened by some football jock who's probably balding and has a beer belly by now?" She patted her stomach and laughed.

“I don’t like the thought of anyone’s hands on you—” he paused a beat “—except mine.”

She liked the possessiveness in his voice, but that darned honesty got in the way. “Actually, I don’t remember much,” she admitted. “There really wasn’t anyone who lasted longer than a day or two.” When she was in her teens, she hadn’t been ready for a steady boyfriend. By the time she’d hit her twenties, she’d developed the ability to date and remain detached. She’d had a couple of intimate relationships but none that had truly touched her heart.

He squeezed her hand. “Then let me be the first to introduce you to the idea.” The laughter and fun dancing in his dark eyes were contagious.

“I’m listening.”

Chapter Twelve

LOGAN TOOK HER hand and led her back through the apartment until they reached the soft, black, faux leather couch. Pulling her down beside him, he drew her close. “Going steady involves a lot of drive-through fast-food restaurants, for one thing.” His hands eased under her shirt until his palms rested, warm and strong, against her skin.

Her heart started beating heavily again and she licked her dry lips. “What else?”

“Parking on a deserted road.” His hands inched upward until they settled just below her breasts.

Her skin tingled where he touched and her stomach clenched with an aching need.

“No bra again, Cat.” He made a *tsk-tsking* sound.

“I wasn’t expecting...” His fingertips swiped at her nipple and she sucked in a startled gasp. Fiery darts of pleasure pricked at her nerve endings. “Company,” she somehow choked out.

“I thought we weren’t going to do this.” Not that she wanted to discourage him. Just the opposite. So, she leaned back, settling herself between his legs and giving his hands better access to her chest.

He nuzzled her neck with his lips. His hot breath tickled her sensitive skin and his hands lingered as he cupped her breasts in his hands. “I see I have a lot to teach you,” he murmured in her ear.

Full and heavy, she felt the weight of her breasts settle into his palms. “Parking involves forbidden desire. I want you, you want me... but we know it’s too soon.” He continued to explain. All the while his thumbs wreaked havoc on her senses by rolling and pulling her nipples into tight peaks, and his lips traveled a damp path up her neck.

She sighed aloud, half hoping he’d understand what she needed, even if she wasn’t sure herself.

“When you’re parking, you can do anything you want.” He grasped her earlobe between his teeth and pulled. The stinging sensation traveled straight downward and she clenched her thighs together tightly. But the empty, longing sensation remained.

“Anything?” she asked. Her need was so great she’d do anything to alleviate the pulsing, pounding desire. Waves of longing rolled over her, intense and strong.

“Almost anything,” he replied. Without warning, he turned her around, caught her beneath him on the couch. His arms bracketed her, and he eased himself down until he lay on top of her, chest to chest. His erection pressed strongly against her, ready and wanting just like she was.

“I think I like this parking business,” she managed to say through labored breaths.

He laughed. “Done like this, I have to agree. It’s a lot more comfortable on a full-length couch in an air-conditioned apartment. But I’d be happy anywhere as long as I was with you.” His hips jerked against hers.

His swollen desire pushed insistently against her and liquid trickled between her legs. She leaned her head back and moaned with pleasure.

Without warning, he began a grinding motion, a circular press of his hips that pushed her into the couch and ground his hard erection into her. “Now, this is what parking’s all about,” he whispered in her ear.

The waves came fast and furious, bringing her closer and closer to the edge. “Logan...”

“Go with it, sweetheart.”

“But you’re not, we’re not...”

He groaned, pumping his body into hers. “Yes, Cat, we are.” He let out a harsh breath.

Minutes later, still wrapped in his arms, Catherine nuzzled her cheek into his. This was as close to perfect as life could get. If she was in heaven, she never wanted to wake up.

And if life never intruded again, she never would.



SWEET SIXTEEN, CATHERINE thought as she placed the balloon-laden centerpiece on the last table. She stepped back to admire her handiwork. The pink and white balloons intermingled with gold Mylar and red roses were a testament to the young girl’s youthful dreams—and, Catherine thought, the love of her parents. The soon-to-be sixteen-year-old was very lucky.

She looked around the room once more, and ascertaining the tables were complete and the party favors were in the

corner, she headed out. The restaurant was handling the catering. All Pot Luck had been hired for were decorations. Her job here was complete.

In the week since the Montgomery party, Catherine had received a flurry of phone calls and had set up appointments with many of Hampshire's residents who had been at the Montgomery Garden Gala. Although Pot Luck had catered a classy affair, Catherine knew she had Emma to thank for the ensuing referrals. But that had been before her run-in with Judge Montgomery. She couldn't imagine what the fallout from that episode would be.

Nor, she realized, did she care. She and Kayla had built a catering business in one short year. They'd been doing fine before they'd known the name Montgomery and they'd do fine after. Business-wise, Catherine was happy with her life and she'd survive without Montgomery referrals if need be.

But she wouldn't survive without Logan. Her heart knew it as well as her mind. The question remained: What did she intend to do about it?

When she hit the top of the stairs, exhaustion overtook her. Her body still tingled from the pleasure Logan had given her last night and her mind soared with possibilities. The front of the restaurant was comprised of a waiting area and a bar. The stools looked cushioned and comfortable, and she didn't think anyone would mind if she grabbed one and rested before making the half-hour drive back to Boston.

"Drink?" The bartender who'd been wiping down glasses paused in front of her.

Catherine shook her head.

“Come on, I saw you unload that van of balloons yourself. Have a drink. It’s on the house.”

Catherine smiled. “How can I refuse an offer like that? Club soda with a twist of lime.”

“You got it.” He flipped on the television sitting high above the bar. “My girlfriend does a local entertainment show at noon.”

“Mmm. Good for her.”

“Yeah. She’s hoping the bigger networks will pick her up one day. For now, she’s happy doing weekends on the local station. There she is now.” With a flip of the remote, he raised the volume.

Except for the trickle of people beginning to flow to the party downstairs, no other patrons were in the bar. Catherine found it easy to relax and focus on the television show. “She’s got poise,” Catherine murmured, glancing at the woman on the screen.

The bartender nodded. “Sure does. I just hope she gets the break she deserves.”

“Me too.” Catherine blinked, and the next thing she saw was Logan’s beachfront cottage. Warning bells and an unwelcome sense of foreboding sent her apprehension soaring. “Make it louder, please.”

“See? She’s even won you over.”

Catherine ignored him, focusing on the screen. The anchorwoman's voice-over did little to calm the churning in Catherine's stomach. This was not good. She'd avoided the Internet, afraid of what she'd see. Although she knew she couldn't avoid the headlines forever, she'd wanted to bask in the memories of last night for as long as possible. She also hadn't expected television coverage of Judge Montgomery's arranged event.

Just what do you think a press conference entails, Catherine? She shook her head and concentrated on the cultured, feminine voice. "Hampshire's boy wonder, Logan Montgomery, firmly dispelled any rumors of an impending run for mayor. Despite Judge Montgomery's posturing and claims to the contrary, the younger Montgomery insists he will *not* be running for office."

Catherine smiled. At least Logan had swayed the media to see things his way. The screen went from the beautiful young anchor to Logan, standing in his standard jeans and pullover, his cottage in the background. He looked sexily disheveled and Catherine knew she had helped cause that rumpled look before they'd been caught by the photographers.

Logan's voice cut into her thoughts. "...and while I appreciate the confidence of the judge and other supporters, running for mayor is not in my plans."

"And what would those plans be, Mr. Montgomery?" a reporter's voice sounded.

"After my stay at the public defender's office, I intend to open my own practice where clients will be offered affordable

representation.”

Catherine couldn't help but notice his class and poise. If he'd chosen to run for mayor, he'd make a formidable opponent. Composed and sure of himself, it would take an incredible opposing candidate to beat his charismatic charm. She also noticed his father was not by his side during this speech.

Her heart squeezed at the thought of him standing up to the judge and coming out on top but still alone. She wondered what had transpired between the two men after her abrupt departure. Logan had been deliberately vague on the subject. She could only imagine his father's displeasure at finding them together. Not that he'd realized right away who she was.

“Every generation of Montgomerys has either sat on the bench or held public office, conquered the world by leaps and bounds. Doesn't it bother you to break with tradition?” the reporter asked.

“Not at all.” Logan looked straight into the camera. “I'd rather conquer the world *one* person at a time.”

Catherine's stomach curled into a delicious knot. With his emphasis on the word *one* and the intense, focused look in his eyes, he might as well have been gazing into *her* eyes and promising *her* his undying devotion.

They'd said as much with their bodies last night. The unspoken words meant little when the actions were there. For the first time today, she realized he'd managed to convince her that different backgrounds didn't matter as much as she thought.

Without warning, the camera panned back and the anchorwoman's serious face replaced Logan's smile. "Mr. Montgomery's pullback from a speculated run for office couldn't have come at a more convenient time. Minutes before the scheduled press conference, this picture was taken of Mr. Montgomery in a *compromising* position."

Catherine's nightmare flashed on the television screen for the world to see. Well, for all of Boston to see since this was a local station, but that didn't ease the sudden pain in her chest. There she was, Logan's shirt pulled up to her thighs, his arms wrapped around her waist and his cutoff shorts, his only clothing, hidden by their entangled position.

"Hey, isn't that—"

"Me," she said, cutting the bartender off, then she turned her attention back to the screen.

"Logan Montgomery's companion is Catherine Luck, co-owner with her sister, Kayla Luck, of a local catering and party company, whimsically named Pot Luck."

"No publicity is bad publicity," Catherine muttered aloud. She held her head in her hands and continued to watch her life be made fodder for gossip, speculation, and ridicule, just as she'd feared.

She wasn't immune to the embarrassment. Neither, Catherine suspected, was her pregnant and emotionally vulnerable sister.

"The Luck sisters are best known for the scandal involving an inherited business, a charm school for men that turned out

to be a front for a prostitution ring with ties to organized crime...”

Good God, what would they drag up next?

“...and, with her working-class background, Catherine Luck is not the woman one would expect to see Logan Montgomery consorting with. But a romp on the beach is far different from a lifetime...”

Entertainment show? More like gossip and tabloid exploitation, she thought with disgust. She didn't have to take any more. “Shut it off. Please.”

The bartender glanced from Catherine's face to his girlfriend on the screen. He turned off the television.

Catherine tried to breathe, but her heart was beating so rapidly she thought her chest might explode. Thinking was near impossible, but she forced herself to concentrate—and her first coherent thought was of Kayla. Bed rest and a high-risk pregnancy. Catherine had to check on her sister.

If she'd seen the news, Catherine had to minimize the damage. If Kayla had missed the local broadcast, then Catherine wanted to be the person to break the newest scandal to her sister. And to Kane. At the thought of the overprotective cop, Catherine winced.

She grabbed her purse and bolted outside. Until she'd made sure Kayla was okay, Catherine couldn't think of the ramifications to herself. But she'd have to, and soon, she thought, fingering the tie still on her finger.

Not to mention the ramifications to her relationship with Logan.



“SHE’S NOT ANSWERING the phone, but I’d lay odds she’s there.” Logan muttered a frustrated curse.

“I don’t like this.” Emma paced the linoleum floor of his office. She’d arrived soon after him, shared coffee, and commiserated over his stint on television and social media. With his friends and colleagues ribbing him, he appreciated her support.

The sun shone brightly through the battered blinds, but Logan barely felt the heat. “I don’t like it, either,” he muttered.

“Call her again.”

“I’ve been calling on the hour since last night.”

Catherine hadn’t answered the phone. She hadn’t returned his calls. And he didn’t think she was coincidentally busy or out of touch.

His once-solitary life had become a recipe for disaster. Catherine, the only woman he’d ever fallen for, was the one woman who shouldn’t be subjected to the indignities of the media. The photo of Logan and Catherine on the beach had gone viral—all in record time. Logan hadn’t realized the public had such a raging interest in his sex life. It would almost be funny if the consequences weren’t so dire.

He grabbed for the phone and punched in her number once more.

“Is she in labor?” To his shock, Catherine’s concerned voice answered after the first ring.

“Cat?”

“Logan. I didn’t check the screen before I answered,” she said.

“You were expecting Kane.” It wasn’t a hard guess.

“Yes.”

He anticipated a strained silence to follow, but she continued to speak instead. “To be honest, now’s not a good time.”

Not that he liked what she had to say. “Gossip stinks, Cat, but it has nothing to do with us.”

He heard a distinctive beep and knew she’d gotten another call on the line. He muttered a curse.

“What’d she say?” Emma asked, leaning too close to the phone.

He shoed her away and she went gracefully, seating herself in the old chair across from his desk. One good thing that had come out of this fiasco was Emma’s new-found grace, dignity, and respect for his private life.

“I’ve got to go,” Catherine said.

“Take the call and come back to me. I’ll hang on.” He knew how important her sister was in her life. Although Logan wouldn’t stand in the way of her obvious fear and concern, he wouldn’t cut her loose without a fight, either.

“I can’t think about myself now.”

The question was would she think about them later or would she use this time to retreat further away? He drew a deep breath, then another, ignoring his hovering grandmother.

He had no choice but to grab opportunity when he had the chance. “Then think about this. I love you.”

Her soft gasp of shock was cut off by the damned insistent call-waiting. “I can’t do this now. I’m sorry. Goodbye, Logan.”

“Just think about it, Cat.”

“I can’t.” The phone intruded again. “I’m hanging up now,” she said before severing the connection.

He snorted in frustration at her use of Emma’s tactic and placed his phone down, his stomach in twisted knots.

“You are going after her, aren’t you? Because I have an idea. We can...”

“Forget it, Gran. I’ll handle this myself.”

“Fine, leave an old lady out of the fun. Deny me my enjoyment in life.” She let out a long-suffering sigh.

He rolled his eyes. “You’ll survive.”

“Well, then, I have a car waiting for me outside.”

“I’ll walk you to the elevator,” Logan said.

“No need. I’d like to hang by the water cooler a while first.”

Logan grinned. “I do love you, Gran.”

Emma smiled. “I love you, too. And so does Catherine.” His grandmother kissed his cheek. “Even if she didn’t say it

back.”

He shook his head. “You’re too perceptive, smart, and nosy for my own good.”

“Ah, but I spice up your life.”

“That you do.”

He watched her regal retreat and heard her voice as she mingled with the office staff. Knowing she was occupied, not meddling in his life, gave him time to think about Cat.

Then think about this. I love you, he’d told her. Logan didn’t mind giving her his heart, but if she wanted to accept it, she was going to have to come to him.



KAYLA AND KANE had a baby boy. Catherine stretched her feet out in front of her on the plastic-like couch in the hospital waiting room. She hung her head backward, breathing deeply for the first time in what felt like hours.

Her sister had a family of her own now. One that didn’t include her. Oh, they’d never exclude her, and she planned to be the best aunt in the universe to that child, but she wasn’t a part of their immediate family.

Not in the ways that counted. Why did that bother her so much? When had she begun wanting more out of a life she’d thought made her happy?

When she’d met Logan. He’d dredged up her old class-difference insecurities, then set out to overcome them. To

make her believe she could have everything in life, even a man from a wealthy family.

She sat up in her seat, realizing she was up to the challenge. Going viral on the Internet and hitting entertainment shows had opened her eyes to a lot of things. So had the birth of this baby.

A new life meant new possibilities. New directions. Catherine could learn from that. She wasn't defined by her past. So she'd come from a poor background. She'd gotten beyond it. The judge would have to as well because Catherine wasn't going anywhere.

She wanted all the things in life her sister had found, and she was determined to get them. Her heart still fluttered when she remembered his unexpected words.

I love you.

Well, she loved him, too, and she was damn well going to show him.

✧ ✧ ✧

“...THE CHARGES AGAINST the defendant are dismissed. Court is adjourned.” The judge banged his gavel and strode from the room. After a brief handshake with his ecstatic client, Logan heaved a groan of relief. The case from hell was over.

He tossed things into his briefcase, grateful it was only Tuesday, and he was looking forward to a quiet end of the week. Not surprisingly, his thoughts turned to Catherine. He hadn't heard from her. Not one word.

Logan was as understanding as the next guy, but he'd discovered something about himself. His desire to be her lapdog only went so far. He'd extended himself as much as he could without compromising his integrity.

I love you weren't words he said idly or to every woman he'd dated. In fact, he'd never said them before. And he wouldn't be saying them again unless she decided to get in touch with him.

But that didn't stop his concern, and he'd called Kane yesterday to check on Catherine's sister and had sent a bundle of balloons to celebrate the birth of their baby.

"Mr. Montgomery."

Logan turned to face the bailiff who ran the courtroom. "How's it going, Stan?"

"Fine. I have a message for you." The burly man passed Logan a white, sealed envelope.

He loosened his tie and examined the generic envelope. "From whom?"

"Pretty lady. Blond. Five-foot three or so..."

Logan lifted an eyebrow. "Thanks, Stan."

"No worries. I've gotta get home or the wife'll kill me. Have a good one, Montgomery."

"You, too, Stan."

Curious now, Logan opened the envelope. As he pulled out the folded sheet inside, a sprinkling of what looked like

confetti fell to the floor. He unfolded the sheet and read aloud.
“*Come Home.*”

Logan’s heart sprang into action, beating too hard and too fast—as if it had been lying dormant, waiting for Catherine’s return. He glanced toward the doorway, but the courtroom was empty.

Still, he understood the message. She’d put aside her doubts and her fears. She was ready to place her faith in the unknown. He knew what that leap of faith cost her. He intended to make sure she never regretted it.

He grabbed his briefcase and headed out the door into the dwindling heat of the day.

What was it he’d said the first time he’d taken her to the beach house? *It’s humble but it’s home.* She’d glanced around the run-down cottage, the idea of which had sent other women running, and greeted him with an approving gleam in her green eyes. *Home. It is that,* she’d murmured.

He’d probably fallen in love with her then and there.

Logan slid into the Jeep and turned the ignition. What felt like hours but could only have been twenty minutes later, he finally walked up to his cottage. The Pot Luck company van sat parked in the driveway.

He turned the knob. Not surprisingly, the door was open. After days of uncertainty, the adrenaline rush felt damn good. Knowing she was inside but not knowing exactly what awaited him left him breathless with anticipation.

He *wanted* her, and she was here. He stepped inside and shut the door. Placing his briefcase on the floor, he glanced around. The spring weather was still cool and a fire crackled in the hearth, the scent of fresh-burning wood enveloping him.

“Cat?” he called out, but she didn’t answer, so he walked in farther, pausing in the kitchen. Though she wasn’t inside, she’d made her presence known. His old table had been transformed.

A beige tablecloth draped his wooden table, hiding the old scars and nicks. Candles burned in holders he’d never seen before and a bouquet of spring flowers sat low in the center. A heavenly smell hit his nostrils and he realized she’d been cooking.

Wondering what else she’d been doing, he backed out of the dimly lit kitchen and headed for the bedroom. He didn’t need a map to guide him to a room he’d been in dozens of times before. But Catherine had been thoughtful, leaving him a trail to follow.

A sexy, seductive trail, he thought as he bent down and picked up the first article of clothing at the end of the hall. Leopard sandals dangled from his fingertips. Need kicked in, intense and strong.

He took a step farther and retrieved a black skirt. Another step and he’d reached the bedroom door. Hanging from the doorknob was an emerald-green-and-black lace teddy. His body tightened in response to the seductive garment.

His heart pounded and his cock throbbed with need. Turning the doorknob, he entered the room. Although Logan

was certain he'd find Catherine waiting for him, certain she'd come back to him, he refused to succumb to her seduction until she made it clear she'd committed for good.

The room he entered was the stuff of fantasies. Mood lamps and candles and burning incense were scattered around the room, setting an undeniably sensual mood.

He glanced through sheer curtains hanging from the bedposts. Catherine lay waiting for him, covered by a single sheet, her pale skin glowing in the candlelight. She was the stuff of his fantasies. And all he had to do was step across her leopard print rug...

Catherine met his gaze. Determination to explain and set things right warred with the need to rush into Logan's arms.

Before she could decide, Logan had come up beside her and lowered himself onto the bed. "I told you that rug would go well in the cottage." He treated her to his most endearing grin, and his eyes—those cocoa-colored eyes—stared into hers, filled with the most amazing emotions. Honesty, sincerity, and love.

"When you decide to come around, you do it in style." He let out a long breath. "I'd counted you out, Cat. I figured there was nothing that would convince you we weren't a disaster waiting to happen."

She reached a hand out to cup his cheek. "I grew up lonely, Logan. Always waiting for my father to come back. Relying on a mother who wasn't ever there—not emotionally anyway, and later on, not even physically. I was always prepared for the worst."

“And it always happened.”

She nodded.

“Even with us,” he continued. “The press conference, the media frenzy...”

“Happened for the best. It showed me what I could handle and forced me to go after what I want.” She looked him in the eye. “And I want you.”

He propped himself up on the bed and wrapped his arms around her. A combination of easy warmth and heated sexual need raced through her. It was always that way with Logan, the intense mix of desire and comfort.

“You know I want you, too. But want isn’t enough. Not between us.”

“I know.” She lay her head against his chest. The rapid beating of his heart told her he wasn’t as relaxed as he appeared. Which was a good thing considering she was nowhere near composed. “At first, the scandal gave me an excuse to run. And later, being without you, it made me take stock and realize I’m worthy of anything or anyone, including Logan Montgomery.”

“I’ve known that all along.” His fingers tangled in her hair, tugging with urgent insistency. “And the way you faced down the judge, I can tell you, he knows it, too.” He tipped her head back to meet his gaze. “I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure you never forget it.”

“I love you,” she murmured and met his lips for a scorching kiss, all the more heated because of the emotions

involved. To her shock, her eyes filled with tears. Because she'd finally gotten everything she'd ever wanted in life—and never dared to dream of. The tie on her finger would remind her, should she ever forget.

A salty drop of water slipped between their lips. Logan lifted his head. “You’re crying?” He swiped at the stray tear with his hand.

Catherine shrugged, then forced a laugh. “What can I say? I’m a sucker for a happy ending.”

He held her hands tight, never wanting to let her go. “I thought you didn’t believe in happily ever after.”

“I didn’t... until you.”

“This might come as a shock to you, but I didn’t believe, either.” For all his posturing and attempts to convince Catherine they had a future, Logan wasn’t certain he’d possessed the faith in happily ever after that he’d claimed to have.

“What changed your mind?” she asked.

“You. You’re my happily ever after, Cat.” He looked into her green eyes.

She rolled back onto the bed, holding out her arms for him, and whispered in her most seductive voice, “Then come home.”

Epilogue

A SMALL BAND played in the background while the sun shone overhead, basking the beach in warmth. Catherine grabbed Logan's hand and squeezed hard. "Would you mind giving up this dance with me?" she asked.

"Are you tired?" He pulled her close and placed his hand over her still-flat stomach. "We could make excuses and go inside to lie down." A wicked grin touched his lips.

"Not at our own wedding we can't." She laughed. "Besides, I'm fine. Just a little pregnant." She smiled. "I just wanted to ask someone else to dance."

His eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"Your father."

"He's here, he's drinking a glass of champagne, he's grudgingly accepting life, but that may be taking things too far."

A light gust of wind whipped her hair around her face, bringing with it the salty smell of the ocean. "You don't think he'd want to dance with his daughter-in-law?" she asked, mock hurt in her voice.

"Of course, he would. At least I think he would. Between you and my mother, he's come around. Sort of. But dancing on the beach? That may be below the judge's standards," he said wryly.

Remembering his face when they'd told Logan's father they would be married on the beach and not at the Montgomery Estate, Catherine had to agree. "He's got to realize what he's been missing in life, and twirling around in the sand barefoot is one of life's grand experiences."

Logan laughed. "Okay, Cat. Do your best."

A loud shriek interrupted them, and Catherine whirled around in time to see Kayla being carried off by Kane. "At least they're having a good time," she said.

"They'd have a good time anywhere they were together." Logan nuzzled her cheek. "Like us."

"Who's got Ace?" Catherine asked, using Kane's pet name for his son, Tim.

"I do."

Catherine turned to see Grace standing beside them.

Logan's sister had arrived last week and she'd been staying in Catherine's apartment in the city. Both Catherine and Logan had wanted her to stay at the beach house, but she didn't want to intrude, and the mansion had been out of the question. Catherine couldn't help but notice her strained relationship with her parents along with the longing in Grace's eyes. Like Logan, she desired more out of her family. She probably needed it more, too.

Catherine's eyes narrowed. If she could convince Grace to stick around, she could work on the entire Montgomery family dynamic. She grinned. If she could bring Judge Edgar

Montgomery around with Logan, Grace couldn't be all that hard.

“What are you thinking?” Logan asked.

“How wonderful it is to have everyone together. And Grace, I was wondering if you'd consider moving back here.”

The graceful, willowy blonde shook her head while reshifting Kane and Kayla's bundle in her arms. “I don't think that would work. But don't worry. I won't be a stranger.”

“You'd better not, young lady.”

“Hi, Gran.” Logan held his arm out for Emma and gave her a loving squeeze as she kissed his cheek.

“Grace, you're my final project. Do you have any idea how difficult it was to finagle these two together?” Emma asked. “Now, it's your turn. I refuse to leave this earth without seeing you happily settled down.”

“You're too healthy to go anywhere just yet,” Grace told her.

“You never know. Now Logan, just look how perfect she looks with the baby in her arms.”

Grace, who had been holding Ace with comfort and ease, shifted uncomfortably and the little guy let out a squeal of displeasure.

Logan laughed. “I'll take him.”

His sister handed him over. “Stay out of my life, Gran.”

Catherine laughed. They'd been down this road before.

Emma shook her head. “I think a trip to New York City is in order, don’t you, Catherine? I haven’t been there in ages, and of course, my granddaughter couldn’t possibly turn me away.”

Grace stiffened, but like Logan, the love in her expression shone through despite her displeasure with Emma’s meddling ways. “My apartment is small, Gran.”

“Any cute neighbors?”

Logan laughed and grabbed for Catherine’s elbow, leading her away. “We’ve had our turn. Let Grace handle Emma now.”

“You’re bad, Logan.”

“But you love me just the same.”

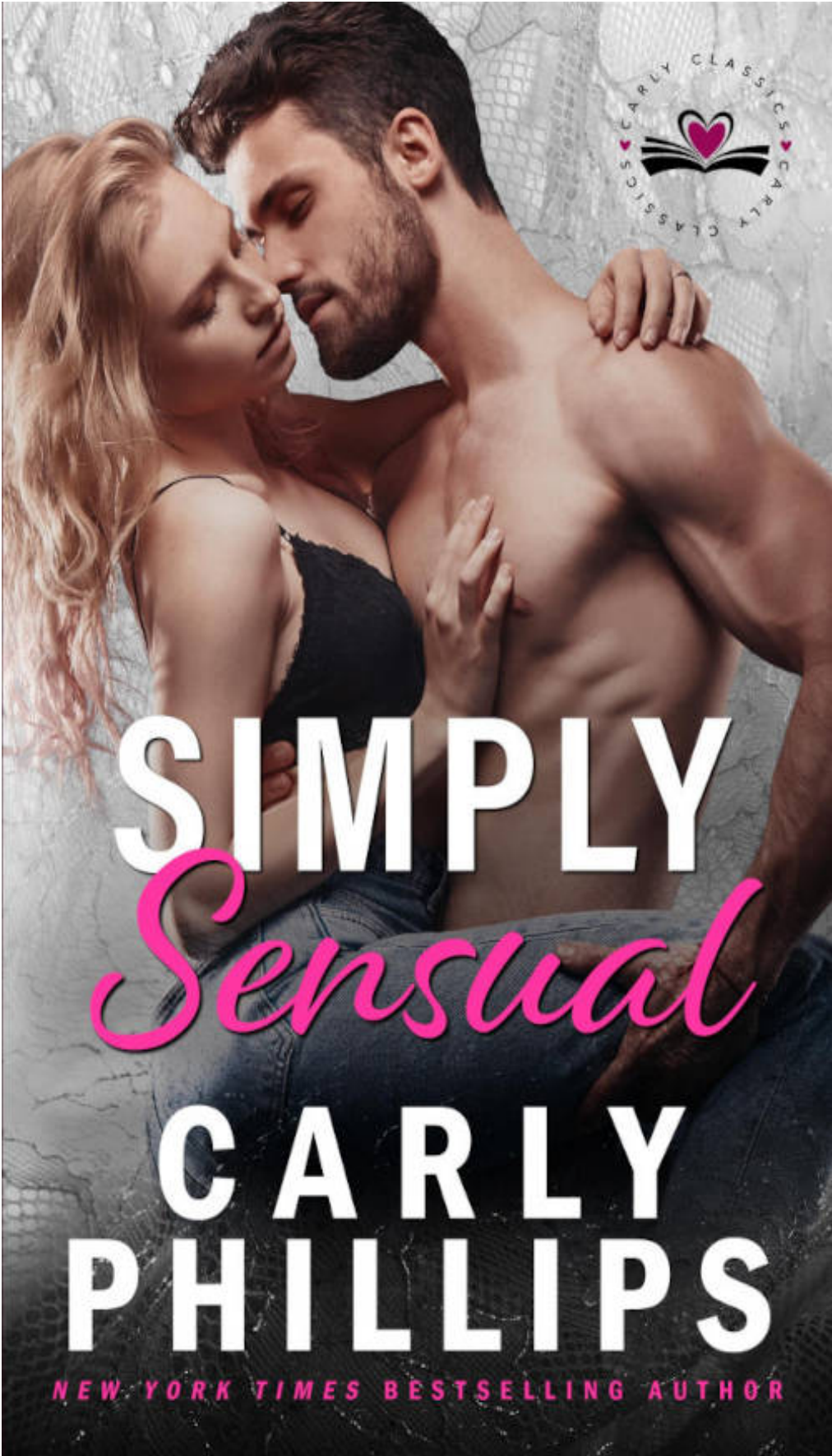
She settled her lips over his for a deep, mind-drugging kiss. “You know I do.” The baby cooed in his arms and Catherine smiled. She’d have one of her own in less than nine months. Hers and Logan’s.

“And I love you.”

“Then let me go dance with your father.” She gestured to where Logan’s parents stood, stiffly overlooking the beach, his father in a suit, his mother, at least, in a comfortable sundress. And bare feet. Catherine laughed. Of all the things she hadn’t expected, his mother’s approval had been it. Cat actually enjoyed spending time with her, and considering she’d been instrumental in convincing the judge to accept Logan and Catherine or lose everything, Cat felt as if she owed her.

“Go ahead,” Logan said. “But I’ll be waiting for you.”

Just as each of them had been waiting for each other. All their lives.



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**CARLY
PHILLIPS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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BOOK 3

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Carly Phillips

Chapter One

BEN CALLAHAN FROWNED at the bone china cup on the sterling serving tray in front of him. Unable to fit one of his large fingers through the handle, he tried instead to hold the delicate cup with his whole hand. He'd have chucked the idea of attempting to grasp the cup, if not for his elderly hostess. Emma Montgomery had declared it was teatime, and from what Ben had seen, he wouldn't be getting any information out of her until he'd shared in her daily ritual.

He'd never understand the wealthy, nor did he care to try. He'd had a good deal of experience, none of it leaving a positive impression. His mother had scrubbed floors for a living and he'd seen firsthand how poorly the help was treated. He'd whisked his mother away from menial labor and verbal abuse as soon as he was old enough to support them both.

It was ironic, really. Most of the clients he'd accumulated as a private investigator had money to burn. Ben didn't mind taking their cash. It paid not only his bills but the extra money covered the cost of the independent living community where he'd placed his mother. He considered it payback for her years of service.

The elderly woman seated across from him was a potential client. She'd been referred to him by an acquaintance in her social set, one he remembered from the time he'd worked for her last year. So far, Emma Montgomery, his hostess, had been refreshing, both charming and persistent at the same time.

While other clients tried to whittle away at his expenses and final take despite their ability to afford his reasonable fee, Emma Montgomery had paid his airfare and expenses from New York City to Hampshire, Massachusetts, to discuss her reasons for wanting to hire him. As further enticement, she'd named a hefty sum he'd never seen before on a single case and promised him free rein with expenses, no questions asked. All *before* she'd explained why she needed his services.

Ben was not only intrigued but inclined to accept. The money she'd promised would enable him to have his mother moved from independent living to assisted care. With her eyesight rapidly deteriorating, she couldn't live alone and this case might make the upgraded care possible. If it meant putting up with idiosyncrasies like teatime, he'd force himself to endure.

He met his hostess' gaze. Piercing brown eyes regarded him from over the rim of her cup. *I'm waiting*, she seemed to be saying. There was nothing he could do but raise the cup and take a sip.

The minute the hot liquid passed his lips, she said, "My granddaughter needs a sitter. Do you have any interest in the job?"

He swallowed fast, burning his tongue and nearly losing his precarious hold on the fine china. No way he'd heard her correctly. She was offering all that good money for him to play babysitter? He shook his head. "Excuse me?"

"Perhaps I didn't phrase that quite right. I think maybe keeper is the correct word." She tapped the side of her head

without messing the perfect bun in her gray hair. “Yes, that’s right. My granddaughter is in the process of finding herself and she needs a keeper.”

He placed the cup onto the saucer before he could do serious damage. “I think you’ve been misinformed, Mrs. Montgomery.” Good money or not, Ben drew the line at babysitting.

“Call me Emma.” Her smile grew wider.

“Emma. I’m a private investigator. I don’t babysit wayward children. Just how old is your granddaughter, anyway?”

Emma reached onto the table beside the couch, holding a photo in her hand. She turned the picture toward him.

The woman staring back at him was no child. Honey-blond hair, warm brown eyes, and a face as delicate as the china he’d recently held stared back at him. A rush of desire hit Ben hard, and a shot of adrenaline jump-started his heart.

“She’s almost thirty and quite a beauty, isn’t she?” Emma asked, pride lilting her voice.

He met the older woman’s gaze and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “She’s... something all right.” A golden princess.

In his profession, Ben was used to observing people and photographs. He was used to forming opinions and going with gut instinct. He was rarely mistaken in his impressions and never blindsided by a pretty face. And he’d always been able to remain detached. Until now.

This woman was beautiful enough to affect his senses and sensual enough to rev up his libido. Her eyes reflected a wealth of emotion and hidden secrets—secrets he yearned to uncover. The assignment he'd been about to throw away had suddenly become one he couldn't resist, and a distinct sense of unease slithered through him.

“Grace moved to New York City a few years ago,” Emma said. “She’s always lived off the trust her parents set up for her as a child. No steady job, no steady man.” She said the last with enforced meaning before she appraised Ben from his work boots to his unkempt hair.

He shook his head as if he could rid himself of her penetrating stare. “And what’s going on with Grace that’s prompted you to contact me now?”

“She’s stopped withdrawing money from her trust and decided it’s time to live on her own.”

“I’d think that was an admirable move,” Ben said, having more respect for the new Grace than the one who had lived off her family money for years.

“Well, of course, it is. It’s how I raised her, after all—to be her own person. It worked, to an extent. She got out of Hampshire and away from her controlling father, Edgar, who is my son. We call him the judge.” She laughed but the sound contained no joy. “He has no idea what family means. Though I admit, with my grandson, Logan’s, recent marriage and new baby, he’s learning. But Grace isn’t around to see it.”

Sensing she’d gotten off track, Ben tried to steer her back to what she wanted from him. “So, you want Grace back

home?”

Emma shook her head. “Not if she’s safe and happy in New York. That’s all I care about, you see. But I can’t get information out of her because she’s clammed up on me.” The older woman zipped her fingers across her lips. “All she’ll say is that she’s fine and I shouldn’t worry.” Emma snorted, telling Ben what she thought of her granddaughter’s silence. “How can I not worry, the way she travels with a camera around her neck, paying more attention to her photographs than her surroundings?”

“She’s an adult,” Ben felt compelled to remind Emma.

“Women like her are attacked every day in New York City. She swears she’s taken a self-defense class as if that’s enough to soothe me. I’m certain she’s holding out. Ever since my brush with death, she thinks she’s protecting me. She doesn’t realize it’s more stressful on the heart, being kept in the dark.”

Ben nodded in understanding. His own father had died of a heart attack when Ben had been eight. He remembered him as a good man with a heart of gold. Too bad that organ had also been weak and he’d died driving home from his job as a department store manager, leaving no insurance and little money in the bank. His mother had been forced to make ends meet, and she’d turned to the only experience she had—housekeeping, only this time she worked in other people’s homes.

“Make no mistake, Mr. Callahan. I’m glad Grace is finally ready to tackle the world on her own.” Emma’s voice brought him back to the present. “It’ll give her a chance to sow those

wild oats her father made her suppress, but at the same time, that kind of sudden freedom frightens me. Even nearing thirty, Grace has been sheltered too long. And I know her. Now that she's made a stand, her pride won't let her call on me or her brother if she runs into trouble. I need to know she's okay." Emma placed a frail hand on his arm.

"Call me Ben," he said, wondering if Emma was right—if Grace had a penchant for getting into trouble, and if so, what kind.

No way he could deny Emma the peace of mind she sought. Her obvious love for her granddaughter—along with his financial need—sealed his agreement.

She smiled. "I've taken a few liberties under the assumption you'd take this case."

Ben was used to presumptuous clients, but he could only imagine what this woman had decided for him. "What liberties would those be, Mrs...." He caught the quick shake of her head and corrected the formality. "What liberties, Emma?"

"Grace lives in Murray Hill, in a one-bedroom off Third Avenue. After a long talk with the landlord, I managed to secure you the apartment across the hall. It seems his brother lives there and he's out of the country on business for the next month." Her white smile widened. "Wouldn't it be nice of his good friend Ben Callahan to apartment-sit for him?" She reached for something on the sofa table behind her and dangled a set of keys in front of his eyes.

Ben shook his head. "How convenient." He thought he'd been prepared for anything. He'd been wrong. "I'm sure you

realize I already have a place to live, Emma.”

She rolled her eyes as if he were slow. “Of course, you do.” Without warning, the older woman grabbed for his hand again, and her eyes met his in a silent plea, one he had a hard time ignoring. His gut clenched as he silently acknowledged he was in trouble.

“I need to know Grace is safe, satisfied, and fulfilled before I pass on. And you can only do that if you get close enough to see for yourself. I’ve heard you’re the best, Ben.”

He knew he was being worked shamelessly, and even so, he couldn’t look away. Worse, her motives seemed so honest and pure, he couldn’t bring himself to turn her down. What would it hurt if he got to know the granddaughter to assure the grandmother everything was okay? He could give the older woman peace of mind and finance his mother’s care at the same time. A win-win situation, even if it meant putting up with the older woman’s meddling.

“Well?” Emma asked.

He glanced at the photo once more. Detachment? Hell, he’d been sucker-punched by a picture. Heaven only knew what his reaction would be to Grace Montgomery in the flesh.

Emma patted his knee. “That’s okay. All men react like that the first time they see her.”

Was that supposed to make him feel better?

“I suppose you realize now why she needs someone to look out for her, especially since she’s on her own and more vulnerable than before.”

Ben had his doubts Grace was as naive as Emma painted her. After all, she'd been living in the city and even with money to burn, she'd have learned to be cautious and careful. Still, he understood and felt the older woman's concern.

Ben let out a groan. With little effort, he'd become invested in both Emma and her granddaughter. More than he should be with a client. Enough to warn him away from this case.

He stared into those compelling brown eyes and knew he couldn't walk away. Emma's obvious love and concern for Grace was one reason, his financial needs another. But there was yet another, more elemental reason not to opt out, his personal misgivings be damned. If he bailed, Emma would find another private investigator to get up close and personal with her granddaughter.

At a glance, Ben knew he couldn't trust himself around Grace. But he sure as hell wasn't about to let someone else take the job, either.



ADRENALINE PUMPED THROUGH Grace's system, a natural reaction to the afternoon spent capturing pictures that filled her soul. Unlike her temporary job at a photo studio specializing in portrait shots, her time at the park held the key to her future and she reveled in every minute. Even a routine stop at the corner grocery store hadn't dulled the sense of excitement she found doing what she loved, and if her instincts were on target, she'd captured exactly the right shots.

She juggled the bags filled with necessities while attempting to pull the apartment key out of her poncho pocket. There was so much flowing material she could barely find the opening. She understood now why the tailor had balked against sewing a pocket into the cape, but she hadn't wanted to give up the garment in favor of her more sensible denim jacket. Given to her by her beloved grandmother, the poncho had once allowed her to hide her camera from the rest of the family who hadn't understood her artistic obsession any more than they'd understood her.

She had escaped to another state and a huge city to be on her own, experience life, and discover the real Grace Montgomery. Her likes, her whims, her future. Ironically, the move alone hadn't accomplished her goal. She'd ended up living off her trust, continuing to emulate her family because, subconsciously, she'd sought the approval she would never receive. It had taken her brother, Logan, and his recent wedding to the most real, down-to-earth woman Grace had ever met to shake Grace up and make her realize she wanted what Logan had: a life of her own choosing.

Once again, irony played a role. Though Grace had divorced herself from the snooty country club set back home, she'd kept in touch with her closest friends. Cara Hill, a woman Grace both liked and respected, worked tirelessly for CHANCES, a charity that benefited underprivileged children. She was putting together a brochure and had purchased a huge layout in a traffic online site as well as a high-circulation print magazine aimed at enlightening the wealthy about the problems faced by people outside their social circle.

Raising substantial cash was the goal and Cara was taking a chance on an unknown photographer—on Grace—to capture that real world and the children who inhabited it. Grace refused to disappoint her. The experience could lead to more jobs and ultimately a photography career that paid the bills and left her fulfilled at the end of the day.

She felt the cold, metal key between her fingers at the same time the first bag toppled out of her arms and crashed to the floor. She glanced down and groaned. “It would have to be the one with the eggs.”

“Another dinner party shot to hell?” A lazy masculine drawl sounded from behind her.

Instinct told her the sexy voice belonged to her new neighbor. Instinct and the curling warmth in her belly. She closed her eyes and held the feeling close. It matched the one she felt whenever she caught a glimpse of him out her window. The first time, he’d been unloading a black Explorer packed with clothing and accessories. Her neighbor, Paul Biggs, an investment banker, was away on business and the super had mentioned she’d be having a new neighbor living across the hall.

He’d turned out to be a sexy new neighbor, in tight jeans and a faded blue T-shirt that clung to an incredibly sculpted body. Grace came from a world where men were soft and manicured. A specimen like him was just one of the treats of living far from home, and she’d enjoyed watching him from a distance.

Steeling herself for their first meeting, she set the rest of the bags on the floor. She turned, and although she'd glimpsed him through her window before—and even snapped a few photos with her camera—she discovered nothing compared to seeing him in the flesh.

He stood across from her, one shoulder propped against the chipped wall. Once white, the dingy paint now held a gray tinge, and still, her neighbor's jet-black hair stood out in stark contrast. Tousled from an apparent jaunt outdoors, his dark hair reached his shoulders and begged for a woman's touch.

Her touch. She swallowed hard and wondered where *that* notion had come from. She'd never been tempted to stroke a man's hair before but nothing about him was like anything she'd ever encountered. He oozed raw sexiness and called to something primal and elemental inside her. Something she hadn't known existed—until now.

He was pure male testosterone in a package that said, "Don't mess with me." And she was suddenly struck with how much fun it could be to do just that.

"Looks like you could use a hand. I'm Ben Callahan, your new neighbor." His voice brought her out of her musings.

She realized she'd been staring and extended her hand. "Grace Montgomery."

"I meant a *helping* hand." He laughed, a seductive rumble that set her already-raw nerve endings on fire.

Before embarrassment at her too-formal behavior could take over, he stepped forward and placed his large, warm palm

inside hers. “It’s nice to meet you, too.”

Heat arced between them, sizzling and hot. Ben cleared his throat, then quickly released her hand, leaving Grace to wonder if he was as unsettled by the sensations as she.

He quickly composed himself and she wished she could do the same.

“Can I help you with those packages?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you. I can handle them.” But she couldn’t handle him or her reaction to him as easily.

“Well, my mother taught me never to let a lady struggle, and besides,” he said with a slow grin, “I like helping beautiful women.” Without waiting for her response, he stepped around the groceries, bent down, and collected her bags.

She turned toward the door, key in hand. Aware of his heat and strength behind her, she put the key into the lock and let them into her apartment.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Just put them on the kitchen counter.” She pointed to the small pass-through that led to her working kitchen.

He deposited the bags, broken eggs included, onto the butcher-block countertop and turned. “So, was I right? Did you ruin another dinner party by dropping the groceries?”

Obviously, he was referring to last night’s parade of women who’d come to her apartment. Once Grace realized her job for CHANCES also enabled her to capture fabulous candid shots of children, she’d begun making copies—and the parents

came by once a week for coffee and free photos. Considering her privileged upbringing—that she hadn't worked for or deserved—it was the least she could do.

Although Grace hadn't realized Ben was monitoring the comings and goings from her place, as an expression of his interest, it would do nicely.

She shook her head. "No dinner party, now or then. Nothing more planned than an evening in front of the TV. And last night wasn't as big a bash as you seem to think."

"I thought I might have missed out on a good one." Curiosity lit his features as he met and held her gaze.

Warmth trickled through her veins. "Nope. Just a few friends over. Would it soothe your ego if I said your invitation got lost in the mail?" She grinned, unable to help the smile he inspired.

He laughed. "No, but it would help if you threw a welcome-to-the-building party in my honor."

"I... uh, think that could be arranged." Her boldness surprised her.

As much as she enjoyed their easy banter, this meeting had thrown her badly. She inhaled deeply. His musky scent seduced and aroused—and would now linger in her apartment long after he was gone. Her life, which just yesterday had been filled with routine and concern about making it on her own, now had spark and zing. Inspiration, she thought, glancing at the man in the fitted T-shirt.

He was everything that intrigued her in the opposite sex, nothing like the kind of men who'd asked her out back home—the suit-and-tie, suck-up to Judge Montgomery type of man, who had turned her ice-cold. And though she'd been just another anonymous female in New York City, she hadn't given much thought to dating since her move. Not after the last couple of setups courtesy of her friends had turned into boring disasters.

Nothing about Ben was boring. She took in his rugged good looks, his sexy, bad-boy posture and attitude. There wasn't a thing about him, from his alluring scent to his heated touch, she didn't enjoy. Why not make use of her discovery?

Professionally, Grace had already begun the starting steps toward a life of her own. On a more personal level, she'd become so used to turning down dates in favor of her own company, her femininity and wiles were rusty from disuse. But thanks to Ben Callahan, that was about to change.

Whether he knew it or not, he had just become the second step on her road to self-knowledge.

She leaned toward him, a whisper away from temptation. “So, what did you have in mind?”

A lazy smile lifted one side of his mouth and caused her to realize she'd backed herself into a corner. A very attractive corner.

“I'd like to get to know you, Grace.”

She smiled. “Sounds good to me.” She liked his boldness. She'd had her fill of too-polite men who wined and dined but

weren't honest about their intentions. Ben let her know upfront who he was and what he wanted.

He'd implied he was available. Though Grace wanted to be bold and daring, all *this* was too new. She wasn't ready to reveal that she desired to get to know him, too, but she had every intention of satisfying his request.

His aura of confidence appealed to the part of her that wanted to feel the same, and time with this man could teach her a lesson or two in self-esteem. He brought out a newer, bolder side of herself she wanted to experience again. Not to mention that the man was a feast for the senses and a boon to her sensual awakening. The knowledge set her heart jumping and myriad intimate possibilities raced through her mind. Her breath caught in a noticeable hitch.

She licked her dry lips and watched, fascinated, as his eyes followed the movement. Without warning, his gaze darted from hers and he turned away.

His sudden retreat was unexpected and hard to understand, but she let out a slow exhale of relief. The reprieve would give her a chance to catch her breath.

Hands in his back pockets and posture erect, no indication of interest or flirting in sight, he walked past her and glanced around her small apartment. "One bedroom?"

"Yes."

His hand swept over the living area, replete with Oriental rugs and porcelain pieces. "Beautiful place."

“Thanks.” She’d decorated the apartment in the days when she’d still been living off her trust, before she’d figured out how to realize her dreams or even what they were. Though she wanted this man to see more to Grace than the trappings of wealth, she wasn’t about to get into explanations now, not when she knew so little about him.

She turned back to her kitchen. “I really should unpack the groceries.”

“Grace?”

She glanced his way.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

Other than the fact that his hot-cold act confused her? But if his feelings were rampaging as quickly as hers, she could begin to understand. “Nothing’s wrong. Just lost in thought. It was nice meeting you, Ben.”

“Likewise.” He hesitated, then reached out and stroked a hand down her cheek. Another sudden change toward her. His fingertip lingered, his touch a sizzling combination of heat and electricity.

His eyes widened and he withdrew once more, confusion and regret sparking his gaze, leaving her to wonder again if he was as thrown by their first meeting as she.

“See you around, Gracie.”

She inclined her head. “Bye.”

He walked out of her apartment with a sexy stride she couldn’t help but admire. The door slammed shut behind him,

and Grace hugged her arms tight around her chest, amazed at the feelings and sensations he inspired.

Ben brought out the side of her she'd suppressed while trying to live by her father's rigid rules. The only time she'd snuck out of the house to meet friends at a local bar, she'd lived to regret it. Her father had embarrassed her badly. He'd called every parent, gotten her friends grounded for weeks, and no one had spoken to Grace for an equally long time.

The judge had accomplished his goal. She'd never rebelled again. But in her sexy neighbor, Grace saw the opportunity to do just that with no painful consequences.

When she'd decided to branch out on her own, she'd desired change in her life. She hadn't known it would come in the form of her sexy, intriguing neighbor, Ben Callahan.

But she intended to take full advantage.

Chapter Two

I'D LIKE TO get to know you, Grace.

Ben smacked his hand against the wall. What the hell had he been thinking, speaking with his gut and not his brain? He'd spent the past five days watching her from a distance, yet he'd underestimated the impact she'd have on him upon meeting her in person. He'd meant to be friendly and begin to gain her trust.

Instead, he'd been blown away. Her cocoa-brown eyes had danced with light and life and he'd been captivated on the spot. Adrenaline had kicked in the second he'd heard her soft voice, and surrounded by her fragrant scent of vanilla, his body had come alive. He'd backed off, but not soon enough. Even a cold shower hadn't lessened the effect of Grace Montgomery.

Small consolation, but at least he'd made substantial progress on the assignment, and in less than a week's time. When Emma called for her daily report—in about five minutes, he noted, glancing at his watch—he'd be able to tell her he'd met her granddaughter.

Ben paced the floor of the apartment. No need for the older woman to know he'd been enchanted and completely caught off guard. The picture hadn't done Grace justice, and Ben knew for certain if he wasn't careful, he'd fall hard and fast for Emma Montgomery's free-spirited granddaughter—a woman far out of his league and the subject of his investigation to boot.

Perhaps because of his father's careless ways, Ben's work ethic was strong. He worked hard, provided for his mother, saved for the future when he could, and made certain his clients were happy enough with his services to secure a referral for future cases. His ethics did not include screwing around with a client's granddaughter.

He had to focus on his job. He had Grace's routine down pat. Not only did he know she had a full-time job at a photography studio uptown, but he knew she spent her lunch hour and weekends frequenting a park that bordered a seedy neighborhood.

Ben knew all about neighborhoods where trouble lurked. He'd grown up in one and knew just how tempting a woman like Grace could be to a guy from the wrong side of the tracks. Hell, he knew how she tempted him now.

He had no problem putting Emma at ease about how Grace was earning money to survive, but he'd hold off before revealing the rest. Ben needed to do some more digging into other areas of Grace's life to find out why she was hanging around questionable parts of the city, camera in hand. The faster he got the information, the faster he could get the hell out... before his rapidly beating heart was broken by a woman who'd undoubtedly grow bored with her new life.

She might be living on her own, and he admired the attempt, but sooner or later, Grace Montgomery would miss the family she'd left behind and desire the easier lifestyle she'd grown up with. The expensive decor of her apartment proved she hadn't completely left it all behind.

Ben didn't begrudge her that life. He just had no intention of being a casualty when the novelty of making it on her own wore off.



GRACE STEPPED OUT of the dark subway station. The freedom she felt walking into the fresh air, camera in hand, the breeze warm on her arms, and the sun hot on her face, was liberating. She passed by the boarded-up building that once held a restaurant, waved to a bunch of neighborhood kids she saw on her daily trips to the park, and rounded the corner leading to the playground she loved.

As usual during lunch hour, the basketball courts were crowded with kids, and she paused in front of the wrought-iron gate. Clutching the cold metal in her hands, she peered through the open spaces and watched the games from the sidelines. The smack of the ball against the blacktop mingled with the low strains of male voices. With most of the players in white T-shirts, Grace was hard-pressed to tell them apart... until she caught sight of the guy in gray.

She couldn't mistake the jet-black hair hitting his shoulders as he ran or the physique she'd memorized the day he'd moved in. But it was the distinctive sound of his voice over the dull roar of the other players that sealed her certainty. She didn't know what Ben Callahan was doing down here, and she intended to find out. But not until she'd captured this moment.

She hadn't seen him for a week and she had no intention of letting the opportunity to feast on his good looks and

masculinity pass her by. She flipped off the lens cap and raised the camera to eye level. At the same moment, play on the court stopped, the guys hitting the benches to take a break—except for Ben and a lone player who remained by the hoop. Though Grace stood in the shade of the buildings' shadows, Ben stood bracketed by sunlight.

Her week of deprivation was at an end and she paused to revel in the sight.

He wiped a hand over his forehead to remove the sweat and grime from the game—a typically masculine move, but there was nothing typical about Ben. His sexy mannerisms, his powerful stance, the muscles in his legs visible thanks to his shorts set him apart from the other men in the world. And Grace appreciated it all as she began to capture his movements with her camera.

His body language mimicked those around them. He spoke to the kids as if he knew their language, as if he were accepted. Yet she'd never seen him here before. Grace wondered who he was and why he'd shown up now. Did he know the neighborhood residents because he worked in the area, or did he have family down here?

But first... With the easy adjustment of her zoom lens, she zeroed in. With each click of the shutter, she became one with Ben, and as she seized his every nuance, every undercurrent, she began to *feel*. Her heart raced as if she'd run the court and her pulse pounded in time to the dribble of the ball smacking the ground.

As he gestured and moved, explaining something to the youth beside him, she couldn't draw her gaze from the ripple of muscle in his arms and the strength in his calves and thighs. Thanks to the sun's strong rays and his hard play, damp stains darkened his T-shirt. She snapped the shutter automatically, not missing a beat, but her body continued a rampage of its own. Her back grew damp and her shirt stuck to her skin while a fine sheen of perspiration dotted her face. She lowered the camera and inhaled deep, drawing an unsteady breath.

Grace had been searching for clues to what kind of woman lay inside the polite female created by her judge father and well-bred mother. Now, she knew seething sensuality lay dormant inside her, just waiting to be unleashed. And Ben was the man to take her on the next part of her journey of self-discovery.

Everything he made her feel was honest and real, so opposite to the artificial world she'd grown up in—a world where people hid their feelings, married for show, cared little for their children, and worst of all, repressed their sexuality—unless they were cheating on a spouse. Except for her brother Logan, who'd defied the family political tradition and had also married for love, the Montgomery world was a phony one.

The opposite of the real world Ben inhabited.

She could only imagine the strength and beauty of the photos she'd just taken—photos for her personal album, not a stepping stone in her career.

Another glance at the court, and she saw Ben once more, hand on the kid's shoulder, apparently explaining the finer

points of the game. Not many men cared enough to work with the kids in this neighborhood, kids who needed guidance. Grace admired not just Ben's physique but the obvious goodness he possessed inside.

She headed around the gate and came up behind him. "Hey there, neighbor."

"Grace?" He turned toward her, surprise in his voice, disbelief in his gaze.

"The one and only." She sprinted onto the court to join him.

He tossed the ball to the young boy. "Get to work on those jump shots. I'll be with you in a second." He pivoted back to her. "What are you doing here?"

Was that anger she heard in his tone? She raised an eyebrow in question. "Well, hello to you, too. And I could ask you the same thing. It just so happens I'm a regular around here. How about you?"

"What's with the camera?" he asked without bothering to answer her question.

She lifted her prized piece of equipment before letting it fall back around her neck. "I'm working. What's your excuse? Because if you don't mind my saying so, it seems awfully coincidental that we'd both end up in the same neighborhood."

He met her gaze, which was a good sign that he wasn't hiding anything, but she didn't know him well enough to read him... yet.

“Don’t get yourself worked up, Gracie.” His voice softened and she couldn’t help melting like ice cream on the hot sidewalk. “I was just concerned to find you hanging in a neighborhood like this.” His arm swept the air around him.

She figured that was as much of an apology as she would get from the man. “Well, I admit it’s not as fine as most, but the people here are real.” Considering concern was behind his attitude, she didn’t mind explaining. “And they deserve the same little joys in life the rest of us have.” She waved the camera. “That’s what these pictures are for, to help raise money on behalf of the kids in this neighborhood—and their mothers love them. Pictures of their kids are the least I can give back.” She silently cursed the insecurity she hadn’t meant to reveal.

He stepped forward. “And why is that?” His soft voice wrapped around her like a warm caress. “Is your background more privileged than most?”

“How’d you guess?” she asked, suddenly wary. Because they’d met once, and she’d never revealed her upbringing to her neighbor. Of course, her apartment decor reeked of wealth, but his tone held more than a hint of certainty that he knew her well.

He lifted her chin with his hand, holding her face up to daylight. Heat having nothing to do with the sun skittered across her skin. “That cultured voice is a dead giveaway. And besides, those sculpted cheekbones speak for themselves.”

So, he’d pegged her from day one. But to Ben, she didn’t want to be the spoiled rich girl, she wanted to be just Grace.

And she believed she still had that chance.

She inhaled deep. The air held Ben's raw scent, and if Grace thought she'd been swept away by the sight of him before, she was on fire now. "What makes you such a good judge of people?"

"In my line of work, being observant is second nature."

She shot him a questioning look.

"Private investigator," he explained.

His occupation surprised her, but she appreciated the insight. "Is that what you're doing down here? Working on a case?"

She glanced over her shoulder, hoping the kid Ben had been coaching wasn't the subject of some undercover investigation that would get him in trouble. Drugs, the illegal sale of fake merchandise—she saw too many kids in danger and hoped the money from CHANCES would help kids like these. Not only would it open the door to her career, but she'd ease the guilt she felt for having so much when others had so little.

"Now, Grace, are you avoiding the question about your background?" He not-so-subtly turned the subject back to her.

She grinned. Apparently, with their interest in each other running high, neither one was willing to give without receiving in return. "No, Mr. Private Investigator. Let's just say I'm leveling the playing field. You answer my question, I'll answer yours."

He fingered the camera strap between his thumb and forefinger. “I didn’t know this was a game, but I’ll play. Since I’m new to the building, I asked the landlord which areas to avoid, and he mentioned this neighborhood. High crime, drug trafficking... kids in need.” He pointed to the game of basketball that had resumed behind them. “So, here I am.”

She’d found this neighborhood in much the same way, but she was a permanent resident. Ben was a temporary neighbor, which made his actions that much more generous and giving.

She wondered again what was behind his presence here. “Why, Ben, I’d never have suspected you had an altruistic streak.”

He laughed. “I don’t go around advertising it, but I grew up in a place like this. Whenever I go into a new neighborhood, I like to go back to my roots. Like you, I give back in return.”

Her chest constricted at the admission. So, not only was the man of her dreams sexy, but he had a heart.

“No welching. It’s your turn. *Is* your background more privileged than most? Is that why you feel the need to hit these areas without backup?”

She laughed. “I don’t think I need backup. Who’d be interested enough to bother with me?”

“Don’t underestimate your worth, Grace.”

She shivered, realizing he’d struck her one weakness with deadly accuracy. Though she hadn’t meant to imply she wasn’t

worthy of interest, it was her greatest fear. That her worth lay only in her money and family name.

“I meant who’d give me a second look? I’m dressed in rags.” She pointed to her ripped jeans and paint-splattered T-shirt. “No makeup, no jewelry to attract attention.” She shrugged, hoping she’d covered any hint of insecurity she might have revealed.

“Just a fancy camera worth good money in a pawn shop, for starters. Then there’s those cheekbones I mentioned earlier.” His finger slipped down her face, whisper-soft but with enough electricity to light this neighborhood in a blackout.

“I can take care of myself.”

“I know you believe that, but...”

“I *know* that.” She grasped his finger in her hand. The desire to feel the rough glide of his skin over her aching breasts was overwhelming. Somehow, she found the ability to speak. “I appreciate the concern, but I really need to get going. I want to shoot a few pictures before I have to get back to work.”

He stepped backward and the distance gave her breathing room. “You owe me some answers, Gracie.”

She laughed, grateful to be off the hook for now. “That’s okay. I’m not going far.”

Before he could answer, she turned and headed for the playground. Little did Ben know, she wasn’t kidding.

He was the key to her sensual self-discovery, and she planned to get very close to him very soon.



BEN SHOOK HIS head, watching as her behind swayed gracefully in tight denim. Her name suited her perfectly, Ben thought. Which was why *Grace* had no business being in this neighborhood.

Hell, he didn't like being back in an exact replica of his old stomping grounds. With little money growing up, the basketball courts had been his escape. The harder he'd pounded the ball, the more he'd thought he would forget that he'd be coming home to an empty apartment. No father, a mother who was working too hard, and neighbors screaming at each other on both sides of the paper-thin walls.

He related to the kids he'd met this morning when he'd stationed himself here to wait for Grace. If Ben could get one in particular, Leon, to keep his focus on the game and not the streets, the kid could get a scholarship and make his way out of here. Ben's time would be well-spent, not to mention that helping the guys was a distraction from Grace—who still hadn't given him a strong enough reason for hanging out in a place like this. He admired her desire to give back. He respected her for the effort. But he'd hate to see her good deeds rewarded by trouble.

And why did he care? Ben let out a groan. This was exactly what he didn't want—to get involved in her life. His job was to find the facts for his client. Instead, he was thinking

about Grace too much, words like admiration and respect coming to mind as he did.

No sense in denying the truth. Far from the detachment he'd promised himself, he was beginning to care. Being around Grace could put his heart at risk, and he didn't like it worth a damn.

Better he focus on the facts of the case—he'd gotten the answers Emma had sought, and in record time. He knew Grace's professional occupation and how she filled her free time. He could see for himself she was indeed happy as Emma wanted for her granddaughter. If her choice in locations wasn't prime, well, she was a smart woman and an adult—she could take care of herself.

Distance, he reminded himself and turned back to the court. Leon threw him the ball, catching him off guard. Ben began a steady dribble, echoing the word detachment each time the ball smacked the blacktop. He went for a layup at the same moment a familiar feminine shriek pierced the air, sounding over the raucous voices of the guys in the game.

His gut clenched hard. Ball forgotten, he ran toward the sound of Grace's voice. She was sprawled on the ground where she'd obviously been pushed, and a tall kid in a red, sleeveless, hooded sweatshirt pulled on the camera strap around her neck. His strength nearly lifted her off the ground, while Grace, looking petite and out of her league, refused to hand over her precious possession.

“Hey!” At the sound of Ben's shout, the youth released the strap, causing Grace to fall backward against the pavement.

Given a choice between running after the attacker or seeing to the victim, Ben chose Grace.

He knelt down beside her. “You okay?” Long strands of blond hair fell over her face and he brushed them aside with one hand. Ignoring the sensation of silk beneath his fingertips wasn’t easy.

She offered him a smile he had no doubt was forced. “I’m fine as long as you don’t say ‘I told you so.’”

“I don’t have to. You already did.” He held out a hand to help her up.

She placed her palm inside his, wincing as her skin slid against his coarser flesh. Grabbing her wrist, he gently turned her hand over to reveal angry red scrapes on her palm. “Other one?”

She flipped over her right hand. Similar abrasions covered her skin. “It’s nothing some antiseptic won’t take care of.”

“Agreed.” But his insides didn’t feel as calm as his voice. A queasy feeling settled in his stomach at the sight of the bruises, and an uneasiness pricked at him when he thought of what could have happened if he hadn’t been around to scare off her attacker.

She swiped at her eyes. So, she wasn’t as brave as she wanted him to believe. Good. In that case, he wouldn’t have to worry about her returning here when he was gone. He pushed aside the added grief that thought caused in his gut.

He helped her rise to her feet without putting pressure on her hands. “You weren’t going to hand over the camera, were

you?”

“Of course not! That camera cost a bundle. I couldn’t afford to replace it, and besides, he’s not entitled to take what doesn’t belong to him.”

He laughed at the innocent proclamation along with the determined clench of her jaw. “And just how did you plan to stop him?”

“If he’d gotten the camera, I’d have tripped him before he got two feet away. But you saved me the hassle. And besides, I held on to the camera, didn’t I?”

The little minx sounded proud of herself.

“He could have snapped your neck.”

“But he didn’t. See?” She whipped a fall of blond hair off one shoulder, exposing delicate, white skin.

But Ben wasn’t fooled, and he pulled back on the camera strap, cringing as he saw the damage. “Your neck doesn’t look much better than your hands, Gracie. Ever think of taking a self-defense class?”

“I haven’t had a chance, but I’ll make time—soon.”

Obviously, she’d lied to her grandmother about having taken those classes. What else had she lied to Emma about and what else was she doing in this neighborhood?

“Thanks for the help, Ben.” Her shoulders slumped and much of the earlier bravado went with them as a tremor shook her slender frame. Taking him off guard, she turned and walked away.

“Hey.”

“Is for horses,” she called over her shoulder.

Two long strides and he caught up with her. Though he admired her independent streak, he was too worried about her to leave her alone. Hell, he *wanted* to be with her after what had just happened. Though he was asking for trouble, taking care of Grace came first.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he walked alongside her. He sensed her need to keep moving, to not think about being attacked. She was probably in shock and he understood. But the numbness would wear off and he planned to be there when the impact set in.

“Where are you off to?” he asked.

“Subway.”

He shook his head. No way he’d let her go alone. The first few times he’d followed her, he’d ducked into a crowded subway car and tailed her at a discreet distance. Today, wanting things to appear coincidental, he’d taken his car.

“Subway’s not safe.”

She stopped in her tracks and turned toward him. Glazed but determined eyes looked up at him. “It’s been safe enough for as long as I’ve been coming here.”

“So was the neighborhood until today. Let me drive you home. My truck is around the corner.”

Gratitude flickered in her eyes, but she shook her head. “No, thanks. I can get home myself.”

“I’m sure you can.” Unable to help himself, he reached out and touched her cheek, and she turned her face into his open palm until he cradled her face in his hand.

She was so soft. Her skin, her voice... but not what was inside. Emma knew her granddaughter well. Grace was tough. And as much as she might want to give in, she wouldn’t let herself lean on him.

He admired her strength, even if right now, he wanted to conquer it. “There’s nothing wrong with accepting help every once in a while.”

She smiled. “I know that.”

“Then lean on me now.” He treated her to his most charming grin. “And I promise I’ll let you ditch me later.” And he hoped to hell she did toss him out. Because Ben wasn’t sure he had what it would take to drag himself away from her.

Chapter Three

GRACE HANDED BEN the keys and let him unlock the door to her apartment. She was too tired to do it herself, and besides, her hands stung worse than when she'd fallen off her bike as a kid. She wasn't ready to think through today's ordeal—or the threat the punk had made to her before Ben ran him off.

Stay out of this neighborhood or else.

She squared her shoulders. Just because he'd scared her to death didn't mean she'd listen. Grace came from a family of strong people who did what they wanted, the rest of the world be damned. And though she rarely cited her family as having virtues, this time, she was prepared to emulate that one trait. After she took care of her cuts and bruises—and after she got rid of Ben. His strong presence made it too easy to want to lean on him. Too easy to succumb and lose the thread of independence she'd begun to weave.

He stepped inside and held the door open for her to do the same. She walked past him. He wasn't dressed for the office; his hair was mussed and hadn't seen a barber's scissors in quite a while. Still, he was the most appealing sight she'd ever laid eyes on.

Independence be damned, the man was right. Leaning on him wouldn't be so bad. In fact, she'd probably enjoy it, and heaven knew being around Ben made the threat of danger seem less real.

“You can put the keys and camera on the shelf.” She pointed to the etched glass shelf “floating” from the wall.

He stepped around her. The keys made an unnaturally loud sound as they clattered onto the glass. “You need to take care of those hands.”

She nodded.

“Where’s the antiseptic?” he asked.

Someone else taking care of her was a novel experience, which was probably what made it so appealing. Except for her grandmother, no one in her family ever made her feel loved for herself. Her mother tried, but thanks to her father’s bullying, she’d always fallen short. But for her brother, Logan, no male in her family had ever made her feel warm or cared for. In fact, her father, with his impossibly high standards and demands, diminished her self-worth and made her more insecure than any child ought to be.

But Ben had held her the entire walk to his car, making her feel safe and cherished. After seeing him with the kids at the park and viewing his unwavering concern for her now, she knew more than sexual attraction drew her to him.

She tipped her head upward and met his concerned gaze. He caused her to feel a whole host of emotions. None platonic. All solid and good.

“Grace? The antiseptic.”

She gave herself a shake. “In the kitchen. The cabinet to the left of the microwave.” She followed him the short distance and waited in her small walk-in kitchen while he

sorted through the cabinet and came up with a light antiseptic to clean her cuts, an antibiotic cream, and bandages.

He took the box off the shelf and held it up for inspection. "Disney Princesses?"

Grace felt a heated flush creep up her face. "I knew I ought to keep something in the house just in case, and, well... that's all they had."

He laughed, his features softening, a dimple appearing in his right cheek. She raised her hand and touched a finger to the enticing crease. His skin was hot and rough with razor stubble.

He sucked in a startled breath and she dropped her hand. "Don't play with fire, Gracie. Unless you want..."

"To get burned?" She met his heavy-lidded gaze. "I admit to liking the idea. I always had to be the good girl. I never crossed the street without an adult and I never played with matches. I'm tired of being good. I *want* to play with fire." She wanted to play with him.

Though she'd never been so bold before, something about Ben made her feel free... to be herself, Grace realized. And it felt good.

His hands came to rest on her hips. Large palms and hot skin.

Before she realized his intent, he lifted her up and placed her on the kitchen counter. "First, we see to your hands and neck."

Grace smiled. Let him tend to her injuries first. She'd get a chance to question him more about who he was and where

he'd come from. The pull between them wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

“Turn your hands palms up.”



BEN DESPERATELY NEEDED the distraction of caring for her injuries before he forgot them in favor of her enticing-yet-innocent proposition.

She did as he asked. He washed his hands at the sink, then returned to her side and saturated a cotton ball. With care, he wiped down her dirt-streaked hands, cleaning the scrapes. Except for the first time when she sucked in a pain-filled breath, she didn't utter a word of complaint and let him work.

“You're good at this. Get much practice?” she asked.

He recognized her attempt to distract herself from what must sting like the devil, but he also recognized a feminine ploy to extract information.

Still, she was so guileless in her attempt, he couldn't help but indulge her. “No younger siblings to take care of, if that's what you're asking.” He reached for a fresh piece of cotton to pat down her hand and then opened the antibiotic cream.

Using his thumbs, he gently rubbed the center of her palms, massaging the ointment into her pale but soft skin—skin marred only by the bruises inflicted when she'd hit the sidewalk. The urge to lift her hand to his lips and ease her pain was strong.

The urge to comfort warred with the more primal desire to wrap her in his arms and protect her from harm. And it had

nothing to do with the case.

Damn, but Grace Montgomery was trouble.

“How about children?” she asked.

At the blunt, out-of-the-blue question, his finger pressed against her hand too hard and she let out a gasp. “Sorry. Jeez, Grace, if you want to know something, just come out and ask.” He glanced up at her sheepish expression.

An embarrassed but endearing smile worked its way onto her lips. “You caught me, I guess.”

He laughed. “Let’s just say your investigating skills need some brushing up.”

She shrugged. “Good thing you’re just the man to teach me.” She paused. “Unless there’s a wife, child, or girlfriend I don’t know about.” Curiosity and hope mingled in her warm brown eyes.

“No wife and child, no girlfriend, and no exes with kids, either. But I meant brushing up on more discreet ways of getting information.” He peeled open the bandaid and patched her hands as best he could. “I’ll make a drugstore run later and pick up something better to cover those hands, at least until they’re feeling better.”

She glanced down at his handiwork. “You don’t need to make a special trip. I can live with Cinderella until tomorrow.”

He ignored her protest. If a drugstore trip was the only way he could escape he’d take it in a heartbeat. He ignored the devilish voice in his head reminding him of what other items

could be found at a drugstore should the need arise, and he refocused on her injuries. “Okay, now, for your neck.”

She winced at the thought of him repeating the procedure on the burn left by the heavy camera strap rubbing against her skin.

“I think we can forget the antiseptic and just go with the cream,” he said.

She exhaled a sigh of relief. “Sounds good.”

“Let’s see.”

As she brushed long strands of hair off the side of her neck, she made room for him to take a look—by spreading her legs and letting him step inside. Surrounded by her feminine heat and intoxicating scent, Ben realized he was in trouble.

Fingertips covered with ointment, he touched her neck as gently as possible. A tremor shook her body, and her thighs clamped shut, enclosing him in her warmth. An echoing shudder overtook him.

He had to clear his throat in order to speak, and even then, his voice came out a hoarse whisper. “Can we skip the bandages, too?”

She turned her head, and her face was a tempting millimeter from his, her lips within kissing distance. His mind demanded he walk away. His body refused to listen to reason. He opened his mouth to speak, to prevent the inevitable, when she took advantage of his indecision and touched her lips to his.

Hot. Sweet. Demanding. Giving. The swirl of emotions flowed inside him as urgently as her tongue swept inside his mouth. Her hands gripped his forearms, heedless of the scrapes on her palms, and her nails dug into his skin.

Good judgment be damned, Ben thought and answered her silent plea, sealing his lips over hers. She moaned and he swallowed the sound, threading his fingers into her hair. The strands felt like fine silk beneath his fingertips, a stark contrast to the hardness building inside him.

A shred of sanity remained—the part of him that knew he ought to stop now before things went any further. He grabbed her wrist, calling for her attention.

She tilted her head back. Eyes glazed with desire, she met and held his gaze—until the ringing of her cell shocked him back into reality.

He tried to push back, but Grace's legs held him tight. His gaze fell to the cell phone on the counter and a familiar name, one guaranteed to instill guilt in Ben, popped up on the screen.

“It's my grandmother. Let it go to voicemail. I'll listen after. I'd rather hear what she has to say than talk right now,” she said, face still flushed, her breathing as ragged as his. “I just need to make sure it's not important.”

She waited until the alert on the cell phone showed a message and pressed to listen, hitting speaker. Grace obviously felt she had nothing to hide.

“Hello, Grace. It's been too long since I've heard your voice. I want to know how you're getting along in the big,

lonely city. Met anyone interesting lately? You know, I wouldn't mind a great-grandchild from *you* before I pass on. And if that's too much to ask, how about a little information about your life instead? After all, the woman who raised you ought to be privy to such information."

Somehow, he managed to stifle a combination laugh at Emma and self-directed groan. He wasn't supposed to know Grace's grandmother—any more than he was supposed to be kissing Grace.

The grip on his waist loosened and he took advantage. He stepped back into the safety zone, out from between her legs and out of her reach.

"I'm sorry." Grace's voice didn't sound much steadier than he felt at the moment. "Emma, my grandmother, has impeccable timing, even long distance."

"She sounds like quite a character."

"Oh, she is. But a lovable one and she worries about me."

"What was it she said? She raised you?"

Grace nodded. "She was the only adult in the house who cared about me and my brother—about how we felt, not how we appeared to the outside world. I adore her." Warmth and kindness softened her voice.

Her relationship with Emma seemed to parallel Ben and his mother's, and he could understand her strong feelings for the woman who'd raised and cared for her. "Then I'd say you were lucky to have her around."

Grace laughed wryly. “You can’t possibly feel that way now.”

Considering Emma had placed him firmly back in reality, reminding him of his job and what his relationship with Grace was supposed to be, Ben most definitely appreciated her call.

“But she has good reason to worry, wouldn’t you say?” He turned the conversation back to Emma’s message.

Grace’s gaze darted from his. “Until today, not really,” she said, lightly.

Her soft laugh didn’t fool him. This afternoon’s attack had shaken her up more than she was willing to admit. Why else had she sought to release her adrenaline with that heart-stopping kiss?

“Why don’t you just stop by every once in a while and reassure her?” Ben asked to keep conversation flowing. But he hated lying to her, even by implication.

“She lives in Boston.”

“Ah. You’re a New Englander. That explains the accent.” Which was light considering the Boston accent.

“Hampshire, Massachusetts, born and raised. But I really don’t want to talk about me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Then what would you like to talk about? And don’t say that kiss because it never should have happened.” No matter how great it was, he silently added. Women tended to dislike being told they were a mistake. But for Ben, being honest with Grace was the only way to avoid finding himself in this predicament again.

“Oh, really?” She folded her arms across her chest. “Care to tell me why not?” Unfortunately, she didn’t seem the least bit upset about his comment.

“I took advantage of your injuries.”

A smile curved her lips. “I’d say I took advantage of you. But instead of quibbling, why don’t I just tell you what I want to talk about?” Without waiting for a response, she jumped right in. “I want to talk about you.” Using her hands to brace herself, she hopped off the counter, then winced.

“You okay?”

She nodded. “I just have to remember to watch myself for the next few days.”

“At least you have the weekend. Unless you have someplace you have to be, like work.”

“I work at a portrait studio uptown, but I’m off Saturday and they’re closed Sunday... which reminds me. I need to call and let them know why I never showed up after lunch.”

“Go ahead.” He gestured to her cell. While she made her call, a wave of relief washed over him. He wouldn’t have to follow her around and watch her back for the next two days because she’d take care of herself at home. He’d have a reprieve.

“The owner was very understanding.” She hung up the receiver. “I’ll rest up today but I’m working on a freelance project in my spare time, so I can’t afford to sit around and pamper myself because of a few scratches.”

He was curious about the project she'd mentioned but more concerned about her safety. He narrowed his gaze. "You're not planning on heading back to the park, are you?"

Her shoulders stiffened and she lifted her chin a determined notch. Not a good indication that he'd get his wish on this. And definitely not a sign she was pleased with his interference, either.

She let out a slow exhale. "Any reason why I shouldn't go back there?"

"Other than the obvious?" Much as he'd love to back off and respect her independence, he couldn't.

"No punk kid is going to run me off. I come from stronger stock than that and I don't respond to threats."

"Threats? *Threats*? What haven't you told me, Grace?"

She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again, clamping her jaw tight. Apparently, she'd decided not to let him in on whatever he'd missed back at the park. If she thought keeping secrets would deter him, she was wrong.

"Grace?"

She bit down on her lower lip. The same lip he'd kissed and sucked into his mouth minutes earlier. He stifled a groan and concentrated on what was important: her safety.

She shook her head. "You're doing it again, you know. Changing the subject."

"If you ask me, you're doing the same thing."

She grinned. “But we’re talking about you.” She stepped closer. “And you’re avoiding the fact that I had a question of my own. I want to know about you.”

He shook his head in exasperation. Emma was right. Grace needed a keeper. Like it or not, he’d have to stick close, at least until he knew more about the threats she’d mentioned and until he discovered what was behind today’s attack. Suddenly, it didn’t seem as random as he’d originally thought.

He spread his palms wide and played along, treating her to an easy grin. “Ask away. I’m an open book.”

“Good. Then you won’t mind telling me how long you’re staying across the hall.”

He lifted her chin and looked into those brown eyes. “I wouldn’t mind at all if I didn’t think you had an ulterior motive. What’s up, Gracie?”

She stepped closer until he could inhale her scent and practically taste her glistening lips. “I just want to know how long I have to seduce you.”



SEDUCE HIM. THE next day, Grace’s words still haunted him. She’d uttered them with such complete certainty that even twenty-four hours later Ben was still aroused. The hell of it was he didn’t think he could deny her if faced with an all-out assault. One he felt certain would come. Grace now knew she had three weeks to act—or not act, if he had his way.

After her proclamation, he’d answered her question and made a quick exit. She should have taken the hint. But her soft

laughter had followed behind him, telling him she didn't consider his hasty retreat a defeat. Considering the feelings rioting inside him, she had every reason to feel victorious.

If it were just her sexuality he had to deal with, Ben felt certain he could easily maintain his professional distance. Instead, he found himself faced with a beautiful woman he also respected and admired. Walking away from her trust fund when it would have been easier to give in and live easy, spending her days at the park to give back to society—he'd yet to discover what that meant, but he sensed great import behind her words. She was generous, caring, and gutsy. And though he'd withdrawn last night, he didn't know if he'd have the strength to do it again.

What Grace didn't know or understand were the reasons for that withdrawal. So far, she hadn't asked. But she would. And he couldn't give the simplest explanation without revealing he was being paid to investigate her and he wouldn't betray a client's trust without permission. Emma's trust had to come before his personal feelings, never mind the money he'd see from this case.

But he never wanted to face Grace's wrath should she ever discover he'd deceived her. He felt guilty enough as it was, and guilt was an emotion alien to him when dealing with the subject of an investigation—another clear sign Ben was in too deep.

He hooked a hose up to the building's outside spigot and dragged it over to his car. The high-rise boasted not only a doorman but a circular driveway with plenty of room to spare.

The super, being a car fanatic himself, hadn't minded Ben's request to hand-wash his Explorer outside the building. He needed the distraction even more than his truck needed cleaning.

He squeezed the sprayer on the hose and began watering down his vehicle. As he bent for the bucket of soapy water, an uncomfortable sensation of being watched pricked at him. He shook off the feeling, knowing he was surrounded by high-rise apartment buildings and windows galore.

Impossible, Ben thought. But the longer he stayed there, the stronger the feeling grew.

Chapter Four

GRACE LOWERED THE camera and placed it on her dresser. A light sheen of perspiration tickled the back of her neck and blood was pumping fast and furious through her system—a result of both watching Ben and worrying about the day to come. She stretched, arching her back and feeling her sore muscles from yesterday’s struggle with her attacker. She shivered at the reminder and decided some raw courage was in order.

She couldn’t live in fear of walking through New York City nor could she avoid the neighborhood where she’d made friends and had found a source of perfect photographs for the CHANCES brochure. She had to get back on the horse, so to speak. But she’d do it the first time without the camera. She needed to face down her trouble, not look for more. And she needed to go alone.

By the time she headed outside, Ben had soaped his truck into a good lather. She could slip by him with a quick wave and there was nothing he could do about it. But she took one look at him and all her intentions dissolved in a puddle of soapy water.

He’d stripped off his shirt and her first glimpse was of his bare back. Muscles in his upper arms and shoulders rippled each time he wiped down the vehicle with a soft rag. She couldn’t walk away from him any more than she wanted to.

He was a mystery beneath the tough-guy exterior. A private investigator, he’d said. An intriguing profession for an

intriguing man, a man she admired for going back to low-income areas similar to where he'd grown up. It took guts to return to your roots—Grace ought to know considering she'd run from hers.

She stepped up behind him. “Working hard?”

He turned, one arm propped against the side-view mirror. “I'd hardly call this working. I'm just grateful to have the day off.”

“I know what you mean.” The sun beckoned overhead, already warming her arms and legs. Though she could go to the park on her day off, she could also afford to follow his lead and take a few hours to herself first.

“Where are you off to?” He glanced down at her sneakers and narrowed his gaze.

She could read his thoughts and knew he was worried she was heading to the park alone. She appreciated his concern but didn't want the argument. Besides, she'd already decided to hold off on her jaunt.

She held up her hands in mock surrender. “Nowhere you have to worry about.” Yet, she thought.

She walked around the car, sliding her hand over the cool metal as she inspected the gleaming exterior. “Good job. Have you started on the inside?”

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

She rolled up the sleeves on the jersey she'd swiped from her brother's drawer before he went away to college. “Then let me help.”

“What about your hands?” He reached out to take a look. His hot touch singed her skin and she felt the pull inside her as well.

“Sleeping Beauty’s got them covered. I changed them this morning.”

He still held onto her hand. She didn’t know if he was even aware of it, but she was. And along with the enticing sensations he inspired, a wave of determination rose in her chest. She’d spent her childhood suppressing her desires in favor of the good-girl role. She’d finally broken free, and thanks to Ben, she had the chance to experience being bad.

With her window of opportunity limited to three weeks, she had every reason to be more brazen and bold, no matter how difficult the act. She drew a deep breath and rubbed her thumb over his more callused flesh.

He jerked his hand back in surprise, then turned toward the car. “Go ahead and help. If you’re sure you’re up to it...”

“I am.”

He gestured to the pile of supplies on the ground. “Then get to work.”

She bent, picked up a dry rag and a bottle of spray cleaner, and climbed into the front seat. Though she’d left the door open, sitting in Ben’s truck, she was enveloped in his scent, in the essence of what made him sexy and real. Chemistry, a subject she’d never understood but now appreciated, was at work. And as usual, when it had to do with Ben, it made Grace burn.

She wondered as she wiped down the inside of the front window what would make a man like Ben lose that rigid control. She darted a glance out the window, and to her amusement, she caught him watching her before he jerked his attention back to whatever task he'd been doing. It wasn't the first time she'd caught him looking, and after a few minutes passed, she realized it wasn't the last.

She slid out of the truck and leaned against the exterior. "It's hot out here. It may only be spring, but it has to be near seventy already."

"Perfect day for a wash," he said from his position on the opposite side, where he was working on polishing the hubcaps.

"Yup. A girl can work up a good sweat if she's not careful." Gathering her courage, she lifted the hem on her jersey and pulled the center upward, tucking the bottom into the rounded collar and yanking down on it. The result was a bikini-like top. A shirt that had once covered too much now covered very little.

"Whew." Grace made a show of fanning herself with her hand. "That's better."

Her voice captured his attention and he walked around to her side of the truck and took in her outfit. He looked her up and down thoroughly—just as she'd hoped. Then he flipped his sunglasses off and hung them on an empty belt loop.

"For a better look?" she asked with a grin.

A muscle worked in his jaw, and if Grace had to bet, that rigid control of his was hanging by a delicate thread. He

exhaled hard. “Get back to work before the landlord revokes my washing privileges,” he muttered.

Mission accomplished, she thought and let out a sigh of relief. This being naughty was not only fun, but she wasn’t too bad at it, either.

Grace saluted and climbed back into the car. “I haven’t had the chance to do anything like this in a while,” she called out to him. “When my brother turned sixteen, he got his first car. A brand-new...” She clamped her mouth shut. She’d spoken without thinking and swallowed a curse, wishing she could choke on the words to avoid revealing the truth.

Why was it all the little facts of her childhood she’d taken for granted before embarrassed her now that Ben had come into her life? Even when she’d decided to forego her trust fund, she hadn’t been quite as ashamed of her background. She shook her head. Well, shame was a good thing. It would teach her humility and help her appreciate all the things she now worked to achieve.

He paused, obviously picking up on the silence. “Brand-new what?”

“Porsche,” she said under her breath.

He let out a slow whistle. “Nice.”

She cringed and held on to the futile hope he’d change the subject.

“And what did the princess get when she turned sixteen?” he asked.

So much for hoping. She crinkled her nose and glanced up at him. “The *princess*?” She hoped he caught the disdain for the term in her voice. She wanted him to appreciate her as a down-to-earth woman.

He braced his arm on the roof and leaned into the car. “You. Princess Grace.”

His face was so close she had the desire to reach out and touch the razor stubble on his cheeks. To play with the fire he aroused. But she suddenly wanted more between them than pure sexual attraction.

She wanted him to both like and respect her, the way she liked and respected him. She might not know much about him, but his character spoke volumes. He was a knight in shining armor, helping the underprivileged and caring for damsels in distress. She stifled a laugh, knowing he wouldn’t enjoy her description.

She didn’t want to be the unattainable princess in the locked tower. “Is that how you see me?”

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BEN CAUGHT THE disappointment in her tone and felt like a heel for using an obviously sensitive subject to his advantage. He didn’t understand why her background always sent her running for cover, not when she was making an independent stand now.

“Princess,” he murmured, repeating the word, softer this time. “Is calling you that such a bad thing?”

She raised her hand to touch his cheek. “If it puts me out of your reach it is.”

But that’s where he needed to be—out of her reach. So, he’d used the term princess on purpose. Considering her brazen assault, he’d figured he could be forgiven for treading on touchy ground. Now that he saw the vulnerability in her eyes, he wasn’t so sure the ends justified the means.

“I meant it in the nicest possible way.” The excuse sounded pathetic even to his ears.

She snorted in disbelief. “Yeah, right. Okay, this isn’t the first time you’ve asked or alluded, so I’ll tell you all about my background, okay? I come from a wealthy New England family, just like you thought. An uptight, staid, don’t-embarrass-us-or-betray-your-roots kind of clan. We’ve got political tradition dating back to the early 1900s and not one divorce in our history. Want to know why?”

He heard the bitterness in her tone and regretted opening this can of worms. He hated having caused her the least bit of pain.

“Why?” he asked, partly because she expected him to but mostly because she so obviously wanted to get this out in the open between them.

“Because Montgomerys don’t divorce, they endure.” Her features contorted in disgust at what sounded like the family motto. “For the last five or six generations, the Montgomerys did what was expected. They married the so-called *right* people. The result was miserable unions, infidelities, unhappy

children they ignored—none of it mattered as long as outside perception was good.” She shook her head in dismay.

Ben didn’t attempt to stop the explanation he knew hurt her badly.

“My brother, Logan, was the first to break the mold, and I’m proud of him. Not for betraying his heritage but because he’s happy. Me? I’m working on it. But in the meantime, yes, I’ve learned the art of perfection in public and maybe that’s where that princess image you have of me comes in. It’s so deeply ingrained I don’t even realize how I’m behaving half the time.” Her shoulders dropped in relief. As if by revealing she’d released a huge burden.

Ben didn’t kid himself. Just because Logan had broken free didn’t mean Grace would be able to do the same. That public perfection she’d mentioned was apparent in the way she carried herself, although less so in the way she acted. And damn, but it was just one of the things that drew him to her. Amazing that the world he disdained had shaped the woman he desired.

She was a woman with shadows lurking in her eyes right now. He wanted to take her in his arms and protect her from the memories he’d evoked. Because it would only complicate things, he refrained.

“There’s more,” she said.

He shook his head. “I appreciate the honesty, but you don’t have to do this.”

Her gaze met his. “Yes, I do. You need to know one last thing. All that money I mentioned doesn’t do a bit of good if you’re unhappy or you lose yourself in the process.” She shrugged and her cheeks turned pink as if she was embarrassed by the admission.

He’d known the facts from Emma, yet hearing Grace’s view of her world, he could almost believe she’d walked away for good. Almost. He knew she meant every word she’d uttered. But once she found herself and everything she was looking for, going back to the money and the life she’d left behind wouldn’t be as difficult as she thought. As she’d said, it was second nature.

But right now, that world was far away. And what he saw in front of him was a vulnerable woman. One who’d gotten to a heart Ben would have sworn wasn’t capable of deep emotion. Before Grace, he’d never *felt* so much before.

And that was yet another reason to back off. He reached out and grabbed her hand, holding it briefly. For reassurance. For selfish need. “We’d better get back to work.”

She let out a slow breath but was obviously relieved the subject was closed for now. “Anyone ever tell you you’re a slave driver?”

He laughed but it sounded harsh to his own ears. “I can think of worse things to be.” Like a liar, he thought in disgust, wondering when in the hell doing his job had become something that turned his stomach.

For the next hour, they worked side by side. Rather, she worked and he admired... He admired her attention to detail,

her diligence at scrubbing coffee stains off the dashboard, and the way her behind moved in tight denim as she scrambled to her knees and wiped down the center console.

He shook his head. He had no doubt every move was calculated to capture his attention. Damned if he wasn't mesmerized anyway.

"Time to call it a day." She climbed out of the truck looking wrinkled, messed, and every inch *not* the Grace Kelly image he'd tried to paint her in. She was as beautiful, regal, and striking as the young Princess of Monaco had been, but at this moment, she was also dirt-streaked and rumped.

His Grace wasn't a princess. She was real. Enough to make him forget her background and his case—if he was looking for trouble. He told himself he wasn't.

But his throbbing body didn't agree. And neither did the part of his brain that both liked and admired Grace Montgomery.

She wiped her hands on the front of her jeans, drawing his attention to the pull of material at the fly. He tried to swallow but his mouth had grown dry.

"I'm through here. Take a look and take a whiff. The fresh scent of clean." With a bow, she waved, meaning to give him a look at the inside of his truck.

What he got was a glimpse down her makeshift shirt instead. Pale flesh swelled over delicate lace. He shook his head to distract himself, then bent and peered inside the vehicle, hoping to get sidetracked. His seats shone and the

scent of lemon-lime surrounded him, but his mind was firmly on Grace.

He straightened and met her gaze. “Good job, Gracie.”

“Really? Thanks.” The flash of white teeth told him she was proud of her handiwork and even more pleased by his compliment.

“How long has it been since someone told you you’ve done good?” He was suddenly certain her discomfort with her background was related to her occasional bouts of insecurity.

“Too long. Especially from someone I... care about.” Her cheeks grew pink at the admission.

So, his instincts had been right on. Ben had no doubt Emma bolstered her granddaughter’s self-esteem as much as she could, but nothing could replace parental pride. From all the insinuations, Grace’s father’s parenting tactics could use some work. Ben had been fortunate with his parental luck of the draw; both his mother and father had supported him emotionally and had always shown their love. But Grace apparently hadn’t been as lucky.

He looked into her beautiful face and was glad he’d been able to contribute something positive to her life after all. Even if she didn’t realize it, he did.

“I really have to be going,” she said.

He reached for her, but she stepped back. “Where to?” As if he didn’t know.

“The park. And playground. The sun’s out and tomorrow’s forecast says rain.” She backed up another step.

“Okay. Give me ten minutes to clean up and I’ll go with you.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Absolutely not.” She stepped backward again. “I need to do this alone. And I know you understand that—respect it, even. If you can just put those caveman instincts aside and trust me on this...”

“Can’t, Gracie.” He wished like hell he could, if only because she wanted it so badly. But he had Emma to answer to, for one thing, his conscience for another. And he had to—wanted to—look out for her.

“I thought not. Bye, Ben.”

He let out a groan. He hadn’t wanted it to come to this, but she’d left him with no choice. He reached for the hose behind him. “Grace.” He called her back, banking on her good manners to kick in.

They did and she turned to face him. “What?” She raised her hands outward, the action pulling the white jersey taut across her chest. “It’s called getting back in the saddle, Ben. Facing your fears. I can’t do that with a bodyguard by my side.”

She was right. But he still couldn’t let her go alone. “You said you used to hand-wash cars with your brother?”

“Is there a point to this other than stalling me?” She tipped her head to the side and her blond ponytail swiped her shoulders.

He shrugged. “I just wanted to remind you of the fun times in your childhood.” With remorse but not regret, he raised the

hose and turned it on her.

The cold water hit her chest and Grace let out a shriek. Then she leaped forward and made a grab for the hose, only Ben was faster. He turned out of the way just as she managed to get a hand locked on the green rubber. She yanked hard and caught him off guard, but the force of the water took the hose out of his hands. It hit the ground, moving around like a snake, saturating them both.



GRACE KNEW SHE ought to be furious, but she was too busy laughing instead. For those few minutes, she'd felt young and free as she had only when she'd hung out with Logan—away from the judge and her mother, their control, and social mores.

She yanked her shirt free of the knot she'd made earlier and wrung out the hem while Ben got the hose under control. "Don't think I don't know that was deliberate."

He turned back toward her, his eyes gleaming with amusement and mischief. "You left me no choice." He met her stare briefly before his gaze darted lower.

She followed his lead and looked down only to find her pure lace bra was completely visible through the wet T-shirt. A fact Ben hadn't missed if the darkening of his irises was any indication. A breeze blew through the air, chilling her wet skin. Her darkened nipples pulled into tight peaks before her eyes—and Ben's steely gaze. That control was shot to hell if she had to take a guess.

And Grace couldn't say she'd miss it. Obviously, she'd captured his attention, and no matter how awkward she felt, damned if she was going to fold her arms over her chest and ruin the moment. A bad girl wouldn't miss this opportunity.

"We all have choices, Ben." They both knew she spoke more of the electricity between them and what he chose to do—or not do—about it.

He folded his arms across his broad chest. "And I'm choosing to walk away before this gets out of hand." He turned toward the truck. Away from her.

But Grace wasn't giving in. Not now. She grabbed for his wrist. "What are you running from?" She'd wondered before. Now she had to know.

A steady stream of people had begun to enter and exit the building. "Can we take this somewhere private?" he asked, deliberately staring at her chest. A reminder that if he could see what was so clearly visible, so could anyone else who chose to take a peek.

She refused to let him accomplish his goal—to make *her* uncomfortable enough to do the backing off for him. "Sure thing." She grabbed for the handle of the truck, slid into the back. And waited.

He stared at her in disbelief.

"Are you going to join me? Because I look pretty silly sitting in here by myself."

His glare told her he wasn't amused by her antics. She grinned. "No problem. You can go inside and dry off, and I

can head downtown as planned.”

He narrowed his gaze. “Not dressed like that, you’re not.”

She treated him to her sweetest smile. “Want to test me?” Grace had no intention of going anywhere in her drenched state except her apartment, and only if Ben went with her. But unless he gave in and crawled into the back for a more personal, intimate conversation, he might just force her hand. And she might find herself walking down the street, giving New York City’s residents a view of more than the skyline.

He let out a growl, then slipped into the front seat and turned on the ignition.

“Where are we going?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he put the truck in gear and drove around the corner, coming to a stop on a side street behind the building. A secluded, quiet area without a steady flow of pedestrian traffic.

“I get it. Privacy.” She grinned. “Maybe I was wrong about you. Maybe you aren’t running from me after all.”

He shut off the engine, opened the door, and got out long enough to switch positions and join her in the back seat. “Okay, princess. I played the game your way. You got what you wanted. You got me alone.” His darkened eyes met hers. “Now, what are you going to do with me?”

Chapter Five

GRACE RECOGNIZED THE challenge in Ben's words. He didn't think she had it in her to make the first move. She wouldn't have thought she had it in her, either. But she knew a showdown when she saw one, and if she didn't act now, there wouldn't be a later. Suddenly chilled from sitting in a damp shirt, she shivered.

"Cold?" He may have joined her in the back, but he still sat in the opposite corner.

She nodded. "Good thing I know just how to keep warm."

She moved quickly before she lost her nerve, and hoping to catch him off guard, she climbed onto his lap. Face-to-face, she placed her knees on either side of his legs and settled herself into the juncture of his thighs.

He exhaled hard and let out a groan that vibrated through her. "Body heat," she explained. But what she felt went beyond heat. More like a burning blaze and unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

She released any leg muscles that would have held her apart from him until his erection settled snug between her thighs.

He clenched his jaw, fighting the obvious pleasure brought by their intimate contact. "Do you always get what you want, princess?"

She shook her head. "Good try, but I'm not biting." Grace recognized the ploy to place distance between them. No way

would she let him use her weakness to push her away again.

“How so?” He raised an eyebrow and met her gaze, attempting to appear unaffected.

But she knew better. She’d caught the flicker of regret at his words in his dark eyes. “Let’s just say I may have been privileged, but I rarely got what I really wanted.” Fewer *things* and more caring. “On the other hand, I get the feeling you tend to get what you desire.”

“Not while I was growing up. We weren’t exactly in your league.” His jaw clenched tight.

“Not many families are, and believe me, you ought to consider yourself lucky. Did you have love?”

The word hovered between them.

He nodded.

“Then you were much more privileged than I ever was. And Ben, I should warn you—I may not have gotten what I wanted then...”

“But you plan to get it now?”

She nodded. “I most certainly do.”

His eyes smoldered with the same flame threatening to consume her, but instead of pulling her into the kiss she desired, he clenched his hands into fists at his sides.

She shook her head and admitted to herself she’d have preferred he took control and kissed her senseless, but by holding back, he was teaching her important lessons on experimenting and being bold.

She let out an exaggerated sigh. “I can do this the hard way or the easy way. With your cooperation or without it. Either way, I have no doubt I’ll eventually get what we both want.” She raised her hands and placed them on his bare chest.

That initial move was difficult, but now that she’d touched his skin, the rest came a bit easier. She shut her eyes for only a moment, savoring the feel of his heated flesh beneath her palms. Then, taking advantage, she grazed his nipples with her thumbs until they’d distended into hard peaks.

His hips jerked upward, and she sucked in a breath at the same time an unexpected rising swell of desire flooded through her.

New. The sensations he aroused were new and exciting. She dampened her lips with her tongue. “Before I go with the more aggressive approach, you’re going to have to tell me why you’re holding back.”

A smile twitched at his lips. “You’re telling me you can actually get *more* aggressive?” His hands came to rest at her hips. “Cause from where I’m sitting, princess, this is as aggressive as it gets.”

She glanced down at their nearly joined bodies. “Yeah, it is pretty smart of me, isn’t it?” She grinned, pleased with how quickly she was learning.

His hands slid beneath her shirt and inched upward until his palms settled on the bare skin by her rib cage and his thumbs grazed the lower swell of her breasts. She knew he was attempting to scare her off again. Either that or make her give in to whatever pleasure *he* had in mind. As tempting as

that thought was, Grace had her own agenda. By sheer strength of will alone, she kept her eyelids open and refused to give in.

“Smart women turn me on.” His hands moved higher as his fingertips brushed her nipples, a brief, teasing touch that left her wanting more.

“So, you like dominant women, do you?” She brushed a fingertip down his cheek and nearly lost herself in his seductive gaze.

“Oh, yeah.”

Taking a wild guess at what he'd like, she clamped her thighs together and pushed her hips forward, holding his powerful erection hostage to her whims. He groaned, and she discovered what he liked, she enjoyed, too.

“I can play the same game you can,” she said on a ragged breath and hoped she wasn't lying. “I can tease and torment as long as you can, probably longer. And I will. Until I know why the push and pull. Why you've been fighting the attraction between us.”

“You don't want much, do you?”

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JUST HIS SOUL, Ben thought. Her damp heat surrounded him, and she'd begun a steady clenching of her pelvic muscles that had him grinding his teeth and nearly sent him over the edge.

But the rational part of him didn't blame her for her confusion and understood the need to resort to dominant tactics. And she was good at them. So good that in another

second, he'd be blurting out all his secrets. Something that wouldn't do either of them any good and would deny them both what they desperately desired: each other.

Warm brown eyes met his. "I want you, Ben." But he saw the insecurity hovering in the darkened depths and respected that although she played a game, the act and the feelings were obviously new for her, too.

His body shook from the effort of holding back, from the exertion of *not* taking her into his arms and kissing her senseless, then stripping off those wet clothes and burying himself deep inside her.

He forced himself to think about what her statement implied. She wanted him, but she didn't know who he really was. She desired answers to why he held back, yet he couldn't tell her he was maintaining his distance for the sake of his job. And for her grandmother's sake.

So, he opted for the safest route. "I don't do commitments."

At least, he never had before. No woman had lasted longer than a month, tops. Between work and caring for his ailing mother, he'd never had the time to make the effort it took for a relationship to last. He glanced at Grace. Or maybe no woman had interested him enough, fascinated him enough.

She shrugged. "It's been a while since I've had one of my own. And I don't recall asking you for any commitments." She ran one fingernail down his chest, slowing down at the thin line of hair from his navel into the waistband of his jeans.

The tingling sensation set his already-raw nerve endings aflame. He swallowed hard. “You might not be asking, but you’re entitled to them.”

“I think I know best what I want.” She worked at the clasp on his fly. “What I need.” She popped open the button of his jeans. “What I *deserve*.”

He grabbed her wrist in his hand. His body was strung tight while his mind wandered in varied directions. He could give in, give them both what they desired, and he could walk away in the end. But his conscience kicked in, telling him he couldn’t selfishly take while lying to her at the same time.

If he wanted to deceive himself, he could say giving in had professional benefits. A temporary relationship with Grace enabled him to protect her when she was on the streets, in the park. She’d fight him accompanying her under any circumstances, but as a couple, he’d have a chance to remain by her side during the time he was in Emma’s employ. A chance to discover who was out to get her—and why.

But why lie? He *wanted* to protect her, apart from doing his job. When he left in a few short weeks, he wanted to leave her safe. And giving in to her now would help him in his cause, help him be close to her in the time they had left. “You deserve the best.”

She arched her back and leaned closer. The effect was more intimate body contact—if such a thing were possible. Her sex nestled against his straining cock.

She glanced down at their intertwined hands. “Then you need to let go of me.” Her voice came out a breathless

whisper.

He released his grip, wondering just how far she would go. But he had to touch her. He needed the contact too badly. Reaching out, he grabbed for her ponytail, freeing the delicate strands from confinement. Blond hair sifted over her shoulders and grazed her face.

“I’m all yours, princess.” He leaned his head back against the seat, wanting to get a better look at her. Her cheeks were flushed and her brown eyes were alive with delight... and determination.

She wiggled backward, each not-so-subtle movement putting a strain on his erection. She hesitated, and he felt her indecision. He waited, knowing it was her choice.

And then she made it, pulling down on his zipper in an excruciatingly slow motion, making sure her hand cupped and molded his arousal with each incremental move downward.

Ben thought he knew all about foreplay. He thought he knew how to control himself, but her dainty-yet-deliberate maneuvers were bringing him closer to the edge than ever before in his life, and the anticipation of what she planned next was killing him.

“You’d better be sure you know what you’re doing,” he said through tightly clenched teeth.

She flipped her mane of hair over her shoulder and glanced up. “Are you questioning my prowess?” Her lips lifted into a provocative grin, but her eyes held questions.

“I’d be a fool to deny the obvious.”

As if his words had given her permission, she then edged the zipper down completely. With one hand, she reached inside his open jeans, and with a little dexterity, she freed his cock.

He let out a slow groan. “I just want to make sure you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“Like you said, it’d be ridiculous to deny the obvious.” She ran her palm up and down his rigid shaft in a move more experimental than sure. “And besides, you drove us into a secluded alley behind the building. No one’s going to see us.”

He let out a groan. She obviously meant what she said. She wanted to play with fire. And since he’d already made his decision not to back off, the control he’d held on to snapped.

Between them, they made fast work of her jeans. Despite the cramped quarters, somehow, they got them unsnapped and down over her hips until they went flying to the other side of the car.

Clad only in a wet T-shirt and a mere scrap of silk, Grace sat on her knees beside him. He took in her pale skin and the rounded curves beneath the wet material and let out an approving whistle.

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. “I take it you like what you see?” she asked, her eyes hopeful.

The question was more telling than the spurts of bravado she’d been exhibiting. She might know what she wanted but she wasn’t certain of his approval. She wasn’t certain of him.

Ben might not be able to give her the whole honest truth, but he could give her this. He crooked a finger her way.

“Come here, Grace.”

“Not princess?” she asked lightly. Too lightly.

He hadn't realized just how important the distinction was to her. He met her gaze. “I want.” Without glancing down, he added, “I think you know how much. And I also know *who* I want, and it's *Grace*. Not someone I imagine you to be, but you. My gorgeous, sexy neighbor.” He crooked his finger once more. “So, how long are you going to make me wait?”

Her eyes gleamed with approval before she crawled back into his lap, only this time, just a thin barrier of silk separated their wanting flesh. And he felt her. Every hot inch of his dick was enveloped by slick heat. “Sweet heaven, you feel good.”

“You're not so bad yourself.” She squeezed her legs together and succeeded in enhancing the powerful sensations building within him.

He grabbed the back of her neck in his hand. “Just this once, I hope you don't mind if I take charge.” Without waiting for an answer, he pulled her close and sealed her lips with his.

Before they went further, he'd wanted to taste the sweetness of her mouth and the promise of more to come. He'd needed the intimacy of this kiss.

A loud rapping on the window startled them and she jumped, nearly dislodging herself from his lap. He grabbed her hips to keep her on top of him. Although whoever was out there couldn't possibly see Grace thanks to the combination of steamed-up windows and the angle in which he'd pulled the

truck, he still didn't want to expose any more of them than necessary.

“Take it inside.” Ben recognized their landlord's voice and raucous laugh. No doubt Grace did as well.

With an embarrassed groan, she reached for her jeans. Ben muttered a curse and leaned his head back against the seat. No matter how much he'd enjoyed, he couldn't deny a part of him welcomed the interruption.

Because when the alarm bells had gone off in his head, he had been too far gone to listen.



GRACE TURNED ON the shower. She glanced at the faucet and debated—hot water to stop the chill on her damp skin or cold water to douse the fire raging inside her? After five minutes of both, she realized neither would help. Cold water pelted her sensitized skin and chafed her still-puckered nipples until they ached for Ben's soothing touch. Hot water let steam invade the room, reminding her of the heat they'd created together inside Ben's steamy truck.

Her body was alive with sensation and there was nothing that could change it—except Ben. And he'd disappeared into his own apartment with the lame excuse that he had to take a shower. She wished they could have taken one together—it would have been a first for her. One she'd have liked to experience with Ben.

She stepped out and wrapped a towel around her, knowing she wasn't ready for that kind of step. For as much as she'd

gone looking for sexual awareness, she'd found so much more... too much more. Beyond discovering her capability to be brazen and wanton around a man, she'd learned much about Ben—and herself.

She craved caring and he knew how to provide it. But, Grace reminded herself, her time with Ben was limited. One month in duration, and by her own agreement, they were involved in nothing more than a casual, no-strings affair. It was too bad because Logan and Catherine would love his down-to-earth charm.

Whoa. She paused in wiping down her legs with the fluffy towel. She was getting way ahead of herself. Ben had no intention of sticking around or being a part of her life, and besides, what made her think she would even want him to? She shouldn't even be thinking about what-ifs.

The jarring ring of her cell saved her from any more analysis. She grabbed for the cell she'd left on the counter by the sink. "Hello?"

"Finally. Do you have any idea what it's like getting through to you?"

Grace smiled. "Hi, Gran. I'm sorry I haven't gotten back to you. I've been..." Preoccupied seducing a man. Her smile turned to a full-fledged grin. "Busy."

"Too busy to call your grandmother and let her know you're okay?"

"You're right, and I'm sorry."

Emma let out a loud exhale. “Well, that took the wind out of my sails.”

Grace chuckled. “I really miss you, Gran.”

“Then come visit.”

“I... will. Just give me some time to work out my schedule.” Like a couple of weeks, once Ben walked out of her life. Grace had a hunch she’d be needing her grandmother’s TLC more than ever then.

“That’s wonderful. You haven’t been willing to consider it since Logan’s wedding and that was over a year ago.”

She sat down on the edge of the closed toilet seat and sighed. “My life is changing. I can’t explain it to you now, but I’m feeling better about things. About me.”

“No reason why you shouldn’t. You’re the best. Now, tell me, why the change. New job?”

“That’s part of it.” Grace hadn’t filled Emma in on all the details in her post-trust fund life because she wanted to have things settled. Wanted to know she *could* get by on her own before coming home or sharing her new experiences.

“New guy?”

“Maybe.”

Her grandmother let out a long-suffering sigh. “Well, fine. Keep up the silent routine. Just make sure he treats you right on your birthday. And before you get all huffy on me, I’m not talking about expensive gifts. There’re plenty of things you

can do on a shoestring budget. Why, I hear those sex shops in the city are quite reasonable.”

“*Gran!*” Despite all she’d done today with Ben, a heated flush crept up her cheeks at her grandmother’s risqué comment.

Emma sniffed into the phone. “When did you and your brother turn into such prudes? I take it you haven’t used the bath soaps and candles I sent you for your birthday.”

Grace laughed, refusing to answer. Both she and Logan had grown used to their grandmother’s outrageousness years ago. It was Grace’s father, the judge, who never understood his mother and constantly threatened to put her in a home. But since neither Logan nor Grace would allow such a thing, he blustered but backed off. As long as Emma didn’t publicly create a scandal, Judge Montgomery was satisfied.

“So, how are Logan and Cat and the little princess?” Grace asked.

“Perfect, of course. And since you won’t come see them, they’re talking about coming to visit you. But now that you say you’re coming home...”

“Let’s take it one step at a time, Gran, okay? I’ve got to go now. I love you.”

“I love you, too. And whoever this guy is, don’t act all prim and proper around him. It isn’t a turn-on. Bye, dear.”

Grace rolled her eyes and hit the End Call button on the cell. She thought of herself earlier today in the back seat of Ben’s Explorer. Jeans beside her on the back seat, knees

spread across Ben's lap, his erection nudging at her sex, and the look of pure ecstasy on his face. A tremor of awareness traveled through her, settling in the empty place between her thighs, the place that longed to be filled—by Ben.

She hadn't been prim and proper this afternoon. Not at all. She'd been downright bad. And she wanted to be naughty again. Amazing that an eighty-something-year-old was giving Grace advice on her sex life.

And it was advice she was already following. If Grace didn't know better, she'd think her grandmother knew Ben.

Chapter Six

GRACE WAS TROUBLE, Ben thought. But not more trouble than she was worth, and that was the problem. He'd no sooner jumped out of the cold shower than the daytime doorman had called to inform him Grace was on her way down to the lobby. He hated having to resort to surveillance tactics, but she'd left him no choice.

So, he'd waited until she'd gotten into the elevator and then hightailed it down the stairs.

"She went that way." The doorman pointed left, a huge grin on his face.

"Glad you find this amusing," Ben muttered. He followed her out of the building, unable to tear his gaze from the sassy sway of her behind in tight, white denim. He waited around the corner while she went into Starbucks and watched as she disappeared into the subway entrance, coffee in hand, before he grabbed a cab and headed to the park.

He didn't relish a confrontation and planned to stay out of sight. That way, he figured he could keep an eye on her and anyone else doing the same. His sole consolation lay in the fact that she hadn't brought her camera and was a less-conspicuous target. But as she rounded the corner by the basketball courts, her blond hair gleamed in the sunshine and her regal form made her stand out in a crowd. Grace was a walking target just by virtue of who she was.

She entered the playground where a group of women sat on a park bench while their children played on the swings and with each other. There wasn't a free seat, but Grace didn't hesitate. She joined them on the ground beside a dark-haired woman without a thought or care to the white jeans she wore.

Ben didn't know why he was surprised. Grace was as down-to-earth as they came. Too much so for a woman raised in the Montgomery mansion he'd visited a few weeks earlier. But the woman he'd come to know was more at home sitting in the dirt than she was tiptoeing on freshly waxed floors. And she didn't seem to put off the women who'd accepted her into their circle.

Certain her back was to him, he made his way over to the fence and rested his hands on top until the cold bite of metal dug into his skin. She'd kicked her feet out in front of her and leaned back on her elbows, every inch of her relaxed and unwound.

In contrast, his body was still strung tight. He hadn't been kidding when he'd told her smart women turned him on. What he'd omitted was that it was *her* brains that did it to him. He'd never encountered such an erotic combination of innocence and seduction in one delectable package. Never had that kind of wide-eyed determination focused solely on him.

A child's shriek rent the air and snapped Ben out of his reverie. He jerked his gaze toward the swings and a set of monkey bars behind. A young kid hung upside down from his legs on one of the bars that were meant to be swung across. A young mother rose, but Grace jumped up and placed a hand on

her arm. The woman nodded and Grace ran over in her place, rescuing the upside-down child from all sorts of possible disasters. She set the kid down on his feet, but instead of running off to play, he jumped up and grabbed Grace around the neck, hugging her hard. Apparently, they weren't strangers, and she lifted him so his legs wrapped around her waist. She paused to ruffle his hair before bringing him back to his waiting mother.

An unexpected lump formed in Ben's throat. He fought it, he tried to swallow it, but the damn thing remained. He recalled similar incidents in his childhood—usually on Sundays, his mother's only day off. No matter how exhausted, she'd take him to a neighborhood park, pack a picnic lunch, and set him loose to play. She'd laugh, she'd watch, she'd mend his scrapes, and wipe the tears a macho boy didn't want to show.

Just as Grace was doing now. Now he knew for certain she had motherly instincts, even if she hadn't once mentioned the desire for family. Hell, she was running so hard from her own family he'd bet she was burying this desire, too. But it existed. Just, he now realized, as it existed for him.

So much of Ben's job was based on sight, perception, and instinct. And right now, his were screaming about the danger this woman posed. To his life, his sanity... his heart.

He'd seen many sides of her: the disheveled woman with bags of groceries, the partner who'd helped him wash his truck without complaint, and the princess in the marble-and-crystal palace. But the Grace Montgomery with a child hanging

around her neck was more of a threat to Ben than the seductive siren who'd sat nearly naked on his lap.

Feeling like an intruder in her life as well as his own, he turned away. But not before Grace looked toward him and her gaze seemed to zero in. He couldn't be certain she'd seen him.

But if she had, he'd know soon enough.



GRACE REREAD THE note in her hand. *Play it smart. Don't come back. Or else.* With shaking hands, she dumped the paper into the trash by her bed. Whoever was harassing her had stooped low enough to use a child to deliver his threats. Grace recalled the moment Kurt had given her the innocent-looking note—about the same time she'd caught sight of Ben.

And it was Ben she focused on now. The threats wouldn't go away any more than her need to take pictures, and she'd have to deal with both. Later.

Grace exited the building. She knew she wasn't playing fair. But then again, had Ben played fair when he'd followed her earlier? He thought she hadn't noticed when he'd exited the side entrance to the building, but she had.

She wasn't as angry as she ought to be considering he hadn't trusted her enough to go out on her own. He'd followed her because he was concerned, yet he'd given her the freedom to do as she pleased with the security of knowing he was a shout away should trouble find her.

But when the note had been delivered, Grace hadn't yelled for Ben. She'd kept it from him because he'd overreact. He'd

fight her need to return to the place she loved best, the place that helped her to find her place in the world.

She wasn't angry that Ben felt the need to follow her and she understood his reasons—but she did plan on teaching him a lesson. One he wouldn't soon forget.

After her fright at the park, she'd thrown her energies into preparing Ben's surprise for the evening. She cleaned up and took yet another shower, making certain to use the bath soaps and lotions Emma had sent her as part of her birthday present—the ones her grandmother claimed had so-called aphrodisiac powers, though how Emma knew about such things was something Grace had no desire to question further.

She put the finishing touches on her apartment, slipped into an outfit designed to send Ben over the edge, and headed out the door.



NOT AGAIN. BEN hadn't recovered from Grace's last jaunt outdoors when he got the call from the doorman downstairs she was off again. He'd be grateful for Monday when she returned to work and a regimented schedule. In the meantime, if she was out of here, so was he.

Varying his routine, he waited till she got on the elevator and then took the next one down himself. The doorman had promised to watch out for her, and when Ben got downstairs, he pointed in the direction she'd taken—downtown, as he'd feared.

Ben exited the double doors and glanced in the direction the doorman had gestured. Why the hell did she have to hit that part of the city in the evening? When she was more likely to find trouble... definitely, dressed like that.

He recognized her even from behind. *Especially* from behind. The blond hair pulled up with strands brushing her shoulders, the pale skin on her back, the long shapely legs and lithe body—all visible thanks to the slender tank-type two-piece top and short skirt she wore.

He sucked in an audible breath. He had no idea where she was headed, but she wasn't going alone. And she damn sure better not be meeting someone male.

He followed her into the subway, unable to stop staring. Unable to stop fantasizing about those long legs and how they'd feel wrapped around him again, only this time there'd be no barriers between them. No scrap of silk acting as a shield between her wet heat and the arousal she inspired. Dressed the way she was, he couldn't imagine her ultimate destination, other than a date. Ben cursed and swore to himself. Date or not, no other man would come between them.

He broke into a heated sweat that had nothing to do with the hot and humid subway car they entered. He watched from behind a crowd as Grace twirled a blond strand around one finger, wishing she'd tangle those hands in his hair. He grew impossibly hotter as he mentally removed himself from the subway and placed himself back into the Explorer. His breathing became shallow as he remembered their mingled

breaths steaming up the windows and heating the recycled air in the back of the truck.

The squeal of the brakes as they came to a halt jolted Ben back into reality in time for him to rise and follow Grace's exit from the subway car. She walked up the stairs and into the street, but to his surprise, instead of turning toward the park, she rounded the corner and headed back into the subway station that would return her to the Murray Hill neighborhood where she lived.

And in the instant she settled herself into a seat and turned back to wave at him in between the crowds of people, Ben knew. He'd been had.

He waved back. What else could he do?

She smiled, her glossy red lips turned upward in an amused grin. He wanted to kiss those lips and taste the sweet recesses of her mouth, but since she was toying with him, he doubted he'd be doing any of those things any time soon. And though he should be grateful, he'd already accepted sex with Grace was inevitable. It was his guilt and inner torment he hadn't come to terms with.

But when she sidled up to him, so close he could inhale her fragrant scent over the other less-appealing smells in the musty car, he couldn't focus on anything but her.

Like any other passenger, she grabbed the hanging strap next to his. But she wasn't any other woman. She was the one who had him tied in knots. The one who had lured him into her trap and enticed him to succumb to wiles he'd guess she was just discovering she possessed.

“I take it you aren’t going anywhere special?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“Just taking a ride for the hell of it then?”

When she remained silent, he glanced down, then up again, from her high heels and long legs to the short hem on her enticing nude-colored outfit. His hands itched to lift the bottom a notch and see if her undergarments looked as sultry and sexy as the lady herself. “No hot date?”

“Now, that depends.” She twirled a stray tendril around her finger. He’d bet the gesture was a deliberate attempt to be provocative.

It worked. Grace was doing a damn good job of working him up and keeping him captivated. No doubt about it, everything about her turned him on. “Depends on what?”

“You’re pretty hot when you’re not following me around like I’m a kid who can’t be trusted to go out on my own.”

He knew better than to get into the debate about why he’d tailed her. Instead, he addressed the more important issue at hand. “So, you think I’m hot?”

She tipped her head to the side. “I’m not sure I like that cocky smile.”

“Oh, I think you do.”

Her arousing laugh echoed inside the crowded car. “You’re all male, I’ll give you that.”

The subway jarred to a halt and a majority of the passengers disembarked at the stop, leaving them alone in the

nearly empty car. “Want to sit?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you. I’d rather stay here. This close to you.” Her hip brushed against him as the subway jerked forward once more.

His palms grew damp, making it difficult to hang on to the strap.

“Now, where were we?” She pursed those red lips in thought. “Oh, yes. You. Being all male.” The pucker turned into a grin. “From these strong eyebrows to those pouty lips, you’re one extremely *sexy* man.” She drew a line down the side of his face, then traced his lips with a newly polished red fingernail. Her finger lingered on his mouth for another few seconds before she rested her hand against her hip. Just looking at how the red on her nails matched the red on her lips caused a quickening in his gut.

He knew he’d have noticed if she’d worn that flaming red shade before. The color was sexy enough to bring a man to his knees. He glanced up, but he couldn’t tear his gaze from her smoky one.

Nor could he stop the pull running from his tingling lips to his hard arousal. “This is *payback* for following you, isn’t it?” His voice was rough with wanting.

“Now, that would be *petty*.”

An evasive answer at best, he thought. And since the trip was obviously planned, he couldn’t help but wonder what else she had in store. Add to that she still hadn’t answered his question. “Are you hinting that *I* might be your date?”

A smoldering heat darkened her eyes as she leaned closer. “It’s a possibility—if you’ll agree not to treat me like a child.”

His gaze slipped downward to her cleavage, visible from his slightly taller vantage point. Her rounded flesh swelled over cream-colored lace, making him drool. “You’re anything but a child, Gracie.”

“Nice of you to notice.”

“You know, I had no choice but to provide backup for you, just in case.”

She averted her stare for an instant before touching his cheek with her hand. “Yes, I know. You’re a good man, Ben. You’re concerned about me and I appreciate that. But I want you to treat me like a woman. And that means I just might have to remind you how much of a one I can be.”

He glanced around. The only few passengers left were seated, involved in conversation or reading the paper. He and Grace might as well have been alone.

“Trust me, Grace, I have no doubt just how much woman you are.” Adrenaline rushed through him and his heart beat too fast in his chest.

“The question is can you handle me?”

“Oh, I think I’m up to the challenge.” Since she was taking full advantage, how could he not do the same? “Feel what you do to me.” He brushed up against her, making sure the rigidity of his cock pressed hard and insistent against her leg.

She sucked in a startled breath.

Turning the tables on her felt too good. He was enjoying this too much. But, at the moment, he didn't give a damn. And, he reminded himself without listing the reasons again, he'd already made up his mind to go with her lead—and his desire.

He knew all too well where they were headed. And so did she, unless her shocked silence indicated she'd changed her mind.



GRACE SWALLOWED HARD. Heat seared her thigh where his erection thrust against her leg, reminding her of exactly what she'd put into motion. The ultimate seduction, she thought.

“It's not too late to change your mind.” His husky voice reverberated in her ear. “I'll be disappointed, but I'd understand. My mother raised a gentleman.”

“She did, huh?”

“Not that you'd know it by looking at me, but yes, she did.”

She tilted her head. “Well, tell her she did a fine job.”

“I will. She'll appreciate it, too. She doesn't get much outside information anymore.”

Honest information willingly given for the first time. Grace was grateful. “You make it sound like she lives in prison.”

“They call it an independent living facility, but her eyesight's going, so the independent part no longer fits. She

doesn't get out much anymore."

Grace heard the love and affection in his tone for the woman who'd raised him. Yet another thing to like and admire about this man. "But I'll bet she's got you."

"Every Sunday afternoon and whenever else I can drop by."

Her heart opened toward him even more. First, the kids downtown and now, his mother. "You're special," she murmured.

It touched her deeply to know he had yet another soft spot. This man, the one she'd picked to help discover and release her inner self, was so much more than just a sexy neighbor.

"You're pretty special yourself."

"What makes you say that?"

"For one thing, you've polished your investigating skills in a short time."

She laughed, knowing she'd been caught prying into his life and not caring a bit. "What else?" She'd already decided she was shameless when it came to Ben. Why not push for more compliments? She could use them to bolster her courage.

"You're an incredible woman." He squeezed her hand tight in his.

That simple gesture, along with his support, admiration, and respect, solidified her feelings for him. Ben was exactly what she saw, no more, no less. But most importantly, and the one thing that made him the perfect man at this point in her

life, was that he respected Grace Montgomery, apart from her family money or family name. Ben Callahan was an honest man, one world apart from the Montgomery influence.

Without warning, the subway came to a jarring halt. She lost her balance and fell against his hard male body. His arms grabbed her around the waist. Enveloped in his warmth, surrounded by his scent, Grace wondered who was the seducer and who was the one being seduced.

“I think that’s our cue.”

She straightened and smoothed her outfit at the waist. “I think you’re right.” The doors opened and she preceded him out of the subway. Hands shaking, heart hammering, she waited for him to meet her on the platform.

With his razor stubble, his worn jeans, and ripped sweatshirt, he was her rebel. The antithesis of everyone and everything she’d turned her back on, Ben epitomized all she’d wanted to be and never had the courage to reach out for—until now.

She licked her lips, tasting gloss and wishing she tasted him. She looked into his eyes, seeing a man she desired and a man she respected. Despite her promise of no strings, she wasn’t a casual sex type of person, and she wouldn’t have chosen Ben if all he could give was a glimpse into her passionate side. He had depth and offered her so much more.

“Ready when you are,” she said.

“You already welcomed me to the building.” He reached out and touched her cheek. “Anything else is icing on the

cake.”

She inhaled an unsteady breath. “So, I guess the question is are you ready to welcome me to your bed?” Who was this shameless woman who had brazenly propositioned Ben Callahan? Grace didn’t recognize her.

But she liked her—a lot.

And she had Ben to thank for bringing out this wanton side of her. For introducing her to Grace Montgomery, the woman. And she knew exactly how to repay him.

Chapter Seven

THE TRAIN PULLED out behind them. Standing on the platform, Ben took her hand. Her palms were damp, one of the few signs she was nervous about this seduction. The desire between them was mutual, but he could tell by her question she wasn't as secure as she'd have him believe.

The only way to convince her was to show her. Without hesitation, he swept her into his arms and off her feet.

“What do you think you're doing?” The note of outrage in her voice was rendered ineffective by the upturned corners of her mouth.

He couldn't draw his gaze from those wet lips. “I'm answering your question. Hell, yes, I want you in my bed,” he said and lowered his lips to hers.

Her touch was warm and welcoming at first and immediately turned hot and devouring. The gloss let her coated lips slide over his in an erotic caress the likes of which he'd never felt before. As he stroked the heated recesses of her mouth with his tongue, she massaged his lips with hers. Every stroke sent blazing darts of fire to his cock.

But they were in a public place where he was sure they were creating a free show. With an agonized groan, one echoed silently by each part of his body, he somehow managed to lift his head and rest his forehead against hers.

“Not bad.” She sounded out of breath and extremely pleased.

“Yeah, well, I did my best.”

Her eyes met his and those sweet lips turned upward into a grin. “I’ll be damned. It works.” She traced his mouth with her fingertip, sending his already-overheated body into a frenzy of need.

“What’s that?”

“I bought this lipstick just for you. The slogan read, ‘Color stays on your lips, not his.’” The pad of her finger lingered on the center of his bottom lip, teasing him with a featherlight touch.

He couldn’t resist and grazed her skin with his teeth. He tasted warm, salty flesh—tasted Grace—and groaned.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” she murmured.

“No kidding.” He started for the exit of the subway, ignoring the curious onlookers and the occasional snickers. He knew he’d taken the caveman thing too far, but this woman drove him to utter distraction.

“I can walk.”

“I’m sure you can.” He continued through the turnstile and up the short flight of stairs.

“But you have no intention of allowing it?”

He answered with a short grunt and kept walking.

Considering that sexy outfit she wore and the stares given her by other men, she should be glad he hadn’t banged her over the head and dragged her home by her hair the way his primitive ancestors would have. No doubt she’d intended to

rouse his more savage instincts with this plan, and she'd succeeded. Now, she could live with the consequences. They were only a short block from the building. The faster he got her home, the better off they'd both be.

She threaded her fingers through his hair. "You know, if you insist on keeping this up, I might as well enjoy it."

He recognized the playful threat in her words. "Go ahead. Your enjoyment is exactly what I have in mind."

She nestled her face between his chin and shoulder. The fragrant scent of her hair assaulted his senses. The soft feel of her skin and her warm breath against his neck gave him a preview of what was to come when he got her alone. Cool sheets, warm bodies, the sensual glide of damp skin—his over hers, hers over his.

He swept her through the open door to the lobby of the building and past the chuckling doorman.

"I'm not sure I'll ever live that down," she said.

He laughed. "And I'm certain it'll do wonders for my reputation."

She shook her head. "You're going to have to pay for that."

"Promises, promises." He hit the button on the elevator. Thankfully, it opened without delay. He stepped inside and the doors glided to a close behind them.

No sooner had he pressed the button for their floor than she nuzzled close to his cheek again, only this time, she bit down on his earlobe, sending shock waves through his system.

His heart pounded hard in his chest, a fast and furious beat of arousal and anticipation.

By the time they got to the hall outside the apartments, he could barely stand the wait.

“My place work for you?” she asked, her voice as breathless as he felt.

“Since mine’s not really mine, yours is fine.” He’d much rather be in a place that smelled and felt like Grace than one as unfamiliar as his temporary residence. Besides, he didn’t need the reminder of his deception marring his time with this special woman.

He put the issue out of his mind. “Keys?” he asked.

She bit down on her lower lip. “It’s unlocked.”

He opened his mouth to yell but she beat him to it. “Don’t go and lecture me, Ben. I had no place to hide keys on me. Besides, you’ve been watching my every move. You’ve probably even got the security cameras trained on my door.”

Another subject he’d avoid. There were too damn many. “Just don’t do it again,” he muttered and grabbed for the doorknob.

“Wait.”

He met her gaze. Her eyes were opened wide and brimming with an emotion he couldn’t name.

“Second thoughts?” Because he’d respect them in an instant, difficult as it would be. In the end, she might be doing herself a favor if she backed out now.

She shook her head. “It’s just that I obviously planned this, but it’s not an everyday thing for me. And I just wanted to make sure... I mean, I know this is going to sound silly, but... will you respect me in the morning?” Her cheeks flushed a bright shade of pink.

“I’ll more than respect you, Gracie.” That was his biggest fear—how deeply she drew him in.

He twisted open the doorknob and let them inside, walking into the short entryway with her still in his arms. The flickering candles took Ben by surprise. The small votives had been strategically placed around a room ideal for seduction. A stimulating scent he couldn’t name but one that aroused his senses surrounded him. He now knew what she meant when she said she’d planned this, and he was touched by the effort and thought she’d put into their first time together.

“Incredible,” he whispered in her ear. He lowered her to the floor, letting her body slide against his, letting her feel how much he wanted her.

“Yes, you are.”

He chuckled, but his laughter ceased as she molded herself to him. Her legs aligned with his and her sex settled against the hard bulge in his jeans. With her bracketed in his arms, flush against him, all thoughts fled, replaced by a sizzling heat and a pounding of desire.

“You went to a lot of trouble for us, Gracie.” He let his hands sweep into her hair, freeing the strands from confinement and luxuriating in their silken feel.

She smiled. “I’m glad you noticed. I had the doorman come in and light them while we were gone. See why I didn’t need keys?”

Grace stepped back and grabbed his hand. Only the knowledge that they wouldn’t be apart for long allowed him to separate their bodies, to remove himself from the heated cocoon of desire, long enough to follow her into the atmosphere she’d created.

The glow from the candles created a warmth and intimacy he’d never before experienced. With the pleated shades drawn closed but left open on top, the oncoming of dusk filtered through the window. The dimly lit candles provided the only other light in the room. He inhaled and caught that intoxicating scent again, one he’d never forget.

She walked over to the table where she’d set up an array of sensual treats from which they could choose. With one hand, she swept the expanse of the delight-filled table—a vase of freshly bought roses and a selection of jars, creams, and oils.

“Welcome to my simply sensual seduction,” she said and motioned for him to come near.

She’d been seducing him from the moment they met, yet Ben felt as if he’d been awaiting this moment for much longer. A lifetime.

He came up beside her and wasted no time in cradling her cheeks in his hands and stealing a deep, meaningful kiss, one certain to seal their fate for the night ahead. Her mouth was sweet, so warm and welcoming, Ben nearly lost it right then.

He broke the kiss long enough to free the zipper running down the back of her top. He spread the material with his hands and the fabric fell away, sliding down her arms with little effort and pooling on the floor at their feet.

Taking in the view beneath, he drew in a sharp breath. Nude-colored lingerie covered her full breasts, easing them upward so rounded swells of pale skin provided a tantalizing view. And if that sight weren't enough to bring him to his knees, the material was sheer, nearly translucent, with a hint of shimmer to dazzle him in the candlelight. Darkened nipples, visible through the flimsy material, puckered and hardened beneath his hungry gaze. He traced their dusky outline with the pad of one finger, savoring their texture against his hand.

He met her gaze, watching as her pupils dilated with each rotation of his hand and every pinch of his fingers on her hardened flesh. He took it slow, holding himself in check, wanting to savor what they shared—not just the physical but the emotional, too. Because the play of expressions on her face—the ecstasy at his touch and the flush of desire—affected him on a level no woman had ever reached before.

He reached out with his hand and pressed it against her soft breast. His fingers curled, wrapping around her and testing her weight and fullness in his hand. “Like that?” he asked.

“Yes.” She let out a slow breath coupled with a ragged moan. “And I like this, too.” Her hand slid downward until her palm rested over his erection.

His hips jerked forward, seeking more of her firm touch. The sensual array of objects she'd left for them beckoned to

him, but no way could he hold out long enough to make use of them. Not the first time. He'd been waiting for her too long as it was.

A wicked grin touched her lips as she pulled his T-shirt out of the waistband of his jeans. He knew how much she was enjoying, but it was costing him. He'd already broken into a sweat.

Her fingertips grazed his stomach, then his shoulders as she made fast work of removing his shirt and sending it flying across the room. She dipped her head and placed strategic kisses on his chest. Wet kisses with those red lips. Flickering motions of her agile tongue across his hair-roughened skin, across his nipples. The fiery sensation began where she touched, where she licked, where she nipped with her teeth... and traveled a heated path straight to his groin.

He'd had enough of the playful torment. He edged his fingers beneath the straps of her bra, moving his fingers in a slow downward arc, taking the elastic with him until her arms were bracketed by the thin straps. Then he reached for the front clasp and released the hook, freeing her breasts for his view, his touch, his mouth. He bent his head and pulled one of her nipples between his lips, lapping her skin with his tongue, and tugging none too gently with his teeth, until she writhed with the force of her desire.

His body bucked in kind, but he wanted her so primed and ready that when the joining came, she'd feel as if they were made to be together. And apparently, she enjoyed his ministrations because she grasped his head in her hands,

holding him to her breast in a blatant plea for more. He grazed more insistently with the edge of his teeth and her legs buckled beneath her.

“Easy,” he murmured, stopping her fall by sweeping her into his arms once more.

“This is becoming a habit of yours.” Her eyes were a deep, dark brown, shaded with desire.

“Can’t say I mind. Where to?”

She wrapped her hands around his neck and cuddled close. Her bare and sensitive breasts rasped against his naked chest, and the abrading sensation aroused him even more. “Protection’s on the table. We could go to the bedroom—if you make it that far. Personally, I don’t want to wait.”

He let out a low growl. “You finally did it, Gracie.” He took her from being cradled in his arms to lying flat on her back on the carpeted floor in mere seconds. He hovered over her, his arms on either side of her shoulders, his body levered over hers, feeling predatory and more like his caveman ancestors with each passing second. “You snapped that control I’ve been hanging on to.”

She exhaled a sigh of relief and grinned. “Well, it’s about time.” She reached out and popped the snap on his jeans and began to tug and twist them downward, impatience showing in her jerky motions. With little difficulty, he yanked them over his hips, boxer briefs along with them, and tossed the garments beside her top.

Grace shook with anticipation. She'd felt the pressure of his body against hers before but always behind a barrier of clothing or in cramped quarters in the back seat of his car. Never had she seen him fully erect and aroused as he was now. Her heart began a steady pounding, knowing he wanted her as badly and as desperately as she wanted him. And she did. Never before had she felt such elemental lust for a man.

He reached for the condom on the table and left them beside her on the carpet. Then he knelt on the floor. His heady scent filled her nostrils, and when he met her gaze with his steely one, a rush of liquid pooled between her legs. Without breaking eye contact, he grasped her hips and pulled on the skirt, taking the material down to her knees and then lower until she was able to kick it off with one foot.

Ben glanced down. Grace held her breath as he took in her nude, sheer, string-bikini panties. His eyes glazed over. "If I'd known about these, you'd never have made it off the subway." He eased one finger between her skin and the barely-there thread of material holding front and back triangles together, while his other hand covered her sex.

Hot and heavy, his palm eased up then down, gently at first, until the cresting wave hit her without warning and his touch became a harder, more insistent branding of his flesh against hers. Her hips rode upward, searching for more of the exquisite pressure, and she let out a shuddering moan of frustration and need.

Ben caught on quick, bearing down with his hand. The rippling of contractions started at her clit and circled outward,

encompassing her entire body in white-hot spiraling heat. She thrust upward, gyrating against his giving hand. She heard the whimpers, knew they were coming from her throat, and didn't care. Not so long as the amazing waves continued.

Just as the crest began to ease off, just as a hint of awareness began to return, he picked up a circling motion with his palm, a demanding rotation that started the surge of ecstasy all over again.

She didn't think she could take it, not again, not alone, coming alive beneath his touch but without him deep inside her body. He didn't give her a choice, just continued to take her on a ride she'd never experienced before. His hand worked magic while his fingers cupped her more intimately, pushing against the silken, wet barrier of the bikinis she wore. Her climax was just as hard, just as fast, just as long the second time, the sheer force and passion involved taking her by surprise.

Her mind slowly began to clear. His gaze remained steady on hers. A taut but pleased expression settled on his face while his hand remained between her thighs.

“You're so wet, so responsive.” His hoarse voice registered in her still-sensually fogged brain.

“All for you,” she murmured, barely able to speak. But she was finally able to think, and she focused on this man who had given her such intense, singular pleasure. A lump rose in her throat along with an emotion she refused to dissect or name.

His fingers curled deeper, pressed harder against her panties. Pleasure, more sensitized this time, rose fast.

“Again?” Grace hadn’t known it was possible.

“Together this time.” She hardly recognized his raspy, desire-laden voice, and a ripple of anticipation traveled through her.

He slid out of her reach and straddled her thighs, leaning forward to press a kiss against the triangle of material still covering her.

His breath was warm, his lips hot, and fire licked at her once more. “Ben.” His name burst from her lips, an expression of her desire for them to make love.

He understood that she wanted to be filled by him because he yanked on the thin strap of material, ripping the sides and freeing her sex. She was hot and she was damp. The cooler air in the apartment touched her already-swollen, needy skin, and she trembled.

Grasping her thighs in his hands, he exhaled hard, his breathing coming in shallow gasps. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

“Show me.”

He reached for the condom, tearing at the foil with his teeth and making fast work of protecting them both. A shudder consumed her at the sight, and seconds later, his hands were back on her thighs, inching higher. With exact precision, his thumbs moved upward, gliding over her slick folds. And then he nudged his erection inside, solid and strong as he came into her with a single, powerful thrust.

As he filled her body, Grace felt every hot inch, each rigid upward motion. And as he leaned down for a warm, tender kiss, one filled with the mixture of his unique taste and her feminine scent, an unexpected emotion swamped her.

She realized... he had also filled her heart.



A POWERFUL WAVE of desire rushed through Ben's veins. He closed her hands inside his and raised her arms above her head. The action brought their bodies into more intimate contact, sealing their damp skin together, forcing him deeper inside her. Cocooned in her warmth, Ben wasn't certain where he left off and she began.

He gritted his teeth, knowing he was mere seconds away from release. She trembled beneath him, her entire body in a slickened, fevered state identical to his own. Needing the leverage, he released her hands, but before he could move, she reached for his shoulders and pushed against him.

"Sit," she whispered, her breath hot against his ear.

Curious, he met her gaze. Somehow, he stayed inside her as they juggled into the position she'd commanded. Her legs straddled his waist while he sat with her on his lap. Their bodies meshed, his penetration deep, their top halves aligned. Her lush breasts crushed against his chest and her nipples pressed into his skin. The result was the most consuming intimacy he'd ever experienced with a woman, one he'd never forget.

Her wide-eyed gaze met his, telling him she, too, felt the awe-inspiring sense of completeness. “I guess those articles don’t lie.”

“You’re bad, Gracie.” He brushed her long strands of hair off her face. A flush of desire along with embarrassment stained her cheeks. He gazed directly into her eyes. Another unique result of their position was the ability to wholly focus on her delicate features. “Have you been reading up on this?”

“Would you believe I discovered the article by accident?” She licked at her lips.

“Not a chance, sweetheart.” He leaned forward for a taste of the dampness she’d created, drawing her lower lip between his teeth and nibbling before letting go. “I’d rather believe you were getting ready for me.”

She wrapped his arms around her waist and that threatening wave rose once more. His body shook with the effort of restraint, but he didn’t miss the dilation of her pupils or the tremors beginning to engulf her body. She was beyond ready and so was he.

He enclosed his legs around her ass, pressing his hips against hers. Arching her back, she met his movements as they began a pulsing, grinding reach for completion. He reached out and cupped her breasts, flattening her nipples against his palms and squeezing her plump flesh with his hands.

Without warning, she threw her head back and moaned, bucking her lower body against his. His cock slid out a fraction, then back in, deeper, harder than before. Her undulating, frenzied motions drove him mad, and he lost

control, ceded command of their lovemaking to the wild bucking of her hips and the grinding of her slick body against his own.

He wanted to watch her when she came, wanted to see her face as he exploded inside her, but she caught him off guard. Her climax hit without warning, engulfing her entire body in a quaking release that started inside her but traveled to him until he was absorbed by the power of his orgasm and consumed by the shuddering vibrations racking her body.

When it was over, he found himself staring into her brown eyes, darkened by need and rounded by wonder. “That was... unbelievable,” she said.

And a hell of a lot more, Ben thought. He ought to know. She’d picked the position and it had been incredible, but it didn’t allow for retreat. He hadn’t counted on the tenderness he’d feel afterward, and now, still enclosed inside her, her face mere inches away, he was experiencing a whole host of emotions he was afraid to look at too deeply, afraid of identifying.

“Glad you enjoyed it.” He forced a lightness to his voice he didn’t feel, but even he heard the strain.

Time to go. He started to push himself backward, but her legs tightened around his waist and the squeezing sensation sent tremors of awareness shooting to his dick, starting the pangs of arousal all over again.

“You don’t have to run anywhere. Physically or emotionally, you don’t need to withdraw from me.” Understanding softened her features and she cradled his face

between her palms. “I’m not going to ask or force you into anything other than what we have here. Now. And if I do say so myself, it was pretty damned good.” She wiggled her hips provocatively against his.

He let out a groan. “It was great.” They were great.

And though he ought to be relieved at her cavalier acceptance of how little he wanted from her, how little he was willing to offer, he wasn’t—not by a long shot. And a ridiculous pang of regret twisted at his gut.

“Yes, it was great.” She leaned closer and her breasts brushed his chest. “And you have nothing to worry about. Frankly, I can’t see my daddy running after you with a shotgun, so why not just relax and enjoy the rest of the night?”

He laughed. A brittle sound because her words cemented what he’d always known. He wasn’t worthy of Grace Montgomery and her privileged, elitist background. No father of hers would chase after him, demanding he marry his daughter.

They were different people from divergent, clashing backgrounds—not to mention that he’d entered her life under false pretenses. He couldn’t undo his lies any more than she’d forgive him if she knew.

He shook his head. All this damn thinking wasn’t like him. And it had to stop. He’d take what he could in the short time they had and walk away. No more analyzing, no more regret.

“Ben?”

He grasped her around the waist, holding her slender hips in his hands and sliding his palms around to her flat belly. She sighed and his fingers dipped lower until they rested atop the coarser hair and secrets lying beneath. “Enjoying now sounds good to me, Gracie.”

“I knew you could be persuaded.” She brushed her mouth over his cheek.

He tilted his head toward her table of jars and bath gels. “How about a shower and some more fun?”

“Sounds good. Wickedly good.” Her lips lifted upward.

If the smile didn’t quite reach her eyes, he refused to acknowledge it. If there were shadows in the brown depths, he refused to look deeper or ask why.

Now, he reminded himself. It was all they had.

Chapter Eight

STEAM, MIXED WITH the arousing scent of jasmine, filled the enclosed space in the bathroom. Grace didn't need any additional aphrodisiac other than Ben to turn her on, but the seductive aroma and the liquid bath gel would heighten what had already been an extraordinary experience.

She wished it didn't have to end. But when the earth-shattering climax had subsided, she'd opened her eyes, taken one look at the panic in Ben's face, and known there was no future. Not for them. And though she didn't know exactly why he feared intimacy and commitment, she was perceptive enough to take note of his anxiety and realize if she didn't reassure him and accept *now*, she'd lose whatever time he was still willing to share.

Her lighthearted rhetoric letting him off the hook had been the most difficult words of her life. But they'd accomplished her goal; Ben was still by her side.

She planned on using her pathetic detective skills to uncover the source of his commitment phobia, but not quite yet. She had other treats in store first.

"All ready." She walked to the partially open door and called out. Ben had offered to blow out the candles to prevent a fire hazard. Suspecting he needed a moment to regroup, she'd agreed.

By the time he joined her in the bathroom, she was standing beneath the pulsating spray, welcoming the hot water

sluicing over her sensitized skin. Her shower curtain was see-through with silver stars but they didn't obscure her vision. He entered looking more relaxed than he had minutes earlier. Of course, she planned to allay his concerns and soothe his tension even more.

His body was incredible to gaze upon, but she wanted to do much more than look. The play of muscle as he moved and the sexy air that was so much a part of him beckoned to her. And her fingers itched to work themselves up his hard calves, the muscular thighs, and bury themselves in the tangle of hair surrounding his erection, which seemed to grow on command beneath her heated stare. She would have swallowed but her mouth had grown dry.

Determined to keep things light and playful, she crooked a finger his way. "Water's just right. Come on in."

He swung back the shower curtain and stepped over the tub, coming up beside her. In his eyes, she saw passion and fire, a burning in his gaze that had indeed been shadowed by the curtain between them.

He reached out and spanned her waist with his full hands. He might not want possession or ownership, he might not even desire a relationship, but she felt his touch branding her as his own with an imprint that went deeper than her skin. One that couldn't be washed away by the droplets of water pelting her flesh, and one that would last infinitely longer than he'd stay in her life.

"No matter how many times I tell myself to keep my hands off you, I can't do it." His desire-laden voice cut through to

her heart.

No time like the present, Grace thought. “Tell me again why you think you should keep your distance.”

He laughed. “I don’t remember telling you the first time.”

She couldn’t contain a smile at his ability to catch her each time she attempted to put one over on him. “Then tell me now.”

“I can think of better things to do than talk.”

She couldn’t. She wanted answers and she wanted them now... until he dipped his head and began to lick at the droplets trickling down her neck and shoulders with long, delicious laps of his tongue. She shuddered at the unexpected assault, trembled as he worked his way lower, tasting the water on her chest, following the curve of her breast downward until his tongue lapped relentlessly at her rigid, sensitive nipple.

She felt the sensation of his touch on her breast, her throat and it spread to the spot between her legs, becoming a violent onslaught against all of her senses at one time. His hands cupped her waist tighter as if he knew she couldn’t remain standing without his help. But then she realized he had an ulterior motive because he replaced his tongue with his teeth, grazing at her nipple, pulling the rigid peak into his mouth, and suckling so hard her knees buckled.

He turned her around and sat her back against the tub so she was facing the pelting water that now reflected off his back. He knelt down along with her, nudging her knees apart and settling himself between her legs.

He cupped her tender breast in his hand and held her gently, almost reverently. “Are you always so responsive?”

Grace leaned her head back against the wall. She’d been with men, thought during those few times she’d been making love. She’d been wrong. She’d had sex.

She and Ben had made love.

Even now, with just foreplay, she was closer to him than she’d ever been to another man. He took her to sexual highs and encouraged her to explore her sensuality all without directly asking anything from her. Her responsiveness now was in direct correlation to the feelings and emotions tied up with this man.

She met his patient gaze. “Are you looking for an honest answer?”

That seemed to take him by surprise. “I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.”

She forced a smile at the disparity between what he was asking and what he was willing to give. “I get it. I answer honestly, you avoid answering. Not a fair deal, if you ask me.”

He shook his head and water flung from the longer strands. “You’re a smart cookie. Okay, tell you what. You answer honestly now, and I’ll answer your other question later.”

She bit down on her lower lip and pondered his offer, knowing he was buying time and would probably find another excuse to stall later.

His hand plumped her breast, careful to avoid directly stimulating her again, but definitely teasing her all the same.

“I need an answer. Before the water turns cold and forces us out.” He punctuated his statement with a revolving motion of his thumb around her distended nipple.

She stifled a gasp, sucked in the combination of pleasure and sensitized pain, and made her decision. “You win. I’ll answer.” Was she always this responsive? “No, Ben. Never before. No one’s ever taken this kind of time or care.”

He brushed a damp strand of hair out of her face. “Well, they damn well should have.”

She grinned at his ferocious, protective tone. “You’re the first man to separate Grace, the woman, from the Montgomery name and money. The first man unrelated to that part of my life who brings out the best in m—” She didn’t get a chance to finish. He leaned forward and sealed his lips over hers, cutting off her answer.

Probably because he feared the implications, and as Grace felt the rapid beating of her heart, she knew he was right to avoid hearing the rest.

His kiss was brief but sweet, and she tasted his unique flavor. The beating in her heart became a throbbing of desire between her thighs. As if he sensed her need and understood, he stood, swung one leg around her back, and lowered himself to a sitting position behind her. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her against his chest and into the V of his legs until his cock pushed hard and erect against the small of her back. Water pelted from the showerhead directly in front of her, hitting by her knees, and keeping them warm.

“Comfortable?” he whispered in her ear.

She nodded. “And curious.” A drumming of anticipation thundered in her veins, and his laugh reverberated through her.

“I like your lack of inhibitions.”

“Must have something to do with you because I’d never imagined myself doing anything like... *this*.” Without warning, his hands encircled her thighs and spread them wide. She sucked in a breath. “What are you doing?”

“Trust me, Gracie. Now take a deep breath and let it out. Relax.”

Remembering that she’d asked him to trust her earlier, Grace did as he asked, inhaling and exhaling, feeling her body release its hold and let go of its fear. Her muscles slackened against him until she felt his heart beat against her back. A warm and welcoming feeling of security stole over her. *Trust me*, he’d asked. And she did. Much more than she should.

“Better?”

She nodded.

“Okay, ready?”

She leaned her head back against his chest. “For what?”

“Keep leaning against me, sweetheart.” He nudged her forward, slowly but insistently, until the warm spray of the shower moved up her legs, from her knees to her thighs and higher. Until the pelting water hit her most sensitive juncture, sluicing over her sex and pummeling at her swollen, folds of flesh and teasing her clit.

Shock at the intimate assault came first and she instinctively attempted to close her legs, but his firm grip stopped her. “Breathe deep,” his rough, seducing voice murmured again in her ear. “Relax. Enjoy.”

With each word, he eased his hold on her thighs and moved his hands inward. A man with an obvious mission, his fingers inched towards *there*, closer, faster, hotter, deeper... Without warning, he parted her flesh and eased one long finger inside. Her hips bucked, drawing him further into her. The roughness of his skin mixed with the water and her own juices, making for an easy glide in, a slickened slide out. In. Out. Her body echoed the rhythm, picking up a motion of its own that created a surge of need so strong she had to twist and pull her legs upward to get him deep enough, hard enough inside her.

“Not alone.” Grace heard the plea in a voice she barely recognized as her own.

“Condoms are in the living room, and I’m not about to stop you now.” He kept up the unbearable friction with his finger while parting her gently with his other hand. Water crashed down on parts she’d never exposed before and the building waves were so incredible, so fast, she could barely keep her sanity. Her body clenched and unclenched around his hand, and climax beckoned, almost there and yet so out of reach.

“Close your eyes.”

Had they been open? He couldn’t know and neither did she. “Now feel.” He pushed deep inside her, hotter, more

demanding. “It’s me inside you, Gracie. Just me, no condom, nothing to come between us.”

She heard the fantasy, she *felt* the fantasy. The final wave rushed her without warning, and she screamed, heard her cries as her body wrung tight around his, clenching, grinding, undulating in never-ending waves of completion.

Only then did she realize she’d been the recipient of his fantasy, but she had yet to indulge in her own.

But the night wasn’t over yet.



BEN WRAPPED HER in a towel and carried her limp, sated body to the bed. She curled close to his chest and rested her head on his shoulder with a satisfied moan.

Had he really thought that by not facing her when she came he wouldn’t be affected? Had he really believed that if he didn’t come inside her he’d remain detached? Hell, had he been stupid enough to buy into the belief that he wasn’t falling hard for this woman he was deceiving?

He laid her onto her comforter and propped her up against the pillows, then turned away.

“Where are you going?” Panic tinged her voice, causing guilt and regret to swamp him once more.

“To get myself a towel. I’m dripping all over your floor.” Without waiting for her reply, he headed for the steam-filled bathroom, the site of his latest sin, and yanked a towel off a hook behind the door. He dried himself off and grabbed his boxer briefs from the floor in the living room, pulling them on

in the futile hope the barrier would provide him with some needed restraint.

When he returned, she was waiting for him just as he'd left her. She gazed at him through heavy-lidded eyes. "Sorry. I didn't mean to panic on you. Can I ask you for something? I know I said I wouldn't, but this... it would mean a lot to me."

"Anything." He spoke without thinking but wouldn't retract that one word. Instead, he lowered himself beside her. The fragrant scent of soap and shampoo lingered in the air, reminding him of their shower and how she'd come apart in his arms.

Anything, he thought. He wanted to give her anything she desired. "What is it?"

"Stay the night."

At least she wasn't asking for a lifetime. Ben's gut clenched hard. A lifetime, the one thing they could never share, was the one thing he could so easily imagine. He shook himself out of that particular fantasy. "I can manage that."

"Thanks."

"None necessary. But we need to dry you off before we can crawl under the covers." He tugged at the end of the towel he'd wrapped around her and pulled open the ends.

Her skin was red from the heated water and the scratch of his unshaven face, her makeup was long gone, and damp strands of unbrushed hair fell over her cheeks. And still, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes upon.

She shivered. "It's cold."

“Then let me warm you.” He joined her on the bed and pulled the towel out from beneath her, then he began to pat her legs dry with the fluffy material, working his way upward, starting with her toes.

“You’re pampering me,” she murmured.

“Yup.”

“It’s nice.”

“Something you’re used to?” he asked, wondering just how luxurious her previous life had been.

“Not really, although we grew up in a mausoleum of a house we called *The Estate*, and we had servants galore... but we also had Emma.”

The warmth and love in her tone were unmistakable. Having met the impish older woman, Ben could understand Grace’s affection. “Your grandmother.” He moved from her toes to her ankles, working his way up her skin with slow, circular motions.

“Mmm. Emma kept us grounded. She didn’t let us take advantage of the help or use them as our personal maids. Logan and I learned early on to pick up after and take care of ourselves.”

He wanted to hear more about her life and deliberately slowed his movements. “You keep talking about Emma and Logan. You never mention the rest of your family. What about your parents?”

She levered herself up, resting her weight on her elbows. “I’m going to answer your questions because after all we’ve

just shared, I want to open up to you. But make no mistake, the next round is mine.”

He laughed. “Okay, go on.”

“My parents are my parents in name only. Or should I say especially in name. Nothing’s more important to them than the Montgomery name, the legacy, the money—not even their kids. We were expected to be trained pets, taken out for show when it looked good for my father, the judge, to have family around and ignored the rest of the time.”

The pain of her childhood was evident in her voice and by the way she’d clenched her jaw tight. He’d been curious, but he hadn’t meant to make her relive unpleasant memories or tense up on him now. “Was it really that bad?”

She nodded. “When I was fifteen, I wanted to run for class president. I decided I wasn’t going to tell my family until I’d won. It was my way of carrying on the Montgomery family tradition, and let’s face it, I desperately wanted to please my father. But it was just another futile attempt to get him to pay attention to me.”

“What happened?”

“Someone told him about the race, and I came in to school to find he’d spoken to the teachers and volunteered to speak at an assembly on the proper way to handle a campaign. And when Judge Montgomery speaks, people listen.”

“Did you win the campaign?”

“Sure did, but not on my own merit. Because my father the judge had convinced every kid present that Montgomerys were

born to be public servants and that a vote for Grace was a vote for the Constitution.”

His gut clenched at the way her father had so obviously belittled her in front of her friends and teachers. At the way she'd spent a lifetime trying to please a man who couldn't be pleased, and how she'd lost herself in the process. But she was on her way back now, and he couldn't be more proud of her.

“I'm sure people saw through your father.” He knew his words were lame.

“Maybe. But they voted his way anyhow. It was revolting. The other runner-up was so much better qualified. I wanted to run against him and win because I'd swayed people my way. Instead, I won on the family name and because my father called in all the favors people owed him. As if I wasn't smart enough to win on my own.”

“You must know now you're smarter than any of those kids you went to school with.”

She shrugged.

“But I'm sorry you had to live through that. And even sorrier you had to relive it by repeating the story to me now.”

She met his gaze with glistening eyes. “Don't be. If I didn't want you to know, I wouldn't have shared. Besides, it wasn't all bad. I had Logan and Emma who loved me for myself. And if you ever met my grandmother, you'd understand what a different experience she can be. Eccentric doesn't begin to cover it.”

He agreed, not that he was free to tell Grace. “And you adore her.”

She nodded.

With the ends of the towel, he traveled a path up the inside of her thighs until her skin began to quiver and her legs started to shake. “Ben.”

Warning tinged her tone and he laughed. “Yes, Gracie?”

“I know exactly what you’re up to.”

“I should hope so.”

She let out a near-growl of frustration. “You’re avoiding answering questions.”

“Untrue. I’m merely taking advantage of your gloriously naked body.” He settled himself between her thighs, and using the terry towel, he rubbed gently over the damp folds of skin lying bare for his touch.

At his first caress, she moaned softly, and his body hardened upon hearing the seductive, husky sound. He rolled over, taking her with him.

Grace knew she’d found heaven in Ben’s arms. She’d find answers later. Just feeling the strength of his need pressing against her thigh, desire bordering on exquisite pain rippled through her. She lifted her hips, thrust herself against him, welcomed the beginning waves. But knowing how incredible making love with Ben was, she didn’t want just solitary pleasure, so she raised her head toward the nightstand.

She looked him in the eye, and his gaze deepened, darkened. The next few seconds passed in a rush of anticipation as he shed his briefs and took care of protection. And then he was back, kneeling over her, spreading her legs wider.

“Sit up.”

She couldn't ignore the command and pushed herself up on her elbows.

“Now look.”

She did, gazing down as he spread her with his fingers, seeing her own dampness beckon to him, and watching as he eased the long, hard length of his erection into her swollen, waiting flesh.

“It's so erotic,” she whispered in awe at the sight of their bodies locked intimately together with the feel of every rigid inch of him filling her. A feast for the senses, she thought in a daze, unable to distinguish the host of feelings swamping her.

He eased her back down until he was lying on top of her, moving inside her, *making love to her*. And she refused to believe what they shared was anything less. Especially when every upward thrust not only brought him deeper—but closer to her heart.

Chapter Nine

GRACE WOKE UP with a shiver and realized she'd rolled away from Ben in the middle of the night. They'd fallen asleep exhausted in each other's arms on top of the covers, and when she'd eased away from his body heat, she'd instantly sensed the change.

"You okay?" he asked in a sleep-roughened voice.

"Yeah. Just cold." Better that than to admit she'd missed him. He'd think her ridiculous since he was lying beside her throughout the night. The last thing she wanted to risk was spooking him away.

Though it was dark, the lights from neighboring buildings filtered into the room and Grace could easily make out his masculine form. She shivered again, this time because looking at him made her realize how fortunate she was that he'd come into her life. That a man as caring and sexy as Ben had accepted her. All of her.

"Grace? I asked if you wanted to get beneath the covers."

His voice intruded on her thoughts. "Oh, yes. But there's something I wanted to do first." She swung her legs off the bed and leaned down to retrieve a stack of pictures from beneath the nightstand.

"I take it you're not tired anymore?"

She grinned. "I have lots of stamina. A little rest and I'm raring to go. Unless you'd rather sleep."

“Sweetheart, I can more than keep up with your stamina. What did you have in mind?”

She snapped on the bedside light and turned back to face him. “Get those naughty thoughts out of your head—at least for now.” He’d turned down the covers and she joined him in her bed, pushing away the thought of how lonely it would be for her once he was gone.

“What do you have there?”

She glanced down at the album in her hand, suddenly embarrassed. What had seemed like such a good idea in the dark didn’t seem as smart now that the lights were on.

In the dark, she’d thought Ben would like to see the pictures she’d taken in the park. She’d thought that he’d understand what drew her to give something back to these hardworking mothers and their children. That he’d be interested in her and the passion that guided her. But beneath the harsh glare of the lamp’s light, Grace saw their situation for what it really was.

It was an affair. A passionate one to be sure, but a short-term relationship, nonetheless. And a man who’d made it clear he wasn’t interested in anything that involved commitment wouldn’t be interested in what made Grace Montgomery tick.

Even if Grace had stupidly fallen in love with him.

Grace paused in shock. She’d fallen in love with Ben. She clutched the photo album against her chest. “It’s nothing important.”

He grabbed for her arm and gently swung her around to face him. “I doubt that.” He pried her fingers off the plastic binder until he held her life’s work in his hands. “These are your pictures,” he said without opening the cover.

She managed a nod.

“I can see in your eyes how special these are to you.”

“They’re a part of me. Proof that I can accomplish what I want to.” She shrugged self-consciously. “Kind of silly, huh?”

“You aren’t silly. Neither are the things you desire. And that’s something I’d like to know—what would those be?”

Passion still simmered in his eyes and found an answer inside her. “Other than you?”

He grinned. “Other than me.”

“Did you ever hear of the charity called CHANCES?”

“Vaguely.”

“It helps underprivileged children. Remember what I said in the park about giving back? Well, this is how. They’ve hired me to do the photos and layout for their new brochure and an online spread. I’m hoping to be able to show the folks back home what real life is like—and collect their cash at the same time.” She laughed, feeling embarrassed at her lofty goals.

Admiration shone in his gaze. “I want to see them.”

“Well, most are photos of children. I adore children, and capturing them enjoying life, no matter what their background—well, there’s nothing better.”

“Do you ever think about having kids?”

“Sometimes.” She glanced away. The truth was she’d love to have a family, a close-knit, fun family, so unlike her own.

She realized now she wanted that family with Ben. The man who didn’t do commitments. She swallowed over the lump in her throat and looked at the photo album again. “Take a look at these.” She deliberately changed the subject. “I’ve given copies of these to the parents for free so they can enjoy their kids, too. So that’s it.” She gestured to the book. “A broad spectrum of life.”

“My mother would understand you so well.” He settled in beside her, then ran a hand through his already-disheveled hair. “She loved life. Even when things were toughest for us financially, when she worked all day scrubbing other people’s floors for a living, she still appreciated the little things. The butterflies in spring and the snowflakes in winter.” He patted the space beside him.

Grace crawled back into bed, cuddling next to him. Whether he realized it or not, he’d treated her to a window inside his soul and she’d never take that gift for granted. She placed a hand on his bare arm, knowing he’d chosen this time to open up to her because he sensed how difficult she’d suddenly found it to show him her photos.

And Grace realized that, in her embarrassment, she’d misjudged him. But not entirely because he wouldn’t have the album in his hand now if her gut instinct hadn’t trusted him all along.

She intended to make sure he never regretted letting her in. “And now your mother can’t see the things she loves.”

He shook his head. “Only shadows.”

If she hadn't been looking, she'd have missed the flash of pain and regret that crossed his face.

“Ben, you need to remember life goes on for her in other ways. The things she keeps with her in here.” She tapped her chest, near her heart. “And here.” She pointed to her head. “Even if she never sees a sunset again, the memory will sustain her.”

His gaze locked with hers. Surprise registered first, then gratitude flickered in his eyes. “I should have known you'd understand.”

She reached for his hand. “I'm not sure why you thought I wouldn't. While we're on the subject of your mother, what happened to your father? I've never heard you mention him.”

“He was a good man. He died when I was eight. Heart attack,” he added, answering her unasked question.

“I'm sorry. And here I was complaining about my parents ignoring me. At least both of mine were there.”

A scowl creased his forehead. “Don't apologize for being unhappy with the hand you were dealt. A child has a right to expect love and concern from their parents.” He squeezed her hand back, and she realized they weren't only sharing stories, they were sharing comfort. And it felt good.

It had been too long since she'd had someone to just hold onto. When she was young, she'd always had Logan to comfort her when things got rough at home. Her poor brother had spent too many late nights massaging her forehead to

alleviate pounding migraines thanks to the incessant arguments between her parents. The ones behind the walls, the ones they didn't think anyone could hear. Because Montgomerys didn't argue in public where everything was picture-perfect. But Grace had grown up and she hadn't had anyone to lean on for too long.

Now she had Ben. She rested her head on his shoulder and warned herself not to get used to it, but her heart, beating hard against her chest, refused to face the truth right now. Until he walked out, he was hers.

“I'm not saying I had a perfect life, but you must think I'm pretty ridiculous. Talking about mansions and Porsches, servants and money while complaining in the same breath.” She paused and let out a long sigh. “As clichéd as it sounds, though, money can't buy happiness.”

“I don't think you're ridiculous. I think you've had a long road toward growing up. But you've gotten there and you should be proud.” He paused. “And to think all the years I thought I had it rough... looks like I was lucky.” He flipped open the album cover, exposing her pictures to the light of day.

But embarrassment around Ben was no longer an issue, and as he perused her collection, Grace wasn't worried about what he'd think or whether he'd approve.

She already knew. With Ben occupied, she pondered this last conversation and the realization sank in. He both liked and respected her. All of her, no secrets, no hiding, everything laid out for him to see. And he hadn't belittled her. He'd praised her instead.

“What you just said? That means more than you’ll ever know,” she whispered.



BEN KNEW—MORE THAN he should about Grace and what made her tick. Not only what turned her on, but what motivated her actions. Looking at the pictures from the park—the children on the swings being pushed by their fathers, the kids with ice cream dripping down their faces and into a puddle on the floor, and finally, the mothers holding crying infants in their arms—Ben knew Grace was as traditional, sweet, and guileless as they came.

She wanted everything she’d been denied growing up. The loving family. He’d even go so far as to say she desired the white picket fence, the 2.5 kids, and the dog. And damned if he couldn’t imagine her with all of that and more.

But in the meantime, she was trying to make up for having so much wealth when others did not. She wasn’t handing out money but something far more precious. She was giving these hardworking people memories to cherish. The kind of loving memories she’d never had.

“Today’s Sunday.” Grace’s soft voice cut into Ben’s thoughts. “Will you be visiting your mother today?”

He met her clear-eyed gaze. “Yeah. Around four. I usually stay for dinner.” And damned if he didn’t want to bring her with him. But he wouldn’t. He’d only be setting Grace up for disappointment and pain later if he allowed her deeper into his personal life.

And there was his mother to consider—his feisty mother who wanted to see him married and had even resorted to pumping her elderly neighbors for information about their single daughters. No way could Ben bring a woman around. Her sight was gone, not her mind. She'd draw the right conclusions about Grace, and then Ben would have to explain why he'd had to let her go—and suffer a motherly lecture on his improper behavior.

He glanced down at a photo of a bright, sunny day, the park aglow with the faces of happy children. No hint of poverty or disillusionment in sight. “Amazing how different the park looks through your eyes.”

He met her gaze. Her face had flushed pink and she beamed with pride in her work. He looked back down and turned the next page. The setting had changed to shadows instead of sunlight, an alley instead of the park. “Like the picnics my mother took me on. I'd forget all the bad things that ever happened to us.”

Ben felt the same peace and contentment around Grace. Uncomfortable with the thought, he glanced down. She had focused in on one child with her zoom lens. She'd captured a wide-eyed imp waving for the camera with an obvious look of glee on his face as if she'd caught him being naughty and enjoying it.

But it was the flash of red in the background that caught Ben's attention. He gently pried the photo out of its holder.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Getting a closer look.” He held the picture up to the light and squinted. “If I didn’t know better…”

“What is it?” She sat up behind him and rested against his back so she could look over his shoulder. Her bare breasts brushed against his skin. Only then did he realize they’d been sitting nude, discussing their lives, sharing their pasts in a purely comfortable state. Like he’d caught his parents doing one morning when he’d stumbled into their bedroom without knocking. Like an old married couple.

“Well? What is it?” she asked.

He forced himself to refocus on the picture. “The guy that attacked you, if I’m not mistaken. When was this taken?”

“Same day.”

“Same red cutoff shirt. It was the first thing I noticed after I heard you scream. The flash of red.” He squinted again. “Take a look at what’s in his hands.”

She leaned closer. All he had to do was turn around and she’d be in his arms.

“It’s hard to see. I followed Kurt—the little boy—from the playground. He disappeared when his mother wasn’t looking. He’s good at that—always going after his big brother.”

“Ever meet the brother?”

“No. He makes himself scarce. From what his mother tells me, he does the same thing at school. Anyway, I followed Kurt to a back alley. He turned, saw me behind him, and knew he’d been caught. He knew I’d drag him back to his mother, but the look on his face was priceless, so I snapped the picture.”

“And you caught a lot more than a precocious kid. Looks like a bag of white powder in your attacker’s hand.”

“Give me that.” She grabbed the picture. “I can’t make that out. How can you?”

Gut instinct, Ben thought. He’d seen similar situations going down too many times in his younger days. Hell, he’d been lucky he hadn’t gotten caught up in it himself. But taking care of his mother had always come first. “I told you, I grew up in a neighborhood like this. That picture is trouble.”

“So that explains the note,” she whispered.

He stiffened. “What note?”

She exhaled and bent down, pulling a crumpled sheet of paper from the bedside garbage. “This one.”

After handing him the letter, she cuddled up behind him and pressed a kiss to his neck. He shivered against her heated touch. “Stop trying to distract me, Gracie. When’d you get this?”

She sighed. “This afternoon. Kurt handed it to me while I was sitting at the playground. Innocent as can be.”

He muttered a curse that was modified for her benefit. “And you still took the subway back tonight?”

“If you’ll calm down and remember, I never left the sidewalk outside the entrance. I just did a complete circle—and I knew you were behind me the whole time. I was safe.”

He appreciated the vote of confidence but not her cavalier attitude. “Do you have any idea what this means?” He waved

the photo in the air.

She sat back. “That Kurt’s big brother is into drugs and Kurt’s seen way too much for a boy his age.”

“That, too. But it also means you caught a photo of something illegal. They know it or they don’t want to risk the chance that you might get something in the future. Either way, you’re a walking target.”

Grace shivered at his deliberately blunt words.

He turned and held her close. “I don’t want you scared, I just want you careful.”

Her soft hands snaked around his waist. “Well, how about I’ll be both? Because my pictures have to get taken. So, I guess it’s a good thing I have you for backup.”

“I distinctly remember you dismissing the need out of hand.”

“I’m independent, not stupid. I also know my limitations. Tripping him won’t take care of the problem.”

He knew what a huge concession he’d just been given. Grace had worked too hard to become her own person. She wouldn’t admit her need for help easily. Hell, she’d fought his attempts to watch out for her often enough in the past week.

He pulled out of her embrace. “Know what I like about you?”

“What’s that?” Her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“You’re a smart woman.”

“Because I admit I need you?”

He shook his head. It wasn't that simple. "Because you're willing to compromise your hard-won independence until we resolve this. First thing tomorrow, I'll go on down and ask some questions while you're at work. Hopefully, by the time you get there for lunch, I'll have some answers."

"You knew I'd be going anyway?"

"I know *you*."

"And you aren't going to try to talk me out of it?"

He shrugged. "Would it do any good?"

She laughed. "Not a bit."

He'd known that. "Which is why the best I can do is be there first, to stake things out and keep an eye on you. Leon—the guy from the basketball courts—has a lot of connections. I'll discover something. Find some way to make it safe for you down there."

What had begun as a search for information for her grandmother had just turned into something far more personal: his personal crusade to keep Grace safe.

Her hands came to rest on his chest, her flat palms covering his nipples. He let out a strangled groan. "Grace, this is serious."

"I know. And my private detective and his expertise will take care of the threat. In the meantime, I'm going to take care of you."



A PERSISTENT RINGING woke Ben out of a sound sleep. Surrounded by warmth—Gracie’s warmth—he had no desire to move. A steady knocking began to accompany the doorbell’s harsh sound.

Beside him, Grace groaned. “Go away.”

“Not a morning person?” Leaning over, he brushed her hair off her face and placed a kiss on her cheek. “That’s okay. I liked your kind of night games.” He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

She didn’t answer, not even a playful response or swat.

He chuckled, realizing he even liked her grumpy and disheveled in the morning. He pulled on his jeans, standing to zip them but not taking the time to button the fly. “Sure you want me to get that?” Because he had no desire to answer her door half-dressed. “The neighbors might talk.”

She yanked the pillow over her head in response.

He laughed all the way to the door... until he glanced out the peephole. Standing in the hall were two well-dressed, good-looking people, people he’d seen in photographs around Grace’s apartment. The man studied his watch in concern while the woman patted his arm and tried knocking again.

If Ben had hesitated about answering her door before, he really didn’t like doing it now. He glanced back toward the bedroom.

“Come on, Grace,” the male voice in the hall called out.

Ben groaned. He had no choice.

“Doorman said you’re here. It’s... your brother,” Logan said just as Ben swung the door open wide. “You’re not my sister.” The concern on Logan’s features turned into an open scowl as his gaze swept Ben, from his morning razor stubble to his unbuttoned jeans to his bare feet.

Ben liked the situation even less now. He didn’t have any siblings, but he knew without a doubt if he were in Logan’s place, he’d want to kill. No matter that his sister was an adult, this first—and only—meeting would not go smoothly.

“Well, this is awkward.” A blond woman wearing black jeans, a black T-shirt, and a wide, leopard-print headband stepped forward. “I’m Catherine, Grace’s sister-in-law. And this is her brother, Logan.” She jabbed her husband in the ribs. “Quit scowling. Grace is an adult. She’s entitled to live her life the same way we are. Don’t jump all over her the second you see her and give her even more reason to back off.”

Catherine paused in her monologue to stick her hand out toward Ben. “And you are...?”

He grinned. Yet another member of this family he liked immediately. “Ben Callahan. Neighbor.” He figured bare minimum information was sufficient. Unfortunately, the details were all too obvious.

After shaking Catherine’s hand, Ben extended his hand to Logan. He understood the other man’s glaring silence, but he wouldn’t be rude to people Grace cared about.

The man accepted the gesture. “Doesn’t mean I approve,” he muttered.

“Good thing I don’t need your permission then.” Grace’s voice sounded from behind Ben.

He turned in time to see her, a blur in a floor-length blue terry robe, squeal in delight and run past him, first to Logan and then to Catherine, enclosing them both in a loving embrace. The sight caused a lump in Ben’s throat because it showed him how much she loved—and was loved—by her family. And how much she was missing by living alone in New York. And also how right he was about her returning to the life she’d left behind. One day soon. Even if she didn’t realize it yet.

Ben had been given this one night. The glaring light of day had come too soon.

“What are you doing here?” Grace asked her brother.

“Do you think you can be silent for so long and not have me check up on you?”

She shrugged. “Sorry. But I’m still glad you’re here.”

“Besides,” Catherine added, “we wouldn’t miss your birthday.”

“Birthday?” Ben spoke without thinking.

“Yes, birthday. Tomorrow.” Logan raised an unamused eyebrow and Ben could practically hear his unspoken thought. *You slept with my sister and you don’t even know her birthday’s tomorrow? Just how well do you really know her?*

Too well, Ben thought. Too damn well, and a small detail like not knowing what day she was born couldn’t change what had happened between them. But he knew when to make an

exit, and the pounding in his chest and the sheen of sweat on his forehead told him now was the opportune moment.

While Grace brought her family into the apartment, Ben ducked into the bedroom and finished dressing. He refused to think, to deal with his emotions or anything else until he got the hell out of there.

He walked out of the bedroom to find them all sitting in the living room. The room was still littered with candles, though the sensual goodies they'd never gotten to had been moved—and Ben was grateful Grace had swept them away. And though neither Logan nor Grace had commented on the seductive atmosphere, it wasn't something that could have been missed.

“Ben, come get to know Cat and Logan. If you're lucky, they'll even tell you the story of how they got together. My grandmother handpicked Cat, then set them up and locked them in a closet together in the middle of a party.”

“Your grandmother sounds like a real character,” Ben said.

“You don't know the half of it. Her matchmaking shenanigans put the most seasoned pro to shame.” Catherine shook her head and chuckled. “I can laugh about it. *Now.*”

Grace patted the couch beside her. “Have a seat. Logan's finished with the protective older brother routine.” Logan still scowled, but Grace seemed—or pretended—not to notice. Her gentle laugh floated around the room and squeezed Ben's heart tight.

He'd miss that sound most of all. "I really need to get going." He wondered if the excuse sounded as lame as he knew it to be.

"No, you don't. Not till four. How about I get dressed, run down, and pick up breakfast?" Grace asked.

He inhaled deep. Denying her anything was damn difficult. "How about I run down and pick up breakfast? You visit with your family."

Her face lit up and she nodded. Ben knew she thought he'd be staying to eat with them. But he wouldn't.

He slammed the door to the apartment behind him. He'd entered Grace's life based on a lie. He'd also slept with her knowing he was deceiving her, and in an hour, he'd be reporting news of her life back to her grandmother. He had no business socializing with her family like he was a good friend or something more. Grace certainly wouldn't appreciate the truth if she knew it—and neither would her brother.

"So, where's the baby?" Grace asked her brother, minutes after Ben's abrupt departure.

"Home with Emma, and stop changing the subject. Who's the guy?"

"Would you leave her alone?" Catherine complained, siding with Grace in a gesture of female unity.

Logan gave his wife a pointed look. "Did *you* back off your sister, Kayla, when she started with Kane?"

Grace curled her feet beneath her, enjoying the familial argument, the loving bickering between her brother and his

wife. She'd missed them terribly and was grateful they'd come to visit. She just wished their timing had been better. The way Ben had hightailed it out of here after dropping off breakfast, Grace knew their intrusion had destroyed the warmth and intimacy of their night together.

He'd backed off again, and this time, it wouldn't be as easy to bring him back.

After a too-short visit, Logan and Catherine took a ride share to their hotel. Catherine was operating on sleep deprivation thanks to her teething baby and needed a nap before heading home. She'd claimed she didn't want to displace Grace and take her bed, but Grace sensed Logan and Cat needed time alone.

Grace was left on her own, feeling restless and jittery. Adrenaline from her night with Ben floated through her veins, and with a long day stretching ahead of her, Grace couldn't sit still. Besides, she had to have a talk with little Kurt's mother before the child followed in his big brother's footsteps—if he hadn't already. Grace didn't know exactly what his brother was into or how deep, but she couldn't worry about getting him into trouble. Nor could she worry about her own personal safety. Not when a still-innocent boy's life was at stake.

Grabbing her camera, Grace headed downtown.

Chapter Ten

HIS CELL RANG the moment Ben walked into his apartment. Visiting his mother had lifted his spirits—how could it not when nothing got her down? Knowing it was probably Emma threatened his improved mood, but why put off the inevitable?

He grabbed for the cell phone in his pocket. “Callahan.”

“Good afternoon!” Emma’s cheery voice came through the line loud and too clear.

“Hi, Emma.” He deliberately omitted any sentence with *good* in the equation.

“Late night last night?”

“I take it you tried calling this morning?”

“Why, yes. I wanted to warn you Grace’s brother was coming for a surprise visit, but I assume you found out the hard way.”

“Excuse me?” Ben nearly choked with guilt. The older woman couldn’t possibly have known anything was going on between himself and Grace. If she did, she’d kick him off the case and out of this apartment so fast his head would spin. Of course, since Logan now knew of Ben’s overnight activities, there was a good chance Emma would, too. Unless Logan wanted to protect his grandmother’s delicate sensibilities and had remained silent. Ben swallowed a laugh. There wasn’t one thing delicate about Emma’s sensibilities—if she even had any.

“I’ve been calling since nine. Not home last night, not home first thing this morning, out all afternoon. You’ve been busy. So, you know Logan and Cat have made an appearance... because you’re watching Grace’s every move, I mean.”

“Of course.” He shook his head. “I mean, yes, I know your grandson is here.”

If nothing else, Ben had felt free to visit his mother knowing Logan and Cat would keep Grace busy for the day. He hadn’t had to worry about Grace making a solo trip to the park or getting into another tangle with Kurt’s big brother.

“Logan’s a wonderful man,” Emma mused. “Took a little doing to get him together with Catherine, but I was up to the challenge.”

“Of course, you were.” Why did Ben suspect Logan Montgomery would have had an easier time getting together with Catherine if the older woman had stayed out of things instead?

“And Grace?”

His gut clenched at the sound of her name. With need. With longing. With more guilt than he could have imagined just days earlier when he’d taken the case.

He had no desire to reveal any information about Grace’s life to her grandmother. His client. The person to whom he owed his loyalty. He didn’t want to inform Emma that Grace had friends from all walks of life or that she had a decent job taking pictures for a charity brochure, a job that was a stepping

stone to bigger and better things. He didn't even want to reveal that she was happy. Anything and everything felt like a betrayal of the worst kind.

But he'd already accepted money for expenses on this assignment, already lived in an apartment Emma paid rent on, already put his mother on a waiting list for the next available space in the assisted living facility of her choice—a place where she could be among friends and retain as much quality of life as possible.

On a professional level, he'd promised Emma his best. On a personal level, he'd promised his mother even more. He owed them both. Refusing to think about where that placed Grace in the scheme of his life, he refocused on the conversation with her grandmother.

“I'm nearly done here. I have all the information you need to rest easy where your granddaughter is concerned. I just need another day or two to wrap things up on my end.”

To check out the attacker at the park and to let the police in on the other guy's extra-curricular activities. Once Ben knew the cops were watching the attacker and the neighborhood kids who lived on the courts were keeping an eye on Grace in the meantime, Ben's job here would be finished. “I'll let you know when I'm ready to move on and I'll send you a formal report.”

Emma made what sounded like a choking sound and began to cough heavily into the phone.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes.” A few seconds of silence followed, then Ben heard what sounded like water being swallowed. “Sorry. What I was trying to say was I’m impressed with how fast you work.”

He thought of Grace lying naked beneath him. The older lady didn’t know the half of it. “Thank you,” he somehow managed to answer.

“I don’t need a written report. Your word is fine with me.”

“I appreciate that, but it’s how I always close a case.” And that’s what Ben was hoping for this time, too.

Closure that wasn’t too painful.

“Well, I enjoyed working with you, and I’ll look forward to seeing for myself. I mean, reading for myself. Bye.”

He slid his cell back into his pocket and began straightening the place as best he could. But his gaze kept straying to the door as if he could see what was going on across the hall. He was torn by the desire to see Grace again and the knowledge that getting to know her family would only make his leaving more difficult.

His cell rang once more. Once again he took the cell from his pocket and answered. “I thought we were finished.”

“Wrong person, man.”

“Hey, Leon.” Ben listened to the reason for Leon’s call and muttered a curse.

Guilt took on a whole new meaning. He should have known better than to think Grace would trust him to take care of things downtown. That damn independent streak of hers

would be the death of him yet... especially if something had happened to her.

He shoved his phone into his pocket and took off running.



WHEN BEN ARRIVED, he found the scene Leon had called him about—an unfamiliar building and a swarm of people with a police car out front. If the subway hadn't been ninety degrees, he would have broken into a sweat from fear alone—until he caught sight of Grace, unhurt and unharmed. But only because he hadn't gotten hold of her yet.

“Hey, man,” Leon said.

Ben turned toward the tall, lanky kid who excelled on the courts and to whom he now owed his unending gratitude. “What happened?”

“Your lady knows how to get into trouble. She shows up with the camera around her neck, snooping around, askin' questions like anyone seen Bobby when everyone knows Bobby don't want to be seen. So, she takes the little brother out for a walk when everyone knows Bobby's got Kurt running errands for him if you know what I mean.”

“Apparently not everyone knew better than to stay away from Bobby.” Ben muttered a curse.

“You got that right.” Leon nodded in agreement. “So, like I was sayin', she gets herself alone with Kurt and then Bobby gets himself alone with your lady.”

Ben's stomach twisted in tight knots. “What happened?”

“Lucky for everyone, Mrs. Ramone knows her boy and she called the cops.”

“Before anyone got hurt.”

Leon nodded again. “And before anyone sees me ratting, I’m outta here.”

“You be at the basketball courts tomorrow,” Ben called after the youth.

Then he turned toward Grace. The crowd had dispersed and the police were getting into their cars and driving away as Ben made his way to the front stoop of the old building.

He knew better than to lecture Grace in public, but heaven help her when he got her alone. “Hi, Gracie.” He clenched his hands into fists at his side.

“Ben!” She stood quickly. “What are you doing... Never mind.” She was obviously surprised to see him—and just as obviously aware of his mood because she backed up a step and ended up falling back down on her behind.

She donned a sheepish grin, one he’d have a hard time resisting if fear for her safety wasn’t still pumping through his veins.

“Have you ever met Mrs. Ramone? She’s Kurt’s mother. You remember Kurt? The cute kid in the picture I showed you?”

“I remember the picture,” he said through clenched teeth. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Ramone.” Ben shook the older woman’s hand, taking in her tearstained face and the weariness in her eyes that made her old before her time.

In Mrs. Ramone, Ben saw all he'd feared happening to his mother, but thanks to her optimism and Ben's determination to get them both out of the old neighborhood fast and safe, Ben's mother had fared much better. Even with the onset of blindness and age, she appeared happier and more youthful than this woman ever had a chance of being.

As he listened, she explained how Grace had shown up at her door, the incriminating photo in hand. She'd sat the woman down and shown her proof that her older son was dealing drugs and her younger son's idolization of his brother would get him in serious trouble. Then she'd taken Kurt for ice cream. On the walk home, she'd run into trouble in the name of Bobby Ramone.

"But the police were waiting, and I'd given them the picture. They have Bobby in custody, and we can only hope it's not too late for Kurt," Grace chimed in. "There's an after-school program I've heard about, and if we can keep him busy and educated, maybe he won't end up like his brother," Grace rambled, her residual fear still obvious, and her nervousness about letting Ben get a word in equally apparent.

Considering he'd like to throttle her for taking this on alone, he didn't blame her. But he'd learned something else, too. Grace had a big heart—and he loved her for it.

He loved her. And there was no way he could walk away when this case was over.

He glanced at her wide-eyed, apprehensive expression, and though he still wanted to shake her for taking such a huge risk, more than that, he wanted to pull her into his arms and *feel* she

was safe. Then he could tell her how proud she made him, even as his heart thudded in his chest out of fear for her safety.

But he'd do none of those things. Because he had no right to call Grace Montgomery his. Not when everything between them was based on one huge lie—*his* lie. One only he could correct.

And he would correct it. He had to if he wanted even a chance at a future, and suddenly, Ben the loner wanted just that.

Knowing he couldn't deal with Grace, not while the lump in his throat was so huge it threatened to choke him, Ben turned toward Kurt's mother. "If you need anything, you call me."

He stuck his hand into his pocket and retrieved his wallet and business card within. His cases might center on the more privileged because the financial gain was better, but he always helped out friends in the old neighborhood, the one so similar to this one.

"I've got some connections with social services that can help you out, and if your son gets out of jail and wants to go straight, let him get in touch. I'll put him to work and keep an eye on him."

The older woman grabbed him in a bear hug. He inhaled and smelled a combination of musty aromas from the old apartments and the scent of good old-fashioned cooking—all as familiar to him as his own mother. The memories weren't painful any longer, they just *were*. And Ben sensed he had

Grace to thank for that. For understanding him. For reaching out and accepting the person he'd once been.

He extended his hand to Grace. "Ready to go?"

Looking wary, she placed a hand in his and allowed him to pull her to a standing position.

"If you're planning on yelling, you should know I have sensitive ears," she warned him.

He laughed, though he felt anything but lighthearted. "You've got plenty of sensitive parts," he murmured for her ears only. "I wouldn't expect your ears to be any different. But make no mistake, you are going to hear what I have to say."

She rolled her eyes but remained silent.

He hoped she understood he intended to have his lecture. She hadn't given him a say in her safety, opting instead to exert that blasted independence of hers. He definitely wasn't through with her yet.



"THEY CAUGHT BOBBY Ramone with cocaine. Between drug possession and trafficking charges, he should be out of commission for a while." Grace glanced at Ben.

His jaw was still clenched tight. He hadn't said a word the entire hot, steamy subway ride, and now, with their building in sight, she hoped to smooth things over before they went their separate ways. She held no illusions he hadn't gotten over her brother's intrusion, and his withdrawal had begun once more.

And obviously, he was too furious to deal with her now. Not in the intimate way she desired. A way that would soothe her fears and make her feel safe.

“Don’t kid yourself about Bobby,” Ben said, breaking the silence. “If he snitches and gives the cops bigger fish, he’s back on the street and you’re back where you started.” Ben’s mood couldn’t have been more grim.

“If you’d been around, I’d have let you know I was headed for the park.” She crossed her fingers behind her back.

No need for him to know she’d needed to take care of this on her own. No matter how hard her heart had been pounding, no matter how scared she’d been, Grace had to solve this on her own. As much to prove to herself that she was capable of taking care of herself as to know she was capable of making a difference in someone’s life. Without the Montgomery name or money. Without Ben’s help.

“Don’t lie to me.” Her hand still held firmly in his, he led her into the building. “And don’t kid yourself that this is over—until I’ve checked it out and know for sure.”

Because she sensed his need to be in control and she understood, Grace agreed. “Okay.”

Silence surrounded them the entire elevator ride, and Grace couldn’t think of a way to make amends until he decided to calm down.

Fear still pounded inside Ben when he thought of how badly Grace could have been hurt. Until he’d leashed the adrenaline pumping through his system, he had nothing more

to say. He rounded the corner leading to her apartment and stopped short.

A stranger stood in front of Grace's door, suitcase in hand and a stereo-box and folding table leaning against the wall.

"Marcus!" Grace said, a mixture of shock and delight evident in her tone. She rushed forward to give the other man a too-friendly squeeze.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten your grandmother's annual birthday surprise." The man sounded mockingly offended.

Ben cleared his throat. "And what surprise would that be?" Ben asked.

The other man turned and extended his hand. "Marcus Taylor, Master Masseur at your service."

Masseur. An intrusion he didn't need, but Ben shook Marcus's hand, certain of one thing—he couldn't stand the thought of this man touching Grace. Ben didn't give a damn if the guy made a living with those hands or how professional the contact. He wasn't sliding his fingers down Grace's smooth skin. He wouldn't be the one to make her muscles slacken or elicit those contented sighs.

Ben shook the man's hand then dug into his pocket. "How much are you getting paid for this gig?"

"Ben!" Grace sounded outraged in her best, snooty Montgomery voice.

He loved it.

Over her protest, Marcus named a sum only Emma Montgomery would pay for an hour's worth of work. "Up front," the man added.

"Tell you what," Ben counted out the money he'd withdrawn earlier today, "the lady and I want to be alone. This ought to cover the use of your equipment plus some. Take the night off. I'll leave your stuff for you with the doorman."

Grace watched the exchange—of dialogue and cash—mouth open wide. He touched the bottom of her chin and pushed her jaw closed. She stood, arms crossed, eyes huge, but not a word of protest crossed her lips. Ben gained a perverse sense of satisfaction knowing she preferred his touch to the professional's.

"Grace?" Marcus turned toward her.

As an additional incentive, Ben added the last hundred-dollar bill in his pocket to the stash. Marcus snatched up the wad of cash Ben had flashed his way. "It'll help pay for the engagement ring my girlfriend's been eyeing," he explained sheepishly.

"At least it's going for something worthwhile," Ben said. Because he sure as hell couldn't afford the expense of paying Marcus off.

He glanced at Grace. Her warm brown eyes had darkened with pleasure and she laughed, a sparkling, infectious laugh. He still had his point to make, but there were more effective ways than yelling, he thought wryly. And as far as his wallet was concerned, some sacrifices were worth the price.



BEN HAD BANISHED her from the bedroom while he set up. Grace paced the floor of her living room, anticipation and desire building inside her. She had no illusions. He was still furious, but at least he'd been jealous over Marcus—jealous enough to buy the man off.

She shivered, knowing as much as she loved her newfound independence, she loved Ben's take-charge attitude, too. Especially when he directed it at her.

She waited as he took over her birthday surprise, unable to believe she'd forgotten Emma's ritual. Every year since Grace had turned eighteen, Emma had sent a personal masseur to her granddaughter as a special gift. *Take care of the body and the spirit will follow.* Because Grace had suffered migraines since she was a child, usually brought on by the stress of living under her parents' rigid rules and incessant fights, Emma had insisted she follow that particular prescription for healing. What had begun as a kind of therapy had turned into a birthday gift Grace truly enjoyed—and normally looked forward to.

During the years when she'd lived off her trust, a massage by Marcus had been a weekly event included in her budget. But she was older and wiser these days, and such a frivolity wasn't something she needed. And she realized now that she wasn't splurging on herself, Emma's gift meant so much more.

So did Ben's.

“Come on in,” Ben called out. “Sheet's on the bed. Change and I'll be right out.”

A delicious tingling arose inside her as she walked into her room. He'd closed himself in her bathroom, giving her privacy as Marcus would have done.

She undressed, ignoring the sudden chill on her skin. She'd be warm soon enough. A tremor of awareness shot down her spine, an anticipation unlike any she'd ever felt before. Because this wouldn't be just any massage.

Wrapping herself in the cool sheet, she climbed onto the padded table and stretched out on her stomach, adjusting the sheet until it covered her back but could be easily removed. "All set," she called out, then rested her head against her arms and waited.

The bathroom door opened. The sound of creaking hinges sounded unnaturally loud in her small bedroom; so did the padded footsteps that came up behind her. "Music?" Ben asked.

"Mmm. The waterfall." Nothing soothed her more than the echo of cascading water and the soft strains of a violin in the background.

He shuffled through the CDs and placed her choice into the player, then drew the shades and dimmed the lights. The result was a shift in atmosphere. The bubbling sounds of water mentally transported her from her bedroom to a solitary outdoor spot.

Soon, the intoxicating scent of coconut oil filled her nostrils, reminding her of days at the beach and the sinful delights she knew Ben had in store. With each silent minute that passed, her anticipation built. Lying face down, her

breasts pressed against the table and a heavy feeling growing between her legs, a need for Ben's touch became overwhelming.

Finally, his large, warm hands began their job, working with deep, circular motions against the soles of her feet, relaxing muscles she didn't know she had. Tension and stress seeped out of her body as she was lulled into a blissful state of oblivion.

His firm touch eased its way up her calves and lingered before reaching her thighs—and that's where oblivion ended and awareness took over. Sensual, sexual, heated awareness of the firm touch on the back of her legs and the long fingers easing their way upward, to places no regular masseur would ever venture to go.

“I'm not sure this is within the definition of massage.”

“I thought we'd bend the rules a bit.” His finger slipped between her legs and she let out a soft moan. “Considering tomorrow's your birthday and all.” He leaned closer so his warm breath fanned her neck and his lips brushed the shell of her ear. “Unless you have any objection.”

“I already told you, I've been a good girl way too long.” She paused a beat, letting her words hover between them.

He moved his hand, letting his finger slide provocatively along her wet heat before removing his touch completely. Her body felt the loss and she shuddered, bucking against the table in frustration.

“Easy.” His husky reassurance set her nerve endings on fire.

She glanced over in time to see him slicken his fingertips with oil once more. He met her gaze, his eyes dark and glittering with passion. Was it her imagination or did she see an edge to his gaze, a desperation she didn’t want to accept?

She knew he hadn’t planned anything intimate. In fact, since her brother’s arrival, he’d probably planned to back off. *This* interlude was probably his way of letting go of the tension he’d felt earlier when she’d been in danger. She knew her own burning need was, to a great extent, a release of fear and adrenaline. Of course, for her, it was also driven by her love for him and her desire to be loved by him in return.

His hand returned with a smooth glide along her skin, over her buttocks, and dipping into unexplored territory. An unexpected jolt of pleasure shot through her and satisfaction gleamed in his eyes. She shivered and groaned, realizing he wasn’t through arousing her in this way any more than she was finished exploring her feminine side and pushing the boundaries of passion.

In both her heart and the depth of her soul, Grace accepted that Ben was the only man she’d ever trust in this intimate way. So, if it was desperation she saw in his gaze, she understood because she felt an extreme need to make the most of the time they had left—time, she suddenly realized, that he had granted them.

The knowledge made her brazen enough to give him everything she had and more. So when he walked out of her

life, he would never forget Grace Montgomery.

Grace looked at him with greedy eyes, devouring him with her gaze. "I've only been bad with you." A seductive smile curved her lips.

He eased his fingers deeper inside her, moving downward with a glide made easy by the oil and her own feminine dampness. "How's this?"

She trembled beneath his hand. "Not bad, but you can do better."

Chapter Eleven

“YOU’RE RIGHT. I can.” Ben slipped his hands beneath her, lifting her into his arms. He walked around the table, which wouldn’t hold their combined weight, and lay her face down on the bed. “Since I didn’t know it was your birthday until this morning, I didn’t have time to prepare. I don’t want you to be disappointed.” His heart hammered hard in his chest.

She rolled over and he let her, waiting until she was comfortable to straddle himself over her.

By all rights their time together should be coming to an end, but he refused to give her up without a fight. There was nothing he could do about his predicament now, but first thing tomorrow, he’d attempt to dig himself out of this mess of lies.

For the time being, he would lose himself inside her and hope she’d forgive him. And hope they’d have a future.

“You could never disappoint me, Ben.”

If she only knew how untrue that statement was. He deliberately forced his lies out of his mind.

Her large brown eyes met his. Filled with need and emotion, she held his stare and wouldn’t let go. “I don’t want gifts. I just want you.”

“Then we’re on the same wavelength, sweetheart.” Because what he had for Grace wasn’t an item to be opened, rather it was a gift from the heart. “But I need your cooperation. And I need your trust.”

“You have it,” She spoke without hesitation.

That easy, Ben thought. And that complicated. He was about to show her what it felt like to lose control—the same way she made him lose his.

He leaned forward to brush a kiss over her lips and her hands grasped his neck, holding him close. “Uh-uh.” He untangled her arms and placed them at her sides.

The gleam in her eyes held more curiosity than anything else. Ben adjusted the sheet that had remained twisted around her until the opening parted in front. Slowly, he eased the ends apart, revealing her breasts to his hungry gaze.

He wanted her writhing, begging and pleading for release, and then he wanted to watch her explode as he entered her, with his name on her lips. He wanted this to be a birthday she’d never forget.

He laved one nipple with his tongue, dampening the rigid tip and encircling the plump flesh surrounding it. She smelled so damn good and tasted even better. Only focusing on *her* pleasure enabled him to control his own, and he paused to blow a stream of cool air over the flesh he’d just bathed.

A strangled sound came from deep inside her, making him hard with wanting, and then her hand came to rest on his neck and pulled him closer, telling him without words what she needed.

“You’ve forced my hand, sweetheart.”

“How so?” Her voice was rough with desire.

“I can’t have those hands of yours distracting me, and it’s time you learned what it feels like to feel helpless—the way I felt when you ran off today.”

She’d taken years off his life, and he’d rather cut off his own arm than have anything happen to her. The only reason he hadn’t confronted her yet was the unexpected birthday celebration.

He reached for and opened the night table drawer and retrieved the bandannas he’d placed there earlier.

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t argue. In fact, she seemed to be enjoying every minute. He lifted one of her wrists and massaged her soft flesh in his hands. “I want you to be okay with this.”

Her dark eyes met his. There was that implicit trust again. “There’s nothing you can do I’m not okay with.”

He could almost see himself through her eyes and wished he could be everything she believed him to be. He looped a bandanna around one brass bar on the headboard, then secured her wrist before doing the same to her other hand. “Comfortable?”

“Aroused,” she murmured.

“That’s the point.” And he knew the feeling. Before Grace, he’d never known sweatpants could be too damn tight.

Grace looked into Ben’s eyes and knew she was telling him the truth. There wasn’t another human being she trusted as much as she trusted him to take care of her, body, heart, and soul. With her hands tied loosely above her, she was more

exposed to him than she'd ever thought she'd allow herself to be to anyone. More vulnerable. And more receptive to anything he desired.

But she couldn't help wanting to level the playing field just a bit. She took in his baggy gray sweats with NYPD printed down the left side and his ragged T-shirt that revealed his abdomen. Never had she seen such a sexy man. A man so comfortable in his own skin and with his own masculinity.

God, she loved him. Letting him go might kill her, and though she'd give them her best shot, she'd also keep her promise and let him walk away if he chose. "You need to do something for me."

"I hardly think you're in the position to be asking for favors," he said with a grin.

She laughed. "Strip for me, Ben. Make us equal, and then you can ravish me any which way you desire."

His eyes glazed over even more. "I hope you're not looking for music and dancing."

She shook her head. "All I need is you."

He drew a shuddering breath, reaching for the bottom of his shirt, then he whipped it over his head and tossed it onto the floor in one easy movement. His pants came off next as he released the drawstring knot and pushed them down. They pooled around his ankles and he kicked them aside, leaving him standing nude.

Fully aroused and completely nude.

"No underwear?"

He shrugged. “Ran out. A certain someone’s kept me too busy to even think about basic things like laundry.”

She laughed, but she couldn’t draw her gaze from his erection. Though they’d made love more than once, his sheer size and strength were almost more than she could handle. Her nipples puckered and dampness trickled between her legs. There was nothing she could do to hide her feminine reactions from him even if she wanted to.

And she didn’t want to because opening herself to him in every way imaginable was the only chance she had of keeping him by her side when this was over. She was completely exposed and his to take as he desired.

He eased himself beside her on the bed and placed a warm, comforting hand on her thigh. At least, it was comforting until he rotated his wrist and eased his palm over her sex.

“So hot, so wet. For me,” he murmured. He slid his fingers over her sensitive folds, arousing her full and wanting flesh.

With a sigh, she shut her eyes and gave herself up to sensation. To Ben. Grace refused to look, finding the sensations twice as erotic in the dark, with bound hands and legs open wide.

She felt the weight and dip of the mattress as he moved. Yet she was shocked when she felt his lips on her inner thigh, even more surprised when those same lips found her most feminine secrets and drank them in. His strong hands held her legs wide, locking them in place while his mouth worked a magic she’d never felt before. His tongue traced her, learning

her taste and discovering what made her moan, what made her writhe, what she liked best.

Grace learned that if she groaned a certain way, that wicked tongue would delve deeper, if her hips rose of their own volition off the mattress, his fingers would part her folds, giving him greater access to nip and graze with his teeth, then soothe with wide laps of his tongue. His touch was always gentle, and ever-increasing in tempo and pressure. Her body quivered on the edge of release, yet not once did he take her over the edge.

He brought her so close. With caresses of his tongue against her swollen flesh, he took her higher. With a suckling, pulling maneuver, he sent her soaring, teetering at the brink. The waves would begin to build only to retreat, climax always just out of reach.

And with each near-crescendo, the spiraling need grew higher; the pounding in her swollen flesh became harder and more insistent until her hands grabbed for the brass bars on the headboard and her hips shook hard and fast.

His technique was flawless. Not that of a man who knew women well, but that of the one man who took the time to learn *her* well.

Grace couldn't take another minute of his loving torture. She needed him to take the edge off, to let her climax, and allow those rapturous waves to take over and buffet her body with painful yet exquisite force and completion.

He nibbled gently her clit, not letting up.

“Oh, please!” The words ripped from the depths of her soul. “Please,” she said on a sob, her eyes still closed, her hands still clenched, and her body strung tight with wanting.

Without warning, he was on top of her, thrusting deep inside her, harder and faster than she’d ever experienced, filling the empty places and giving her exactly what she’d begged for. And everything about his rigid flesh felt magnified in intensity and beauty. Each long inch, each hard ridge of his erection eased her distress yet built it higher until without warning he pulled back, leaving her bereft.

“Again.” She hardly recognized the begging, pleading voice as her own. How could she when her sensitized, quivering body didn’t feel familiar, either? She’d never *felt* so much before.

His glittering gaze met hers, revealing a depth and intensity of feeling that mirrored her own, causing a knot of emotion to well up inside her and threaten to burst.

Yet still, he waited. For something, for what, Grace didn’t know. “Ben!” She lifted her hips and called out his name.

Satisfaction filled his gaze and darkened his features as he grabbed for her shoulders and thrust deep. Then nothing could stop the climax that he’d forestalled for so long. As he moved inside her, gliding in and out, each motion making her feel more, want more, her orgasm burst inside her like an explosion, ripping away everything that was safe and leaving her raw and more exposed than ever.

But she wasn’t alone, and Ben was with her, holding her, cherishing her, and coming at exactly the same moment with

equal force. As the quivers lessened but didn't subside, he pulled her hair off her face and brushed her lips with his. Not a soft, gentle kiss, but a possessive, demanding one that brought tears back to her eyes.

He collapsed on top of her, spent as she was, but she welcomed the warmth, weight, and feel of him against her.

And then he whispered in her ear. "Happy birthday, Gracie."

I love you, she thought but kept the words locked in her heart, sensing he wouldn't want to hear.



BEN RELEASED THE material shackling her arms and drew her close. He massaged first one delicate wrist, then the other, realizing for the first time the magnitude of trust she'd put in him when she allowed him to bind her arms and be at his mercy. Grace valued her independence and her freedom, yet she'd allowed him to restrain her—no questions asked.

"Are you okay?"

She curled into him. "Never better."

He relaxed with her under the covers, the scent of musky lovemaking and coconut oil filling the air around them, just as contentment filled him—so much it scared him.

He, a man who needed no one, needed this woman as much as he needed oxygen to breathe. Not an easy admission. And no easy solutions in sight.

Except the truth.

Something he wasn't ready to reveal. Not until he'd straightened out a few things first, and not on a birthday he'd promised himself Grace would never forget—for good reasons, not bad.

“Grace, we need to talk.”

Her palm splayed on his stomach while her fingertips dipped lower. “Talking’s overrated.”

His cock twitched in agreement. He wanted her again. “Not when it comes to your safety. You took a risk today. A huge risk.”

Her hand stilled. “I know. I didn’t want to waste any time.”

“I respect your independence, but next time you pull a stunt like that, I might have to resort to this.” He waved the bandanna in the air.

“And that’s supposed to deter me?” Her eyes glazed at the memory of being tied and at his mercy. She sighed. “But you’re right. I took a huge risk. I’m sorry if I made you worry, and I appreciate your coming after me.”

“What, no anger?”

She shrugged. “I’ve done a lot of thinking lately. I’ve broken free from the family, the money, and the strings attached. To do that, I needed to prove to myself I could be independent. I’m just sorry I scared you in the process.”

“Well, I suppose I can forgive you.” He kissed the top of her head.

“You’re too generous.” She laughed. “I guess that means I can admit that I don’t mind you being my protector when it’s warranted. You know, it actually feels good to know someone cares enough to want to take care of me. Better than someone doing it because my father paid them to.”

He sucked in air but choked anyway. He hated living this lie. A few more loose ends and it was over. Too bad he had no idea how it would end.

He let out a deep breath and refocused on Grace. “You need to forget the Montgomery issues and put them behind you.”

She curled into him and her warmth seeped inside him. “It’s gotten easier with you around.” She yawned and he leaned over to flick off the light.

Seconds passed in silence, turning into long minutes. Had he ever thought he’d find such peace with a woman by his side? And Grace Montgomery, of all women—a client’s granddaughter, from a family so different from his own. He swallowed a laugh.

Though a part of him still believed Grace would miss the luxuries one day, he dismissed that part as prejudiced—as the part of him who’d disdained wealth as a kid. Not the man who knew Grace Montgomery.

No doubt about it, he’d fallen too hard to walk away. But if he chose to fight, he had one hell of an uphill battle ahead of him.



GRACE AWOKE WITH a jolt. She wasn't sure what had startled her, but once up, she tossed and turned, unable to fall back to sleep. She glanced over at the man sleeping by her side. His body heated her bed just as he melted her heart. How had she gotten used to his presence so quickly? And how would she get used to being alone again once he was gone?

She flicked on a small lamp in the corner of the room. She wasn't surprised that Ben didn't stir. When the mighty P.I. crashed, ten thousand drummers couldn't wake him.

And she'd worn him out. She felt the corners of her mouth turn upward at the memory. His lips had touched places she'd considered private, branding her and marking her his own. And she'd let him. Because nothing had been more sacred than her heart, and he'd stolen that without even trying.

In sleep, his hair fell over his forehead, making him lose some of the tough facade he exuded during the day. But none of the sexiness vanished. Sensuality was too much a part of him. He lay on his back, one arm over his head, the sheet dipping low at his waist. The dark hair on his chest trailed in an enticing line down his abdomen, disappearing beneath the covers. And what lay beneath...

She trembled at the memory. Her heart beat faster and arousal set her body throbbing. Grace didn't need to see what lay beneath the covers because she'd memorized him in intimate detail. Not only the sight of his erection, hard and ready just for her, but also the feel of him beneath her hand, and inside her body. For the first time, she understood the mixed metaphor that described that body part, velvet and steel.

His skin felt smooth to the touch yet hard and strong with ridges able to arouse her in an instant.

If only it ended there. If only sex and desire were all she felt for Ben. Life would be so much easier. She eased herself beside him on the mattress. Buried deep inside the tough private investigator was a softness he let few people see. A childhood of hard work and deprivation had shaped him, but Grace had seen a more vulnerable side: his love for his ailing mother, dedication to the poorer kids of the world, and his concern for Grace and the lengths to which he would go to look out for her welfare. Beneath the tough guy exterior which drew her was the man Grace Montgomery loved.

Quietly, she stood and crossed the room. She lifted her camera and raised it, focusing in on Ben. She'd snapped photos of him involved in various activities, but the man in her bed was the man of her dreams, and if she missed this opportunity, she might never have another one. And Grace had a hunch these photos would be all she'd have to sustain her heart and soul in the lonely nights ahead.

Swallowing over the lump in her throat, she began to take pictures, walking around the room and capturing him from different angles. In her heart, she knew these were the best pictures she'd ever taken. Because they held so much a part of her in each shot.

With each click of the shutter or flash of light, Grace cringed, not wanting him to wake up before she was through. But even if he rose now, she'd still have her treasured photos. And soon, that might be all she had left of Ben Callahan.

Chapter Twelve

GIVING GRACE THE freedom to go to work the next day and then to the park by herself was one of the hardest things Ben had ever done. Not because he worried about her safety but because it represented the end.

The end of the case for Emma was a mixed blessing. By definition, he'd accomplished all the older woman had asked, and his job here was complete. He'd tried to call her all morning and into late afternoon to let her know, but according to the help at the mansion, she wasn't available for calls. He didn't know what the hell that meant exactly except he'd have to stall his final report—a report he no longer wanted to give. And she didn't answer her cell phone.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearing five and he still had to bring the massage gear downstairs and leave it with the doorman, so he pulled the key Grace had given him out of his pocket and let himself inside her apartment.

As he walked through the living room and entered her bedroom, the scent of coconut oil assaulted his senses. The musky fragrance would never remind him of the beach again. Instead, he'd forever associate the scent with Grace lying nude, arms loosely bound, eyes wide and hazy with desire, waiting for him to possess her. The trust she'd given him would be in his heart forever. He just hoped that once Grace found out the truth, he'd have a chance at forever.

He paused at the nightstand to collect the bottles of oil when his gaze fell upon the bed. Her computer lay open and he

touched the laptop, intending to close it when the motion jiggled the screen to life.

Grace had obviously been busy today, but not just at the photography studio where she worked. Now that he thought about it, they'd parted this morning and he'd only assumed she was going to there for the day. Apparently, she'd had other things to do, including taking photos of him.

Although he was snooping, he sat down and scrolled through the photos. Of him. Unloading his truck, shooting hoops in the park, washing his vehicle... and sleeping in her bed last night.

Shock held him still. For the first time in his career, he got a glimpse of what it felt like to be the subject and not the investigator. Of being observed without knowing it. He'd never considered his subjects' feelings before, but now he had his own to contend with. He ought to feel violated—and would have if the person on the other side of the camera were anyone other than Grace.

He remembered the prickling feeling of being watched the day he washed his truck and how quickly he'd shrugged off his unease. Some private investigator he was, Ben thought wryly. The P.I. had been set up, and a part of him admired Grace's ability to catch him unaware.

Easing himself onto the bed, he scrolled through the photos one at a time, examining them through a detached eye. As a photographer, Grace was good. He'd already seen her more precious pictures and knew how well she captured life. She'd definitely do an incredible job on the CHANCES

brochure and bring in substantial money for the charity. Everything stopped in that one second Grace caught, but the vivid, vibrant scenes were powerful and perfect.

As he pored over these shots, Ben realized she hadn't just taken pictures of him. She'd captured his soul. Every facet of his personality, from the bad-boy attempting to be one with the kids from the street, to the relaxed man hosing down his truck on a Saturday morning, to the man sated by her lovemaking. She'd seen and savored them all.

He broke into a sweat, realizing just how well this woman knew him. She'd said her photos were a reflection of her feelings for the world around her and he had proof in his hands. Emotion showed in every picture, and as he saw himself through her eyes, he realized she was in deep.

As deep as Ben, and he was in love.

He muttered a curse. For as often as he'd contemplated his own feelings, he'd never factored in the possibility that Grace could fall in love with him. He'd been too absorbed by the impossibility of their situation and their extreme differences.

Differences that still existed.

His heart thundered loud in his chest and he realized that though he wanted a way out, finding one would hurt her badly. Love, caring—he felt them all for Grace, but would she forgive him for his deception? Would the woman seeking a life apart from the Montgomery family name understand that he'd kept one glaring truth from her—that he'd been hired by Emma Montgomery to keep tabs on her?

He shut the laptop and rose. One last look at the bed where he'd spent the best moments of his life and Ben let himself out the door. He didn't want to be there when Grace came home because he needed time to think.

The truth, the one thing that could give them a future, could also tear them apart. But even if he wanted to come clean with Grace, professional ethics and his respect for Emma demanded he speak to the older woman first before revealing both of their roles in the deception.

If Emma was angry, and she had every reason to be, she could demand he return the money he'd spent on the case—and Ben needed to factor his mother's situation and his finances into the equation before making any rash, selfish decisions. If it was just Ben, he was prepared to refund every penny he'd made on this case, but he was responsible for his mother, too.

But, he realized, his mother would understand. He could take that one burden off his shoulders. Having experienced love, she wouldn't deny her son the same thing, even if it meant delaying her move or sacrificing for him.

But Ben cared enough about his mother and Grace to find a way to make it work. He'd just find another way to pay for his mom's care, to take on more cases, and be less discriminating about his clientele from now on. The chance to have Grace by his side was worth any sacrifice.

But there was the biggest risk of all—the one that scared him more than anything—and that risk was Grace. When

disclosure was over, she could very well walk out on him anyway.



GRACE RACED OUT of the studio. She wasn't sure why, but she had the strongest compulsion to get home—almost as if she feared Ben would be gone if she didn't rush fast enough. So she ran, promising herself that as soon as she saw him, as soon as she got her hands on him, she'd use that one word most men feared. The word *she* feared would send him away for good.

But Grace was through hiding. Before meeting Ben, she knew she wanted out of her shell, out of the protection and false sense of security the Montgomery name and money offered. She'd shed all of those trappings, but not until she'd gotten involved with Ben did she discover the essence of the woman she was.

Grace Montgomery wasn't impressed with status or money nor was she affected by appearances. She cared more for what existed in someone's heart than in their wallet and found honesty more of a turn-on than pretense.

She found Ben so very attractive not because of his inherent sexiness, although she had to admit his appearance lured her in at first. But she gravitated toward Ben because he was the antithesis of everything she'd grown up with—because he was open and honest and real. Even when he was admitting his aversion to commitment, he was trusting her with the truth.

Before she let him go for good, she owed him the truth. She loved him and had every intention of telling him. Even if it drove him away forever.

She entered her apartment, surprised to find the door open. “Ben?” Though she’d left him her key to return Marcus’ supplies, she couldn’t imagine him being so careless as to leave her door unlocked. “Are you still here?”

“Still here? I just got here. It was the longest trip. Of course, if I still had my license, I’d have made it doing eighty-five, but your stick-in-the-mud father made sure I’ll never get behind the wheel again. Imagine sitting in the back of a limousine for three hours while the driver does sixty.”

“Gran?” Grace dropped her bag and ran for the living room.

“Who else has the key to your apartment?” Emma stood in the center of the room, arms open wide.

Grace met her halfway and found herself enveloped in her grandmother’s thin arms. Thank goodness they still had a great deal of strength, and as always, they made her feel both safe and loved. “First Logan and Cat, now you. What are you doing here?”

“Like I’d let another birthday pass without a visit.” Emma pushed Grace away and held her at arm’s length for inspection. “You’re beautiful. You could use a little meat on those bones, but you’re still my Gracie.”

A lump rose to her throat. It had been so long since her grandmother had resorted to her childhood name. Long

enough that even Ben's use of the endearment hadn't evoked childhood memories, only adult yearning.

She took a moment to admire her grandmother in return. Although older with each visit, Emma was still regal and beautiful, her white hair pulled up in the same bun she'd always worn, and her designer suit was spotless and unwrinkled despite the long car ride to New York. "You look wonderful, Gran."

"Of course, I do." The older woman grinned. "And thank goodness you have my genes. But you're avoiding the question, young lady. Who else has the key to your apartment?"

Grace took her grandmother's weathered hand and led her to the couch. "We have a lot to talk about." Suddenly, the months of silence became a burden and Grace wanted to unload on the only person who would understand and accept.

Emma wouldn't judge because she'd raised Grace to be her own person and make her own choices. But the first time Emma met Ben, Emma would pump him for so much information he'd think he was facing an interrogation. Grace hoped she'd be able to either warn Ben or give her grandmother enough facts to forestall the inquisition.

"There's a man," Grace began and decided to hold nothing back. "And I love him."

As if on cue, there was a knock on her door followed by the sound of the key in the lock. *Ben*. His timing was awful. She'd had no time to prime Emma or to warn him about what

was to come. Add to that Emma's visit would prevent Grace from laying out her feelings to Ben.

Yet she couldn't regret the spontaneous visit. She'd missed her grandmother as much as she'd missed her brother. Sitting for hours on end couldn't be easy for Emma, not at her age, yet she'd made the trip anyway.

"I take it that's him now?" Emma asked.

"Yes, and behave yourself." Not that Grace believed her warning would do a bit of good. If Emma wanted to be precocious, nothing could stop her.

"I always do. Is this the neighbor your brother met?"

"Yes," Grace said quickly before Emma could elaborate on what else Logan had seen. She only hoped her brother had been discreet.

"Grace?" Ben's voice carried into the apartment and his footsteps followed. "We need to talk."

"There seems to be a lot of that going around," Emma said with a laugh.

"Hush." Grace grit her teeth. Although she couldn't be happier to see her grandmother, Emma's nosiness was the one negative aspect of her surprise visit.

"I hope now's a good time..." His voice trailed off as he entered the living room, stopping short at the sight of Grace and her guest.

"Hi, Ben," Grace said.

He nodded at both women. Shock registered on his face.

She supposed he'd had his fill of surprise Montgomery visits in the past few days. "I'd like you to meet my grandmother." Grace rose and helped Emma to her feet. "I've told you so much about her I'm sure you feel as if you know her already."

Ben's smile froze on his face.

Meeting the family, Grace thought. Ben couldn't possibly be happy about this turn of events. Still, she was thrilled that the two people she loved most in the world could actually meet face-to-face.

She turned to Ben. "Ben, this is my grandmother, Emma Montgomery. Gran, this is my... new neighbor, Ben Callahan."

Since Ben's possession of her key made his relationship to Grace more than obvious, she opted just to call him a neighbor to spare him any further embarrassment. Emma would draw whatever conclusions she chose anyway, regardless of the words Grace used.

"A pleasure." Her grandmother beamed at Ben.

The sight of a man in Grace's apartment obviously did Emma's heart good. After Grace's dateless years and the lack of information Grace gave the older woman, her grandmother's teeth were probably chattering with excitement over the prospect of a live date to interrogate.

Emma extended her hand and he grasped it, shaking gently. "Same here."

Emma shook her head. “I’d expect a stronger grip from the man my granddaughter chose.”

Grace was unable to stifle a laugh.

Ben colored and pumped Emma’s hand with more gusto.

“That’s better. Now, sit and regale me with details. At my age, I don’t get near enough exposure to pheromones at work. The good Lord knows your parents sleeping in separate bedrooms hardly gets my blood pumping.”

Grace rolled her eyes. Her parents had been in separate bedrooms for as long as she could remember—except when they were arguing. It wasn’t a secret, but she didn’t like her grandmother to reveal private family details or embarrass Ben with her penchant for sexual innuendo at the most inopportune moment. And based upon his uncharacteristic silence, Emma had not only embarrassed him, but she had him at a loss for words.

Grace sighed. If she wasn’t careful, Emma would drive Ben away long before the words *I love you* even left Grace’s mouth. “Behave yourself, Gran.”

The older woman snorted. “Okay, then you two sit together and let me revel in young love.”

“Mrs. Montgomery...”

“It’s Emma,” her grandmother said pointedly. “And I’m genuinely glad you’re here. If my granddaughter likes you, that’s good enough for me. Gracie, open a bottle of wine.”

Grace narrowed her gaze. She’d expected Emma’s approval, if only because her grandmother trusted Grace’s

judgment. But she'd also expected Emma to hit the man up with twenty questions, not accept him at face value.

And it bothered Grace beyond reason that Emma was so accepting. Not because she wanted to subject Ben to an Inquisition but because she didn't understand why her grandmother wasn't pushing harder. Grace's prom date had gotten a more difficult time, and he'd been nothing more than a close friend.

"Why don't you two get to know each other and I'll see if I can find a decent bottle of wine." Maybe if she left them alone, Emma would talk. And maybe then the uneasy feeling in the pit of Grace's stomach would disappear.

Emma nodded. "Good idea. Have a seat, Ben."

Grace let out a long stream of air. So, there was hope for Emma yet.

Ben edged closer to Emma on the couch slowly as if facing a firing squad instead of her eighty-year-old spitfire of a grandmother. "Don't let her intimidate you, Ben," she called over her shoulder, then disappeared into the kitchen.

Grace knelt and began a search of the one cabinet that might have some wine or something Emma would enjoy drinking. Coming up empty, she rose and glanced through the pass-through. Emma and Ben sat together on the couch, deep in conversation.

Like two co-conspirators.

The uneasy feeling returned. She rounded the corner and joined them in the living room. Silence surrounded them. A

silence so unlike Emma that a proverbial tingle raced up Grace's spine.

"No wine," she said inanely.

Emma shrugged.

"I know you two must have a lot of catching up to do so..." Ben began to stand.

Grace stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Please, don't go."

He eased himself back into the seat beside Emma. "Your grandmother said she'd like to see my truck sometime."

"Oh, really."

"Yes. I adore high up trucks. If only your father would let me drive one."

Grace narrowed her eyes. "Since when? You like a good, fast, sports car. Isn't that what you said when the judge refused to let you behind the wheel of his McClaren? And when he bought a Range Rover you turned up your nose at it."

"Well, yes, but your father's a stick-in-the-mud. Ben here's truck would have character."

"You barely know Ben, so what makes you say that?" Grace placed her hands on her hips and faced her grandmother. "And you haven't asked him a single prying question since he walked in the door. That's unlike you, even with someone you know well. And you never met Ben before today so he's a prime candidate for your meddling..." Grace's voice trailed off.

She froze. Without warning, snatches of conversation came back to her. *My grandmother handpicked Cat. Set them up and locked them in a closet together. Her matchmaking shenanigans would put the most seasoned pro to shame...*

Impossible. Her grandmother and Ben had never met before today.

Emma patted Ben's hand. "Gut instinct, dear. He seems like a good boy and I trust your judgment. You know that."

Grace suddenly recalled with startling clarity Logan's wedding reception on the beach, along with Emma's teasing words: *Grace, you're my final project. I refuse to leave this earth without seeing you happily settled down. I think a trip to New York City is in order.*

She shook her head harder. Impossible, she thought again. Then why did the two of them look so guilty? *What are they hiding?*

"We're not hiding anything. I'm just pleased that everything worked out the way I'd hoped." Emma spoke at the same time Grace realized she'd asked the question aloud.

"And how's that?" Grace asked, still wary.

"You know me. I just want you settled and happy." Emma shifted in her seat, fidgeting uncomfortably.

"And what did you do to make that happen?" Grace glanced back and forth between Emma and Ben. "What could you possibly have done? Because it's obvious to me you're hiding something."

"Nonsense." But Emma didn't meet her gaze.

“Ben?” Grace captured his attention. “What is it my grandmother won’t tell me?”

“Grace, can we talk about this later when we’re alone?”

Her mouth grew dry. “Up till now, I was working on a hunch. On gut instinct and no concrete evidence. But since you’ve just all but admitted there *is* something between you two, it’s time you filled me in.” She placed her hands on her hips. “Right now.”

“I’d rather not do this now.” Ben’s reluctance couldn’t be more obvious.

Emma placed a hand on his arm and Grace knew something was wrong. “I think she’s got us cornered,” Emma said, looking none too happy at the prospect.

The uneasiness in Grace’s stomach turned into painful cramping. “Cornered about what?” she asked, though she already knew—or thought she did.

“This damn charade,” Ben said. He walked closer to Grace and tried to touch her cheek.

She stepped back, needing the space to think. “So, you know each other.”

“We’ve met,” Emma hedged.

Grace folded her arms across her chest. “Deliberately vague doesn’t cut it, Gran. Met how? Where?”

Ben and Emma met each other’s gaze, each, it seemed, imploring the other to fill Grace in on their secret. As she waited, her heart pounded harder in her chest.

Finally, Ben spoke first. “We met at the Montgomery Estate a few weeks ago when Emma hired me.” He let out a groan, running a hand through his already-disheveled hair.

“*Hired you?*” This was a scenario she’d never envisioned.

He shook his head. “We can talk about this later. Please.”

She heard the plea in his voice and ignored it. “Hired you to do what?” she asked again.

He dipped his head and said, “To keep tabs on you and fill her in on your activities.” The words seemed to be drawn from inside him painfully, but the knowledge that he hurt, too, didn’t soften the blow.

“But you have to understand Emma’s reasons,” he went on. “You were keeping her in the dark and she was concerned.”

Grace swallowed over the lump in her throat. “It’s kind of you to stick up for my grandmother’s meddling, but it doesn’t exonerate her. Or you. It’s too little information and too late for the reasons to matter.” Grace lowered herself into the nearest chair, agony tearing her apart.

The man she’d thought had nothing to do with the Montgomery family name or money had been paid for all the attention he’d shown her. He hadn’t learned about her life or looked out for her welfare because he cared. He hadn’t fallen for *just Grace* at all.

The sense of betrayal rose, clogging her throat, making her unable to swallow. She could barely speak. No wonder he couldn’t promise anything beyond their short time together—

when Emma was no longer laying out cash for his services, Ben intended to be gone.

Grace looked up, not surprised to see her grandmother couldn't meet her gaze. But Ben's eyes bore into hers. She'd seen those eyes glazed by passion and lightened by laughter. Now, emotion flickered in the darkened depths, and she wanted to grasp onto those emotions like a lifeline.

How pathetic, Grace thought. Because she wanted some ray of hope, she was willing to see caring where there was none. She'd only thought she'd caught glimpses of his innermost thoughts and feelings, only deluded herself into thinking he was falling as hard for her as she'd fallen for him.

She'd believed it because she thought she knew him. But looking at Ben now, the lies and deception exposed, she didn't know him at all. And it hurt. Badly.

"Grace..." His voice intruded on her pain.

She shook her head. She didn't want to hear anything he had to say. What could possibly excuse such a colossal lie? Just doing his job would only have held water until their relationship turned from neighbors to lovers. At that point, he might not have desired forever, but he could have told her the truth.

"If you'll just let me explain." Emma sounded more fragile than usual, and Grace understood. She felt as if she herself might shatter if she had to hear any more.

She needed to get away from them. From the two people she loved most—and the two who had betrayed her.

Chapter Thirteen

GRACE SLAMMED THE apartment door shut behind her. Ben didn't try to stop her. The shattered look of hurt that had flashed across her delicate features would live inside him forever. If getting away from them helped, he was all for letting her go.

He turned to Emma. The older woman lowered herself into a seat, looking weary. "There had to be a better way to tell her."

He wasn't sure if she'd have taken the news any better coming from him first and him alone, but he'd never know. Emma's arrival had destroyed any hope of letting Grace down gently.

"I had the best of intentions, but I still hurt her badly."

Ben placed a hand on Emma's shoulder. "It wasn't your fault." If he'd kept his hands to himself, if he'd done his job and gotten out, if he'd remained detached and uninvolved, none of this would ever have happened.

Of course, he'd have missed out on the best thing to come along in his lifetime, but he wasn't the person who counted. That was Grace.

"Sit down, Benjamin."

He blinked, certain he hadn't heard Emma correctly. No one called him Benjamin, not even his mother, and Emma couldn't possibly have regained her spunk and fortitude so

quickly. One glance into those regal brown eyes and he realized he'd underestimated her again.

So, Ben did the only thing he could under the circumstances. He sat.

"I won't have you blaming yourself for my meddling. Make no mistake. I'd heard wonderful things about you professionally and I needed your assistance to keep an eye on my granddaughter, but I took one look at you and I just knew you'd be good for Grace. Women's intuition, you understand." Emma tapped at her head and nodded.

Ben didn't understand. "You're telling me you hired me for a legitimate business reason, but you wanted me to get involved with your granddaughter?"

Emma nodded.

So, he'd been set up as much as Grace. Somehow, Ben doubted the knowledge would make her feel any better. And considering he'd had a choice every step of the way, he was still disgusted with his actions and the hurt they'd caused.

He clenched his hands into fists at his side and faced Grace's grandmother. "I don't like being played for a fool."

"I saw the look on your face the minute you laid eyes on her picture. And can you deny the chemistry between you two now? Can you deny you've fallen in love with her?"

Ben's stomach clenched hard. Thinking it to himself and hearing the words aloud were very different things. Yet faced with Grace's beloved grandmother, he couldn't lie. Not even in the wake of the older woman's meddling ways. Not even when

he was dealing with the very real possibility that he'd lost Grace for good.

"I'm not sure how I feel matters anymore. She's not likely to forgive the lies, and frankly, I wouldn't blame her." He gazed around the expensively decorated apartment, seeing how even this environment was a facet of Grace, one he loved as much as the fun-loving, down-to-earth woman who lived here.

Without warning, Emma smacked him hard on the shoulder. He glanced up, shocked at the strength in her frail bones and surprised she felt comfortable enough to whack him like that. "What was that for?"

"You're too much like Logan for your own good. Don't take things sitting down. You need to fight for what you want. If you're out of ideas, I can help..."

"No, thank you." The older woman had done enough. "I can handle things on my own."

He doubted he could change the outcome, but he could most definitely have his one-on-one with Grace before she threw him out of her life. At the very least, she deserved to understand what motivated his actions, even if the explanation couldn't make up for the pain of his deception.

Ben stood. "Can I get you anything before I go?"

Emma glanced up at him, concern and caring in her eyes. "You can tell me my granddaughter's okay."

He grasped her hand and held on tight. "She's fine. Or at least she was fine until tonight." Time to lay all his cards on

the table, Ben thought. “There won’t be any further report, written or otherwise.”

Emma nodded in understanding. “I’m past wanting details anyway. I see now how wrong that really was.”

“Good because I can’t give you any more information about Grace and still live with myself. But I can refund what money you’ve laid out for this assignment, and if I run short, I swear to you I’ll pay you back in installments.”

The older woman clucked her tongue in a gesture reminiscent of his mother. “Nonsense. You did your job and I pay for services rendered.”

And that, Ben thought, was the ultimate problem. If he accepted any of Emma’s money, Grace would never believe his interest in her was real, separate and apart from the Montgomery name and Montgomery money. Even if he didn’t, she might not believe him.

Because Ben had made her biggest fear come true and had probably decimated the self-worth she’d worked so hard to achieve. He’d recently been so sure that she would return to her privileged lifestyle once the novelty of independence wore off. But now he knew she would never abandon a life that had been so right for her. A life he’d now undercut with his deceit.

He didn’t like himself much right now. “It’s useless to argue about payment.”

Emma nodded. “I agree. Your time would be better spent finding Grace, and since that’s where you’d rather be, then I suggest you get to it.”

“Tell me one thing first.”

“What’s that?”

“Why are you so accepting of someone you know doesn’t have your family background or status? Someone who’ll make Grace’s judge father cringe at best?” He voiced the question that had been nagging at him.

Emma treated him to a genuine smile. “That’s simple. You make my granddaughter happy.”

Maybe he had once. But not anymore.

Yet he found it impossible to dislike or remain angry with Emma Montgomery, no matter how much trouble she caused or how irrepressible she chose to be. Deep down she had a heart of gold.

Like Grace.

Ben had broken that heart. He only hoped he could undo some of the damage he’d caused. If not, he’d live with the consequences—and emptiness—for the rest of his life.



BEN APPROACHED HER from behind. He’d found her at the park, kicking at the sand in the sandbox. She could have been a kid who’d lost her best friend, but Ben knew better. She was a woman who’d lost someone she loved and her faith in a man she’d trusted. The anguish couldn’t be smoothed over with a stick of candy or a kiss on the cheek. Much as he’d like to try.

He came up beside her and eased himself onto the wooden planks surrounding the sand. “Hi, there.”

She didn't glance up. "I suppose that's just one of the drawbacks of you being a private investigator. The ability to find people who don't want to be found."

"If you didn't want to be found you wouldn't have come here." Ben drew a deep breath. "I didn't find you because of professional skills. I found you because I know *you*."

"Too bad I can't say the same." She laughed, but it wasn't the lighthearted laugh he'd come to associate with Grace, and his gut twisted with the knowledge that he'd taken that away from her.

All he could do was explain. "When I took the case, I didn't know you. Working for Emma was just another assignment."

"That paid extremely well, no doubt."

He wished he could deny it. "Would it make a difference if I said I needed the money to get my mother into assisted care?"

She kicked at the dirt once more. "I'm not angry with you for taking a job. You're entitled. I just can't understand how you could... sleep with me knowing you were taking money to get close to me. I don't understand how you... how *we* did the things we did together, and you never once tried to tell me the truth."

She swiped at a tear dripping down her face and his gut clenched with regret and shame. Mere words wouldn't undo the damage he'd caused.

Her brown eyes, absent of the light and life he adored, met his gaze. “And most of all I don’t understand how you let me go on believing that what we shared was the one thing in my life separate and apart from my family’s name and money.”

Her voice cracked, but she didn’t quit talking and Ben didn’t try to stop her.

“You knew how important my independence was. You knew, even if I never said it aloud, that my whole self-perception had been shaped by what my family could buy for me. But you—I never thought you could be bought. Not for me, not for anyone. Yet it turns out that’s exactly what happened. Emma bought you. For me.”

“Grace...”

She shook her head. “She bought your services as a private investigator as a ruse for you to get close to me. She hoped you’d fall in love with me. Because she didn’t think I was worthy on my own.”

Hearing her view of their situation, Ben thought he’d be sick. Not once had he believed he’d been bought to fall in love with Grace.

He’d done that all on his own. “Is it my turn yet?”

“Go ahead. But like I said earlier, it’s too little too late.”

“Maybe so, but I’m not leaving until you hear me out.”

Her arm swept the expanse of the park. “Free speech,” she muttered. “I can’t deny you that.”

“Gee, thanks,” he said wryly. “This is more serious than that.”

She tipped her head to the side and looked at him through huge brown eyes. “More serious than constitutional rights? Then I suppose it needs to be said.”

He grabbed for her ice-cold hand. “I’m not sure this is going to come out right. It’s twisted in here.” He pointed to his head. “And here.” He tapped at his heart. “So I’m not positive I can even explain myself well to you. But I’ll give it a shot.”

Dusk was setting around them, the sun dipping below the buildings, and a cool breeze chilled the air. But Ben wasn’t going anywhere, and so far, neither was Grace.

This was his last opportunity. His last chance to win—or lose—the woman he loved. Considering she seemed to have her mind set against him, he doubted anything he said now would make a difference. But he couldn’t live the rest of his life without trying.

“It was never just a job. From the second I saw your picture...”

“You saw my picture?” She shook her head. “Never mind. Emma’s been foisting my photo on eligible males for as long as I can remember. Go on.”

“From the minute I saw your picture, I was invested. I warned myself to back off, to let the case go, but I couldn’t.”

“The money.”

“My mother, the money, and you. All three got tangled together. She needs more care than I can provide right now.

It'll take six months to a year of cases I wouldn't normally touch to make a large enough cushion to set her up in the home of her choice."

Unexpectedly, Grace placed a hand on his arm. A heated tingling set up residence on his skin. "You love her. I can understand that."

"I'm not sure you can. You grew up in that mansion. I grew up on the other side looking in. I understand now that even without money I got the better end of the deal—because I had love and you didn't." He covered her hand with his. "You had to perform for your father and still didn't get the love that should have been unconditional, the love you deserved. But you had money. And servants." He let out a groan. "And my mother was one of them. Can you imagine what that's like? A woman who spent her life as a mother—a stay-at-home mother—suddenly finds herself a widow with little money. So, she turns to the only thing she knows—housekeeping for others. And those others weren't as kind to the help as I suspect Emma is."



GRACE SHUDDERED, RECALLING her father's bellowing at 'the servants,' as he called them, belittling them for unimportant things not done correctly.

"And I knew how badly she was being treated and that she put up with it to support me, us. But I couldn't do a damn thing about it until years later."

Grace watched Ben's face contort with remembered pain and she felt not only for him but for his mother, a woman

she'd never met. She understood his frustration at his youth and inability to do anything but watch his mother suffer to make his life better. She understood, too, that everything he did now was to compensate and make up for things he hadn't been able to change back then.

But that was the past while Grace was the present. And she'd been the one to pay for Ben's atonement. "I understand why you took the case. I don't understand why the minute our relationship became intimate you didn't come clean."

He ran a hand through his hair. "That's where things got tangled. I'd promised Emma secrecy. By virtue of taking the case, my professional ethics had to come first. And I know how lame it sounds now, but it's the truth."

She listened in silence, so he kept going.

"There was also the attack and the threat. If I'd told you that I was working for Emma, you'd have kicked me out of your life. No way would you have let me close enough to make sure you were safe. I couldn't take the risk with your life."

"Because Emma was paying you to keep me safe."

"No! Because I cared too much to let you walk the streets alone and unprotected." His dark eyes held her captive and begged for her to believe.

She stared back, unwilling to be the one to break eye contact, wishing he'd pull her into his arms and knowing she'd break away if he did. As much as she wanted to believe him, she couldn't get past the fact that he'd been paid for every bit

of interest he'd shown in her life. Taken to the extreme, he'd been paid by a family member she loved to sleep with her. And it hurt.

“So, let me get this straight. You didn't tell me because you owed Emma your loyalty and because you wanted to protect me from a threat on the street.”

“That's right.”

She kicked at the sand in the box hard, not caring that it sifted onto Ben. What was a little more dirt on his hands? “No, it's wrong. Because, let's face it, you took money from my grandmother and you felt a responsibility toward her. You took the money for your mother, to whom you also feel responsible. You, your mother, and my grandmother. Every person in this scenario taken care of... except me.”

She hated the self-pity in her voice when it was the last thing she was feeling. Much stronger were anger and betrayal, hurt and pain for a love gone bad. One that obviously never existed. Not on his side, anyway.

At least she could give him credit for not lying about feelings that didn't exist.

Hurt and disbelief flashed across his handsome face. “It wasn't like that.” He stood and shoved his hands into his back pockets. “Summed up badly, I made a bad decision in the name of ethics, Gracie.”

“I respect your ethics. I don't respect the lies.”

“And I don't respect the fact that I couldn't keep my damn hands off you.” He reached for her, grabbing her shoulders and

pulling her close. “I still can’t.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not.”

His hands traveled down her arms and up again. His body heat was potent as was his sexuality—and the love she still felt, regardless that her feelings went unreciprocated.

“Trust me, it is.” Ben groaned in frustration. “And if you believe nothing else, believe this: this mess didn’t have anything to do with you. It had to do with me. I should have backed off. I should have kept things platonic. I shouldn’t have gotten involved with a client’s granddaughter, the subject of my investigation.”

“Well, you did.” The anger she’d been withholding resurfaced and she shoved him away. “You damn well did. Not only did you put your hands on me but inside me, dammit. I was a woman you couldn’t keep your hands off of but not one you respected enough to tell the truth.”

He sighed and stepped back, obviously accepting the barriers she’d placed between them. “I understand you’re hurt, Grace, but hurt doesn’t change the feelings you had before you found out the truth.”

She lifted her chin a notch. “And what would those be?”

“You love me.”

Feeling as if she’d been punched in the stomach, she nearly doubled over. She held herself around the waist—anything to hold herself together until he was gone. “That’s an arrogant assumption.”

He shook his head. “It’s fact. I saw the pictures you took of me. No one’s ever gotten that close. That deep. No one’s cared enough to bother. So, you can be hurt and betrayed. I wouldn’t presume to take that away from you. But when the pain wears off, what’ll happen to the love?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

A tired smile pulled at his lips. “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?”

She shook her head. “Unlike you, I can’t bring myself to lie.”

“That’s good. Because it’s just one of the things I love about you.” He raised his hand in a wave, turned, and respected her silent request. He left her alone, the way she’d been before he barged into her solitary existence.

The way she’d be for the rest of her life.



BEN LOADED THE last of his things into the Explorer. Moving out of the Murray Hill apartment and back into his studio in the Village should have made him happy. He’d never been comfortable in the apartment owned by the landlord’s brother. But having Grace across the hall had been worth the sacrifice.

In fact, having her in his life, even for a short time, was a selfish blessing for a guy who didn’t deserve one. If he’d been up-front with her sooner, maybe he’d be moving *in* with her instead of away. Then again, if he’d told her he loved her as he’d wanted to last night, he might have eaten a mouthful of sand for dinner.

Ben had to face that a future with Grace was never meant to be. From the day he'd accepted Emma's money in exchange for keeping tabs on her granddaughter, he'd sealed the impossibility of any long-term relationship. Coming clean sooner rather than later wouldn't have changed her feelings of betrayal. In her eyes, he'd used her and had been paid for the opportunity.

That was why he hadn't bothered telling her he had no intention of keeping Emma's money nor taking any further payment. It was also why he hadn't told her he loved her, too. From the bleak look in her eyes, it wouldn't have made a damn bit of difference.

He muttered a curse and slammed the back closed. As he turned, an uneasy feeling of being watched stole over him. Recalling the last time he'd had such a sensation and the resulting photos he'd seen in Grace's apartment, Ben had to laugh aloud.

Grace couldn't stand the sight of him. There was no chance in hell she cared enough to watch him out her window now. Unless she was waving goodbye.



GRACE LOWERED THE camera and set it down on the dresser. Taking pictures of Ben as he loaded his truck and prepared to drive off was torture. Why she thought she'd find closure and peace in the act, she'd never know.

Instead, she found herself standing by the window with tears pouring out of her eyes as she called herself a coward for refusing to confront Ben one more time.

“All you have to do is run downstairs and stop him.”

Grace folded her arms across her chest and turned to face her grandmother.

Because of Emma’s age, apology, and undying love for her, Grace had forgiven her last night. If she hadn’t kept Emma in the dark and caused her to worry, her grandmother wouldn’t have hired Ben. Grace accepted that she’d taken her bid for independence too far. She’d been the one to set the chain of events in motion that led to this moment.

She glanced out the window once more. Ben stood talking to the doorman. One hip propped against the Explorer, his shirt hem ragged from being ripped at the seam and his sleeves cut by hand, he looked like the bad boy she’d fallen in love with.

“It’s not the lie that’s stopping you from going after him, is it?” Emma asked. “Because Lord knows you and Logan told me your fair share growing up and I’m still speaking to you both. Never took you across my knee, either.” A wicked gleam sparked in Emma’s gaze. “But that just might be a good punishment for your Ben.”

Grace couldn’t help but laugh despite the pain. “Cut it out, Gran. It’s not the lie that’s holding me back.”

She’d gotten past that last night. Alone in the dark, remembering the time she and Ben had spent together, recalling the feel of his arms around her, Grace knew in her heart he was still the decent, honest man she’d pegged him to be. A man with too many responsibilities and too many people to answer to.

Emma had put him in an untenable position—she'd done it to Logan and Catherine before him. But Emma hadn't realized Ben had an ailing mother to consider on top of his own feelings. In the light of day, Grace could even respect his decision to remain silent in order to secure his mother's health and well-being.

She also recalled the intimacy they'd shared, and while she'd given him her body, she'd also given him her heart. He just hadn't felt the same. "He doesn't love me, Gran. He had fun with me. He cares about me. But he doesn't love me."

"And how do you know this? What makes you so certain?"

Grace swallowed over the lump in her throat. "Because he knows I love him, and he didn't say it back."

But she hadn't actually said it to him, either, Grace realized. Her heart began to pound hard in her chest.

Emma raised an eyebrow, a gesture Grace had become familiar with over the years. One that meant her grandmother had all the answers while Grace or Logan or whoever she was lecturing had none.

"Since when do men lay their feelings on the line with words?" Emma asked.

Grace blinked. "Go on." She glanced out the window again.

Ben still stood, engrossed in conversation. She hadn't lost him—yet. And even without hearing what else Emma had to say, she already had one foot out the door—because she hadn't

laid her feelings on the line, either. And suddenly, she knew why.

She was a coward. She could let Ben go now and blame him for his lies, or she could accept his explanation and move on. Before Emma's shenanigans had blown up in her face, Grace had promised herself she'd tell Ben she loved him. If he'd still chosen to leave, she'd have stepped aside without another word because he'd said no commitment and she'd given her promise that she'd let him go. But she'd never gotten the chance... because he'd never had the opportunity to reject her.

“Not everyone's as open with their feelings as I am,” her grandmother said.

Grace laughed. “That's an understatement.”

“And not everyone's as cold and unfeeling as your father. He may never have said he loved you, but he does in his own arrogant, I-want-her-to-fit-the-mold way. Doesn't excuse him for acting like an ass, but he loves you. And if you confronted him, he might just say it back. Or maybe he wouldn't, and you'd be left out there raw and exposed. Same way you've been for most of your life.”

Grace blinked back tears. Her grandmother had just summed up her biggest fear—that Ben would reject her the same way her parents had. So, instead of getting past the lie, she'd let it come between them. Because it was easier to blame Ben than set herself up for potential rejection.

But thanks to Ben, she'd discovered the woman named Grace Montgomery. She learned she had an innate sensuality,

a deep ability to love, and a heartfelt sense of honesty. How could she demand the truth from Ben if she wasn't willing to give it herself? And besides, hadn't she decided long before Ben that she was through hiding from life?

"The opposite sex is notorious for withholding their feelings. They won't chance putting themselves out there to be hurt. It's up to us women to make the first move. Where would we be if Eve hadn't eaten the apple? We certainly wouldn't be having all this fun, now would we?" Emma winked at Grace. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Grace hugged her grandmother tight. "I've got to go."

"It's about time," Emma muttered.

As Grace ran for the door, her grandmother's voice followed after her. "Did I mention he's refusing to take my money?"

Grace laughed, feeling more hopeful than she had seconds earlier, and slipped into the hall.



BEN TOOK ONE last look at the high-rise building and turned to get into his truck. No point in indulging in lingering regrets or what-ifs, he thought. The end had come.

"Going somewhere?"

At the sound of Grace's soft voice, he turned fast. She faced him wearing a pair of frayed shorts and a T-shirt. But cut the hem of the shirt, exposing the pale skin on her stomach and accentuating her curves. His mouth grew dry just looking at her and his jeans grew too tight.

“I asked if you’re going somewhere.” She folded her arms across her chest.

He wasn’t sure if she meant to be provocative, but the effect of her action pushed the rounded flesh up enticingly. “I was heading home.”

She nodded. “You never did mention where home was.”

“The Village.” He had no desire to stand in broad daylight and converse with her like total strangers. Just being around Grace and not being able to touch her reminded him of his bad judgment and mistakes, of all the might-have-beens and things they’d never share.

He turned toward the car, away from her, away from the memories.

Her sudden hold on his wrist surprised him. “Running again?”

He recognized the challenge in her voice and took heart. If she was stopping him from leaving, she had something to say. And he intended to stick around and hear every word.

The usual stream of people entered and exited the building. “How about we take this somewhere private?” He was deliberately teasing her, reminding her of the games they’d played, hoping she’d recall where those dares and challenges had ended up.

She grinned. “Sure thing.” She swung around and her ponytail whipped behind her in a sassy move that turned him on even more. Now, this was the Grace he liked to see—happy, playful, hopeful.

She grabbed for the handle of the truck and opened the door and slid into the back.

He met her gaze and grinned before hopping into the front seat, turning on the ignition, and driving the vehicle around to the side street behind the building where they'd parked once before. Faster than he thought possible, he turned off the ignition, exited and climbed into the back seat along with her.

“Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you aren't running again after all.” Her eyes glittered with hope and a touch of uncertainty. The uncertainty got to him, wrapping around his heart and not letting go.

He placed his knuckles beneath her chin and lifted her face to meet his gaze. “No more games, Gracie. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere. Not till you have your say and maybe not even after that.”

She nodded. “I see that.” Her voice trembled slightly.

Wanting to ease that vulnerability once and for all, he leaned within kissing distance. “You've got me alone, princess.” Her darkened eyes met his. “Now, what are you going to do with me?” Ben's pulse thudded so loud he would swear Grace could hear it, too.

“Did you mean it when you said you don't do commitment?”

Her question took him by surprise. “I meant it at the time. I didn't know I'd...”

“Didn't know you'd what? Because I love you, Ben, and it's a rough emotion to be feeling alone.” Her brown eyes were

wide and she sat so still he was afraid she'd shatter if he botched his answer.

He hadn't realized how badly he needed to hear her say the words. Now that she had, his world righted itself once more.

His heart kicked into high gear. "I didn't know I'd fall in love with you, too." He shook his head. "Yes, I did. In my gut, I knew from the moment I laid eyes on that picture. But I couldn't let myself feel it any more than I could have told you the truth. But I should have. Because from the beginning, you were more important to me than the case, than Emma, even more than my mother. And that's saying a lot."

She brushed her lips over his. Featherlight, the comforting kiss was still enough to tease, and arouse, and make him want much more. "Speaking of your mother, you're taking Emma's money. And don't fight me on this if you ever want to get lucky again. And second, when do I get to meet her?"



GRACE HELD HER breath and waited. No more hiding. She'd conquered her fear, but she still didn't know if she'd walk away with her heart intact. She hoped, but she needed proof.

She got it when Ben lifted her around the waist and pulled her onto his lap. She shifted until her legs straddled his thighs and she was back where she belonged. His erection pulsed hard and strong between her legs in a steady beat that echoed the need inside of her.

"We have a few things to take care of first."

"I take it you're not going anywhere?" she asked.

“Sweetheart, nothing and no one could tear me away from you. Not now, not ever.”

He leaned forward and licked a tear off her cheek.

“You make me happy,” she said.

“You always cry when you’re happy?”

Grace laughed. “Stick around and find out.”

Epilogue

EMMA HAD PEERED out the window, watching as Grace lured Ben into his truck and together, they disappeared around the corner. Then she'd let out a long sigh of relief.

This matchmaking business was draining for a woman of her age, she thought now as she lowered herself into a seat on the couch. If only young people today weren't so difficult her job would be so much easier.

But she'd accomplished her goals and with great success. Logan was happily married and Grace was well on her way. She patted her bun with satisfaction. If Ben was as good as Emma thought he'd be, he and Grace wouldn't return from around the corner for quite a while. Thinking back to her youth, she knew that with a little imagination, the back seat could be a very inventive place for intimate relations.

She stretched her legs in front of her. They ached from yesterday's long car ride, but she'd never felt so happy or rejuvenated. Her presence was just what those two young kids needed to push them toward that final step—admitting their true feelings.

With Grace and Logan settled, Emma could rest easy that her beloved immediate family was taken care of. But she couldn't sit still for long. No, a woman of her talent... it would be a shame to waste a precious minute of the time she had left on this earth.

And Emma planned to be around for a long time. Long enough to bounce Grace and Ben's children on her knee. But what would keep her occupied in the meantime?

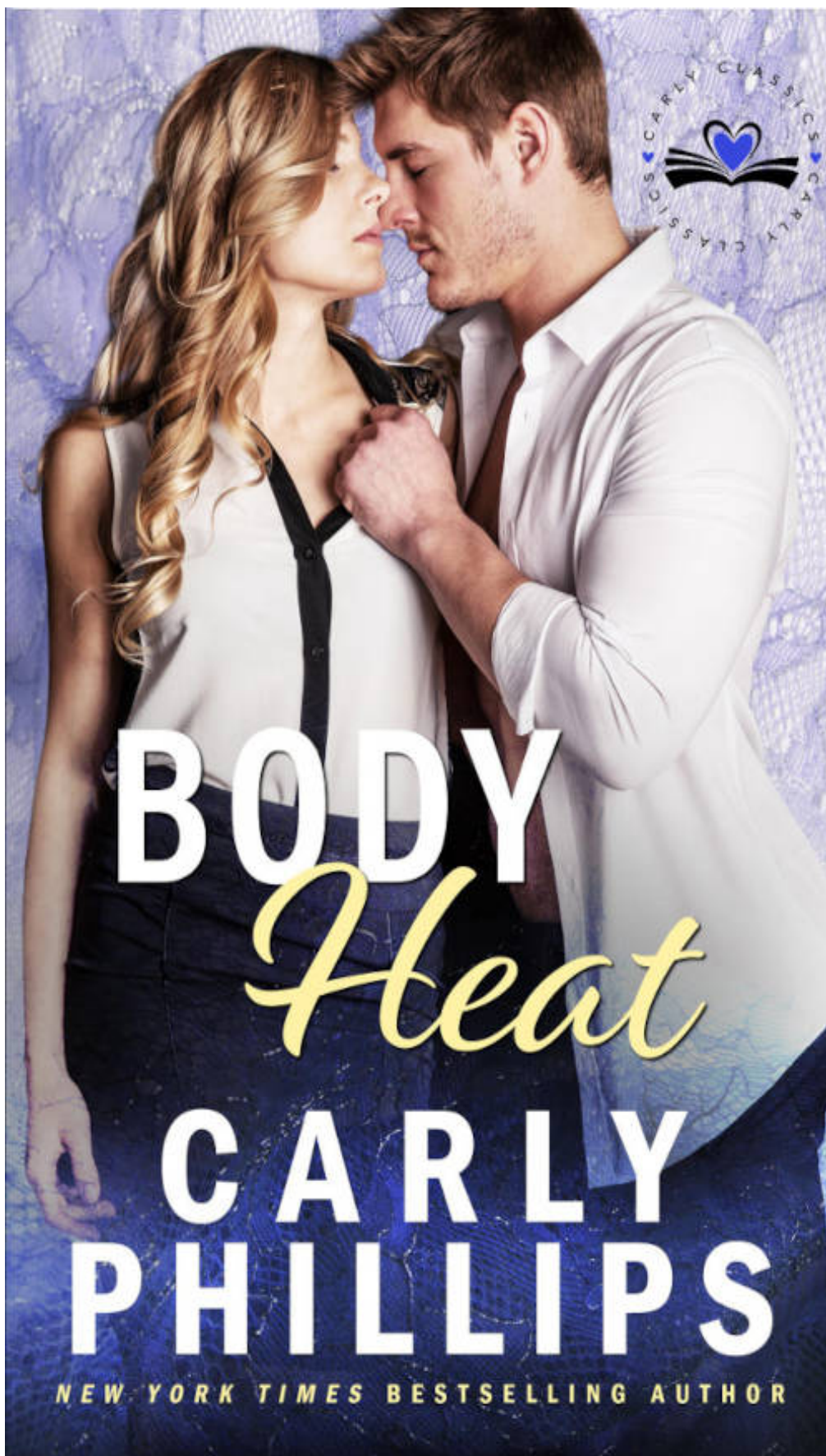
Continue what she was good at! She snapped her fingers as the thought came to her. She had nieces and nephews that would be at her disposal in just a few years. In the meantime, her social set was full of widows, widowers, and divorcées. All people in desperate need of companionship—even if they didn't know it yet. Most of them had had miserable first marriages, but they hadn't had Emma Montgomery to choose their mates.

She picked up the cell phone Logan had insisted she own and learn how to use, pleased when Alice Farnsworth answered on the first ring. "Alice, I'm visiting my granddaughter, but I'll be home tomorrow in time for the charity benefit at Wild Acres Country Club. My chauffeur's ill and I was wondering if you could pick me up."

She listened to her response. "No problem? Well, thank you. Did I mention I promised to drive poor Ralph Emerson? He hasn't been the same since his wife passed on..."

Yes, Emma thought. She was born to matchmake, those little snafus notwithstanding. She glanced at her watch. After all, Ben and Grace still hadn't resurfaced, and it had been a good half hour or more.

Ah, to be young, and be able to make love all you wanted, 24/7. Grace and Ben were lucky, indeed.



BODY

Heat

**CARLY
PHILLIPS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BODY HEAT

THE SIMPLY SERIES

BOOK 4

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Carly Phillips

Chapter One

THE DAYS WERE hot but, thanks to her, his nights were even hotter. He welcomed the mixture of anticipation and desire that rushed through him as he looked around The Sidewalk Café. As he looked for *her*.

Jake Lowell clasped his hand around a chilled glass of ice water. The condensation left his palm cold and wet, in stark contrast to the New York City heat and humidity pulsing around him. In opposition to the inferno raging inside him. Nothing could extinguish the flame she'd ignited.

He leaned forward in the wrought-iron seat, shifting, trying to find a comfortable position for his back against the hard metal, one that wouldn't put pressure on his left shoulder and the injury that had finally begun to heal. He shifted again, and pain shot through his upper body. Damn fancy chair. Outdoor cafés with sissy drinks weren't his thing, they were his sister's. But ever since he'd come here for the first time, ever since he'd taken a look at the sexy waitress with the compelling gaze, he'd forced himself to endure.

Jake glanced around, but the woman who starred in his fantasies was nowhere to be found.

Only a few couples graced the outdoor section of the restaurant. He looked at his watch. Typical of his sister, Rina, she was already fifteen minutes late. After a childhood of sharing one bathroom with a teenage girl, he'd become used to waiting for her; he'd be shocked if she showed up on time. But

with the guy who shot Jake wandering the street, Rina's lateness—typical or not—made him wary.

He took in the empty street once more, then turned toward the inside of the nearly empty restaurant and bar, reminding himself that the scum was now living a so-called clean life and that his sister was safe. He headed inside, figuring he'd wait for Rina in front of the television set and a good Yankee game.

That was when he saw *her*—his vision in white jeans and a black tank top with an apron tied around her waist. She stood by the bar, a bottle of water in hand. Her auburn hair had been pulled back in a ponytail while stray strands resisted confinement and curled around a face with delicate, angelic features. More than lust or desire, it was the purity in her expression and the smile on her lips that lured him back to this place, to her, over and over again.

After reading an order off her pad, she shoved it into her pocket, and the bartender got busy mixing drinks. Jake rose from his seat and walked to the open sliding glass door that led to the inside of the restaurant. She leaned against the wall and glanced around—looking for what, he didn't know. Then she tipped her head backward and ran the bottle over her forehead, down one cheek and then the next, until she finally eased it over her long neck.

As the bottle moved over her skin, he swallowed a groan. Her back arched and her breasts pushed against the black tank. Taut nipples teased both the fabric and his restraint. He ought to feel like a voyeur, yet her every sensual, seductive

movement seemed as if it had been choreographed for his eyes only.

Though she was a stranger, he felt as if he knew her intimately, yet not intimately enough. Eyes shut tight, her shoulders dropped and her muscles relaxed. As the cold plastic touched bare skin, her long sigh echoed inside him. Whether aware or not, she'd aroused both his curiosity and his imagination.

What would she taste like? he wondered. Would he find her lips moist, her mouth flavored with mint? Or would she taste sweet, like the coffee drinks served here? And in the throes of passion would she meet his gaze or shut her eyes in expectation and pleasure? Just imagining making love to her had his body strung tight with need and his soul on fire. He took neither lightly.

Little had piqued his interest other than the incident that had sidelined him and taken down Frank Dickinson, his best friend and fellow detective, causing Jake to rethink his direction in life. But desire licked at him now, hotter and with more force than the bullet that had seared his skin.

Neon lights over the bar reflected off the droplets of water on her flesh. He wanted to taste her damp heat, to absorb it with his body. He broke into a sweat that had nothing to do with the heat wave outside. His hand had turned wet from the condensation on the glass, and he wiped his palm on jeans that had grown too tight.

She straightened and placed her bottle on the bar before glancing around the confines of the small restaurant. He held

his breath, but she didn't look in his direction. Then she grabbed a napkin and blotted the glistening skin on her chest, patting downward to where droplets had probably dripped into the *V* of her cleavage, nestling between her full breasts.

Without warning, she turned and glanced his way. Her gaze met his and her eyes grew wide, not with horror but with surprise. Just as he thought, she hadn't known anyone was watching. But when the surprise wore off, she stared at him with more than a hint of interest in her expression.

It was an interest he recognized because she captivated him, too. The mutual attraction had been strong from the first. And over the past few weeks, the sizzling awareness had only grown stronger.

His sister had fed his interest, meeting him here in the evenings so he could get his fill. And *she'd* always been here, always waiting on tables in stations other than his. He didn't know why she hadn't approached him, only why he'd maintained the distance. Fantasy, he'd learned, always surpassed gritty reality.

But never had the current between them been as charged as it was tonight. Their connection was electric, so all-encompassing that his body throbbed with need and his mind soared with myriad possibilities—none of which he intended to act upon.

She still held his gaze, as if waiting for him to make the next move. Without breaking eye contact, he lifted his glass in silent acknowledgment. He expected her to turn away, to rebuff his subtle advance. She did neither. Instead she held his

stare with a searing heat and bold curiosity he hadn't expected—until the bartender's arrival with her order severed the connection.

She glanced back at him once more before she crumpled the napkin and tossed it into the trash. Then she returned to business, taking orders and serving drinks. But the flush in her cheeks remained, testament to what had passed between them.

“Oh my God, Jake, I'm sorry.” His sister's voice calling him brought him out of the sensual haze, though the sizzling in his veins remained.

Relieved Rina had showed up unharmed, he headed back to his table and settled himself into the uncomfortable seat. Though distracted, he tried to focus as she slid into the chair across from him. Her skin glistened from the humidity and her dark hair clung to her cheeks. She was no different from most rushed and overheated New Yorkers, yet her outfit distinguished her from the other mostly jean-wearing patrons of the café. All elegance, she appeared out of place in the casual atmosphere, but Rina being Rina, she failed to notice.

“I know I'm late. But Norton hates the heat,” she said, talking about her Chinese sharpei. He was all wrinkles with a black tongue, a dog no self-respecting person would take out in public, but Jake had developed a soft spot for the pedigreed pooch.

He shook his head and laughed. “Money really has changed you, Ri.” They'd grown up with a half-breed mutt that had wandered through the dirt and grime of the South

Bronx. The dog had taken a nap one day by the front of their building and had stayed.

When Rina, a legal secretary, had met and married her boss, Jake had had his doubts about the man and the marriage. Who wouldn't question a guy who had his fingernails polished weekly? But he'd turned out to be the best thing ever to happen to his kid sister. But then he'd died, leaving Rina alone. She was too young to be a widow, but Jake found comfort in knowing she'd had happiness for a little while.

A union of opposites had worked well for Rina, but not for Jake. His marriage had ended in a bitter divorce because his wife hadn't realized that marrying a cop meant living on a cop's salary and adjusting to erratic hours. His wife hadn't just given up being married to a cop; she'd given up on Jake. And, after five years, it still hurt. Not because he still loved his wife but because he thought he'd given that kind of life his best shot. Still, Rina's marriage had flourished, and for that Jake was grateful.

"Money hasn't changed me." She sniffed, raising her chin in the air, pretending to take offense. "Well, not much, anyway. At least I walk him myself. I could pay someone to do it for me, but they'd quit after one day."

"High-maintenance breed?" Jake asked, watching the sexy waitress out of the corner of his eye.

"You could say that," Rina said.

He barely heard. *She* worked the inside restaurant, where the thickening crowd chose to sit. She impressed him with things that went beyond the superficial. Nothing fazed her—

not the overwhelming heat, not the picky customer. She served with a thousand-watt smile, one he could watch all night. Especially since, every so often, she sent a covert look his way—to make sure he hadn't left? He liked to think so.

Because he sure as hell was aware of her. Jake couldn't recall the last time he'd been so sexually and emotionally conscious of a woman he didn't know. He hadn't been celibate since his marriage, but he hadn't gotten seriously involved, either. And none of the women in his far or recent past had piqued his interest in quite the same way *she* had. The sensual game they played intrigued him. He wasn't ready to end it by meeting her and destroying the fantasy. No woman could be as fresh and unjaded as she seemed to be. His marriage had taught him that.

Appearances, Jake knew now, were too often deceiving; women weren't always what they seemed. The sexy waitress attracted him more strongly than his ex ever had, and if that wasn't enough of a warning to steer clear, he had his current case to focus upon. He couldn't risk the distraction.

Rina waved a hand in front of his eyes and grinned. Obviously she knew his mind had been not on her words, but on the waitress who fascinated him. Considering he'd insisted on meeting at this place, at this hour, on the same night for the past few weeks, Jake figured his thoughts were pretty much transparent.

"As I was saying," she reminded him, "I had to walk Norton before meeting you, and he didn't want to go. I mean, he's trained to go on command, but you have to get him out

onto the street, first. The poor thing hates the hot concrete on the pads of his paws. There I was, literally dragging him down Park Avenue, while he was trying to drag me back home. Can you imagine the sight?”

Jake shook his head. “The dog’s a wuss,” he muttered. He glanced over her shoulder, looking for the woman of his fantasies, but in the moment he’d refocused on Rina, *she* had disappeared. Disappointment gripped him as hard as the desire had earlier.

Rina patted his hand. “She’ll be back. And Norton’s not a wuss, he’s just particular about what he likes, who he likes...”

“And who he doesn’t,” Jake said, recalling the puddle that had ruined his new sneakers on their first meeting.

“Well, regardless, he was Robert’s dog, and I’m all he has left now.”

Jake leaned forward in his seat. “So how are you, really?”

Rina had decided not to accompany her husband on a business trip, and he’d died in a car accident while rushing home to avoid an overnight stay. She’d been consumed with guilt and grief, and Jake had made it a priority to keep her spirits up. That included meeting her for dinner or drinks a few times a week. Almost a year had passed—a year in which Jake had kept up the routine because he enjoyed it, too. Rina was stronger now. Even the jokes had come more freely to her of late. Jake’s mission had been a success. It had also recently led to his obsession with a woman he didn’t know.

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. How I’m doing. I’m going to take a vacation. A friend invited me to spend the summer with her in Italy. And I really need the break. I need to get away and...”

“I think it’s a great idea.” Jake didn’t hesitate. Not only would the vacation do wonders for Rina’s mental health, but it would keep her out of the country and safe until Ramirez was behind bars. “Anything that gets you out of that mausoleum of an apartment is good by me.” Besides, all that marble and china made Jake nervous. Every time he turned around in the penthouse, he felt in danger of breaking something.

“I’m glad you think so. But about the penthouse?”

“Mausoleum.”

“Whatever. I need you to stay there while I’m gone and watch Norton—and before you say no, think about the whirlpool and the pool. They’ll do wonders for your rehabilitation.” She opened her brown eyes wide and fluttered her thick lashes.

Not a good sign, he thought, and he knew he was in deep. “I don’t need physical therapy. I’m doing some exercises the orthopedist recommended, and my shoulder’s just fine.” He caught her stare and realized he’d been subconsciously rubbing the muscle with his hand. He quickly wrapped the hand around his glass, which had grown warm to the touch.

She raised an eyebrow. “The department says otherwise.”

Much as he loved Rina, no way could he let her in on the fact that he had been undertaking strenuous rehabilitation. Her

well-meaning concern often translated into talking at inopportune moments and generally butting into his life. He couldn't risk her informing the department that he'd be in shape sooner than they thought.

"The department has no say unless I choose to go back," he told her. And he was no longer sure he wanted to. Getting hit by a bullet and damaging his shoulder while diving out of harm's way had nothing to do with his uncertainty. The circumstances surrounding the episode did.

Louis Ramirez, who had been drug trafficking on college campuses and had access to major dealers, had been ripe for the picking. As a detective on narcotics detail, Jake had invested all his time and energy on the scum. He'd seen one too many co-eds in the morgue thanks to Ramirez's tainted goods, too many once fresh-faced kids now addicted. Jake had sworn he'd nail the crook, and had skirted the edges of proper police procedure to arrange a bust that would put Ramirez away for a long time. He'd trusted a snitch, something he regretted the instant the first bullet was fired and he realized he and his fellow officers had been set up.

But they'd gotten their man, anyway. After the hail of bullets that had stolen Frank's life and sidelined Jake, Ramirez had been taken into custody. And he would have stayed there, too, if Jake hadn't been down for the count. If some rookie hadn't screwed up and failed to give proper Miranda rights. Ramirez had walked, on a technicality. It wasn't the first time Jake had seen a criminal go free but it was the proverbial last straw. Jake was disgusted, disillusioned with his role in

bringing in the dregs of the earth only to have his efforts thwarted courtesy of America's judicial system.

The detective Ramirez killed had been a good man—a man with a wife and kids—and though all cops knew the risk, Jake would have preferred to take the fatal bullet instead. *He* had no little ones who needed a father. Jake's weekend visits and phone calls to Frank's family were a poor substitute for the real thing.

“The system pisses me off and I've had it with the whole routine,” he said, giving his sister the gut-honest truth.

“So Frank's gone and you're just going to give up?”

Her tone conveyed disbelief, possibly because she knew Jake better than anyone. She knew his friendship with Frank and his family ran deep and she understood the pain of losing someone. But she also knew her brother. Jake Lowell didn't throw in the towel, and he never left a job undone without a fight.

“I'll redirect my energies,” he lied. He didn't want to upset Rina by admitting he planned to get Frank's killer on his own.

Jake couldn't bring Ramirez in on any of the charges stemming from the original bust, but no doubt the guy was still selling drugs and somehow he'd slip up. Between Jake's off-duty digging and the official information two of his detective buddies continued to feed him, Jake would nab Ramirez. It was only a matter of time. But he wouldn't have the freedom to follow up leads if he was constrained by his superiors and newer cases he'd no doubt be assigned.

Jake also needed personal R-and-R. Time without the pressure and restrictions of the job to find out what direction he wanted to take in life. To decide what the restlessness he'd been experiencing lately meant. Was it the gritty life of a cop and the disillusionments that came with the job that had worn him down, or something more? Jake didn't have any answers. And he had a hunch none would be forthcoming until his mind was free of Ramirez.

His lieutenant would jump on him if he thought Jake was ready, so allowing a prolonged recuperation provided the perfect excuse. "Can we change the subject?" he asked his sister.

She shrugged. "Suit yourself. Let the muscle atrophy until you can't make it work. Then when you want to go back, you'll flunk the physical and—"

"Rina," he said, warning her with his tone.

But he understood her concern because it mirrored his feelings for her. There was nothing he wouldn't do for his sister. She knew it and played him shamelessly, but he adored her, anyway. Without a doubt, she had the same loyalty toward him, which prompted her pushing him now.

She held her hands up in surrender. "Okay, I'll back off. So will you stay in the penthouse while I'm gone?"

He raised an eyebrow. Given her usual propensity to butt in where she didn't belong, Jake didn't buy the easy subject change, but he was grateful for the reprieve. "Couldn't you put the dog in a kennel?"

“Norton doesn’t like kennels. He gets nervous. And if you won’t watch him, I’ll have to stay home.”

“Never mind,” he muttered, resigning himself to animal-and apartment-sitting for the summer. His fate had been sealed from the moment she’d batted her brown eyes at him across the table. It didn’t matter where he set himself up, as long as he had the freedom to come and go as he pleased on his quest for Ramirez.

With Rina out of town, Jake had nothing and no one cramping his movements. Besides, she needed the break. “You should get away, and if you need my help to do it, I’ll stay, even if it means walking that pathetic excuse for a dog in public,” he said, infusing his voice with warmth and humor. Once he said yes, he’d never knowingly make her feel guilty and, besides, he and Norton had developed a grudging respect for one another.

Her face lit up in a way Jake hadn’t seen since before her husband passed away. “Oh, thank you.”

Before he could blink, she was up and around the table. She wrapped one arm around his good side and kissed his cheek. “Thank you. You can’t imagine how depressing it’s been for me alone in the penthouse. This trip will help me put the memories behind me,” she whispered.

“That’s all I want for you.” He squeezed her back. “Now, can you get off me before the humidity glues us together?”

She laughed and resettled herself in the chair. “Now that we’ve dealt with my life, such as it is, it’s time to deal with yours.”

Jake groaned. “I knew my reprieve was too good to last. I’ll make a deal with you. Go to Italy and have fun. Come back happy, and then we’ll deal with my life.” By then Jake should have Ramirez back behind bars where he belonged. But he knew Rina wasn’t just referring to work.

Rina glanced over her shoulder. “I don’t know, Jake. If you wait too long, someone might snatch her up. For all you know, she might already be attached.”

“No ring,” he said, and immediately regretted the admission.

“Then, do something about it,” his sister said, challengingly.

He wanted to rise to the bait as he’d often done when they were children. But he couldn’t. After his ex-wife, the only women he’d consider now were the ones who were safe, who didn’t threaten his sanity or his heart. Considering the strong pull *she* exerted over him, Jake had a hunch this one was capable of doing that and more. With the Ramirez case hanging over his head, Jake didn’t have time for distractions. And *she* was most definitely a distraction.



SHE WAS LATE. Brianne Nelson sprinted down the street toward The Sidewalk Café. She needed this second job and the money it brought in, but all she could think about was *him*. Was he here as he’d been last night and the night before that? Was he waiting or had he given up and gone home? And was he alone or, as usual, was he with the beautiful woman? The woman Brianne had seen hug him last evening.

Brianne's heart beat a furious pace, due more to anticipation and excitement than from her mad rush to make it to work. She'd thought she would never get out of the hospital. Her last client had gotten hung up in X-ray, and by the time Mr. Johnson arrived at physical therapy, he was forty-five minutes overdue for his appointment. After his second stroke, the older man needed rehabilitation as much as Brianne needed the money this waitressing job brought in. He had a new grandbaby he wanted to hold on his lap. She couldn't reschedule or hand him off to another therapist any more than she could give up her night job.

Nor did she want to. Not since she had the man of her dreams waiting. He arrived three times a week, wearing the same type of outfit—a pair of jeans and a shirt he'd obviously created himself with a pair of scissors and one good rip. The cropped shirt exposed a hint of tantalizing tanned skin, with a dark sprinkling of hair running down his abdomen until it disappeared into the denim waistband. And his forearms... she'd never seen muscles that well toned. He'd piqued her interest and fed her fantasies.

She slowed her pace as she reached the outdoor entrance, her gaze taking in the crowded tables on the sidewalk, lingering on the men seated outside. Though many had jet-black hair, none made her heart race. None met her gaze with a knowing gleam in his eyes or caused a liquid rush of desire in response to his sexy grin.

She shook off the disappointment caused by his absence, reminding herself that the man she anticipated was already taken. Meeting with the same woman *that* many times a week

spoke of devotion and commitment—to someone else. Which was why she'd asked Jimmy to let Kellie handle the outdoor tables. Kellie was an accomplished flirt who rarely took any one man seriously, someone who could handle such a gorgeous customer with ease. Unlike Brianne, who had way too much interest in the man. Besides, even if he weren't involved, her dating and mating skills were rusty from disuse. Brianne understood her real life. *He* was a fantasy. She rushed in and past the bar.

“You're late,” Jimmy called out.

“I'm sorry.”

“Hang on. Someone wants to—”

She ducked into the small bathroom, cutting Jimmy off before he could lecture her about burnout again. He was her boss and in the process had become her friend. She was a physical therapist by day, and Jimmy understood how badly she needed this job at night. No matter how tired or how weary she was of smiling for the customers, she had no choice. She needed the money.

She was just fortunate Jimmy put up with her often delayed arrival; he rarely complained. Like her, he'd lost his parents young, and he'd also raised a sibling. He just hadn't had the added pressure of having a genius brother who deserved to remain in an exclusive, expensive, private boarding school and who would attend college thereafter.

Too bad her parents hadn't thought of either Marc or Brianne when they'd gone out in a small plane in weather that even the FAA had warned against flying in. Too bad they'd

invested their money in pleasure and not in insurance for their children.

She shivered, then pushed all thoughts of her selfish, risk-taking parents aside. She'd been her brother's only means of support for so long, she didn't know any different. But even a boss who was her friend couldn't keep her on if she didn't get her behind outside and start serving the customers.

Shoving her clothes under one arm, she paused to wash the grime of the New York City subway from her hands. Brianne wondered if *he* would show up later, and knew that thought would keep her going when her feet begged for a rest. Because, lately, she wasn't as tired, nor did she approach this job with the dread she had felt in the past. He kept her spirits high and her adrenaline flowing. Just knowing he'd be waiting, watching, making her feel sexy and desirable, when she had no time to *be* desirable, caused her anticipation to soar.

She air-dried her hands, then grabbed her clothes and turned toward the stalls. Before she could blink, she ran smack into a customer. "Sorry," she muttered.

"My fault."

Brianne took a step back and found herself face-to-face with the woman who usually sat with her fantasy man. Her dark hair was layered and razored in the most up-to-date style. The shaglike cut was perfect with her lightly made-up face and trendy clothes.

The woman certainly didn't look as if *she'd* spent the day massaging other people's body parts, Brianne thought, glancing down at her own scrubs. Then she looked at her

watch and groaned before meeting the other woman's appraising gaze. "Excuse me. I'm running late." Brianne started for the open stall.

"Can we talk first?"

The other woman's voice stopped Brianne cold, and she pivoted fast. "Excuse me?" Her heart beat more quickly.

They had nothing in common, nothing to discuss—except *him*. She'd done nothing wrong, Brianne assured herself. Yet the thoughts and fantasies she'd spun about a man she'd never met were enough to make her—a woman who'd seen men and women in varying degrees of nakedness during patient therapy—blush.

But no one she'd seen in patient therapy had even remotely resembled him. He was every inch a potent, sexy male who allowed her the freedom to feel like a woman, to test her limits and flirt without fear of anything more coming of it, because he was involved and she was too busy—which made him safe. Or so she thought.

"Hey, are you okay? I don't want you to faint on me," the woman said with concern.

Brianne nodded. "I'm fine," she said, embarrassment and shame filling her. Her fantasy man had a girlfriend who wanted to talk. Brianne had witnessed that hug between them last night with a pang of envy she hadn't known she was capable of feeling. But it served to remind her that he was spoken for. She cleared her throat. "I'm fine," she said again. "Thank you. It's just that I'm running very late. My boss..."

“Is a great guy. He said we could take a minute when you got in.”

Brianne shook her head. “I’m not trying to be rude, but I really need to get to work. Jimmy’s wonderful, but he can’t compensate for the tips.”

“I understand much more than you think. I come here often.”

“I know.” Brianne could have bitten her tongue for that admission.

“Yes, well, I don’t want you to think I’m rude, or that I was eavesdropping, but...” She shrugged, and a sheepish grin lifted her lips. “I was eavesdropping. Last night. I heard you tell Jimmy how tired you were and how much you wished you could afford to get off your feet. And then he reminded you how much you want to move with your brother when he starts Stanford in the fall.”

“And you’d like to put me on the first plane west?” Brianne asked with a hint of sarcasm.

“Yes. No.” The woman let out a laugh. “I’d better just explain.”

Brianne wasn’t so sure she wanted to hear. If this woman thought Brianne was poaching on her boyfriend, she’d probably attempt to make California look good. Which it did—a new start for both her brother and herself. Physical therapy in a warmer climate, Brianne thought. Normal hours. Friends. A life.

She sighed. She'd sent résumés, but so far she hadn't had much luck. Either she'd been turned down flat or the salaries offered didn't come close to New York City's. Brianne had to be picky if she wanted to pay off Marc's boarding school loans and her own debts.

But reality aside, Brianne had a dream job in mind. A place she'd applied and still hadn't heard back from. If the Special Kid Ranch offered her placement, she hoped she could afford to take it. Working with children had always been her goal, one she hadn't been able to fulfill because the geriatrics job she'd gotten right out of school paid so well. Brianne didn't hold out much hope that the Ranch offer would come or be any better than those she'd had so far. She and Marc would be separated for the first time in both their lives—which was probably best for her brother's college experience, but still...

“Are you with me?”

Brianne blinked. “Yes. Sorry.” She had so much on her mind these days, it was a wonder she functioned at all. Brianne refocused on the woman before her.

“I'd say we should sit and talk, but...” The other woman glanced around, taking in the tiled floor and single stall, and she grinned. “Well, you see the problem there. But just hear me out. I've got a proposition that I guarantee you won't be able to refuse.”

Chapter Two

BRIANNE STEPPED INTO the ornate lobby of the luxury building on the East Side of Manhattan. A uniformed doorman met her at the entrance and greeted her with a welcoming smile. “Hello, Miss Nelson.”

Brianne paused, surprised the older man remembered her. She’d only met him once before, when she’d visited Rina earlier in the week. Brianne paused to take in the name on his badge before answering. “Hello, Harry.” She smiled in return.

He tipped his head and ushered her toward the private elevator leading exclusively to the penthouse, then he punched the button and illuminated the up arrow.

While waiting, Brianne glanced around her. Glass and chrome gleamed brightly, showing off her reflection from every possible angle. She had to admit, the impact of the ornate lobby hadn’t diminished on second viewing.

“You’ll get used to it, miss.”

The doorman’s unexpected words told Brianne she looked as stunned as she felt. “I doubt it,” she murmured. Not after living on bare necessities for so long. But she had no choice, seeing as how she’d be living here throughout the summer.

Without warning, the doors slid open. Brianne stepped into the elevator and the doors shut quietly, leaving her alone with her disquieting thoughts.

She’d never believed she could be bought, but that was before the woman named Rina had made an offer Brianne

couldn't resist. In return for being a physical therapist for Rina's brother in the evenings, Brianne would earn more than enough money finally to have a life of her own. She'd be able to pay off Marc's exclusive boarding school loans, and with his college costs covered by scholarships, her days of financial burden would be over. She'd even make a dent in her personal debt, thanks to the second part of Rina's offer—the back room in her penthouse, rent-free for the entire summer.

At the thought of moving in with Rina and her brother, virtually total strangers, Brianne's old anxieties threatened to resurface, but she battled them down with an ability she'd acquired over the years. Even if she hadn't met Rina's brother yet, Rina's warmth had been enough to put her at ease. There was no reason to fall back into old patterns created by her parents' dangerous and erratic lifestyle. Not now.

She had a larger concern—Rina's boyfriend. And Brianne hoped she wouldn't run into her sexy fantasy man during her time here. But Brianne felt certain that if Rina had an inkling of the attraction that had flowed between them, the other woman would keep them apart. Brianne swallowed at the painful notion, yet knew it was for the best—for Brianne, for her brother...for so many reasons.

The elevator cruised to a silent stop, and the doors slid open with a hushed glide. She stepped directly into the entryway and was overwhelmed by the large penthouse. Apparently Rina shared this place with her brother, an arrangement that would work well for Brianne's evening physical therapy sessions. Glancing around at the crystal chandelier above her, the wide expanse of windows and the

marble floors, Brianne was struck again by the enormity of her quick decision. But as she'd told herself before, if a wealthy widow, as Rina had called herself, wanted to spend her money making her brother's life easier, Brianne would accept the residual good fortune and work hard in return.

She glanced down and smoothed the workout leggings she'd worn to meet Rina's brother. Instead of dressing to impress, she'd dressed down, intent to prove she wanted to work and was ready to begin. She wondered now if she'd made a mistake. Perhaps she should have opted for a better visual impression, but it was too late to change her mind. All that remained was the initial meeting with her new client.

Difficult was how Rina had described her brother. *Obstinate. Unwilling to continue therapy without being convinced.* Brianne covered her stomach with her hands, attempting to calm her nerves. She'd learned a long time ago how to cover her insecurities and make the most of any opportunity.

No time like the present, she thought. "Hello?" Brianne called into the empty apartment, surprised when she didn't hear an echo. The penthouse took up the entire top floor of the high-rise building, and no one could enter the private lobby elevator without the use of a passkey. She'd never been in any place as exclusive or as elegant as this. Or as empty, she thought. Considering the doorman had said she was expected, she wondered where Rina had disappeared to.

"Is anyone here?" she called out once more.

In response, the short, chubby dog she'd met on her last visit came bounding toward her, tail wagging in excitement and greeting. From his exuberance and glee, Brianne knew she had nothing to fear and bent down.

“Some watchdog you are.” She had to dig beneath the wrinkles on his skin to give him a loving scratch behind his ears. “You’re a cutey.” She’d never seen a dog like this anywhere but on TV. She glanced at the dog tag beneath his neck for a reminder. “Is anyone else here, Norton?”

He licked her hand. “Black tongue,” she murmured. “Interesting.”

“Rina? What are you doing back?” A distinctly male voice called from somewhere inside the large apartment. Before Brianne could answer, he continued talking, his masculine voice coming closer. “I thought you were on your way to the airport. You didn’t tell me the damn dog stands and licks your legs as you get out of the shower...” The voice stopped abruptly.

Brianne stood. She raised her gaze, and her breath caught in her throat. Her fantasy man stood before her—and he wasn’t dressed. Unless she considered a couple of small towels, one around his waist and another around his shoulders, being dressed. She didn’t, not when the parts that were uncovered were so muscular and spectacular. And he was tanned golden brown, except for the teasing glimpses of white skin below his waist, which disappeared beneath a towel that covered parts she didn’t even want to think about.

Yes, she admitted, she did. She wanted to do more than think about them, and those illicit thoughts were rampaging as fast as her beating heart. Needing oxygen desperately, she tried to suck in a breath, then forced her gaze upward to meet his shocked stare.

“You’re not Rina,” he said.

Just as Brienne shook her head and wondered if he was disappointed, a sexy grin lifted his lips into the most unbelievable smile.

Breathe, she silently ordered.

“I didn’t think you could be her. The limo picked her up for the airport a while ago.”

Her eyes strayed to the towel riding low on his hips. She could handle this. She had to handle this. Her hands curled into tight fists. When she’d accepted Rina’s proposition, she’d convinced herself she wouldn’t be running into *him*. She was sure Rina wouldn’t permit it. But she was seeing him here now.

And she’d be seeing a lot more of him, if he lived here, as she suspected he did. As if she wasn’t seeing enough already. She watched in awe as the sun reflected off his tanned, muscular chest. Brienne grew dizzy and forced herself to inhale.

He took a step closer. The clean scent of soap mixed with a masculine spiced aftershave assaulted her, until she was enveloped in his essence. She couldn’t take any more, not if

she was going to maintain any dignity. “Don’t move,” she ordered. “Do not take another step.”

“She speaks. And here I thought you were mute.”

“Very funny,” she muttered.

“Why can’t I come closer?” He folded his arms low on his chest.

Damn, she wished he wouldn’t do things that drew her attention to his body. Thanks to the many nights she’d spent fantasizing about him, her own body was on edge—her skin sensitized, her senses too aware of him. It didn’t matter that they’d never actually met until now. This was a man she’d taken into her home, into her bed with her at night. And she now worked for the woman with whom he was involved. Brianne couldn’t pretend the knowledge didn’t bother her any more than she could pretend he didn’t affect her.

Forget the money, there was no way she could take this job.

As if he could read her thoughts, Norton whined once, then placed his head down on the marble floor and looked up at her with soulful eyes. But when her fantasy man braced the knuckles of one hand beneath her chin and tipped her head upward so their eyes met and their gazes locked, she forgot all about the wrinkled dog.

His masculine fingertips were hot against her skin, branding where they touched. “You look like you’re about to faint.”

His body heat was potent. The urge to wrap herself around him and let his damp skin meld with hers was strong. Too strong. “I asked you not to come closer.”

“And I asked you, why not? You never answered.”

His eyes were a deep shade of blue, she realized for the first time, so dark they could be black, but with a hint of navy—or was it indigo?—giving them depth and interest.

She searched for a response that wouldn’t leave her humiliated, and found none. She certainly couldn’t tell him the truth. If he was a mind reader, she might as well jump off the roof of this very high, luxury building.

When she remained silent, he groaned and dropped his hand. “Okay, let’s back up and try this again. I didn’t know Rina was expecting company. Hell, I didn’t know you and Rina even knew each other.”

Without his touch, she was able to focus a little more. “We met last week. And Rina’s not expecting me exactly, her brother is.”

He raised an eyebrow in definite surprise. “He is?”

“I assume so. Rina said she’d let him know I’d be coming. I’m Brianne Nelson.” Good manners dictated she extend her hand for a greeting. Self-preservation demanded she never touch him again. Considering he still stood in a towel and nothing more, Brianne figured she’d be forgiven for her lapse in social graces.

“Brianne,” he murmured. Her name seemed to roll off his tongue. “Beautiful. It suits you.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded. “So tell me, why do you think Rina’s brother is expecting you?”

Brianne narrowed her eyes. Wouldn’t Rina have mentioned she’d hired someone as her brother’s physical therapist? Or was their relationship so shallow, they didn’t discuss anything of emotional importance? Somehow, she didn’t think so. Brianne had sensed a depth to Rina, an innate sense of decency and caring. Much as Brianne would have enjoyed disliking the other woman, she just couldn’t, which suddenly made this conversation even stranger than it already was.

She opted for minimal explanation. “I’m a physical therapist.” She didn’t like the speculative gleam that came into his eye.

“I thought you were a waitress.”

Belatedly, she realized she knew no more about him than when she’d walked in, and she disliked being at a disadvantage. “You know, this has become a very lopsided conversation. You know my name and occupations, but I know nothing about you.”

“You know how I look fresh out of a shower,” he said with a grin. “And that’s an awful lot more than I know about you.” He seared her with his deep eyes and a meaningful glance.

“That isn’t what I meant.”

He shook his head and laughed. “Sorry. Let’s start over.”

“We tried that already.” She folded her arms across her chest—to cover her body’s reaction to his heated stare and to

ease the slow-building ache in her breasts.

“Then, let’s do it till we get it right.” He extended his hand.

In his eyes, she saw a definite challenge, as if he knew how much his touch affected her and dared her to grasp his hand, anyway. She had grown up with a younger brother and had learned to never back down from a dare. She steeled herself and placed her hand inside his.

“Jake Lowell,” he said. “Nice to meet you, Brianne.” He curled his large fingers around her smaller hand. Although she thought she’d been prepared, the connection between them was strong and sure—heated in a distinctly physical way and warm in a purely seductive one.

Without warning, his words registered; Rina had mentioned her brother’s name. Brianne took a shocked step back. “*Jake Lowell? You mean to tell me you’re the one who needs therapy?*” He grinned, and the air left her lungs in a rush. “*You’re Rina’s brother?*” she managed to ask.

“I’m Rina’s brother, in the flesh.” His grin grew wider.

Her gaze fell from his smile to the towel tucked in so that it looked about to fall open at the slightest provocation. She had no doubt that what lay beneath that towel was as incredible as the rest of him. She swallowed hard.

He wasn’t Rina’s boyfriend. He was Brianne’s fantasy man. And she was his very own physical therapist, for as long as it took to both convince him to accept her help and bring him to full recovery. Fainting sounded good about now.

“And you’re the surprise gift Rina said she’d leave for me while she was gone.”

“Gone?” He’d mentioned something about a limo earlier, and Brianne’s mouth grew dry.

“To Europe for the summer.”

“You have got to be kidding.”

He shook his head, looking more amused than she’d have liked. More of his earlier words came back to her. “You said she’s gone and I’m the surprise gift?”

“Apparently so.”

“What the hell do you mean I’m a gift?” Anger and betrayal oozed inside her, and seemed destined to grow. “Physical therapy isn’t a gift; it’s a necessity.” And Rina had seemed to understand that.

She’d cared about her injured brother and wanted to speed his recovery despite his reticence, something Brianne could relate to. Her brother Marc had been a frail child, prone to illness and broken bones. Their parents hadn’t appreciated having their extreme fun curtailed, and often had to hire a private physical therapist to rush his recovery.

Brianne had been fascinated by the seemingly magical healing powers the therapists had possessed, prompting her to follow in their footsteps. And though Marc had eventually outgrown his childhood weaknesses, Brianne had never forgotten. Hence her desire to work with kids at the Special Kid Ranch, a place where she could heal children while they remained with their families.

Family. The word brought her back to Rina's ploy. Fury settled inside Brianne, and she felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. She curled one arm around her waist for support. "Why in the world would she play this kind of game?" Brianne asked aloud, anger simmering.

"Oh, I can venture a guess."

He gestured back and forth between the two of them, and Brianne slapped her hand against her thigh and whirled around, starting for the door. Then she turned back again, not one to leave without letting her feelings be known. "Let me tell you something. I resent being taken advantage of. I take my job and my skills seriously. I'm not interested in some sort of matchmaking scheme." At least, that's what her mind insisted. Her rapidly beating heart begged to differ.

"Knowing Rina, it could very well be a scheme."

He stepped closer again, so close she felt his body heat.

"I wish you would stop doing that."

"How else can I prove you wrong?" His hand touched the pulse point in her throat, and she knew he felt it beating rapidly.

"Wrong about what?" she asked.

"You *are* interested." His voice dropped a seductive note.

"I'm about as interested as you are in need of therapy." She wondered briefly if he was involved in his sister's game, but his shock at seeing her here seemed so real, she dismissed the notion. She might not be able to blame him, but she was furious just the same.

“Then, I guess we have something in common.” He reached for the corner of the towel hanging over his neck.

“What are you doing?”

“Making a point. See this?” Before she could argue or stop him, he lifted the towel high enough to reveal fading bruises across his powerful chest. “It was injured and my mobility’s limited...” he lifted his arm, squinting as he moved, stopping obviously because of pain and an inability to go farther, “which means I am in need of physical therapy. So by your own admission, that means *you*, Brianne, are most definitely interested. In me.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, her thoughts reeling, her heart pounding. He’d been injured, and she couldn’t believe how knowing that affected her. She wanted to comfort him. To heal him. To make him all better.

She didn’t want to pull her gaze from the faint bruising on his chest and shoulder, but dropped her eyes only to find herself focused on the towel barely covering his waist. Obviously he was serious, and Brianne forced her mind to the task at hand. She needed the money his sister had offered too much to walk away.

If she saw this job through to the end, she could afford to move west, even if she didn’t get offered a job at the Ranch just yet. Working with Jake posed a challenge, but she’d never been a quitter, not even at the roughest, most exhausting points in her life. So what if she’d been manipulated into this job?

She pushed aside the hurt and anger and even managed to swallow some pride. *He* hadn’t set her up; his sister had. But

the benefits would be all hers in the long run, and that's all that mattered. She'd continue as planned, take this job, move into this apartment and rehabilitate this man's shoulder.

Oh Lord, what had she gotten herself into?

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JAKE MET HER gaze. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted. The desire to taste those lips had never been stronger. He didn't know what shocked him more—his sister's meddling or the woman she'd handpicked as her parting gift. Amazing that *she* turned out to be a physical therapist.

No matter what Brianne's occupation, Jake had no doubt Rina would have found a way to get them together. It just so happened that Brianne was the perfect woman to meet his current needs. And if she kept staring at the towel around his waist with blatant curiosity in her eyes, some of those needs were going to assert themselves, and soon.

He'd already gotten close enough to smell the lingering fragrance of strawberry in her hair. The scent was fresh and clean in a wholesome way, and yet it aroused a need so strong and intense, he'd been blindsided. For a man with a bad marriage and nasty divorce behind him, who stuck to low-maintenance, no-strings, unemotional relationships, his interest in this woman was too much.

He sure as hell hadn't expected to walk out and find her here. His only consolation was that she was obviously just as surprised and a whole lot shaken up. Jake understood. There was no denying the chemistry between them. But attraction was easy; what sizzled between them was not. Something

more was at work here than lust. In her heavy-lidded gaze, Jake saw a depth of emotion that made the pull between them much more than just physical.

He had a hunch she sensed it, too, because in those eyes he'd also seen wariness. He'd thought Brianne—God, how he loved that name—would bolt given the chance. And he ought to let her, Jake thought. Having her here was a distraction he couldn't afford.

He needed his mind clear for the job at hand. Capturing Ramirez had to take precedence. He owed it to Frank and, more importantly, he owed it to Frank's family. Jake could barely face his buddy's wife and kids. Every time he answered to *Uncle Jake*, he felt like a goddamn fraud. He couldn't bring their father back, but he could make sure no one else lost someone they loved to a lowlife named Louis Ramirez. And he would do it himself, leaving no chance for someone else to screw up the bust again.

“Ready to discuss your rehabilitation, or do you intend to give me as hard a time as you've been giving your sister?” Brianne asked.

Her voice startled him back to reality. She seemed to shore up her defenses and her resolve. His sister had hired her to do a job, and from her squared shoulders and her determined expression it looked as if that's what she planned to do.

But rehabilitation was the last thing Jake wanted right now. Rina had obviously told Brianne that he'd been resisting rehab, and that was the impression he wanted the outside world to have. Brianne included. Everyone's safety—Frank's

family's, Rina's, hell, even Jake's, hinged on taking Ramirez by surprise. Until Jake brought Ramirez in, he needed everyone to think he was being an obstinate SOB. And he could be, given the right motive, he thought wryly.

With Ramirez out of the picture, Jake could then decide whether or not he wanted to return to the force. He couldn't allow Brianne Nelson, physical therapist and the object of his desire, to threaten his "extended recovery." He couldn't have her reporting back to Rina with stories of his amazing improvement.

"You know what?" She cleared her throat. "Before we discuss anything more, would you mind putting on some clothes?"

A smile worked at his mouth. "If you insist." He'd been too floored seeing her here to give a thought to what he was, or wasn't, wearing.

"I have to insist."

He met her gaze and discovered that her eyes were a gorgeous shade of green that sparkled beneath the overhead, high-hat lighting.

"It would help establish the therapist-client relationship," she explained.

So she wanted to keep things professional. Or maybe she just wanted him to believe she did. It didn't matter either way. He knew as well as she did that nothing between them could ever be purely professional. Around her, his heart beat harder, his adrenaline flowed faster, and he was more interested in her

than he'd been in anything other than Ramirez since the shooting. He needed the distance she was attempting to place between them too badly to allow their sizzling attraction to screw up his head or his case—something he figured could happen very easily. As long as she wanted to hide behind the illusion of safety, Jake would let her.

Norton had settled himself on the floor at her feet. Obviously the dog was smarter than Jake had given him credit for. "I'll take him with me. Come on, boy."

Norton lifted his head, then placed it back down between his front paws. Jake groaned. He'd spent the better part of the morning trying to coax the dog out of the moping depression he'd fallen into when Rina had left, suitcases in hand. All he'd gotten for his effort was the doggie bath on his legs when he'd gotten out of the shower. Other than that, the mutt sat crying by Rina's bedroom door. He glanced from the dog lying happily at Brianne's feet, to her beautiful face.

He had to admit Norton had taste. And at least that pathetic whining had stopped. "Do you mind if he stays with you?" he asked, wishing he could do the same thing but knowing he needed some time alone to figure out the best way to avoid rehabilitation with his newly hired therapist.

She knelt and patted the dog's head. "Of course, I don't mind. We've become friends, haven't we, boy." With a prolonged sigh, Norton rolled onto his back, giving her access to his stomach and other body parts Jake would prefer not to see.

He rolled his eyes. “Kiss-ass,” he muttered, then turned to Brianne. “Make yourself at home.” He gestured to the living room and hoped she didn’t mind the velvet couches or the marble statues. They weren’t him, but they were here, and there was nothing much he could do about it except get through the summer.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

Jake turned and headed for the master bedroom Rina had insisted he take as his own. His body burned and sizzled, and he knew without turning back that Brianne’s gaze followed his retreat. He changed into clothes, still having no idea how best to avoid her rehab.

Then the telephone rang. He grabbed the receiver. “Hello?”

“Jake?”

It was Rina. If she hadn’t already sounded out of breath, Jake would have liked to strangle the breath out of her.

“Listen, I have some seating problems and I need to rush, but I wanted to check. Did—?”

“Brianne’s here,” he muttered. “And you should have butted out, Rina.”

“You and I spent enough time at the café for me to know better. Fate doesn’t send many gifts, and when one arrives, you can’t turn it away. The time Robert and I shared was too short. I want more for you. All I did was give you that chance. You can’t be mad at me for pumping her boss for a little information. She was heaven sent, Jake. You *need* her.”

In frustration, he ran a hand through his hair. If he wondered why he'd kept his rehab from Rina, she'd just reminded him. Any time she decided she knew what was best, there was no stopping her. Thank God she was headed for Europe. He couldn't risk her messing with his career next.

He shook his head. "Isn't it up to me to decide who and what I need?"

"Oh, did you hear that? They're paging me. Maybe they found someone to switch seats. You know I can't stand the window. I get claustrophobic, not to mention that I can't get up and pee as often as I like on such a long flight."

He rolled his eyes.

"Oh, and Jake? Before I go, did I mention Brianne will be moving into the spare room off the back hall? She was able to break her lease, and it's so much more convenient for your workouts. Besides, I know she needs..." The rest of his sister's sentence was cut off by a loud voice over a sound system. "I'm sorry, Jake. I really have to run. I'll call from Italy. I love you." And then she was gone, leaving Jake dizzy from her rushed admission.

And he damn well was concerned by her information. He lowered himself onto the bed, trying to absorb his sister's news. His solitary existence was about to be royally screwed up. He'd no sooner gotten Rina safely out of the country than he had another female on his hands. At least this one wasn't a relative. She had no overt ties to Jake, which made her safe from any retaliation by Ramirez. The thought brought him marginal comfort.

He couldn't completely relax because he still had Brianne and their sizzling attraction to deal with. She was right in thinking they'd been set up. And he was right in thinking the physical therapy angle had made Rina's matchmaking easier. But Rina would have found a way to move her in here even if Brianne had been a taxi driver.

Brianne had broken her lease and given up her apartment. She'd obviously accepted this job in good faith and was here to stay. There wasn't a thing Jake could do about it. He couldn't fire her or throw her out on the street. But no matter how much he desired her—and even now his body throbbed with yearning—she definitely didn't fit into his summer plans. Her presence would put his ability to come and go as he pleased at risk, compromising his freedom and private agenda to nab Ramirez.

Once she moved in here, with him...The realization sunk in, slamming into his gut with startling clarity. The woman he'd desired for months was about to become his roommate. Not even a cold shower could douse the heat that thought inspired. He'd spent too many nights, after leaving the café, tossing and turning in his bed, thinking of her, yearning for the touch of a woman who existed only in his fantasies. Yet those fantasies were real enough for his sheets to rasp against his naked, aroused body. Real enough for his hands to become her hands, and for him to be spent, but not satisfied, thereafter.

But things were different now. Because, this time, she was more than a face, more than a fantasy. She had a name and a personality. Like it or not, she was his very own physical

therapist who was moving in with him for the duration of the summer.

And she was waiting for him in the other room.

Chapter Three

BRIANNE WALKED TO the array of windows that offered a perfect view of the East River. Norton followed, his dog tags jingling behind her.

The sun's rays were strong through the thick glass, heating her skin as well as the room. Not that she needed any more body heat. There wasn't a part of her that wasn't already on fire, thanks to Jake. A sexy name for a sexy man. A sexy, single and unattached man, she thought, again taking in the marble floors, sculpted works of art and modern paintings adorning the walls in the apartment he shared with his sister. From the mundane to the more in-depth aspects of his personality, there was a lot she didn't know about Jake Lowell. She wondered what he did for a living, even what he liked to eat for breakfast.

Basically, she questioned everything about him, but she decided here and now, she wouldn't ask. She couldn't afford to find out. Jake excited her, but she'd have to keep their relationship professional. It wouldn't be easy. This man, this apartment, this chemistry between them—all were the stuff from which fantasies were made. But fantasies didn't come true; she knew that firsthand.

She'd wanted loving, concerned parents, and she'd gotten world travelers, more interested in their dangerous adventures than their children. She'd wanted security and the opportunity to live a normal life. To go out when her friends did, to date and to have fun. Instead she'd gotten the responsibility of a

brother she loved more than life itself and the emotional and financial burden of seeing to it that he was raised right. More than most people, Brianne understood fantasies were necessary to ease life's burdens, but they never came true.

Her aching desire for the man in the other room would remain in the realm of impossible dreams. It had no place in her real life. The less she learned about Jake Lowell, the safer she would be. As it was, taking this job would be hazardous to her mind, her heart and, most definitely, her body. How she would live here with him and survive the summer, she had no idea.

Physical therapy itself was extremely hands-on. Her palms would cover his upper back and shoulders, and ease around to the front of his chest. Her fingers would massage his strong muscles. She'd be getting up-close and personal with a man who sent her senses soaring and who'd unexpectedly touched her emotions as well. Brianne saw scars and injuries every day of her life, yet when she'd looked at Jake's, an aching tenderness had risen to her throat. She didn't know why he affected her so, but she knew it didn't bode well for her vow to remain detached, to be the professional she was being paid to be.

But she would if it killed her.

"I'm ready." His deep voice sent tremors of awareness racing through her.

He might be ready but she wasn't. Brianne turned to face him. She could have handled it if he'd dressed in a Polo collared shirt and starched khaki pants. That would have

created distance. Instead he wore his standard ripped sweatshirt, this one in navy, which brought out the depth of color in his eyes, and a pair of sweat shorts that didn't come much lower than the towel had earlier.

At the sight of him, her heart began a steady, rhythmic beat. She sighed. Time to get things between them settled. "You're ready. How interesting. Rina led me to believe you'd be a difficult patient. In fact, she said you'd be a hard sell. That you'd resist therapy."

He shrugged. "And Rina was right. I meant I'm ready to talk." He stepped over to the couch in the living room and seated himself on a velvet sofa. With his day's growth of beard and his casual clothes, he appeared ridiculously out of place in the formal room, and yet nothing could detract from his rugged, bad-boy good looks.

"Join me." He patted the space beside him.

Knowing she had no choice if she wanted to persuade him, she walked over and lowered herself onto the soft cushion, not as close as he'd suggested. But his masculinity couldn't be denied, and even with a good amount of distance separating them, Brianne felt his powerful presence. *Think professional*, she reminded herself. And when her gaze fell to the enticing skin between the ragged edge of his shirt and the waistband of his sweats, Brianne again reminded herself to breathe.

"Tell me something, Jake."

"Say that again."

She tipped her head to the side. "What?"

“My name.”

He leaned forward until he was too close. His breath held a refreshing hint of mint, and her stomach curled with a delicious warmth.

“Jake,” he said. “Say it again.”

His gaze locked with hers and held. She couldn't have turned away if she wanted to, and, heaven help her, she didn't want to. Because she understood. They'd spent the past couple of weeks in silken, seductive silence. Her name on his lips had sounded so very sweet. She couldn't deny him the same pleasure.

“Jake,” she murmured.

His eyes glazed and he inched closer, kissing distance away. The tingling scent of mint surrounded her, tempting her, teasing her.

“I've been curious for so long.”

His masculine voice reached deep inside her, and she couldn't lie. “Me, too.” And curiosity was the only reason she'd allow the inevitable kiss, or so she told herself.

He touched her beneath her chin, holding her head in place as his mouth settled over hers. Strong and sure, yet achingly gentle, his kiss was everything she'd dreamed about, yearned for. And when his searching tongue traced her lips, moistening before slipping inside, her entire body shook in reaction. Pulsing began in her chest and settled lower, between her legs, strengthening the desire that had built between them from across a crowded room.

His breath was warm and minty, his mouth hot and needy, just as she was, and a sigh of pure pleasure escaped her throat. He caught her sigh in his mouth and used it as permission to deepen the kiss. But the sound she'd made shook her out of the haze of desire and back into reality. *Therapist and client*, she reminded herself, and forced her hands to his shoulders—not to feel the firm muscles beneath the sweatshirt, but to push him away.

Unfortunately, the motion took longer than she'd planned, as she first curled her fingers around the soft cotton and his flesh beneath. She allowed the prolonged kiss to go on for another sweet minute before breaking contact.

Shaking off the temporary insanity that had overcome her wasn't as easy. "We can't do this."

He swallowed, his throat moving up and down before her eyes, his breathing as ragged as hers. "Can't do what? Get acquainted?"

She licked at her damp lips, his lingering taste fueling the desire still flickering inside her. "That was more than getting acquainted." Then the rest of his words registered. "Are you saying you've changed your mind about rehab?"

He shook his head and laughed. "I like your strategy. Kiss me and lower my defenses. Are you trying to take advantage of me?" A smile tipped the corner of his mouth.

"You kissed me first," she reminded him.

"You didn't stop me."

They sounded like squabbling children, but there had been nothing juvenile about that kiss. “Let’s just say we got it out of our systems. Now we can move forward.”

“And you can move in?” He shrugged with his one good shoulder. “That was Rina on the phone. She just explained the new living arrangements.” His gaze intense and curious, never left hers, as if he were trying to read her thoughts.

But she couldn’t deny that he looked surprised by his sister’s call and revelation. As surprised as he’d appeared when he’d discovered her in the apartment earlier. “Obviously you didn’t know about that, either?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No.”

“I think this is called manipulation,” she muttered.

“Blatant,” he agreed. “But that’s Rina. Always with the best intentions, but not always thinking up here.” He tapped the side of his head. “She’s a romantic.”

“It’s nice to see people still are.” Her own heart pounded frantically in her chest, their kiss still lingering in her mind.

“My parents are one example. Retired, living in Florida and driving each other crazy. Rina’s another. She’s the secretary who married her wealthy boss. In her eyes, all things are possible.”

She wondered what things were possible in his. Did her fantasy man who kissed like a dream also harbor a belief in fairy tale endings? She shook her head, knowing her deluded thoughts and curiosity could only get her in trouble. “Does

Rina's romanticism extend to getting her stubborn brother into physical therapy by moving me in here?"

"I guess so." He grinned a charming I'm-cute-and-I-know-it grin.

She'd already accepted the setup before that mind-blowing kiss. She couldn't back down now, and her reasons were the same. She needed the money from this job to start her life over. She needed to move in, rehabilitate Jake's shoulder and put her desire for him behind her.

Brianne glanced down. Norton lay at her feet, looking up at her with adoring eyes. Two cute males in one large apartment. However would she survive it?

One way was to get things between them out in the open. "Okay, Jake. Tell me exactly where we stand on the subject of physical therapy. Obviously you're resistant, you've given your sister a hard time over the subject..."

"Of course I have. Do you have a brother or sister?"

She nodded. "A brother."

"Then, you know siblings live to give each other a hard time."

No, Brianne didn't know. Because she'd been more of a parent to Marc than a sister, she'd never experienced classic sibling rivalry. She'd been too busy waitressing while finishing school and taking care of Marc at the same time to indulge in normal family dynamics. "Marc's a good deal younger than me. Our relationship was—is different. But I'm not here to talk about my brother. Rina hired me for a reason,

and I want to know if you're going to let me do my job or not. I want to know what to expect from you."

Jake forced a lighthearted smile. He had no idea what to expect from himself. That kiss had caught him off guard. He hadn't planned to be so forward, and sure as hell hadn't expected her to kiss him back. Or to taste better than he'd dreamed.

If he'd wondered how much trouble she could cause him, he now knew. "If Rina hired you, I certainly can't throw you out."

"Gee, thanks," she said wryly. "But the question is, will you cooperate?"

The professional was back. Jake told himself he was glad, but deep inside he knew he lied. He liked the warmer, softer Brianne better. Still, this one was safer.

And he had to play it safe, too, keep it light, and keep her off guard. That way she wouldn't get too close or discover he was further along in rehab than she and Rina believed. "I'm sure I can be persuaded. And I'm certain you're up to the task."

"So all of a sudden you're willing to consider therapy?"

He shook his head, seeking to buy time. "I'm willing to let you try and persuade me."

"Why the turnaround?"

"No turnaround. I haven't agreed to anything yet."

She raised an eyebrow, obviously unsure what to make of him. “But you will.”

“That certain of yourself and your abilities?”

“Absolutely. The only question I have is, why the change?”

She’d read him well, Jake thought. Or rather, she read *them* well. Did she really have to ask why he’d end up working with her despite his token resistance? “Do you want me to tell you the truth? Or what you want to hear?”

Jake had the distinct impression that the answer was “both.” She wanted to know the only reason he’d even consider rehabilitation was to get close to her. And she wanted him to lie so she didn’t have to face it.

“I’ll consider therapy because of you.”

She exhaled hard.

“Just like you’re not going to walk out on this job because of me.” He grinned.

“You’re a cocky one,” she murmured with a smile.

“And this is a good thing?”

“Sure is. It means you can take a tough workout.” She met his gaze head-on.

She hadn’t backed off at his admission. Even after that kiss, she wasn’t intimidated by the attraction between them. Score one for her, Jake thought. He admired her grit—something he rarely found in a woman.

It also helped his cause. She'd need that strength if they were going to bump into one another in the middle of the night, stealing a drink from the fridge. *He* would need that strength. "I can take anything you dish out, sweetheart. Just tell me what you have in mind."

"You might be sorry you asked. Physical therapy involves strengthening with rubber bands and working the muscle with massage therapy." The word *massage* hovered in the air between them and the blood pulsed inside him, making him ache as if her hands were already on his body.

"But water therapy works well, too," she continued. "The resistance in the water is a help. Add a whirlpool, and the pulsating water jets work wonders to loosen the muscle," she said, her voice resonating with a deep, husky quality.

"Pulsating water jets, huh?"

Her face flushed red. "Different therapists take different approaches, but there are many options."

He wondered if she was imagining them naked in the whirlpool, water flowing freely around them. He wondered if she had any idea what fun two people could have in that whirlpool she'd mentioned, water jets and all. "It all sounds interesting, especially the pulsating water jets." He wiggled his eyebrows provocatively.

"I'll just bet." Watching him warily, she folded her arms over her chest and studied him. "I save the water therapy for my most cooperative patients," she said in a provocative, seductive voice.

Just as she probably had intended, his body began a steady rhythm, one that only those vibrating water jets could match. He sucked in a breath and forced himself to think like the cop he still was. First and foremost, he needed information about her schedule, if only so he could better plan his. When would she be in the penthouse? When would he be on his own? When could he slip out to work on the Ramirez case without her reporting back to his sister?

“So, when do you start—convincing me, I mean? Because with the right incentive, I can be *very* cooperative.” And damn if he didn’t want to comply with any and all of her water-related directives. “I’m a quick learner—and an even better instructor.”

He watched her struggle to maintain her composure. He was glad. If he kept her off balance, he’d be more in control. He needed that control, since he could too easily dismiss Frank and his family, and Ramirez in favor of Brianne. It disturbed him to realize that despite her ability to screw up all he’d worked for, he wanted her.

She cleared her throat. “Relax, water boy. We start as soon as I get a referral, diagnosis and prescription from your doctor. Probably sometime next week.”

He glanced at Brianne. She’d leaned against the couch, still professional but more relaxed, so certain she’d bought herself time before having to deal with him and his reluctance to begin therapy. Before having to convince him the only way he’d allow—a seductive, playful coaxing. Because as long as

Brianne would live and work here, Jake intended to control the situation.

He ignored the voice in his head reminding him that he'd been seconds away from relinquishing control and turning the kiss from sensual to sinful, from easing her onto the couch and satisfying the basic yearning he'd had since laying eyes on the sexy waitress. Neither would or could happen, of course, or she'd know exactly how in shape his shoulder was. The games he'd coax her into playing as she attempted to seduce him into therapy would have to suffice.

She obviously recognized his intent and hoped for some breathing room that would come with waiting for the doctor's response. Too bad for her peace of mind; the paperwork was in the other room. He'd had it for weeks. He just hadn't used it because a close friend had been helping him privately. "Sorry, but you don't get that kind of space, hon."

"Don't call me that."

"Does it offend you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, it turns me on."

Jake turned wide eyes her way.

She let out a laugh. "Sorry. I just can't let you think you'll always have the upper hand."

He inhaled slow and deep, forcing himself *not* to concentrate on what she had just said. Not to contemplate the possibilities of her actually being aroused. Right now. By him. "I have the referral and paperwork in the other room," he told her.

As he'd expected, that dimmed the wattage on her smile.
"I need to get myself settled."

"How long?"

"Not very," she admitted. "Rina's offer was so amazing, I spent last week organizing."

"Can I help you move your things?"

Her gaze fell to his shoulder. "If you can manage that, you don't need me."

She was dead wrong. He definitely needed her. He just couldn't afford to. "I'm certain you have some kind of use for me."

She laughed. "I'm not going to touch that one."

The sound settled inside him, making him feel more alive than he had since he'd both lost his best friend and injured his shoulder.

"Jimmy—you know, the owner of the café—can help me move in."

Jake nodded, ignoring the unwelcome and unfamiliar stab of jealousy he felt at hearing another man's name on her lips. He changed the subject to one more interesting. "I suppose Rina mentioned there's a private gym, a pool on the roof, as well as that whirlpool?" he asked.

"The subject came up, yes. Although if you'd like to look into doing therapy at the hospital, we could use the facilities there."

“I was referring to you using the pool and whirlpool in your free time. Not for therapy.”

“Oh, that’s right. You haven’t agreed to anything yet.”

He grinned. “Exactly right.”

She rolled her eyes. “Care to tell me why not?”

He averted his gaze.

“Guess not.”

He wondered if he imagined the disappointment that flashed across her features when he didn’t confide in her, and refused to dwell on why her feelings bothered him. “I’m curious. What exactly was the deal you made with Rina?”

She shrugged as if the answer were basic. “Private physical therapy.”

“When, Brienne?” He drew out her name, liking the feel of it on his lips. “How often?” He figured Rina would have pinned her down for two to three days a week, and told himself he needed to know the schedule she expected him to follow should he agree to therapy. But a part of Jake wanted to hear that she’d committed to more.

“I work rehab at the hospital during the day, so your therapy would be in the evenings.”

His evenings lately had been routine—dinner, television and bed—and he suddenly envisioned a wealth of sensual opportunities with a woman who interested his mind as well as his body, then mentally decked himself because he needed his

nights free in case he got a tip on Ramirez. “How many nights a week?”

“At least five.”

He forced a laugh. “Rina’s a slave driver. I’m sure we can work out something easier on you. After all, you work days, too.”

She shook her head. “I made a deal and I’ll work what I’m being paid for.” Her green eyes zeroed in on his. “You’re not getting off that easily.”

Knowing what was good for him, Jake took her warning seriously.



BRIANNE HAD BEEN given a reprieve. She couldn’t move into the penthouse until she’d packed up her things and she couldn’t start working on Jake until she satisfied her obligation to Jimmy. She wouldn’t desert her current employer without fair notice.

She’d bolted from the penthouse last night because she’d needed space—fresh air that didn’t include Jake’s seductive, masculine scent. If she hadn’t gotten out of that apartment, she might have succumbed to his easy grin and seductive charm. She might have been tempted to steal another kiss.

She had a hunch he wouldn’t have stopped her. And she wouldn’t have been satisfied with just one.

She curled up on her bed, the morning light spilling through the window, and pulled out the paperwork Jake had given her earlier. Many of the answers she didn’t want to

know lay before her. If she read these papers, she'd be given insight into him as a man. He would become more real, more flesh and blood than he was to her already.

But she didn't have a choice. She hadn't wanted to think about the fact that she'd have to look into his medical records and background before being able to begin physical therapy. That decision had been made, however, so Brianne took a deep breath and unfolded the documents.

One glimpse and her head spun in shock, disappointment and concern. He was a cop, a detective, injured on the job, who needed rehabilitation in order to return to active duty. By providing the physical therapy, she'd be giving him back his career, and enabling him to put himself in danger again.

Apparently she was destined to have her life filled with risk-takers, people whose adrenaline only flowed when in the midst of excitement. She sighed. Well, at least now she had a concrete reason to not let herself get involved with Jake on any level other than the professional.

As if the probability of her leaving for California at the end of the summer wasn't enough of a deterrent to beginning any kind of relationship with this sexy, compelling man, she now had his hazardous occupation. She'd lost her parents and lived through the aftermath of their risk-taking. She'd built her present, established a future and gotten a handle on the way she wanted to live. No way she'd let herself lose her heart or her peace of mind that way ever again. Even if the man excited her in ways she desperately wanted to explore.

Leaving the papers on the bed, she headed for the shower. Anything to soothe her. She stripped off her clothes, turned on the water and stepped inside. Hot water on the hardest massage setting pelted her already sensitized skin. Kissing Jake had aroused her, and now she needed the stinging sensation against her flesh to dull the need he'd inspired.

But as the steady stream of water drilled her skin, instead of dulling the ache, it fanned the flame of desire. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples tight and the sensitive flesh between her legs full to bursting. She tried to tell herself that the way her blood raced through her veins was a response to the knowledge of freedom. That she was reacting to the lure of having a life.

When the summer was over and her time with Jake complete, she'd move west and start over. She could just work one job and have the liberty to come home after work and curl up with a book, or to date a man instead of working a second shift. But Brianne knew she was deceiving herself about the reason for her excited state.

She was responding to Jake, to his flirtatious manner and the sizzling sexual awareness that shimmered between them. But it was an awareness that could go nowhere. She flipped off the water, knowing the shower was doing nothing to dampen her aroused state. No man had ever affected her so strongly, and nothing could ease the building desire.

She stepped out and grabbed for the fluffy towel she'd left hanging behind the door. Steam filled the bathroom, making her hotter than she'd been minutes earlier, if that were

possible. Lifting her foot to the edge of the tub, she patted her leg dry, moving upward to her thigh. And she thought about Jake's injury and the bruising that discolored the otherwise perfect, tanned flesh. She thought about his pain and wanted to ease it.

And she would. With caressing brushes of her fingertips and with stroking movements across his skin. But what would stop her from moving lower? From easing her hands from his shoulder to his hair-roughened chest, to the puckered, darkened nipples just begging for her touch?

What would prevent her from then dipping lower, tracing his firm abdomen, and passing the waistband of his shorts until she encountered the other powerful muscle that would be rigid and firm, waiting for her?

And what would stop him from reciprocating? From moving his strong hands between her legs, from slipping his fingers between the folds of her flesh and easing the ache with slow but sure thrusts? What would stop him from picking up her personal rhythm and from making slow and sure become quick and fulfilling?

Absolutely nothing. The answer came to her immediately, and Brianne's breath flowed in shallow gasps as she realized her own hands mimicked her desire, arousing her wanting flesh. And she realized nothing could stop what was about to happen. Meeting him had fanned the flame that had been lit at the moment of their first illicit glance. His sexy voice and seductive touch had sent her over the edge.

Nothing could stop the fantasy.

Nothing could stop them.

Bright light and a wash of pleasure, strong and enveloping, rushed through her. And Jake's name was on her lips.



AFTER A LONG day at the hospital, Brianne headed over to the restaurant to say goodbye to Jimmy one last time. She'd promised him two weeks' notice, but when she'd arrived and given him details, he'd practically fired her on the spot. Jimmy knew how much money was at stake and refused to let her risk losing the opportunity. More than most, Jimmy understood the freedom Rina's payment would provide.

Brianne packed the small stash of things she kept at The Sidewalk Café, a duffel bag with feminine and emergency items, then zipped it closed. "I'm set. I hate to leave you shorthanded, though," she said, turning to Jimmy.

He leaned both elbows on the bar. "Sweetheart, much as I love you, there's no shortage of waitresses in New York City."

"Are you saying you won't even miss me when I'm gone?" She placed her hand over her heart and feigned a heavy sigh.

"You're dedicated and loyal—but rarely on time, and you took ages and three sets of dishes to train. Remind me again why I kept you on?" He winked, and a lock of sandy-blond hair fell over his forehead.

"Oh, you." She tossed a wet rag his way. "It wasn't that bad."

“Speak for yourself.” His mouth tipped upward in a grin, showing dimples that charmed many women and brought in a harem most weekend nights.

Brianne was grateful for his friendship and support, but he hadn’t appealed to her that way—not the way Jake had. And though Jimmy had asked her out, he’d always respected the boundaries of friendship and accepted her no’s after the first couple of easy letdowns. With all they had in common, he’d become her closest friend and her brother’s male role model when he was home from boarding school.

“Seriously, though, if this guy puts any moves on you, you give me a call.”

Brianne stifled a cough, knowing any *moves* Jake made wouldn’t be unwanted, just unwise. “Thanks, but I’ll be fine.” She slung her bag over her shoulder, refusing to let even Jimmy see her bad case of nerves over taking this new job. “And you lay off the cigarettes, okay? They’ll kill you if some woman doesn’t do it first,” she said with a grin.

He shook his head and laughed. “I’ll be at your place bright and early to help you move in.” He ignored the cigarette reference, just as she’d expected.

“You’re a prince, Jimmy.”

“That’s what they all say. You aren’t angry at me for setting this up, are you?”

“How can I be angry when you dug me out of a deep hole? I finally see daylight. I’m grateful, even if you do have a big mouth.” She grinned, letting him know she was joking. Gossip

was a hazard of his bartending occupation. She couldn't fault him.

“You'll keep in touch?”

She nodded. “You bet. Tell Kellie I'll call.” She had a hunch after one night in the penthouse with Jake, she'd be needing both Jimmy and Kellie's differing gender advice. She also had her friends at the hospital, especially Sharon, another physical therapist in whom she could confide. But there was something about Jake she wanted to keep close and private, share with as few people as possible, Brianne thought.

“Take care, Bri.”

She walked around the bar and gave her best friend a hug, then she strode out into the humid evening air. Heat wafted upward from the sidewalk, but Brianne had a feeling her nights were about to get even hotter.



THE PRECINCT SMELLED familiar, Jake realized as he walked into the place. Musty and old with linoleum floors and chipped-paint walls, it had been the place he'd called home for many years. He'd joined the force straight out of state college and never looked back. Until now.

Nodding as he passed people in the hall, Jake entered the squad room and pulled up a chair by a metal desk. “Hey, Duke.”

“Jake, buddy, how are you doing?” Duke Russell, his good friend and fellow detective, slid his chair back and stood, clapping him on the back.

Jake swallowed hard and refrained from wincing. “Hanging in.” He settled himself into a nearby chair. “Any news on Ramirez?” Duke and Steve Vickers were feeding Jake information.

“We can keep this between us?”

“Haven’t we always?”

Duke nodded his head. “Nothing’s changed. Like I’ve been telling you, Ramirez walked out of the courtroom and, from all reports, he’s living a clean—albeit sleazy—life. Not that we’ve stopped keeping tabs on him.”

“Well, damn.” Jake reached over and grabbed a box of Tic Tacs from the corner of Duke’s desk, shaking one into his hand and popping it into his mouth. The fresh peppermint cleared his palate but not the residual sour taste from a case gone bad. He leaned forward and spoke low. “Ramirez can’t stay clean forever. His girlfriend claims she hasn’t seen him.”

“You’re on injury leave, and I told you Vickers would take care of that shit on patrol. You’re supposed to be coordinating from home. What the hell are you doing talking to Ramirez’s girlfriend? The lieutenant will have your ass if he finds out.”

Jake shrugged. “What the hell’s he going to do? Throw me off the force?” Jake didn’t know if he wanted to be there, anyway. He only knew he wasn’t leaving this case open, and as long as Ramirez was walking the street, free to peddle drugs to kids and take down good men, the case remained unsettled.

“Lowell!” The barking voice reverberated through the room. That bark had intimidated more junior officers than Jake

had fingers on both hands, but he'd never let the lieutenant mess with his head. As a result, a grudging respect had developed over the years. Lieutenant Thompson didn't appreciate Jake's often renegade style, but as long as Jake didn't cross the line, the lieutenant gave him leeway. Each respected the other's boundaries.

But this injury had tested both men. Thompson wanted his detective back; Jake wanted to take his time, first on Ramirez and then on deciding what the hell life had in store. Opposing goals with no middle ground.

Until Brianne, Jake thought, realization dawning. He'd thought having her around would cause nothing but problems, but she'd just given Jake a means of keeping Thompson happy and buying himself time. He hadn't told the lieutenant he'd been in therapy before because Thompson knew his therapist Alfonse, and Alfonse couldn't lie worth a damn if questioned. But if anyone talked with Brianne, she'd tell the truth—Jake was being a pain in the ass and she was working on him slowly.

Jake rose from his seat and turned. "Afternoon, Lieutenant."

"I thought I told you I didn't want to see your sorry ass in here unless you were in rehab."

Jake inclined his head. "Never say I don't follow orders, Lieutenant."

The older man snorted. "That'll be the day."

“No kidding. I’ve got myself my very own physical therapist. It’ll just take a while till I’m up to speed,” he said.

Thompson narrowed his eyes, his suspicion evident. “I won’t ask what changed your mind.”

“Good, because I wouldn’t tell you.”

Thompson turned his steely gaze toward Duke. “You’d better not be spilling department secrets.”

Duke shook his head. “It’s not like he’s an outsider.”

“He damn well is. At least until he aces his physical and gets his ass back in here.”

Jake laughed. “I think this is what they call talking about me like I’m not in the room.”

“Shut the hell up, Lowell.”

Jake shrugged and started for the door.

“Where are you going?” Thompson asked.

“Somewhere you won’t hear me talking, Lieutenant.” Jake infused his tone with the right amount of respect because he truly liked the older man and knew his superior had the department’s as well as Jake’s best interests at heart.

“I hear you in my sleep,” Lieutenant Thompson muttered, and Jake laughed, letting the door swing shut behind him.

In the stale-smelling hall, he slowed his steps, taking in what he knew so far. His perp was playing clean until he figured the cops were through with him. And though Lieutenant Thompson might know Jake was sniffing around, at least he now thought Jake was cooperating with therapy. He

wouldn't be too hard on him if he caught Jake looking into things behind the scenes. With his live-in therapist at work from nine to five, Jake had his daytime free to hunt around.

And he had his nights free for Brianne.



BRIANNE TRIPPED ON her shoelace and paused in front of the high-rise building that housed Rina's penthouse on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Jimmy had moved her in yesterday, and, to her surprise, Jake had made himself scarce. He'd shown her to her room, told her to make herself at home, and then left her to settle in, saying he had an appointment. She appreciated the respect and space he'd given her to acclimate alone to her new surroundings. When Jake was in there, the humongous apartment grew much smaller, and there seemed to be no air to breathe.

As she knelt down to tie her shoe, a humid breeze blew in the night, similar to the air that wafted through her window as she tried to sleep. Because the air-conditioning in the penthouse was cool and uncomfortable, and she'd hoped some familiarity would help her relax, she'd opened the window last night seeking the warmer air. But she'd tossed and turned, anyway, restless because of a heat that had nothing to do with Norton lying next to her or the outside temperature, and everything to do with the fire Jake ignited in her.

She double-knotted the lace, lingering over the simple task, avoiding going "home." But eventually she had no choice. She stood, smoothing her dark green hospital scrubs and taking a deep breath for courage before facing Jake. She

deliberately hadn't changed after work, hoping the more professional she looked, the more professional she'd act. Even if Jake forced her to tease and cajole him into some form of cooperation, she planned to maintain distance.

It would take strength and fortitude not to succumb to her attraction to Jake, but she'd gathered that strength before, at the lowest point in her life. She'd just have to gather it again. Rina's job gave her a means of achieving goals—the money to relocate to California and to continue to be close to the brother she'd raised.

Giving in to Jake's seductive powers, succumbing to a man who valued danger and risk, couldn't result in anything more than a short-term affair. Brianne didn't indulge in meaningless relationships. She'd learned long ago that they failed to relieve the loneliness. And given the strength of the attraction between herself and Jake, by indulging she would only set herself up for a broken heart.



BRIANNE NELSON. PRETTY name for a pretty lady, Louis thought. A name he'd had no trouble learning from the waitresses at the upscale bar Detective Lowell liked to frequent. Louis Ramirez wasn't surprised a man like Lowell had developed an interest in the woman. Any red-blooded man would look twice. *He* had. And now she was bent over, tying her shoes, giving him a view of her slim waist and rounded ass. What a waste, her interest in the detective.

The damn cop thought he was so smart. Louis couldn't stifle the snicker that escaped. He'd not only beaten the rap,

he'd beaten Lowell. Lowell hadn't been clever enough to recognize a setup. He'd gotten shot and hadn't been strong enough to pull himself up and do the Miranda rights himself. And he hadn't been able to keep Louis in jail. Louis loved the cop's obvious frustration over the fact that no one could say Louis was anything but a clean citizen now. But talking to Louis's girlfriend was taking things too far. Making things too personal.

Personal could go both ways, he thought, and watched as Brianne Nelson headed into Lowell's building and checked in at the security desk out front. Fancy address for a cop to be hanging out. He took a drag on his cigarette, then stomped it into the ground. Lowell was a damn fool if he trusted money to keep him safe. Because if and when the time came, no doorman or security system would keep Louis out.

Chapter Four

JAKE SPENT THE afternoon on the streets talking to old informants and even older friends. No one had any information on Ramirez, but Jake hadn't expected them to. All he wanted was for the slime to know he was on the prowl, asking questions. That he hadn't forgotten Ramirez had taken down a cop, was responsible for Jake's injury. That they would meet up again.

When Jake got home, the apartment was quiet except for Norton. Though Jake wanted nothing more than to hit the shower and relax, he grabbed the leash and took the dog on a long walk—on the hot sidewalk. The pedigreed pooch dragged his heels, trying to run home or bolt into any open door he could find where the sun wasn't baking the concrete. No mutt with a brain would want to roast in this heat, and Norton obviously agreed. Jake had to admit, the dog was smart, something the sharpei had proven when he'd rolled over and begged for a belly rub from Brianne. Figuring they had in common both their attraction to her and the fact that they both were male, he decided to give the dog a break.

Once Jake got Norton to his favorite patch of grass, he gave the order his sister had explained would take care of things fast. "Do business," Jake muttered, hoping nobody saw him talking to the mutt.

Unbelievably, as usual, Norton finally did his thing. Jake rewarded him with a fast trip home and a huge bowl of cold water. Then he took a cool shower for himself, and by the time

he heard the sounds of Brianne's return, he'd washed away the grime of the day. He was ready to spar with Brianne, to keep her at a respectable enough distance to avoid therapy—among other physical entanglements he couldn't afford.

Jake told himself that his moral code wouldn't let him take advantage of their living situation. He reminded himself that putting Ramirez away had to come first. And he knew for certain that being both a cop and a gentleman who kept his hands off Brianne would require all his mental and physical energy.

He stepped back and greeted her in the large marble entryway. "Welcome home."

With a curt nod, she walked toward him with brisk, no-nonsense steps. Obviously she had the same concept of distance in mind. He forcibly stopped his smile from turning into a full-fledged grin. Her curt stride, accompanied by her baggy green pants and top exuded a professional demeanor, one she no doubt intended to use to put him off.

He understood. He'd tossed and turned last night, knowing she was asleep in another room in the same apartment, remembering the kiss and knowing he would have liked to take it further—to make love to her and satisfy the yearning she inspired.

She stopped in front of him and let out a huge sigh. "Boy, am I beat."

Before Jake could respond, Norton bolted into the room and ran across the floor, coming to a sliding halt in front of

her. If she hadn't been in his way, he'd have hit the elevator doors behind her with a resounding *thud*.

Brianne grinned and bent down to scratch behind his ear. "Hiya, Norton. How are you? I missed you today."

Jake groaned. Leave it to the mutt to thaw the chill. He wished she'd missed him half as much—then realized he was jealous of the dog. He shook his head, as disgusted with himself as he was impressed with Brianne, an exhausted woman with a soft spot for a lonely pet.

"I'm sure he missed you, too. With Rina gone, he's at loose ends. He either whines nonstop, or I can't find him anywhere. Like last night. I think he must've curled up somewhere that reminded him of Rina. A pile of clothes or someplace I haven't found yet." He shrugged with his one good shoulder.

"He was with me."

He glanced up, surprised. An adorable smile tugged at her lips.

"He weighs a ton. I couldn't move, couldn't roll over. Once he lay down next to me on my blanket, I couldn't budge him, not even with all my body weight. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about since he must have slept with you before I moved in."

"No, he sat at the foot of the bed whining all night." Jake shook his head and swallowed hard. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. While he'd lain awake fantasizing about

Brianne, the damn dog had been living Jake's dreams. He eyed Norton, who lay at her feet, with an annoyed scowl.

“Really? Hmm.” She stretched and yawned all at the same time and quickly clasped an embarrassed hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. I’m just low on energy. Add to that the tossing and turning I tried to do last night and...well...sorry.” A beautiful blush stained her cheeks. “I’m just tired. And hungry.”

In that instant, Jake decided everything, including being jealous of Norton and keeping his distance, could wait. She appeared more exhausted than he'd remembered seeing her. Then again, he hadn't had too many up-close-and-personal conversations, something that would change now that they lived under one roof. Looking at her tired face, he had a very strong desire to wrap Brianne in his arms and keep her safe—from the outside world, and from her own life which was so obviously wearing on her.

As a cop, he'd always had an overactive protective instinct, but what he felt now went beyond a professional impulse to protect. “Can I get you anything to drink? A glass of soda or water?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, thanks. Just food. I know we never discussed the details of this living arrangement, but I did some food shopping during my lunch hour and I thought I'd put together a quick dinner. Can I...should I...” Her voice trailed off, professionalism giving way to uncertainty, barriers crumbling in light of awkward reality.

He found her uncertainty endearing and a refreshing change from her consummate forced demeanor. To hell with

the cop and his secrets, Jake thought. The man in him wanted to ease her stress. “Actually, I called in for pizza before jumping into the shower. It’s already in the kitchen. You’re welcome to share.”

“Thank you. I *love* pizza and, to be honest, I’m so exhausted, cooking’s the last thing I want to do.” Her enthusiasm was so tangible he wanted to taste it—and her.

She turned, her ponytail bobbing as she bounded toward the kitchen, Norton hot on her trail. Jake followed a short distance behind. She tossed a canvas bag on the floor by one of Rina’s decorator wrought-iron, ladder-back kitchen chairs, rested her hands on the table, and inhaled deeply.

“Mmm. That smells delicious. I haven’t had a slice in ages.”

“How come?”

She turned to face him. “How come what?”

“If you love pizza so much, why haven’t you had any lately? You work two jobs, long hours, and you said yourself you’re exhausted. Every single New Yorker knows take-out’s easier than cooking.”

“It also gets expensive.”

He debated for a moment, then decided to ask. “Two jobs must bring in a good salary. What does the money go for, if you don’t mind my asking?” Once again, it wasn’t the cop’s need for answers but personal curiosity that drove him now. A need to get to know her better.

She eased herself into a chair, her hands curling around the gleaming chrome handles. “My parents died when I was twenty. My brother was nine, and I’ve raised him ever since.”

Her lonely existence touched the heart he’d closed off after his ex-wife left. “I’m sorry.”

He came up beside her, placing what he meant to be a supportive hand on her shoulder. But when it came to Brianne, no touch was simple. Heat exploded beneath his fingertips, but he left his hand in place, unable and unwilling to break contact.

“It’s been a long time, but thanks. Marc, my brother, he’s special, unbelievably bright, and it would have been a disservice to him and his abilities to keep him in public school. Everything I earn has been split between his education and making ends meet.”

Jake stared, grateful for the insight and amazed at her generous spirit. She’d given and sacrificed everything for her sibling, and, though Jake would do the same for Rina, his heart twisted with the notion that he’d been right—Brianne was an incredible woman. “Your brother’s lucky to have you.”

A blush rose to her cheeks, and she waved away the compliment, as if what she’d done was inconsequential. “I’m lucky to have him. We’re like this—” She crossed her fingers to make her point.

He nodded, an unexpected lump in his throat. “Well, dig in.” He pointed to the white pizza box on the table. “Your days of deprivation are at an end.”

She grinned and did as he asked. For the duration of the short meal, he watched more than he ate, gaining his fill from her satisfied sighs and gratitude. Such a simple thing, and it broke down barriers far more than any come-on ever would. It was progress he hadn't expected and it touched him more than he would have liked, especially for a man who couldn't afford any involvement or distractions right now.

She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin and rose to clean the table. Used to fending for himself, Jake helped and, despite the size of the large kitchen, they bumped into one another often, the current between them charged.

Still, by the time she'd disposed of the garbage and turned back to him, she seemed calmer and more composed than he felt at the moment. "Ready to work?" she asked.

Professional, he thought again. But nothing could erase the confidence she'd shared or the heat they generated. Hell, he'd already caught the fragrant strawberry scent he associated with this woman—the one that turned him inside out and made him *want* more than he could put into words. But she was right. She was here to do a job, and he ought to let her do it.

"Ready to try and convince me?" He grinned. "It's a gorgeous night out. Want to see the stars?"

"Pathetic pickup line," she said.

He chuckled. "No joke. The whirlpool's outside." He deliberately waited a beat. "Under the stars."

Although she blushed a furious shade of red, she held her ground and his gaze. He was still hoping to persuade her to get

some rest, but if she insisted on working, he figured sexual innuendo would keep her on her guard—and at a distance. He couldn't trust himself if they got too close, and heaven help him if her hands actually worked on his body. This woman could have him forgetting his own name, never mind Ramirez.

“It's the whirlpool or the tub in the master bath,” he said lightly, referring to the water therapy she'd mentioned the other day.

She picked up her duffel bag. “I'll need to see the extent of your injury and mobility before I can even think about the type of exercises you'll need. Are you going to let me evaluate you?”

“Wouldn't you rather take it easy? You said yourself you're exhausted.” Although he had to admit, the food had put color back in her cheeks and she didn't look as tired as she had earlier. He wondered if the sexual innuendo had anything to do with the flush in her face and the sudden energy.

“Nice stalling tactic, but it won't work. Give me a chance, okay? First we'll loosen the area with wet heat wrapped around your shoulder, and then I'll check your mobility.”

“Wet heat, huh? Sounds interesting.” His gaze dropped to her lips. She'd licked them once and did so again, her nerves clearly showing despite her outward calm. And just thinking about breaching those walls again, this time feeling her melt in his arms, at his touch, did something to him deep inside.

“Moist heating pads,” she explained, “on the affected area.” If she'd been flustered before, the blush and body shifting increased now. “You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do.” He let out a mock long-suffering sigh. “No whirlpool?”

“I said water therapy’s always an option. I didn’t say I’d be using it on you.” She wagged her finger in front of him, scolding him for jumping to conclusions.

“What if I’m a good boy and cooperate? Then do I get the water treatment?” He offered her a pleading look and got a laugh for his effort.

Jake knew one thing for certain. No matter how much of a distraction she’d be, he wanted her in that whirlpool willingly before the summer was through. Not that he planned to give in to the need. Still, he reached for her, wrapping his palm around that finger. Surprised, her gaze met his, and his breath caught in his throat. Those warm, compelling green eyes turned the tables, giving her the control that should have been his.

He’d never been in danger of losing control before. Even when his tumultuous marriage was at its best and most sexually charged, he’d never experienced the chemistry he felt now, had never felt the desire to cede power and see where it took him.

She swallowed hard. “Tell you what. You cooperate, and I’ll *consider* the whirlpool.”

“Hardly a fair deal.”

“But it does give you something to work toward, doesn’t it? In case returning mobility isn’t enough of a motivator.” She met and held his gaze, assessing him. She took his measure,

and, as she studied him, Jake knew he had a formidable adversary. One he wouldn't be able to con for long.

He let out a slow groan. He couldn't just walk away, and eventually he'd either be confiding in her and asking her to keep his secret or he'd be dead meat, his plan for the summer and Ramirez busted before it began. "Okay, then. I guess the gym would be the best place to start?"

"You have a gym?"

She wiggled her finger free, and he let her go. For now. "This place has all sorts of amenities. Rina didn't show you?"

Brianne shook her head. "Not the gym."

"I was hoping she'd venture back into that room again. But it was her husband's favorite spot and it brings back too many memories." Brianne's eyes softened in understanding, and Jake let out a groan. "Come." He grasped her bag with his good arm, ignoring her glare, feeling certain she wouldn't get into a tug-of-war with a patient.

He gestured for her to follow, turned and headed for the incredible home gym his brother-in-law had created, stopping in the doorway. Large windows covered the walls and sunlight bounced off the chrome, state-of-the-art equipment. Where there were no windows there were floor-to-ceiling mirrors instead.

Brianne came up beside him. He sensed her presence, felt her body heat, and his own temperature rose in response.

"Nice setup," she murmured.

“Personally I prefer the Village Gym.” He turned and saw how impressed she was. “My brother-in-law was more into glitz than necessity, but I can’t deny it’s perfect for what we need.” And the only room in this whole apartment where he felt completely at ease.

“You don’t live here.” It wasn’t a question, and he wasn’t surprised she’d drawn the correct conclusion. The papers he’d given her outlined his injury and how it was sustained. Common sense dictated a cop couldn’t afford such luxury.

“Disappointed?” He wished he’d withheld the bitterness from his voice, but the past still lived within him.

He’d met his ex-wife, Linda, at the city school where she’d been teaching, when he’d shown up for a talk to the kids about the hazards of drug use. They’d hit it off fast, sharing incredible chemistry, great sex and seemingly similar goals and desires. She’d seemed to be in awe of his badge and uniform, and had been more than happy to marry a cop with a steady income, if unpredictable hours. They both wanted to move out of the city, Linda so she could teach in a safer neighborhood, and Jake so he could enjoy a peaceful family life during his off-time.

But as soon as the honeymoon ended, everything she’d seemed to like and accept in Jake underwent a radical shift. His hours suddenly became too long compared to her friend’s professional husbands, while the money Jake made was insufficient for decorating the home they’d bought in the suburbs. Jake wasn’t a man who liked to overspend or overextend his credit, and for damn sure his salary hadn’t been

able to support his wife's sudden desire to stay at home and shop with the wealthier women she'd met in the area. She sure as hell hadn't been able to deal with Rina and Robert's luxurious lifestyle. Jake's marriage had lasted three increasingly bitter years—years in which he and his wife grew further and further apart. She finally walked out.

Jake hadn't realized that the past still haunted him so strongly, until faced with the possibility that Brianne might find him and his lifestyle lacking. Despite her willingness to sacrifice for her brother, why wouldn't Brianne be impressed with this penthouse and disappointed that Jake wasn't its owner?

“Am I disappointed you don't own this place?” she asked.

“Or have the money to live here,” he muttered.

“That's ridiculous. It's not like I was after you for money.” What sounded like genuine hurt laced her tone. “It's not like I was after you at all.”

Jake chose not to touch that statement, picking up on her emotion instead. He wanted to keep his distance, not hurt her in the process. “My comment was uncalled for.”

“Is that your masculine way of saying ‘I'm sorry’?” She faced him, her back to the door frame, her hands braced behind her.

He reached out and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. “It's my way of saying I'm an ass.”

“I couldn't have put it better myself.” She laughed, and her breasts pushed temptingly against the soft cotton uniform she

wore, rising and falling with each breath she took.

For a moment, the barriers she'd put up between them were gone, making him want to reach out to her, to hold her in his arms and... Without warning, gut-level fear took hold. He'd had his heart ripped to shreds over his lifestyle and his lack of money once before. He couldn't go there again.

Although he had no idea how much money Rina was paying Brianne for her services, for her sacrifice—moving in and devoting her nights—he had no doubt she was being well compensated. And though Brianne's reasons for needing money were altruistic and good, it didn't mean that once she'd finished caring for her brother she wouldn't desire more in life than she'd had before. And “more” demanded money, something a cop would never have in abundance.

“Would you believe I'm apartment-and dog-sitting for the summer?”

“Of course. You've been set up, just like me.” He didn't miss the bitterness in her tone.

Obviously her anger at Rina hadn't dissipated, and he couldn't say he blamed her.

“Speaking of dog-sitting and setups, we need to keep him out of here so neither of us trip.”

Jake nodded, and because Norton had curled up in his crate while they ate, he was able to shut the gym door without creating a scene.

“Is there a sink in here?” Brianne asked next.

He nodded. “There’s a full bathroom back that way.” He gestured to the closed door across the room.

“How about a...”

“There’s a massage area in the corner,” he said, reading her mind. “Trust me, there’s nothing you’ll need that you won’t find here.”

She shook her head, her auburn ponytail falling over one shoulder. “Amazing.”

He clenched his fists to avoid giving in to the impulse to twirl her hair around his fingers...and feel the silken strands brushing over other aware body parts. Instead he focused on their surroundings and her reaction to them. “It’s called wealth, so enjoy it while it’s at your disposal.”

“If you say so.” Her smile was wary.

She grabbed the bag he’d deposited at his feet and headed for the bathroom. Soon the sound of running water reached his ears. His vision of wet heat involved slick bodies—hers and his—in the shower, out of the shower...He didn’t care as long as they were creating that moist, intense heat.

Friction and pleasure, he thought, and his body shook in reaction. He had to get himself in check. He couldn’t plan strategy or figure out how to keep her in the dark about his ability to move well until he got a feel for what she had in store. Jake had no idea what Brianne’s idea of therapy entailed, but he was about to find out.

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BRIANNE CLOSED HERSELF in the bathroom and breathed deeply. She splashed cold water on her face before setting up her equipment for Jake. She re-entered the room, hoping she was more in control of her physical reactions to him. But she took one look at him fully clothed, realized she hadn't told him to undress for therapy, and accepted that, given their situation, she'd rarely be in control.

She sighed, bracing herself for the inevitable. "If we're going to do this right, you need to take off your shirt."

As he reached for the hem of his ragged sweatshirt with one hand, Jake's eyes sparkled with mischief. He looked like a man who was about to be given his fondest wish, or rather a man who thought he was about to give her her fondest wish, by stripping down in her presence.

"Get a grip, Don Juan. It's a purely professional request. I can't very well heat your shoulder if you're wearing heavy cotton."

He laughed, obviously not the least bit offended. "Are you saying you don't want to see my bare chest?"

"I've seen enough bare-chested men in my career. I'm sure yours is no different from the rest." She averted her gaze before he could see the lie in her eyes. His bare chest was spectacular.

"You wound me."

This time she laughed, but at the sound of his groan—definitely one of pain—she pivoted back toward him in time to see him grimace as he began to remove his shirt with his good

hand, with more help than she'd expected from his injured side.

She wondered what was going on. "You said you haven't been in therapy."

He averted his eyes. "I never actually said that. I have a friend in physical therapy who gave me some exercises and checks in once in a while. I've been working the shoulder some."

She wasn't yet sure how much exercise he had or hadn't been doing, but after a session with him, she would. "*Some* exercise isn't enough."

He treated her to a sexy wink. "That's why I have you."

"I'm only as good as your willingness to follow through, and you haven't guaranteed me anything yet."

"I'm not worried."

"Well, I am." She stepped forward, intending to get past the word games and get started on the therapy. "If I'm so good, then let me help you get that shirt off."

He narrowed his eyes, and Brianne could see the war going on inside him. She'd seen it many times before. Allow help and look weak or continue the struggle alone. Normally she'd let the internal struggle go on until the patient gave in, but she sensed Jake wasn't one to cave easily. She now understood the reason for the cutoff sweatshirts. They allowed him wide sleeve room, easier movement.

She had every intention of returning him to full mobility, even if she had to play up to his masculine ego in order to

maintain his cooperation. “Come on, Jake. I’m really good with my hands.” Her voice dropped to a husky level despite her best intentions.

“I just bet you are.” His eyes darkened as he spoke, his voice a deep rumble that set her nerve endings on fire. Her goals, the reasons why she shouldn’t give in to this attraction, diluted each time he got within touching distance.

Reaching out, she grabbed for the hem of his shirt, her fingers grazing his warm skin. At the contact, his stomach muscles rippled beneath her touch, and he sucked in an audible, affected breath. She understood. Her body reacted in an intimate, sexual way, too. Need curled deep in her belly, and her nipples pulled into tight peaks as if awaiting a lover’s caress.

Never in her career had a patient session resonated with desire, and her hands shook as she lifted his shirt up and over his head, exposing that exceptional bare chest for view. Heat emanated from his body to hers, drawing her in, enticing her to drop her guard and shed her inhibitions.

She dropped his shirt instead. And though instinct told her to take a safe step back, she was drawn to him in ways she didn’t understand and ways she wanted to explore more deeply. Slowly, so she didn’t hurt him, she smoothed her palm over his bruised flesh. He let out a drawn-out groan, a rumble that reverberated inside her, and his hands came up to cradle her cheeks. “When you touch me it feels so damn good.”

Her heart beat rapidly in her chest. “It’s my job to make you feel better.” And it was her job to pull away from him—

but the connection was too strong, the need to be with him too compelling.

“Then, by all means, do your best.” His thumb brushed back and forth over her skin, caressing her face.

Unable to resist, she leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on the least bruised part of his chest, over his warm flesh.

“Brienne.” Her name came out both as a warning and a plea.

The next thing she knew his lips were on hers—or had her lips come to his? She didn’t know, but everything between them was real and mutual, hot and ravenous. His tongue delved inside her mouth with passion and need, taking all she offered and giving even more. He smoothed one hand down her back and over her buttocks, pausing there, stopping to knead her flesh through the barrier of clothing and to pull her so close she could feel his hard erection straining against the confines of his jeans.

He wanted her. Not that she’d doubted it before—how could she, with the heated stares and longing glances?—but she felt it now and the certainty fueled bravery she hadn’t known she possessed. She trailed a path with her tongue from his lips to his cheek and outward, lingering behind his ear and nibbling on his earlobe until his large, masculine body trembled in response to her touch.

She inhaled, and his heady scent enveloped her, making her feel, for the first time in her life, that she wasn’t alone. Desire exploded in waves, curling in her stomach, wrapping around her heart and causing her to crave so much more than

the fiery touches they'd shared so far. She wanted to feel his bare skin covering hers, needed him inside her to fill the aching emptiness she'd carried for so long. It was an ache that she sensed only he could satisfy.

And that was the thought that brought her to her senses and forced her to break their electric connection and step back, away from the fire. *He* was the one person who could take her to soaring heights—and destroy her dreams. Better to concentrate on her tangible goals—finishing this job, being with her brother, moving to California.

“Wow.” Not exactly a sophisticated response, but Brianne was so shaken up that she couldn't formulate a better response.

“That about says it.” Jake ran a trembling hand through his hair. “You okay?”

He eyed her with a concern she didn't want to see or feel. Not from him, a man who was the antithesis of everything she desired in life, and that could be summed up in one word: safe.

She nodded. “Fine. I'm fine,” she lied. “You?”

A sexy grin curved his lips. “Touch me again and I'll be even better.”

“I was asking about the pain in your shoulder.” Two lies in two minutes. And after all her hard work teaching Marc the value of honesty, she thought wryly.

“If you say so. Look, Brianne, about what just happened...”

She shook her head. “Forget about it. It was bound to happen and it's already forgotten.” Another whopper for the

books. She'd never forget how warm and welcoming his mouth felt on hers, never truly put his touch behind her. "Let's just get back to work, shall we? Sit down, and I'll be right back."

To her surprise, he complied, shifting in the leather chair until he found a comfortable position. His gaze never left hers, challenging her. She had a hunch that his sudden cooperation was for her benefit because he sensed how thrown she still was. Brianne didn't care about the reason; she was just grateful not to have to spar or argue with him at the moment, and she desperately needed a minute alone.

Ducking into the bathroom, she exhaled deeply and splashed cold water over her face—again. Looking in the mirror, she took in her bright eyes and flushed cheeks. Everything she felt was mirrored in her expression—the desire, the longing. But she couldn't indulge further any more than she could hide in here forever. Yet, as she headed back into the room, she knew even her coat of professional armor wouldn't help her now.

Five minutes later, she had a still-cooperative Jake settled in his seat, wet heat cushioning his neck and shoulders—much the way she desired to cradle him in her arms and ease his pain, she thought, recalling the way he'd winced as she'd positioned him with the padding. Curling her hands around the edge of hard leather, she perched on the seat of a workout machine, dangling her feet while the heat worked on his shoulder.

Silence surrounded them, and his intense, serious gaze never left hers. She wondered what he was thinking, how that kiss had affected him, and knew she couldn't afford to find out, not if she intended to walk away unscathed.

“So how'd you sustain this injury?” She sought conversation that would distract her still-tingling body and remind her of all the reasons she couldn't let herself get involved with this cop who thrived on danger.

He leaned his head back against the headrest as if debating what to tell her. “We got a tip on a drug dealer we'd been watching,” he said finally. “Figured we'd catch him in the act. This was a key chance to get him off the street.”

As he spoke, his eyes began to glitter with remembered determination. He obviously liked his job and fed on the rush of getting the bad guys. Even as disappointment filled her, so did unexpected admiration for the man and his work. She might not like what he did for a living, but how could she not respect it? And him?

“Turns out it was a setup. Our guy showed—with company. Took out a damn good cop. Frank was my football buddy and best friend. A decent guy with a wife and kids. Meanwhile, I hit the ground, he took the bullet, I fractured the shoulder diving out of the way and got shot, anyway. But if I hadn't gone down, if I'd taken Frank's bullet, those kids would still have a father,” he muttered.

“And your already grieving sister would have lost another loved one. Don't question fate,” she said, although she'd done just that, many times in her overworked, solitary life.

“I take it I should be grateful I just got hit by a bullet and ended up with a bum shoulder?”

She winced at his nonchalant description. Proof that danger was so much a part of him, he remained unfazed even after injury. “There are other ways of saying it.”

“Maybe. But *Uncle* Jake is hardly a fair trade-off to those kids.”

He was right, but the thought of his being killed didn’t sit well with her. “Everyone has someone who cares about them. You wouldn’t want Rina to experience that pain again. Sometimes you just have to accept and move on.”

His assessing stare never wavered. “It would have been easier if the guy had been caught and put away. But, to top off the night, some rookie grabbed the perp first and screwed up his Miranda rights,” he said in disgust. “The slime walked on a technicality.”

She nodded, noting his clenched jaw and deciding it was time to change the subject once more. But she still wanted to steer clear of that kiss and her growing feelings for Jake, the man. His caring about his partner’s family added another dimension to his personality, this one warmer and decidedly vulnerable, though she doubted he’d ever admit to it.

“So tell me. Why have you been giving Rina a hard time about therapy?” Brianne had her doubts that he was as immobile as his sister believed, and she wondered what exactly was going on with Jake Lowell.

Gratitude for the topic switch flitted across his expression and then was gone. “And here I thought I was being a model patient.” His blue eyes met hers, daring her to disagree.

“I admit you’re cooperating right now. But obviously you hadn’t been, since Rina was worried enough to hire me.”

“You already know physical therapy wasn’t the only reason Rina hired you,” he reminded her. “Not that I’m defending my sister, but she can’t stop herself from looking out for me. She lost her husband several months ago and I’m all she has left.”

His voice deepened, and Brianne couldn’t help feel his obvious love and concern for his sister. The softer part of him showed once more and beckoned to her in a way that threatened her ability to maintain distance. His caring for others—Frank’s family and his sister—was something she could relate to. She shivered at the notion because their kiss proved she was already having a tough time steering clear of the connection between them. The more they had in common, the harder it was to remain unaffected by him. *California, a stable existence, a life of my own*, she reminded herself. She could have none of those if she got involved with Jake.

Jake watched Brianne closely. Her wariness didn’t surprise him. Hell, after that explosive kiss he was pretty uptight himself.

Twice now they’d proven that each time they got together, they ended in a clinch neither expected and neither could control. Not good for a man who’d promised himself he’d maintain distance and a clear head. But around Brianne,

distance was impossible and so was rational thinking. Just knowing he'd put personal restrictions against being with this woman made him more frustrated and uptight than he could ever remember being.

“Rina needs you,” Brianne said, bringing him back to the present. “All the more reason for you to forget the guilt and be glad you're alive—for your sister's sake.” Her eyes flickered with banked emotion.

Jake would learn to live with the guilt, as soon as he had Ramirez behind bars. He cleared his throat. “Well, Rina doesn't need to worry. I'm fine, and you'll be able to tell her that as soon as she returns.”

“I'll tell her the truth. If you cooperate, she'll know that. If you give me a hard time, she'll hear about that, too.”

And that was exactly what bothered him about this deal Rina had made with Brianne. He couldn't have Brianne reporting his cooperation back to the woman who paid her salary, or Brianne working on his shoulder and discovering exactly how mobile he actually was. Either way, Jake was in deep.

She swung her feet back and forth. “You do realize you can't afford to fool around, not if you want full range of motion back.”

The telephone rang and Brianne jumped, obviously startled by the unexpected interruption. Bound by heating pads, Jake motioned toward his cell lying on the counter behind her. “Would you get that for me?”

She nodded and brought it to him.

“Lowell.”

“It’s Duke. A guy ODeD on some bad shit. The girlfriend’s in critical condition. It’s Vickers’s case, but he called me. Nothing coherent’s come out of her yet and the hospital’s restricted her visitors, but they promised as soon as it was okay they’d give us a go-ahead to talk to her. It’s possible we can piece together some kind of lead on Ramirez once she comes to.”

“Pick me up in five.”

“If the lieutenant finds out you’re sniffing around an active case and a potential witness...”

“So don’t tell him.” Jake slammed his phone onto the counter and found himself face-to-face with Brianne’s wide, curious, gorgeous green eyes.

“No therapy?”

He’d walked out on women before, but, damn, why did the disappointment in this one’s tone hit him like a punch in the gut? He shook his head. “Something’s come up.” And he couldn’t tell her a thing.

“I thought you were off duty. On leave.”

He let out a groan. “I am. This is...about my friend’s family. The one I just told you about. One of the kids is having a problem...”

“Say no more.” She jumped up and began to unwrap the heating pads from his back and shoulder. “You don’t owe me a

detailed explanation. I don't like it, but this can wait." Understanding and compassion filled her expression, making Jake feel like a first-class heel for lying and for ducking out on her.

She understood and didn't question. Even his ex-wife had never done that. Everything he'd worried about and sought to avoid since Rina's revelation about inviting Brianne to live here was coming to pass. "Thanks." He shook his head, not knowing what else to say.

"Take care of your friend's family." Brianne knelt down and tossed him his shirt.

He slipped the wide-necked cutoff over his head, and his arms followed. He struggled a bit and winced slightly, but not nearly as much as he should have, Jake realized when he caught Brianne's knowing gaze.

Arms folded over her chest, foot tapping against the floor, she looked at him and frowned. "When you get back we can talk about your real need for therapy. And your so-called need for me."

Chapter Five

JAKE NEEDED BRIANNE. Needed her in his bed. Needed her in his life. Needed an affair that wouldn't deny him everything about her he desired. Mostly he had to get the woman out of his system before his obsession with her completely consumed him.

He'd been standing at the crime scene watching Forensics work. If he wasn't good friends with the guys on duty he'd have been tossed out on his ass, but they'd let him stay as they picked through the remnants of a romantic dinner gone wrong. Yet, instead of focusing on details, Jake had been thinking of Brianne.

When he'd seen the half-empty glasses of wine, he'd envisioned her taking a seductive sip, licking the fruity liquid off her lips and letting him taste it on her tongue. And when he'd gotten a glimpse of the leftovers from dinner, he'd been remembering Brianne's nearly orgasmic groans of satisfaction while eating a simple slice of pizza. He'd been so wrapped up in memories and what could be that he'd nearly missed an important piece of evidence, one the detectives hadn't gotten to yet.

Wrappers from a place called The Eclectic Eatery, the sister restaurant to a place that originally had opened in the Village, had littered the table. Nothing unusual about take-out garbage from the newest trendy hot spot frequented by grad students, Jake thought. But beside them lay what looked like dinner mints—colored candy-like mints that probably weren't

—lying out in plain sight. But there was no proof the goods came from The Eclectic Eatery.

Seconds after Jake pointed out the scattered pieces, the gloved Forensics guys had bagged the candy or pills or whatever the hell they were. But one of the tablets had a designer signature similar to the one Ramirez used on his goods. Thanks to Louis's overblown ego, he'd overestimated his own intelligence and had had a stamp made that identified his goods instead of using the generic labels other dealers relied upon. Jake had had no doubt the scum would get back into business. He'd just figured the guy would be smart enough to change his M.O.

Exactly the argument Duke was using. He believed it was a copycat looking to cash in on Ramirez's clientele. But Jake just knew the goods came from Louis. The man's arrogance would eventually do him in, and this was just the beginning. At least now they had a lead. Jake could watch The Eclectic Eatery and see if Ramirez showed his face, find out if the new restaurant was a front for selling drugs. It was a lead Jake might never have found if his head had remained in the clouds, fantasizing about Brianne. True, Forensics would probably have uncovered the pills, but Jake had seen them first. He needed to remember that his job ought to come first as well.

Unfortunately, Jake knew exactly where his lack of concentration came from. He was obsessed with a woman he'd promised would remain forbidden. But with thoughts of her distracting him and jeopardizing his case, he could no longer tell himself an affair would only get in the way. In fact, an affair, the last thing he'd thought he wanted, might be the only

solution, the only means to get Brianne out of his system once and for all and clear his head for the job at hand. Back-assed reasoning, he knew. But a possible solution, nonetheless.

And there was another upside to an affair with Brianne. He could keep an eye on her better and know her whereabouts easier if they were indulging in an intimate relationship. Ramirez demanded his full concentration, and if he wasn't distracted by what-if thoughts of Brianne, Jake could give the case his all.

He could give Brianne his all at the same time. Frank's death had driven home how short life was. The time he'd wasted avoiding Brianne at the café could have been better spent acting on his desire. It wasn't too late. If Brianne agreed with his reasoning, the Ramirez case would build toward completion at the same time that his obsession with Brianne began to fade. Both would end and he'd walk away at the end of the summer. Toward what, though, he didn't yet know.

But would she agree? The way she'd melted in his arms told him her desire flared as quickly and as hot as his, but she'd backed off just as fast. With a little luck and persuasion he could convince her to indulge in a summer fling. He had to. His sanity depended on it.

When he returned to the penthouse, he wasn't surprised to find the living room and kitchen dark, but he was disappointed, nonetheless. Even Norton didn't bound out to meet him, and Jake figured the dog was in Brianne's bed—exactly where he wanted to be. How much more pathetic could things get? he wondered, stifling a wry laugh.

But as he made his way to his room, he discovered the lights on in the gym. Jake peered inside. Brianne had obviously just finished a workout and stood wiping down her arms, neck and forehead. True to form, Norton had settled in a corner, content to alternately sleep and watch Brianne—something Jake could relate to. Except that when he looked at Brianne, sleep was the last thing on his mind. Tight black leggings encased her long legs and a brief exercise top covered her chest, ending just below her full breasts, exposing peaked nipples, a flat belly and pale skin.

Molten heat seared his body, and Jake swallowed hard, unable to pull his gaze from the unexpected, tempting sight.

She patted her forehead, then lowered the towel and glanced up, catching his stare as he stood in the doorway. “I didn’t hear you come in. Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Yes.” He stepped into the room. “No. I need to talk to you.”

She inclined her head and gestured to the bench near one of the mirrored walls. “Come sit.” She patted the seat beside her.

He swallowed hard, then joined her.

“You’ve had more than a little therapy.” She jumped to the natural assumption after she’d witnessed his ability to put on his shirt with relative ease. “With the help you’ve been getting you don’t need me.” She started to rise, and he clamped a hand over her wrist to keep her next to him.

“Yes, Brianne, I do.”

She lowered herself slowly. Her green eyes raked over his face, searching for answers. “What are you saying?”

“I need more therapy.”

“Just not as much as everyone thinks.”

He gave a short nod. “Can I trust you to keep my secret?”

“You have my word.”

Even as she spoke, he realized he hadn’t had to ask. She’d respect his request. Her dedication to her brother spoke of her character, and his gut told him even more. He’d always trusted his instincts before. He had no reason not to now.

He squeezed her hand tight. “I’ve made progress with the rehab. A lot more than Rina, or the department, thinks.”

“But why keep your progress a secret?”

“I have my reasons.” Reasons he couldn’t share. Not only because he was unofficially working on a case but because her safety depended on her not knowing details. Another reason an affair would work. He could keep her safe by getting inside her head and by knowing where she was at all times.

She shifted, sliding so close that the heat of her body and the scent of her femininity surrounded him. His adrenaline pumped harder as he formulated what he could reveal. “Some of my reasons have to do with general life dissatisfaction and some are more personal. I can’t divulge them but...”

“Shh.” She placed a finger over his lips, and he found her touch warm, soft and gentle. “You don’t owe me explanations. It’s not like you’re the one who hired me.”

“But I am the one who wants to keep you.”

Brianne let out the breath she hadn't been aware of holding. If he didn't need or want therapy, if he didn't need her, Rina's money and Brianne's plans for a future would disappear before her eyes. Relief that she didn't have to worry about losing this job...relief that she wouldn't be losing Jake, yet, spiraled through her.

“I want to keep the bargain going,” he clarified, “for the summer.”

“You want me to take over your rehabilitation, or what's left of it?”

“That's part of it.”

“What's the rest? The catch?”

Jake reached out for the end of her ponytail, twirling the ends of her hair around his fingers. “I also want you.” His voice deepened to a husky murmur.

Brianne had no doubt he wasn't referring to plain old physical therapy. She kept her eyes trained on his face and attempted to ignore the delicious tugging at her scalp that had an erotic effect on the rest of her body. As did his words. She already knew her response to him, knew each time they came together, no matter how platonic or professional the intent, the chemistry exploded into something much more. She remained quiet, unwilling to tip her hand, to reveal her thoughts or feelings until he'd laid out his meaning before her.

“I'd like to come to an understanding.” One side of his mouth lifted in a sexy yet endearingly hesitant grin.

One she knew didn't bode well for her unsteady emotions and racing heart.

"I am willing to cooperate with you. Completely. Enough for you to feel like you aren't lying to Rina when she checks in—and I can guarantee you she will."

Brianne grinned. "She already has. Earlier tonight."

He clenched his jaw.

"But, don't worry, I didn't let on there were any problems. I wanted to talk to you first."

Relief washed over his expression. "I appreciate that."

She tipped her head to one side. "But you'd obviously like something in return?"

"It's not a *quid pro quo*, Brianne. You can say no, and I'll still give you my full cooperation. It's to both of our benefits for my rehabilitation to go off without a hitch. I just think we have something more to offer each other."

Aware of how he affected her, Brianne believed he was right. "What exactly are you referring to?" Her pulse tripped as she awaited his answer, though a part of her already knew.

"I want to explore this attraction between us. You can't deny it exists." With his hands wrapped in her hair, he brought his fingers to her cheek and stroked slowly, methodically, over her skin. "I know *I* feel it every time we're together. Don't you?"

He leaned closer. Their breaths mingled, and a hint of peppermint reached her nose, a scent she'd never found

arousing until now. Her heart hammered out a rapid beat. “You know I do. I’m just not certain it would be a good idea.” No matter how much his suggestion appealed to her.

“Why not?”

“We’re living together, working together...it can get messy.” Painful, she thought.

“Or it can be amazing. Think about it, Brianne. An entire summer that belongs to us alone.” His eyes blazed with determined blue fire and his finger slid over her face in a lingering caress. “We’ve already proven we can’t be together without fireworks exploding. All the more reason to indulge.”

She swallowed hard, his suggestion so very tempting, but if she agreed she knew it would cost her. She was drawn to this man deeply and if she got involved with him sexually, she feared she’d risk losing her heart. A heart she couldn’t give to a man who thrived on risk and danger, whom she could lose to a bullet.

But she wasn’t ready to divulge all the heartache and pain her past had caused. To share her fears and insecurities would be taking that step toward connecting with him on more than a physical level, something she couldn’t afford. “I’m not in the market for a serious relationship. Once the summer’s over and my brother leaves for Stanford, I’m going to move to California with him,” she told Jake, settling on the easiest truth, one she figured a man would accept and understand.

At her words, something unreadable flickered in his eyes—whether it was disappointment or surprise, she couldn’t tell, and he spoke before she could deliberate further.

“I’m not looking for a serious relationship, either. Seems to me every argument you’ve got strengthens my argument.” Obviously Jake wasn’t put off and he couldn’t be deterred. His deep eyes bore into hers.

“We want the same things—each other and something short term. And we need each other. I need your professional expertise.” He paused. “And I need you and this time we could have together. If you’re honest with yourself, you’ll admit you need it, too.”

Brianne’s breath caught in her throat. She couldn’t speak even if she wanted to. He was so dead-on accurate, she couldn’t argue. Her newfound freedom courtesy of Rina would begin in the fall. But that freedom was scary because she’d been cocooned by her job and responsibilities for so long, she barely knew how to start a life of her own. A personal life.

So just as he needed her professional expertise, she needed his, in areas both sensual and sexual. He was offering her the opportunity to explore her femininity and everything she’d suppressed all these years.

“You want an affair?” she managed to ask, exposing her deepest desire and deepest fear.

“Ideally, yes.”

Her stomach twisted with a burning need to agree. After all, she was leaving in September, and they’d be together for the summer. Nothing was stopping her from grabbing this short span of time. Except that everything inside her shouted this man was potentially dangerous to both her peace of mind and her heart.

“I promise you no matter how much *I* want, I’ll go slow.” His finger stroked her cheek. Soft and sensual, he ignited her skin with a light caress. “I’ll go easy.” His touch feathered lightly down her neck and teased beneath the *V* of her spandex top. “Seductively,” he murmured at last. “And I promise you’ll enjoy.”

She had no doubt he’d keep his word. Brianne had indulged in past affairs, knowing they could go nowhere. Yet she’d been so desperate for company, she’d accepted less than she’d wanted from life. But even in the midst of those relationships, brief as they were, no man had made her feel as desirable as Jake did.

He wanted an affair. By its definition, short term. No strings. Safe, if she didn’t factor emotion into the equation. “You don’t ask for much, do you,” she murmured.

“No more than I’m willing to give in return.”

“What about our patient-client relationship?” she asked, and Jake recognized the last lingering doubt.

She hadn’t rejected him outright, and he exhaled hard. “We’re alone, no rules or regulations binding us except the ones we make ourselves.”

His fingers still lingered on her shoulder, and he savored the feel of her silken skin, wishing he had the freedom to taste and knowing he was a long way from gaining permission.

“When it comes to therapy, I don’t fool around,” she said, an attractive flush staining her cheeks. “I mean, I don’t play

games when it comes to rehabilitation. I take my job seriously.”

He nodded. “Okay, then, no fooling around during therapy.” Damn, but he hadn’t meant to constrain himself that way. “I’ll take our workouts seriously,” he amended. As she’d said herself, therapy was hands-on and no way could he completely refrain from “fooling around” if she agreed to his suggestion.

Though she needed persuading, he could see she was warming to the idea. She just had to put her inhibitions and professional concerns aside.

“You’ll work out?” Those beautiful green eyes assessed his sincerity.

“Diligently. You’ll give me your free time in between?”

“I don’t have much,” she warned him.

“Then, it’s a good thing my schedule’s a lot more flexible. And even better that we’re living under one roof. Are you saying we have a deal?” he asked.

The seconds she hesitated were the longest of his life.

Finally she nodded. “We have a deal.”

She extended her hand for an awkward shake, but Jake had no intention of letting her off the hook that easily. He grasped her hand, her flesh a smooth contrast to his more roughened skin. “Then, we need to seal our bargain.” He pulled her close, and she came willingly.

Her lips parted and her breath caught in her throat. He knew she was waiting for a kiss and he wanted to oblige her, yet as her lashes fluttered closed, he leaned forward and brushed his lips against her forehead instead. Unexpected tenderness washed over him, alien and welcome at the same time.

But that was just the start. He met her wide-eyed gaze. “Slow and easy, remember?”

Her hand rose to cup his cheek. “What happened to seductively?” she asked.

“I think between the two of us we’ve got that nailed down, don’t you?”

“Mmm.” Her voice came out like a purr to his ears and, drawn to her in a way that consumed him, he lowered his mouth to hers.

Her lips were soft, pliant and willing, as he slipped his tongue inside. She tasted uniquely Brianne, feminine and warm. Delicious, he thought, and treated himself to a thorough exploration of the heated depths, eliciting a moan of pleasure from her.

The soft sound was all it took for slow and easy to flare quickly out of control. Desire had been simmering for months, denied by distance and fueled by longing. Neither of them was denying now, and the kiss turned hot. What had been a gentle exploration now became a demanding acknowledgment of need. The powerful thrusting of his tongue mating with hers matched the powerful arousal nudging against his jeans, causing an ache only she could satisfy.

He braced his hands on her shoulders, kneading the muscles with his palms and dipping his fingers beneath the front V of her tight top, caressing the soft skin on her chest and teasing her with low dips downward with the pads of his thumbs. Her back arched, lifting her breasts, giving him access should he choose to take it. And he wanted to. But his promise of slow and easy echoed in his head, as did her initial hesitance in agreeing.

She'd given him what he desired. And now that he knew what lay ahead, they had time. His body fought hard against that argument, demanding gratification now, but he didn't want the desire between them to burn out too fast.

Though a little voice in his head questioned whether he'd ever tire of Brianne, Jake pushed the notion aside and focused on her instead. But it was that voice, that dangerous thought, warning him against too much too soon, that gave Jake the strength to break the kiss first.

Still, physical contact with Brianne wasn't something he'd give up willingly, and he kept hold of her shoulders, drinking in her dazed eyes, flushed cheeks and damp, parted lips. "Seductively, like I said." He drew uneven breaths, his labored breathing loud to his ears, evidence of the potent desire alive between them.

She touched a shaking hand to her lips. "I enjoyed."

He couldn't prevent a smile. "I always keep my word."

"I like that quality." She smiled in return.

“We’ll be good together, Brianne.” He squeezed her shoulders in reassurance.

“Oh, you proved that.” She let out a laugh. “But we’ve got other things just as important between us, remember? And just because you tempt me doesn’t mean I won’t be tough on you during your workouts.”

He wasn’t surprised she’d brought them back to business. After the searing kiss, her need to latch on to the familiar was understandable. “I wouldn’t expect any different.”

She licked her lips, and his gaze followed her enticing and distinct reminder of what had just passed between them. But Jake sensed her action was more a nervous reaction than a deliberately seductive move.

“Good.” Without warning she rose. “I think we both need to get some sleep.”

She was back in protective mode. He respected this side of her as much as he admired her softer, more vulnerable side. He loved learning all facets of this woman, and she obviously had many.

“As long as you don’t change your mind come morning.”

“I won’t.” She looked at him, all seriousness, but it was the barest hint of vulnerability in her eyes that reached out to him and made him care more than was prudent.

“Me, neither.”

She gave him a hesitant smile before disappearing out the door.

Long after she'd turned in for the night, Jake pondered the wisdom of his bargain, wondering if he'd solved his dilemma or merely complicated his life.



BRIANNE PACED OUTSIDE Victoria's Secret on Fifth Avenue, wondering what had possessed her to ask Kellie to meet her here, of all places. She shook her head. She knew exactly what possessed her. Jake.

Or rather Jake's bargain. Her rapidly beating heart had warned her she was playing with fire by getting involved with the man on any level other than the professional. His kiss, the effects of which she still felt, had proven her right. And what a kiss it had been. Slow, seductive and persuasive, it had quickly flared into much more. The attraction had been obvious from day one, but she hadn't been prepared for the heat they generated each time they came together. And next time, she felt certain, they wouldn't stop with a kiss.

Warmth still suffused her stomach and a pulsing excitement rippled through her veins and settled between her legs, leaving her empty and wanting. Wanting Jake. She'd put her life on hold for so long, and suddenly things had changed. She'd be embarking on an affair, she thought, amazed. And she was completely unprepared.

Last night, Jake hadn't been thrilled when she'd abruptly turned in for the evening, but Brianne had needed time. Not only had his proposition and her own acceptance caught her off guard, but she'd never felt less attractive than she had in her workout clothes and disheveled hair. She wanted Jake to

see her as an attractive woman, and she needed to feel like one, and so she'd promised to begin their...liaison—for want of a better word—tomorrow night instead.

And today, she'd taken her first personal time off in ages to prepare. She'd head on back to work this afternoon, but this morning she'd devote herself to the task. And she'd begin by buying sexy underwear.

Brianne glanced at her watch. Although she could handle shopping on her own, she desired feminine advice and company, and for that Kellie ought to be here any minute. Brianne wiped her hand across her damp forehead. The heat outside was getting to her and, after another glance at her watch, she drew a deep breath and entered the store alone. The distinct scent of lavender drifted around her as she surveyed the racks of lace and silk garments dangling temptingly from plush-looking hangers.

The store was a feast for all the senses, making her wonder why she'd never ventured in here before. The obvious answers were money and time, two things she'd never had in abundance. But she did now, and she took in the selection of garments around her. The beautiful matched sets and vibrant colors put her utilitarian cotton panties to shame. She fingered a violet-colored teddy, cut low, and high, in all the right places. The silk slid between her fingertips, soft and sensual, like Jake's touch. She trembled, realizing just what was in store should she be willing to release *all* her inhibitions.

Slow and easy, he'd said. Seductively. He was letting her know she could set the pace, and here she was taking the

plunge. The fire in her cheeks matched the heat outdoors, but she'd come too far to turn back now. When the bells on the door tinkled and her exuberant friend walked inside, Brianne knew her fate had just been sealed. Kellie wouldn't let her back out even if she wanted to. She didn't.

Kellie waved, the silver bracelets on her hand jingling aloud. Kellie was a classic blond beauty with huge, blue eyes, a porcelain complexion and a body only every day in a gym would provide. No matter what she wore, men turned their heads and looked twice. Today she had on black jeans and a white fitted T, held together by a row of hooks up the center. It was time Brianne, too, acted more like a woman who intended to make an impression.

“Getting started without me?” Kellie gave Brianne a brief squeeze hello. “It’s only been one night, but the place isn’t the same without you.”

Brianne grinned. “I can’t say I miss the long hours on my feet, but I did miss you, too.”

“As if you even gave me a thought, with you and the new guy living under the same roof.” Kellie rolled her eyes and laughed, obviously not the least bit offended. “So what’d you find so far?” She spread her arms, gesturing to the undergarments around them.

“I just walked in.”

“Okay, then, what’s this guy’s taste run to? The classic or the kinky?” Kellie shook her head. “Never mind. If he’s fallen for you, it’s classic.”

“Are you calling me boring?” Brianne asked, feigning insult.

Her friend shook her head. “You’re gorgeous. You just don’t take the time to make the most of it. Maybe this new job will give you more time for yourself.”

“That’s the idea.” The money would pay off her brother’s tuition, and when the summer was over, her free hours would belong to her alone. There’d never been a time in her adult life when she’d had the luxury of sitting down, taking a breath and saying, *What do I want to do now?*

“The first rule of thumb is if you wear sexy, you’ll feel sexy. So what do you have beneath those jeans?”

“Underwear, of course.”

“White, I suppose?” She didn’t wait for Brianne to answer. “High-cut and basic? I won’t even ask about the bra.” She let out an exaggerated sigh. “Looks like I’ve got my work cut out for me.” She grabbed Brianne’s hand. “Come on.”

An hour later, Brianne had splurged on the kind of lacy, racy undergarments she had never before given a thought to wearing. She’d even left a set on beneath her clothing when she’d walked out of the store. Practice, she’d decided.

And the idea had worked. With the silk brushing her skin as she walked and the knowledge that she wore sheer, sexy panties and a matching bra, Brianne noticed she *felt* more feminine and attractive. Her stride quickened and she lifted her head, glancing around as she walked. Men met her gaze. One

leered, his lascivious stare lingering long enough to make her uncomfortable.

But long after they'd left Bloomingdale's behind—bathing suits and a couple of sexy, on-sale outfits bagged and ready to go—Brienne held her shoulders back a bit more, her confidence boosted. All things she could thank Jake for calling her attention to. Not that she'd tell him. The man's ego was healthy enough. But she had to admit, freedom felt good.

“Have time to grab an iced latte?” Kellie asked.

Brienne's throat was parched from the heat and all the walking they'd done. “Sounds great.”

“Good.” Kellie nodded approvingly, and they walked in silence the few blocks to the nearest Starbucks. In the doorway, Kellie grabbed Brienne's hand and turned toward her. “Clothing and underwear were the hard part. Now we can sit down and talk about sex.”

Brienne started to cough, but instead forced a casual shrug. What the heck? she thought. It had been so long since she'd had any, she could probably use all the advice she could get. Her sexual history was minimal. A lukewarm relationship in college squeezed in between her classes and work, and a couple of other guys who'd given up when they realized her brother and her jobs had to come first—and that was it. None of those men had left a lasting or lingering impression. None had eased the loneliness.

But the idea of sex with Jake aroused every nerve ending in her body. Her nipples puckered beneath the new silk, a warm heaviness settled in the pit of her stomach and desire

dampened her panties. Though no one could look and know what she was feeling, *she* knew. The intimate, illicit longings were unfamiliar to a woman used to being consumed with work and worries. Being consumed with Jake was a novelty she intended to enjoy.

She shivered in the air-conditioning, but the tremor had nothing to do with the recycled air. Shaking off the sensation, Brianne placed their order while Kellie found a table by the window where they could look out on the nearly empty streets of New York. As it wasn't yet lunchtime, most smart people were inside, away from the oppressive outdoor temperatures instead of enduring the heat rising off the pavement.

No sooner had Brianne carried the drinks to the table and settled herself into a chair than Kellie pulled a box of condoms out of her purse.

Brianne glanced down and swept them under the table. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure you cover all your bases. I know you've had little time for anything lately since you work all day and night —"

"You manage to fit in plenty of extracurricular activity," Brianne said wryly.

"What can I say? I'm resourceful." Kellie grinned. "Not to mention, I don't work nine-to-five during the day. I'm serious. You can't be too careful these days."

Brianne shook her head. "Of course I know that." She glanced down at the box in her hand, shaking them. "There's a

lot of those suckers in there,” she muttered.

Her friend glanced at her too innocently over her iced coffee. “So, use them.”

Brianne’s skin prickled at the thought, a renewed awareness and memories of Jake’s kiss and searing touch arousing her all over again. And he was so good at that, she thought, mentally transported back to last night.

“Hello?” Kellie waved a napkin in front of Brianne’s face. “I take it you plan to? Use the condoms, I mean.”

Brianne blinked, focusing on her friend. “Are you sure you don’t want them for yourself?” A smile tugged at her lips.

Kellie laughed. “Don’t need them. I’ve got my own collection at home. They’re latex and the best protection on the market. Plus they’re made for extra sensitivity and have lubrication. Believe me, you want to give one a shot.” She wiggled her eyebrows enticingly.

Brianne glanced out the window, her thoughts on exactly what her friend had alluded to—making love with Jake. “Did I tell you the place where I’m staying has a private rooftop whirlpool?” She took a sip of the frothy, cold drink, hoping to douse the flame of desire.

“No, but wow. You are in for one awesome summer,” her friend said.

“Mmm.” One group of people, then another, walked past the window. Apparently lunchtime had come for the working people of New York, Brianne thought idly. But she wasn’t

paying much attention—her thoughts were on herself and Jake on that rooftop.

Suddenly a figure caught her attention, then just as quickly slipped out of sight behind some people exiting a building across the street. The figure wasn't *too* familiar, since she'd only seen the man once before. It had been this morning, after she'd walked out of Victoria's Secret. He'd been the leering one—the one whose gaze had lingered too long, as if he could see through her clothing to the new underwear she was wearing beneath. She'd brushed it off earlier, but what were the chances of her seeing him twice in one day?

A shudder of uncomfortable awareness and revulsion rippled through her.

“What's wrong?” Kellie asked, following Brianne's line of vision outside.

“Did you...” Brianne started to ask her friend, then stopped. What was she going to say? Did you see that guy twice today? And if she had, so what? Victoria's Secret was only a block or two from here. The fact that someone had seen Brianne two times that morning didn't make him someone to watch out for.

She shook her head and laughed. “Forget it.” Shadowy figures and fear. Brianne had to admit she rarely suffered from anxiety anymore, but sometimes it appeared in ridiculous ways. Her parents had died in a risky situation, a violent storm, but they'd always indulged in some situation or other that put her nerves on edge. She was so unlike her parents,

she'd have thought she was adopted if she didn't know differently.

But she was their child and sometimes, as a result, her anxieties resurfaced. "Free-floating anxiety," an analyst she'd seen at the hospital had explained to her. Amorphous anxiety with no basis in the factual situation going on around her now. So what if she'd seen a man twice? That didn't make him a stalker.

"Are you sure nothing's wrong?"

Brianne nodded. "Absolutely. Now, what were you saying?" Shaking off the feeling completely wasn't easy, but with even breathing and a change of subject, Brianne was able to at least feel some semblance of control over her feelings. And that was enough to steady her.

Kellie shrugged. "I said you'd also mentioned a mirrored exercise room in the penthouse. I think you're set, Brianne. You've got all you need for a darn good summer. All you need to do is let yourself go."

She inhaled deeply. *All you need to do*. As if it were so simple, when she'd been single-mindedly focused on her job and her brother for so long. Buying the sexy garments wasn't the same as actually wearing them. She knew that now. And buying the revealing underwear definitely wasn't the same as having Jake see her in them. She thought of Kellie's words again. *Let yourself go*. Yes, it was time to concentrate on *her* needs for a change.

Her needs and Jake's. *That* was all she needed to do.



SHE'D SEEN HIM, Louis thought. She'd looked into his eyes and known he'd been admiring her. How could he not appreciate a babe who was into sexy duds? How could he not consider the possibility of screwing such a hot creature—and screwing Lowell at the same time?

Now, *that* he couldn't resist. He took a drag, then ground the butt on the pavement with his heel. He didn't think she'd noticed him when he'd walked past the coffee place, but he'd have to be more careful next time. And there would be a next time. Because Lowell had been snooping around, asking questions again. Louis had known within minutes, something Lowell probably knew would happen.

Cat and mouse, Louis thought. So let the games begin. And those games both started and ended with Brianne Nelson. Detective Lowell's woman...but not for much longer.

Chapter Six

JAKE HADN'T DONE surveillance detail in too long. After an afternoon watching a gourmet shop with nothing to show for his effort, he was stiff and frustrated. The only reason the place remained open and hadn't been closed down for good was the lack of proof that linked the pills to the restaurant. They'd gotten a warrant and searched the place based on the circumstantial evidence at the scene, but they'd come up empty. No surprise there, Jake thought. Ramirez was good, and once those kids ODeD, he'd clean out fast. But Jake believed the crook was arrogant enough to resume business later.

In theory, the drugs could have come from anywhere. Nothing connected the recent OD to Ramirez—at least, not yet. They were awaiting the toxicology report.

On his way home, Jake had stopped by Frank's place for a visit. He'd played street hockey with Frank's son and shared coffee with Iris, his wife. When Frank was alive, his time with them always reminded him of his failed marriage and all he'd missed out on—kids, a wife who understood him. Since the shooting, the visits had become an emotional ordeal, and all he felt was guilt.

Tonight Jake looked forward to turning his attention to Brianne. She not only attracted him sexually but she made him feel good, something he needed after the day he'd had. During his surveillance watch, he'd wracked his brain to come up with an idea, a place he and Brianne could go. He wanted to get

them out of the apartment and into the real world, but he wanted an outing that would be memorable for Brianne.

After an entire day of thinking, he still was at a loss. She'd be back soon, and he had no idea what kind of evening to suggest. Post-therapy, of course. He'd promised her he'd be on his best behavior, and he meant to keep his word.

He walked across the apartment, Norton by his side. After the daily walks and feedings, Norton had grown to trust him more. He still preferred Brianne, something Jake understood, but he no longer whined for hours on end when left alone with an on-leave detective for company. And Jake, having too much idle time on his hands until Ramirez made a move, had begun to appreciate Norton's silent companionship.

He sat down carefully on his sister's velvet sofa, hoping the denim wouldn't rub off on the off-white material. Rina had said not to worry the last time he'd complained, so he settled himself in more comfortably, crossing one leg over the other, waiting for Brianne.

Need and awareness pulsed through his veins and, impatient, he picked up one of the magazines on his sister's marble table and began flipping through the pages. Photos of New York City at night captured his attention, and his gaze settled upon the article's title, "Sexy City Nights."

Tonight would be that and more, he vowed, the wanting increasing along with the wait. One picture in particular caught his attention: two lovers sharing one ice-cream cone, tongues licking the ice cream but so close that it alluded to

more. Looking at the photo, the viewer could easily imagine the conclusion, melded tongues as well as dessert.

The thought of Brianne's sweet mouth, flavored with cool ice cream, her tongue licking the side of the cone slowly and erotically as she lapped up the excess drips...His body grew hard and he shifted in his seat, wondering if ice cream would cool him off.

He must have it bad if a simple magazine piece turned him on. But it wasn't the magazine, Jake knew. It was Brianne. His gaze dropped to the magazine once more, and he turned the page. Same background, new photo, and this time the couple shared more than the ice-cream cone, they shared each other. Tasting ice cream off each other's lips.

Ice cream. Jake flipped the magazine closed, no longer needing to distract himself with vague ideas. Thanks to the "Sexy City Nights" article, Jake now had the solution to the special place he could take Brianne. No doubt desserts in her home were parceled out as scarcely as pizza. But he could change that for her, starting tonight. They could share their own sexy city night.

As if he'd conjured Brianne by thought, the elevator doors slid open and she walked into the apartment, a contradiction in dress and appearance. Her normal hospital scrubs told him she'd been at work, but her arms, laden with packages, indicated she'd also been shopping.

"I can't believe how hot the subway was," she murmured to herself. She allowed the packages to topple onto the floor and let out a huge sigh of relief. Norton woke up from his nap

and greeted her with a wagging tail and slobbering tongue. Jake had already grown used to the routine.

“Can I help you get those things to your room?” he asked.

She jumped, obviously startled. “I didn’t realize you were here.” She scrambled to collect her bags without help.

“Should I be insulted you forgot already? We had plans tonight. Therapy, and then I thought we could go for a walk.”

Her face flushed redder than it had been from the heat. “I didn’t forget, I just...” She juggled the bags once more and ducked one behind her back. “Let me get myself settled.” Without waiting for his response, she darted around him and headed toward her room, the Victoria’s Secret bag knocking against her work uniform as she walked.

Jake laughed, but his soft chuckle disappeared quickly as he realized the reason for Brianne’s nervous behavior and contemplated what might be in that shopping bag. Victoria’s Secret sold women’s intimate garments—silk, lace, teddies, all designed to enhance and reveal, to make any normal man drool.

Jake wouldn’t swear he was normal, but he was a man. The thought of seeing Brianne in any seductive lingerie was enough to send him over the edge. And the mere possibility that she’d bought new things with him in mind...Well, there wasn’t much that would cool him down.

Forty-five minutes later, however, he acknowledged that torturous therapy sure took the edge off. Intense pain shot through his shoulder, making the daily ache feel like a

woman's soft touch in comparison. He had been working with a therapist since a couple of weeks after the injury, but Brianne's approach was different, more thorough. She'd been right in saying *some* therapy wouldn't be enough. He needed Brianne if he wanted to return to full mobility.

He needed her for more than just rehabilitation, he acknowledged, as he waited for her return from the kitchen with ice packs to cool down his shoulder. He yearned to know more about this woman, a desire that went beyond the physical.

He'd grown up in a happy family. They'd lacked money for extras, but they hadn't lacked love. His parents had been high school sweethearts, and the love they shared permeated the small apartment they'd lived in. Even their move to Florida hadn't lessened the bond that existed between them and their children. He wondered what Brianne's upbringing had been like.

She said she'd raised her brother after her parents died—but what had her childhood been like before she'd been burdened with responsibility? Had she always been this determined, driven person, or had becoming her brother's guardian changed her from a lighthearted girl to a responsible woman?

Knowing she was leaving at the end of the summer, he told himself, he was free to explore, and indulge in, all facets of her and his desire. There'd be no painful breakup when September came. But a small part of him wondered if such a short span of time would be enough to satisfy him.

He shook the thought off, knowing better than to mull over things he couldn't control. He wasn't in a position to change the arrangement, anyway, since even if Brianne were staying, his life was in such turmoil and flux that he couldn't contemplate anything more than a fling. And she wasn't in the market for something longer or more enduring. He'd had one woman give up on him and bail. No way he'd leave himself open to that again.

He had the summer, Jake thought. Now would have to be enough.



PRIOR TO JAKE'S workout, Brianne changed out of her hospital scrubs and took the time to clean up, makeup and all. For the first time in ages, she'd looked in the mirror and seen a woman staring back. A woman with thoughts, feelings and needs of her own.

And those needs included Jake. Testing his abilities, lifting his arms, feeling his muscles expand and contract beneath her fingertips had aroused her beyond belief, beyond anything she'd felt before—and in her fevered dreams she'd experienced plenty.

Now she paused when she reached the doorway to the gym, ice in hand, and took a moment to watch Jake as he leaned back in his chair and grimaced when the leather touched his bare shoulder. The play of emotions across his face now and as he'd worked out were honest and strong. She felt bad causing him such intense discomfort and pain, but he'd thank her in the long run.

She bit down on her lower lip. He'd said he had been in therapy, and his ability to move proved him right. She wasn't arrogant or presumptuous but she knew without a doubt she could bring him much further than his old therapist had, if only because he seemed so determined and dedicated. She wondered why he'd led Rina to believe he'd done so much less toward his recuperation, then cautioned herself against getting too involved.

She swallowed a harsh laugh. Who was she kidding? She planned on sleeping with the man. Brianne Nelson didn't indulge in one-night stands that meant nothing. Anything she shared with Jake would be intense and memorable, even if she had to leave him behind when the summer was over.

She wanted to know all about him, and she would find out. Asking questions, getting to know him, wouldn't change how she felt about him. She knew she was in danger of falling hard. But whether she fell or not, she'd just have to exercise the same self-control she had in the past. She'd overcome her anxieties in caring for her brother; she'd put her life and needs second to his. Knowing Jake's kind of life could cause her heartache and pain, she'd just have to walk away when their time together was through. If she kept in mind his occupation and his claim that he wasn't looking for a long-term relationship, she shouldn't have any problem keeping things in perspective. Or so she hoped.

She walked into the room and came up beside Jake. "Here. Let's ice down the shoulder." She placed blue gel packs on his bare skin, swallowing hard, knowing how much discomfort he was in and wishing she had more than her professional

expertise to make him better. “This will contract the muscles and ease the pain.”

“Ahhh.”

She recognized his groan of relief and winced, knowing *she'd* caused him this agony. “So what did you have planned for us after this?”

She hoped the change of subject would help him concentrate on something else, and help her concentrate on something other than Jake. And her undergarments. For their session, she wore spandex Capri pants that provided ease of movement, but the tight material showed off both her legs and her behind for his view, as she'd intended. Beneath the skin-hugging material, she wore sexy underthings, and she felt the combination of silk and lace stretch and glide with every move she made. She'd handpicked the mauve panty and matching bra in tactile lace of delicate flowers. Between the flowers, sheerer lace allowed her skin to show through—a lot of skin.

She wondered what Jake would think and how soon he'd have the chance to think it. Her body trembled with delicious anticipation.

“Hey, I'm the one with ice on my shoulder. Are you cold, too?” he asked.

She forced a grin. “I stuck my hands in the freezer to retrieve that ice, remember?”

He nodded. “Are you too cold for ice cream?”

The simple question seemed to hold a wealth of importance she couldn't understand. She met his blue-eyed

gaze, which danced with possibility and...hope? She wondered if she was misinterpreting his expression and tone of voice, but she couldn't help but sense her response was important to him. "I'm never too cold for ice cream. Why?"

"What's your favorite flavor?" he asked.

"Well, I'm embarrassed to admit, I'm not picky. Any flavor will do." At that moment, her stomach began to growl, a reminder she'd only had time to grab half a sandwich from the hospital cafeteria for dinner. "Especially now." She laughed and pressed one hand against her stomach.

"Did you have dinner?" His forehead furrowed with concern.

"A little." She'd been too rushed and too nervous about their time together to consume much. "But ice cream sounds great. What did you have in mind?"

"A place called Peppermint Park on the corner of Sixty-sixth and First. They have a huge assortment, and it comes highly recommended by Rina."

"Yum." She ran her tongue over her lips, noticing his eyes followed the movement. She obviously had the power to attract him, and they'd already made the bargain to act on that attraction. Slow and easy.

Did she have the nerve to move up the timetable? Heaven knows, she desired more than food and conversation with this man. His kisses had been just a prelude. She wanted much more.

He pulled his gaze from her lips, but his jaw clenched and his eyes stayed glued to hers, desire in the molten depths. If he kept looking at her that way, they'd never make it out for dessert. But the whole Peppermint Park thing seemed to mean something to him, and the idea of indulging in the creamy dessert held a long-forgotten appeal.

“You know, ice cream sorta fell into the category of pizza. If we had extra, we bought some, but generally we reserved it for special occasions. Birthdays, Marc’s graduations, things like that.” She shook her head, suddenly embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make my life sound like some *poor me* tale. Believe me when I tell you, all things considered, we had it good.”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “Nobody in their right mind would feel sorry for you. But I am glad to know I picked right.” He cleared his throat, and this time she sensed his embarrassment. “I wanted to take you someplace you’d remember. Someplace special.”

Good thing she had already acknowledged that she could fall hard for him and had barriers up to prevent it. Otherwise his concerned expression and tender, generous gesture would definitely steal her heart. She tried not to listen to the voice in her head laughing hysterically at her pathetic attempt to conceal her growing feelings for Jake Lowell.



JAKE SAT ON a wooden bench beneath a huge awning, Brianne by his side and Norton at her feet. She’d insisted on giving him an airing, and while she was at it, Jake taught her how to

get Norton to “do business” quickly and efficiently. She was impressed by Norton’s abilities and obviously pleased Jake had agreed to take the pooch along.

Seeing how happy he could make Brianne—and his sister’s dog, he thought wryly—gave him a warm feeling he hadn’t had in far too long. He glanced at Brianne. Vanilla fudge ice cream dripped over the sides of her cone, and her little tongue darted out to catch the remains.

Like the photograph. Two lovers sharing something intimate, something more than just an ice-cream treat. Brianne was unknowingly reenacting the erotic photo. Only, she wasn’t an anonymous face. She wasn’t just his fantasy. She was *his*. Every night for the long, hot summer. He’d already tasted her, knew how her silken mouth and soft lips responded to his.

His fists clenched at his sides as he restrained from acting on his desire. Not now, not yet. He bit hard into his own chocolate-chip scoop and sugar cone, but the sweet dessert didn’t provide the kind of satisfaction he had in mind.

“Can I ask you something?”

Brianne’s voice was a welcome intrusion. “Sure.”

“Well, it’s more of a professional question and it’s kind of silly, but I was wondering how you know whether you’re being followed.” Her cheeks turned pink, and she stared at her cone. “See, I told you it was silly.”

She was more uneasy than embarrassed, and Jake knew she’d been serious. Seconds ago, he’d thought nothing could

distract him from thoughts of making love to her, but she'd managed. "What makes you ask?"

She shrugged. "I was shopping today and I saw a man looking at me."

"Honey, you're beautiful. Men are going to look."

"Thank you." She blushed again. Her gaze met his and lingered, the electricity between them steady and hot, causing a pulsing throughout his body that he couldn't deny.

"But this guy was different," she said, bringing them back to the issue at hand. "I mean, it felt different. I was on Fifth Avenue and he didn't look like your average guy in a business suit during lunch hour. He had this crewcut and leering gaze. And I saw him again. Well, I thought I did, through the window of a coffee shop. And then I blinked and he was gone. And I thought..." She paused, obviously thinking things through.

The ice cream had begun to melt over the cone and dampen the napkin surrounding it. All erotic thoughts gone for the moment, he eased the ice cream out of her hand and dumped their messy cones into the trash next to the bench. "You thought what?"

"That it was happening again." She began twisting her fingers together, and he stilled the nervous movement by covering her hands with his. She shot him a grateful glance.

"You thought what was happening again?"

"When my parents died, I had a hard time." She shook her head. "Actually, it started before that. My parents weren't what

you'd call stay-at-home parents. My dad was a stockbroker and he'd done fairly well in some good markets. He had savings, and since they liked to live on the edge, their money went for extreme sports—hot-air ballooning, bungee jumping, motorcycle trips. Good thing the neighbors liked us because we spent a lot of time sleeping at their homes, and my parents weren't reliable about when they'd return. Sometimes I thought they wouldn't come back at all. That's when it started.”

Jake wasn't sure where she was going with her story but he wanted to hear more. This was the insight he craved and he wanted to listen as well as to help. “When what started?” he asked.

“Anxiety attacks. I swear, I was such a nervous kid.”

He squeezed her hand tight. “Understandable, I'd think. And you must have overcome it well because I'd never have known if you hadn't told me.”

“Well, I was lucky I had a good school psychologist, and when I got older I learned stress management techniques. Things quieted down for a long time, acted up again after the accident. Maybe because they had to. It's amazing what you can accomplish when life forces you to grow up quick.”

“What accident?”

She frowned, making him want to touch her face, stroke and smooth out the wrinkled skin and then kiss her puckered lips. But he refrained, knowing he would have time later on. For now, he needed her to continue.

“I told you I raised my brother, right? Because my parents died in a small plane crash. Dad was piloting.”

She shivered and Jake winced. “I’m sorry.”

“It was their choice. Literally. They went up in a storm, weather even the FAA warned against flying in.” She sighed, obviously resigned. “So the panic attacks got worse and I went for some short-term help. I needed to get myself under control so I could take care of Marc. And I did. It’s been ages since I’ve experienced any kind of true anxiety.”

“Until today.”

“Until today,” she agreed.

“Then, maybe we ought to give it some credence?” Jake knew he already was. The prickling feeling on his skin and in his gut was strong and sure. He just couldn’t put his finger on what was wrong. Yet.

She let out a huge exhale of air, obviously relieved he believed her. “I doubt it. I think I just needed to get it out in the open to see how ridiculous I was being.”

“Feelings are never ridiculous and too often they’re grounded in fact.”

Huge green eyes met his. “Yes, but in my case, I’m probably overreacting. It’s probably related to you.”

He could see she wasn’t comfortable with the admission. He was confused. “How so?”

She swallowed hard. “I hadn’t had an anxiety attack in a while, right? And then I met you and we have this instant

attraction, and I discover you're just like them. Next thing you know, *boom*. Another anxiety attack." She gnawed on her lower lip as she explained.

"I'm just like who?"

"My parents. They lived for taking risks. And that's what you do on your job, right? Take risks?" One hand reached out and touched his shoulder.

He felt the impact of her touch, the heat and the need, straight down to his toes, but her reassurance didn't help. He was damn sure he didn't like the comparison. "Difference is, I take certain risks in order to do my job, but I don't take unnecessary ones. And I don't do the job as a way of taking risks. Your parents did it for fun."

"But you both knowingly, willingly, put yourselves in danger."

He couldn't deny the obvious so he remained silent. She'd equated him to her parents, two people she obviously loved but who'd let her down in the worst way. He'd just met her and was in this for a summer fling. So why did her analogy bother him so much?

"Look, all I'm trying to say is, thanks for listening to my foolishness. There's a reason I panicked, and now that I talked it out I can put it and his disgusting tattoo behind me."

"Tattoo?" Jake's nerve endings went on alert, the reason for his wariness and churning gut all too apparent.

"Yes. I don't know what made me think of it now. The guy was in one of those white tank tops, and he had a crooked

arrow on his right arm. Biceps. Here—” She pointed to her right arm and shivered. “Tattoos always grossed me out.”

“Crooked arrow?” Jake asked tersely.

She nodded. “Like this—” She drew the shape with her hand.

Revulsion and fury raced through his veins. In light of Brianne’s history of well-founded anxiety, he had no intention of mentioning that the insignia on the pills he’d just found matched the tattoo on her stalker’s arm—the same tattoo that was on Ramirez’s right biceps.

He refused to enlighten her and worry her further. The desire to wrap her in his arms and guard her from harm was great. Brianne was no victim. Yet he needed to protect her both physically and emotionally. If she knew there was possible danger relating to Jake and his job, she might bolt. If she returned to her apartment, she’d be vulnerable to Ramirez and Jake would be unable to keep her safe. But if she remained in the penthouse, she’d be safe and secure, at least in the evenings.

As for daytime, Jake could cover her there as well. First thing in the morning he’d call in a favor and have a detective pal put a tail on her during the day. Thank God, Rina was in Italy, Jake thought. But Frank’s family wasn’t. Unwilling to take further chances, Jake decided to make sure they were covered as well. The department wouldn’t assign men on a hunch—they couldn’t afford the manpower. But both Jake and Frank had friends who wouldn’t mind doing the job.

Meanwhile, Jake would step up his digging into Ramirez's hangouts.

For now, he would placate her. "Plenty of men have tattoos. We'll take your suggestion and forget about it, but if you see him again—"

"I'll report directly to you, Detective." She grinned and treated him to a salute. "But since I'm probably right, you can consider it forgotten."

A touch of chocolate remained on her lips, daring him to reach out and lick it off with his tongue. Instead, he touched the pad of his finger to her mouth, wiping at the chocolate gently, savoring the soft feel of her lips and taking in the curtain of desire shading her eyes.

"Know what I'd like to do now?"

If her voice hadn't dropped a husky octave, he'd have no idea. But it had, and the desire resonating in her tone renewed the heavy tempo beating inside him.

"What's that?"

She drew a deep breath, and he understood being bold was new to her. "I'd like to go home."

"And do what?" He had promised he'd take it slowly. She needed to set the pace, and Jake needed to hear her say the words that would free him from his hard-won restraint.

"Take me home and make me forget." He didn't pretend to misunderstand her meaning. And though her words came out a soft whisper, he heard them every place inside him where it counted.

His gaze never leaving hers, he pulled her to her feet so he could do as she asked. He would take her home.



BRIANNE KEPT PACE with Jake, her rush to get back as fierce as his. Once she'd unburdened herself and admitted her fears, she saw how ridiculous they were. And once he gave credence to her feelings and didn't dismiss her with a pat on the head, as her parents used to do, Brianne was able to step back and see things clearly, with renewed perspective.

She wasn't being followed. She merely had an overactive imagination, heightened by Jake's proximity, lifestyle and job. And on the off chance that a stranger had been watching her, she now had Jake aware and on her side. The self-protection course the hospital had insisted its employees take after a rash of rapes a few years back had armed her with knowledge and defensive skills. She'd be fine.

She could free her mind and concentrate on how much she wanted Jake. Apparently he felt the same, because his hands didn't leave her body the entire trip back to the apartment. Whether on the small of her back or grasping her hand, he held on to her as they walked, creating a constant state of awareness and a never-ending current of electricity that sparked between them.

Only when they reached the inside of the apartment building did he break the physical connection between them, stepping aside and allowing her to pass by him and enter the private elevator. For the duration of the ride up, nerves and excitement dominated her emotions. She was about to dive

into sexual and emotional unknown territory, and the adrenaline rushed through her at lightning speed.

She wondered if *this* was what her parents had felt each time they undertook a new adventure or trip. She'd never understood her mother or father before. But as she walked out of the silent but erotically charged atmosphere of the elevator and entered the penthouse apartment, Brianne came as close as she'd ever been to comprehending the thrill-seekers who'd raised her.

Jake was new and exciting. Just thinking about him energized her mind and stimulated her body in erotic and arousing ways. Yet as much as she enjoyed each and every sensation he invoked, she feared, too, for he had the power to undo the healing she'd accomplished since her parents' death, leaving her raw and exposed to someone who didn't come with a promise of security and had no vision of long-term commitment.

But unlike her parents, who by definition were supposed to be in Brianne's life for the long haul, Jake was just passing through. She knew the facts going in; therefore she couldn't be hurt—right? she asked herself. But no voice answered her with a resounding yes, leaving her to admit she had little faith in her own convictions.

“We're here.” Jake's deep voice intruded on her thoughts.

She swallowed hard, lifting her eyes from the carpet and meeting his longing stare. He wanted her. She could see the desire flare in the depths of his gaze, a match for the spiraling need building inside her.

He gestured for her to step into the apartment and she followed, her shoes squeaking on the obviously freshly waxed floor.

“Where to?” he asked before they could descend into awkward silence.

An implicit question, Brianne thought. He was asking her where would she like to make love. As she glanced around, liquid heat pooled low in her abdomen and her heart pounded. Her need for Jake was desperate and all-encompassing, but she wasn't so sure how she felt about her surroundings.

She took in the white furnishings, the cold marble floors and the gleaming chrome and crystal accents around her. The penthouse, which had once seemed like a luxurious haven, suddenly felt cold and stifling—stark, in contrast to the warm man standing by her side. Where in this austere place could she be with Jake yet be herself, she had no idea. Unsure of what to say in answer to his question, she merely shrugged, hoping he had the answer she did not.

“Well, I'm using my sister's room and I'd really prefer not to...well, you know what I mean.”

“Oh, I do.” She laughed, further explanation on his part unnecessary. “But my room doesn't really feel like mine. It's too...”

“Cold and uncomfortable?” he asked, reading her thoughts.

She was glad he didn't find this apartment homey and relaxing, either. “Exactly.”

“I honestly don’t know what Rina was thinking. This place is so unlike her.” His brow furrowed in confusion, and Brianne found the gesture oddly endearing, so different from the manner of the focused cop who’d answered her questions and deflected her concerns.

“Me, neither. Rina has this bubbling warmth. I envy her that.” In Jake’s sister, Brianne had seen a freedom of thought and emotion she herself had never had, making her feel almost old in comparison. “But you said her husband liked glitz. Maybe she was making him happy by decorating like this. Maybe it was his presence here that made this place a home for them. And vice versa.” She shook her head and laughed uncomfortably. “Ignore me. I don’t know why I’m rambling like this.”

“Nerves, most likely.” He nailed her with his correct assumption and innate understanding. “But you’re probably right about Rina and Robert. You’re definitely perceptive.” His voice suddenly grew low and urgent. “And I can’t keep my hands off you for a second longer.” Without hesitation, his palms came to rest on her shoulders.

Because his skin was hot, he branded her with his touch. And because he was incredibly male, he made her want more than simple conversation or a burning kiss that ended almost before it began.

“Since my room’s out and your room’s out, I have another suggestion.”

She glanced over his shoulder. “It had better not involve that white couch with the full-length windows behind it.” She

laughed lightly. “So which room will it be?”

“Our room.”

As soon as the words were spoken, what had been a light conversation turned into something deeper, stronger and more compelling. The cresting waves of longing she’d held at bay for so long rose furiously inside her. “The gym?”

He nodded. “Full-length mirrors instead of windows.”

Her throat grew parched and she couldn’t seem to moisten her dry lips. “Different views.”

“From different angles. Are you game?”

She’d come this far and she wanted to go much further. Gathering her courage, she raised herself onto her tiptoes and gave him an answer he couldn’t mistake—a scorching kiss on the lips, the kind that told him she was indeed game. For any view, any angle, *anything* he desired.

Chapter Seven

DESPITE HER PROTESTATIONS Brianne had an adventurous spirit, Jake sensed. She continually proved him right. First her trip to Victoria's Secret and now this instigation of a kiss. And what a kiss it was. Her tongue glided over the seam of his lips, then retreated, teasing, tormenting him further. His body was strung tight, had been since he'd laid eyes on the beautiful waitress. Unable to wait another second, he grabbed her hand and led her through the apartment, down the hall and into the gym, kicking the door closed and leaving Norton outside.

The room was the only place in this mausoleum where Jake felt remotely comfortable, the only place he could truly be himself and the only place they'd already marked as theirs. And, for some reason, the place he chose was important to him.

It mattered to her, too, if her bright eyes and warm expression were anything to go by. She snaked her arms around his neck and treated him to a deeper, mind-blowing kiss, this one ripe with passion and infused with need—the same need he felt growing, coming to life inside him. He twisted his hips slowly, deliberately, erotically tantalizing her with his full erection pressing hard and insistent against his jeans. She groaned and arched against him, seeking more relief than he could provide through the barrier of clothing.

Jake wanted nothing between them except bare skin. Her clothes were tight and form-fitting, making it difficult to pull and shift so he could eliminate the impediments and give

himself complete access. But once the maneuver was accomplished, his view was incredible, thanks to the mirrors surrounding them and the reflection of light.

“You like?”

A light purple bra with flowered lace exposed more than it covered, and he sucked in a ragged breath. “Sweetheart, there’s nothing not to like.” He traced the scalloped edging with one fingertip, trailing a path over her delicate skin. “And everything to admire.” Cherish, bask in, he thought, lowering his head and replacing his touch with his tongue, tasting her bare flesh.

Her response was a rush of air and a moan of contentment, as he followed a damp path across her heated skin. Her shudder shook him as well. Had he ever before felt the way he did now? Wanted a woman’s pleasure more than his own?

Jake knew the answer to both questions, and it scared him. He knew he’d have to deal with it sometime, but, for now, the heavy beat of arousal overrode all thought and emotion.

His hand came to rest beneath her breast, cupping the fullness and allowing him to move from the lacy edging to the nipple peaking in a hard ridge beneath the flowered sheath of material. As he drew the distended tip into his mouth and nipped lightly with his teeth, it hardened even more, and the grip he held on his control nearly shattered.

Apparently, she felt the same because her hands went for the snap on his jeans. He lifted his head and met her gaze, not wanting her to feel as though she had to go faster to please him. “I promised you slow.”

“That was before we...came this far.” A blush stained her already made-up cheeks.

He grinned. “I never said fast wasn’t good, too.”

God knows, his body would appreciate it if he picked up the pace, but he needed to tell her a few things first. Not just how much he wanted her, but smaller details, too. Things that would let her know she wasn’t just someone he’d screw and forget. She held a special place in his life and his heart, he forced himself to acknowledge, and sleeping with her was the answer to every dream he possessed.

“Do you know I loved watching you while you worked at the café? You had on no makeup, just a thousand-watt smile, and I could have watched you all night.” The flush on her cheeks deepened, and he brushed his knuckles over her reddened skin. “You’re gorgeous with makeup, but you’re one of those special women who doesn’t need it to make an impression.”

Her eyes lightened in wonder and appreciation. “You’re pretty amazing yourself, Jake. Waitressing wasn’t exactly a job I looked forward to after working all day, but once you showed up...well, all of a sudden I couldn’t wait to start my shift.”

“Glad to know the feeling was mutual, sweetheart.”

She bit down on her lower lip. “There’re lots of mutual feelings flowing between us right now.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” He stepped closer, allowing her to feel his groin push against her.

The desire to remove her clothes was as quick and furious as the need she inspired. She shed her tight leggings and revealed a pair of lacy underwear, a complement to the barely-there bra. Remembering how he'd tasted the material around her nipple, the need to do the same to the lace panties and feminine secrets beneath grew like an insatiable hunger deep inside him.

Before she could reach for his shirt, he dropped to his knees. "You might want to grab on to something right now."

"You're naughty," she murmured. But the excited gleam in her eyes told him she desired everything he wanted to give and more.

He waited till she reached for the exercise bar running across the mirrored wall and then inched closer to trace the elastic edge of her underwear with his tongue. The taste was so decadent, her feminine scent so erotic, he nearly came without being inside her—hell, without even being touched, something that spoke of her incredible power over him.

He snaked a path with his tongue, first following the boundaries set by her panties and going no farther, teasing her with delicate strokes. But when her legs quaked and he felt her lean more strongly against the wall for support, he grew bolder and slowly lowered the scrap of silk to her thighs, allowing himself to taste her dewy essence.

Her shuddering moan was all the encouragement he needed to dip his tongue into her heat and attempt to draw from her everything he could, give to her everything he had.

Brianne leaned her shoulder against the hard mirrored wall and opened her eyes for a moment. She glanced down at Jake, his dark hair in stark contrast to her white skin, his strong hands holding on to her thighs and his mouth doing miraculous things to her long-deprived body. She knew she'd been alone but hadn't realized how lonely she'd been, how empty she'd felt, until Jake possessed her. His arms holding, his hands caressing and his mouth giving to her in ways she'd never experienced before.

Without warning, delicate licks of his tongue were suddenly replaced by bold strokes that made her feel warm and cherished, yet uncontrollably aroused. Each lap was designed to take her higher, closer, and she held on to the bar for support, trying desperately to control the waves rushing through her at lightning speed. But there was no controlling the inevitable, no controlling Jake.

Passion enveloped her, and as she rolled her head to the side, a long, drawn-out groan escaping her throat, she caught a glimpse in the mirror. She saw in erotic detail Jake on his knees, holding her thighs apart, his head dipped in between, worshiping her body in ways no man had ever cared enough to do before. The sight was all it took to send her over the edge.

She shut her eyes and gave herself up to sensation, to the need he had created. And just as the first wave hit, encompassing her body in shuddering bliss, she felt the slide of him inside her, one finger filling the empty space, his thumb pressing hard and deep on exactly the right spot, increasing the magic and prolonging the explosive climax he'd given to her.

It took a while for the rippling sensations to subside, and when they did, Brianne found Jake standing by her side, staring into her eyes. “I’ve never, I mean no one’s ever...” Her words trailed off.

He grinned. “Then, I’m glad I did.”

“Me, too.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw and the barely leashed desire in his eyes told her that he’d satisfied her but he was by no means fulfilled.

Strangely, Brianne understood. Although he’d satisfied her in one way, in another she was still aroused, still felt an emptiness only he could fill. She felt free to indulge those yearnings and give back to him at the same time. Thankfully, he didn’t argue when she reached out to help pull his shirt up and over his head. Male ego versus male desire. No contest there, Brianne thought wryly.

Nor did he utter a complaint when she splayed her fingers over his chest to savor the feel of his coarser, so-masculine flesh. Emboldened, she unbuttoned his jeans and helped him push them, along with his boxers, down to the floor. He kicked the encumbering clothing aside and stood before her completely and gloriously undressed.

Her gaze fell to his erection, and she sucked in a sharp breath.

“Please say that’s an appreciative sound.” Jake wanted nothing more than to bury his hard, aching body deep inside her.

Somehow she knew. She held her arms out to him, wearing nothing more than the beginning of a slow grin. “Why don’t you come find out?”

He didn’t need more of an invitation. He grasped her around the waist and had her pinned to the floor in seconds flat. Her body was lush and warm, comforting in ways he’d only dreamed about. He’d also dreamed about being part of her, and he’d stuck condoms in his denim pocket, just in case. He snagged his pants and rolled to his side to take care of protection, then rose over Brianne once more.

“So what do you think? Am I appreciative?” she purred.

Her husky voice ripped his hard-won composure to shreds, and he slipped his hand between them, discovering the moist place between her legs and finding it as welcoming as the woman herself. “I think you’re ready for me.”

“I think you’re right.” She spread her legs wide, giving him complete access and utter trust.

He swallowed hard, wondering what he’d done to deserve such an incredible gift, and pushed from his mind the fact that it wouldn’t last. He couldn’t think beyond now, not when he had a job to do and an uncertain future. If they weren’t meant to be, he meant to savor now.

His body was hard and near bursting as he lifted himself over her. “Bend your knees, sweetheart.”

She did as he asked and he helped, spreading her thighs. He touched her moist heat with the tip of his penis and she let

out a breathy moan, a revelation of exactly how he affected her. He ought to know, since she did the same to him.

“Jake, please.” She uttered his name in her soft voice.

“Please what?” He needed her to say what she wanted, needed to know he was giving her all she desired.

Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed. “Please come inside me.”

As she spoke, her pelvis jerked upward, taking him in one more inch, giving him a taste of what heaven would feel like when he finally earned his way there. He glided the rest of the way, pushing hard, moving deep, and watching the play of emotions cross her beautiful face.

“Come inside you like this—?” He clenched his jaw. He’d entered her but not the way he wanted. Thanks to his shoulder, he couldn’t lean over her, couldn’t feel her body flush against his as he braced himself with both hands and drove into her. Still he lingered, braced on one arm.

She shook her head. “Like this—” she said, then took those long legs, wrapped them around his back and raised her hips higher, embedding him deeper, so deep he was practically kneeling astride her, and the penetration drew a whimper from Brianne.

“Hey.” He forced his eyelids open. “You okay?”

“Amazing.” Her eyes opened wide.

Her expression was nothing short of rapturous and held him by the heart, nearly cutting off his breath.

“It’s been so long and it was never like—” She cut off her own words with a kiss meant to seduce him into oblivion, and it did.

But it was only the beginning of his trip. She raised her hips, rolled her pelvis beneath him, and when her feminine mound came in direct contact with his abdomen, she let out a cry, part sigh, part moan. Upon hearing her satisfaction expressed uninhibited from those precious lips, the remnants of his control nearly unraveled.

“We need to switch positions before you kill your shoulder,” she said softly.

“I think we can manage that.” That she thought of his comfort now caused a softening deep inside his heart, the one he’d walled off years ago. In fact, where women were concerned, he pretended his heart didn’t exist. But Brianne wasn’t just any woman. He’d known that from a mere glimpse. And now she’d proven him right.

Together they attempted a switch in positions that wasn’t easy, but they managed. And then she straddled him. One knee on either side of his thighs, she settled herself on top. The moist heat of her body playfully teased his hard, waiting erection as she subtly shifted her hips.

“Brianne,” he said in a warning she heeded. No more games, she took him completely. He was cushioned in her body, thrusting upward without thought, easing his hard length out and thrusting back in sync with her movements. He felt every liquid push and pull of the exquisite friction they

created. She was tighter than he'd imagined, and she cocooned him in suctioning warmth.

With each successive rotation of her hips and press downward, she took him in deeper, hugging him in velvet heat. Hugging him in her embrace, causing emotion to swell along with his growing need.

His excitement had escalated the minute she took him in and increased each time they moved, but now as she undulated along with him, meeting him thrust for thrust and encouraging him with a circular pumping motion, he surged and grew inside her until his climax beckoned.

He felt her milking him with her body, heard her calling his name, and, as her breathing shallowed, she began to come. And at that moment, Jake let himself go, reaching for completion, driving himself into her one last time, as hard, deep and fast as he could. His world exploded around him in the most consuming orgasm he'd ever experienced, enveloping him in hot, wet heat, rocking his body with seemingly endless, cataclysmic waves.

Reality returned slowly, and with it the realization of how different this experience had been from any other. How different Brianne was.

Jake took short, shallow gulps of air as awareness returned. Brianne collapsed on top of him in silence, her breathing as labored as his. Without warning, she let out a low groan and shifted off him, causing him to wonder if he'd underestimated her so-called adventurous spirit. Making love on the floor probably didn't qualify as a time a girl would never forget—

and he was selfish enough to admit he never wanted her to forget him.

Just as he'd never, ever forget her. "We'd better move," he suggested. He shifted his hips, allowing her to slide off him to lie by his side. The cold rush of air on his body was harsh and unwelcome. "But I liked it better with you covering me."

He wrapped one arm around her, and she curled into a ball, cuddling into him. "And here I was thinking you'd have plenty of objections," he said.

"To feeling you inside me?" she asked with a hint of boldness that seemed to startle even her. "Of course not." She let out a laugh.

"I meant objections to the lack of furniture. The lack of... everything." Once again he was struck by how much he cared about what she was feeling.

She turned and stroked his cheek. "There's no lack of anything. There never is with you. In one night you've given me so much."

"Like what?" He was truly curious. Other than great *sex*, a word that was inadequate to describe all they'd shared, Jake wondered what she thought she'd received.

She nestled her head into his shoulder and sighed. "Well, there's the obvious."

He nodded.

"But there's something else. Did you know I've never had a real date before?"

That surprised him. “I thought you’d been in other relationships.”

“I was. One or two to alleviate the loneliness when things got too overwhelming. But it was always something I fit into my schedule, something that was rushed and never made me feel any better than I had before. But tonight you took me out on a real, planned date.”

“For ice cream. It was no big deal.” But Jake lied to himself, he knew. He’d given plenty of thought to where he could take Brianne. He’d wanted someplace memorable, and though he’d thought of the spot because of a sexy picture he’d seen in a magazine, he’d chosen the place because of Brianne. He’d known in his heart not only that she’d appreciate the chance to indulge in a frivolous treat but that she’d remember him favorably because of it.

“It was a very big deal.” She wriggled out of his embrace so she could look into his eyes. “And I think you know it.”

He damn well did, and he wasn’t just thinking about their so-called date. He’d been married and in love once and he’d been in casual relationships before and since. All paled in comparison to what he’d experienced with Brianne, from looks across a room to the most intimate act imaginable. Jake was a cop, a law enforcement officer, and it wasn’t in his nature to deny or lie to himself, professionally or personally. And he knew he hadn’t had sex tonight—he’d made love with Brianne.

She sighed and seemed to go boneless beside him, her hair tickling his nose and the scent of strawberries lingering in the

air. He wrapped his arms around her waist, but his heart pounded fast and furious as he tried to absorb the implication of how much he cared for this woman who was wrong for him in every imaginable way.

For one thing, she intended to move at the end of the summer. He couldn't fault her for wanting to be near the brother she raised and he had no desire to stand in her way by admitting his growing feelings or asking about hers.

And despite the fact that Brianne understood the value of money more than did most people, Jake still feared he couldn't provide her with all she needed, all she might desire.

And even if he could get past the scars of his marriage, there was something Jake could never overcome. Brianne would never accept what he did for a living. Even if she came to believe differently, one day she'd give up on him the same way his wife had. And though he wasn't sure he'd continue being a cop, Jake's joy and his livelihood would always be tied to some kind of law enforcement. It was "reckless" behavior that Brianne couldn't understand. Behavior that she admitted reminded her of the pain she'd struggled to overcome.

Brianne was his fantasy. At his suggestion, they would have a short-term relationship. A summer fling. Yet when he let himself think about losing her, the pain was blinding.

"There's one last thing you did for me," she said, her words muffled against his chest.

"What's that?" He was eager to put these unexpected emotions and thoughts out of his head and enjoy the time they'd agreed upon.

“I asked you to take me home and make me forget all my ridiculous fears. You really know how to satisfy a woman’s request.” She snuggled closer, and though his body warmed to her touch, his mind rebelled against everything she’d just said.

He’d planned to make her forget, but he hadn’t intended to suffer an amnesiac lapse himself. Yet he had. He’d come back to this apartment, made love to his fantasy woman, *fallen so hard*, he’d nearly lost track of all that was important in his life. A mistake that, if repeated, could cost him everything.

Including Brianne.

Louis was aware of Brianne. How or to what extent, Jake hadn’t a clue. But thanks to Brianne’s relationship with Jake—perceived or otherwise—she’d become a valuable commodity to Ramirez.

It was too late for Jake to protect her by outwardly pretending Brianne meant nothing to him in the hopes that Ramirez would back off. It was also too late to keep Brianne out of his life. Not only did he want what sacred, limited time they could share, but he needed her around to keep her safe. Having her watched wasn’t enough. Jake needed to be involved in her life.

But he couldn’t level with her. Since he’d become privy to her painful past, there was no way in hell he could let Brianne in on the fact that, thanks to his job, a dangerous criminal was watching her...and probably planned worse.

The irony was glaring. As Jake had anticipated, his personal and professional lives had escalated at the same time.

But he hadn't planned for them to become irrevocably intertwined.



A PATHETIC WHINING noise woke Brianne. She opened her eyes and blinked hard. The morning sun shone bright, its golden rays basking her face in heated warmth. She found herself snug in her own bed, Jake curled next to her. They'd made love, and the experience had changed her forever. He'd become a part of her, and wherever she went she'd take Jake with her. Inside her heart, if not by her side.

Last night came back to her more clearly. She remembered them walking down the hall to her room. "Better your bedroom than my sister's bedroom palace," he'd said.

She'd already sensed his discomfort with the overly large and formal apartment, and she was glad to see his taste ran to the more mundane, like her own. She mentally kicked herself for caring what they had in common, when their differences were too great to overcome.

The whine sounded once more, and she realized Norton was closed out of the bedroom and probably needed a walk. She rolled over, glanced at the clock and bolted upright in bed. Norton wasn't the only one who needed to get out of the apartment.

"I'm late." She tossed the covers off her and started to rise, hating the air-conditioned chill but having no choice. Jake stopped her, catching her around the waist, and pulled her back into the downy, warm comforter. Back into his arms.

“Where are you running to?” he asked, nuzzling his nose into her cheek.

“Norton needs to go.”

“I took him an hour ago. He’s fine, just jealous.”

And she hadn’t felt Jake leave the bed? She must have slept more soundly than she realized. She was certainly more relaxed, more sated...The red lights on the clock caught her eye once more, and she groaned. “I still need to get to work.”

“Don’t go.” His palm came to rest on her stomach, his hand splaying wide, his skin hot and warm against her flesh.

Her pulse leapt and her insides coiled into a tight, tempting knot of desire. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve dragged myself out of bed because I couldn’t justify staying home?”

“I’ll give you justification.” He slid his hand downward, his fingers resting on her feminine mound. Slick moisture trickled between her legs, while a pulsing, pounding awareness started slow and grew until it enveloped her.

“Stay home with me, instead.” His husky voice echoed in her ear as his arm snaked out and he reached for her phone, dangling it in front of her eyes. “Come on, Brianne. Call in sick.”

She wanted to. She yearned desperately to shed the years of automated behavior and the obligatory need to follow a set schedule. She bit down on her lower lip. “I’ve never called in sick unless I was deathly ill.”

“Then, do it this once. Give yourself a well-deserved treat.” One finger dipped lower, teasing her with the beginning of the intoxicating waves he was so good at creating.

“People are counting on me,” she murmured, but the protest was weak.

“Then, how about a compromise? Call and say you’ll be late.” With one smooth move, he rolled on top of her, his naked body aligned and all but joining with hers. Though he wasn’t putting weight on his shoulder, the position had to be uncomfortable for him. “I’ll make it well worth your while.”

He grinned, and she couldn’t resist the sparkle in his eye, the warmth and temptation of his body or his willingness to put her needs before his own. Minutes later, her phone call was made and work was pushed aside. As she put the phone back onto the nightstand, she glanced down at her drawer and remembered the box of condoms Kellie had given her the other day.

Embarrassed but determined, she opened the drawer and pulled out a foil packet. Then turning back to Jake, she allowed the intimacy they’d shared to guide her as she drew a deep breath for courage and positioned herself on top of him once more. Her legs on either side of his waist, her femininity directly over his erection, she slid down against the length of him, teasing him with what could be. He was hot and hard beneath her, his enlarged member pulsing with desire. For her. Feeling him erect against her, she let out an appreciative sigh.

“Damn, but I like this position.”

“I can make it even better.” She held out the foil packet she’d retrieved earlier, and he snagged it out of her hand.

““Extra lubrication and increased sensitivity,”” he read, his blue eyes glittering with want.

“Care to try them out? There’s an entire box of them.”

“Honey, we are definitely speaking the same language.”

She hoped so because her entire body was taut with longing. As if he read her mind, he reached out and cupped her breasts. His large hands kneaded her flesh and satisfied a tiny part of the need he’d inspired. But only a part, because her nipples puckered hard and rasped against his coarser palms. He rubbed gently, increasing the friction and her aching need for fulfillment. In response, her hips began to gyrate in circles against his heated skin.

He gestured with a nod to the condom that had fallen beside him on the bed. “Put it on me.”

With shaking hands, she tore into the packet and moved back onto his thighs so she could slide the plastic sheath over his erect penis. With one hand she held his extended length while the other worked the condom over him. She felt every velvet inch and hard ridge of masculine steel. Her pulse pounded, not just in her wrist but between her legs, and a matching trickling of moisture followed.

“You’re good at this, Brianne.”

Swallowing, she met his gaze. Her hand was still wrapped around him, and she knew for certain she wasn’t imagining the

play of emotions crossing his face as he watched her. A lump formed in her throat.

Never in her limited experience had the act of protection been a part of sex itself, but now, with Jake, it was foreplay of the most intimate kind. The kind that only occurred between two people who cared for one another, Brianne thought, and she shook the overwhelming, impossible thought away. It was too soon. They were too new. Yet she knew they'd connected with their first glance and she was lying to herself now.

His hands came to rest on her hips, and he lifted her, still watching intently. Inch by smooth, moist inch, she took him inside her, felt him filling the emptiness and becoming a part of her.

And then he began to move, his hips pumping upward, bringing him deeper, harder. She sucked in a breath and held it fast, then repeated the effort, finding that the controlled breathing brought her closer and closer to release. Her pelvis rocked with his, circular motions that became rhythmic, putting pressure on exactly the right spot at the right time. Each rotation took her higher, higher, until everything exploded in a flash of blinding, all-consuming light and sensation.

He'd just rocked her body, and she knew without a doubt he'd also rocked her world.

✧ ✧ ✧

JAKE SAT UP in bed, physically sated but mentally alert. The shower ran in the other room, and no matter how much he'd like to join Brianne, he couldn't. He'd bought himself some

time by convincing her to go to work late—late enough for him to contact private investigator David Mills, an ex-cop, a damn good detective and the only person Jake trusted to keep an eye on Brianne when Jake couldn't be there himself. He'd already taken care of Frank's family by calling in another favor. And he'd warned Frank's wife to be extra careful, something she understood well.

Jake had attempted to get in touch with his detective friend once during the night, but David's wife and partner said he was out cold after a prolonged stakeout. She'd agreed to take on David's current case to free him up to watch Brianne, and Jake didn't mind owing the Millses a big favor. The stakes were high and the reason worth it. While Jake focused on loose ends, he needed someone awake and alert to protect Brianne.

He'd had to keep her occupied until he could arrange for her safety—not that spending the morning in her bed had been a hardship.

If he'd had any second thoughts about his growing feelings, they'd been answered in the seconds he'd watched her sheath him with protection. His heart had filled as he watched her attempt her task with shaking hands while biting down on her lower lip in intense concentration. And when she'd taken him inside her body, he'd lost a part of himself, probably for good.

He shook his head and cursed aloud. "Focus," he muttered, frustrated with himself and his distracted thoughts. The tattoo and the long-awaited Forensics report would give him a solid

lead on Ramirez. Now he had to step up the heat and get Louis behind bars. He was relieved to have set up David to watch Brianne's back during the day. Jake would cover the nights himself.

But who would cover *him* when Brianne walked out for good?

Chapter Eight

JAKE HAD GOTTEN Brianne out the door, but not without almost succumbing to the urge to make love to her one more time. And he would have if not for her insistence about getting to work. Jake swallowed a groan, knowing that he'd let his heart rule his head and that it couldn't go on. He had to concentrate on his job.

It was a job that he wanted over and done with so he could deal with his future. For now, the job had brought him to a rendezvous with Vickers at the hospital where the overdose victim had been admitted. And the hospital where Brianne worked.

As he walked up the concrete stairs, Jake glanced around at the crowds on the street, but Ramirez was nowhere in sight. Not that he'd expected the slime to jump out of the shadows and announce himself. But it was the guy's damn lurking that was getting to Jake, making him wary and causing him to wonder what Ramirez had in store for Jake—and Brianne.

He glanced at his watch but his empty stomach already told him it was close to lunchtime.

"Make sure you get yourself something to eat in the cafeteria. I damn sure don't want to listen to that grumbling all morning," Vickers muttered.

Jake laughed, then sobered fast as he remembered why he'd had no time for breakfast. Indulging in more erotic pursuits, he thought wryly.

“Thompson will have my ass if he finds out I brought you with me to question a witness.”

Jake shrugged. The lieutenant was the least of his problems. If Jake ran into Brianne now, he'd have a hell of a time explaining why an on-leave cop with a bum shoulder was hanging around waiting to question a witness.

He glanced at Vickers, a brawny, balding man with good instincts but little tact. “What the lieutenant doesn't know won't hurt him,” Jake said. Not that he held any illusions. The lieutenant would hear about his visit one way or another. Jake just didn't give a damn.

“At least if I get reamed I'll have the satisfaction of knowing I won't be the only one.” Vickers snickered.

They nodded to the uniformed cop watching the woman's hospital room door, knocked, and, once given permission, walked inside. A drawn-looking young girl—she looked too young to be called a woman—lay in a bed, an IV in one arm and a dazed, bleak expression on her face. Black hair fanned the stark white hospital sheets and drew attention to her utterly pale skin. She turned to look at them as they entered but she didn't utter a word.

Jake stepped back and let Vickers, the detective on duty, begin the questioning. Vickers flashed his badge. “Ma'am, we know this is difficult for you but would you mind taking us through what happened two nights ago?”

A lone tear dripped down her cheek. She looked younger than her twenty-two years but not too young to know better.

Why the hell was she experimenting with designer drugs? She was pretty, and too damn young to have been so close to death.

“If you don’t want to talk here, we can do it at the station after you’re released,” Vickers said.

“You’re an ass,” Jake muttered under his breath. He trusted Vickers like a brother, but the man had the delicacy of an elephant.

When she remained silent, Jake stepped forward. “Telling us what you know won’t bring your boyfriend back, but it might save someone else.”

She visibly swallowed, then turned her head away from them, obviously unwilling to talk.

“Vick, go get me a cup of coffee, will you?” Jake asked. They’d discussed this scenario ahead of time, and Vickers had agreed if she refused to talk to the police, he’d give Jake, the on-leave cop, time alone with her.

He pulled up a chair and dragged it to the side of the bed. “Cops can be pretty intimidating when they walk in and flash their badges, all full of authority and bull.”

She rolled her head to the side and faced him.

A start, Jake thought. “I’m a detective but I’m on leave. Name’s Jake Lowell but you can call me Jake.” He figured he’d just sealed his chance of the lieutenant finding out about this visit. He’d kill him, but if Jake got information it was worth it.

“Hospitals suck, don’t they?” When she didn’t reply, he merely continued. “I was laid up myself a while back. I was

shot.”

She blinked and raised her eyes to meet his. “How’d you get shot?” she asked.

Her soft, melodic voice sounded out of place in the drab hospital room and in the face of her dire circumstances. But at least he’d captured her attention. She was listening. “At a stakeout. Probably by the same guy who supplied those pills you took last night. The pills that killed your boyfriend.”

She winced, and Jake felt the slice of a knifelike pain in his gut. He knew he was pushing her hard and being cruel, but he hoped that by reminding her of what she’d lost, she’d fight harder to get the guy who’d done this to her. And maybe by aiding in Ramirez’s capture, she’d regain some of the self-esteem lost through the other night’s indulgence.

“I’m not an addict,” she whispered. “Neither is, I mean, was...oh God...neither was Neil. We just wanted to see what the fuss was all about. I never expected—” Her voice caught and her eyes filled once more.

Jake patted her hand. “I understand. Believe me, I see this more times than I want to count. That’s why I need you to help me out, Marina. Help me get the guy. All I need to know is what happened last night. How you got the pills. I’ll take it from there.”

She let out a huge sigh and nodded. Then, slowly at first and then with more trust and courage, she talked. Jake listened carefully. He already knew Ramirez’s MO by heart: Ecstasy delivered to college kids with food as the cover.

Louis had started small, supplying the sandwich man going through the dorms at the local schools, then he'd moved on to the popular restaurant and pub frequented by college students seeking to have a beer or two and unwind. And when they requested the right drink of the night, the patron would receive not only their order but drugs slipped in a rolled napkin.

That was why the pill stuck inside the plastic take-out wrap had intrigued Jake. This girl's version of events was a variation of Ramirez's MO. In this case, instead of a college student, they were postgraduate Psych students in summer school who'd decided, like the other college kids, to let loose and forget studying. They went out and picked up a meal from the newest "in" place. In Jake's mind the similarities were great enough that he refused to rule out Ramirez as the supplier.

"So we ended up at The Eclectic Eatery." She sniffed, and since her hospital gown was too short to be of any use, she wiped her eyes on her bare arm.

Jake leaned over, pulled a tissue from the table beside the bed and handed it to her. "Here—" He shrugged uncomfortably. Though Jake loved the investigating part of the job, he could do without interaction with the bereaved. It was difficult under the best of circumstances, and this was particularly tough.

"Thanks." She forced a smile and rubbed at her eyes.

"You're welcome." He smiled back. "So what did you order?"

“I asked for a Greek salad, and Neil, my boyfriend...” She paused to gulp in air. “Neil ordered something he said was called a falafel, which I’d never heard of. He said it was an Israeli specialty, and The Eatery has dishes from every culture. I always thought Neil was an all-American hot dog or hamburger kind of guy but...” She shrugged.

Falafel? Jake shrugged. Apparently he was all American too, because he’d never heard of the foreign dish. “Did Neil ever ask for drugs?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t even know he was going to get them. I’d never done any before. But when we got back to the apartment, he pulled them out of the bag. Like this big surprise.” She averted her gaze, obviously embarrassed.

“Did you ask him how he got the pills?”

She nodded. “He explained it was all in the ordering.”

“Greek salad and falafel will get you drugs?” Jake muttered.

“No. Every dish has a different name. Greek salad is called Hellenic Heaven. Hellenic, as in the ancient Greeks, you know?”

Jake didn’t know, but he wasn’t about to get into a history lesson, either.

“What did Neil order?” he asked.

A smile briefly crossed her face. “Apparently that Israeli dish also had a history-based name. He said he wanted to taste The Promised Land.”

“I’ll just bet he did,” Jake muttered. He had to admit, the place had a good gimmick going.

But if the substance in the pills or the dead man’s body was Ecstasy, Ramirez’s drug of choice, the cops would close them down in a heartbeat. Hopefully the toxicology answers would come soon.

Without warning, Jake’s beeper went off and he glanced down at the number, then rose from his seat. “Thank you for your honesty, Marina. If I have any other questions, I’ll be in touch.” He’d also make sure she had a good lawyer for the possession charge that was certain to follow and a counselor to ensure this never happened to her again. He squeezed her arm and stepped into the hall.

“Get anything?” Vickers asked.

“Everything. I’ll fill you in on the way out. I’ll grab a sandwich at the cafeteria, too.” He glanced around. Secure that he’d escaped without being seen by Brianne, Jake punched the elevator button and was lucky to make a fast escape.



BRIANNE’S HANDS HAD shaken as she’d worked on every client of the day. Even now as she got ready to take a lunch break, her insides were quaking. She wished she could put the reason into words.

She’d known making love with Jake would change her in some way. She just hadn’t realized how differently she’d feel afterward. How much she’d want to stay in his arms and forget the rest of the world—her job and his occupation. And for too

many fleeting moments this morning, she'd wondered if there was any way for them to make a relationship work.

Before she could go off on another what-if session, someone tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey, ready to get a bite to eat?" Sharon, another physical therapist and Brianne's usual lunch companion, asked.

Shrugging off the memories of Jake for now, she turned to her friend and nodded. "I'm starving."

"Then, let's go."

They walked through a set of double doors and headed down the maze of corridors that made up the hospital, a maze Brianne could navigate in her sleep. But she wasn't surprised they'd had to redirect more than one confused person who'd ended up in the wrong place.

"Did you hear about the commotion last night?" Sharon asked.

"You worked late yesterday? I thought you got off at five."

The pretty blonde shook her head and laughed. "When was the last time either one of us got out on time? The wife of one of my older patients asked me to spend some extra time with him, and they're so sweet, I couldn't say no. So I was here when an emergency overdose case was brought in."

Brianne shook her head and sighed. Although her job didn't normally bring her near the Emergency Room, she wasn't immune to the stories or gossip. She couldn't work in a New York City hospital and ignore the often sad stories that

floated through the halls. “There are always OD cases coming in at night. What makes this one so special?”

“She’s got her own personal bodyguard. A uniformed cop is stationed outside her door, watching who comes in and out. And you know what?” Sharon leaned closer and whispered. “I checked him out this morning and he’s *gorgeous*.”

Brianne had her fill of gorgeous cops at home, she thought. She didn’t need to see any at work.

“What happened to Tony?” Brianne asked of Sharon’s long-term boyfriend.

Her friend shrugged. “We’re taking a break from commitment. Anyway, you’ve got to see this guy.” Determined, Sharon grabbed Brianne’s elbow and pulled her down a hall.

“The cafeteria’s the other way,” Brianne grumbled, but she knew the faster she checked out the cute cop, the faster Sharon would be satisfied—and Brianne would finally be eating lunch. Since she’d skipped breakfast, she was starving. But the reasons why she’d missed a meal had left her sated in many other ways—ways more important to her than appetite.

She walked with Sharon, and when her friend paused, rather indiscreetly in Brianne’s opinion, across the hall from the uniformed cop, Brianne stopped as well.

“Don’t you love a man in uniform?” Sharon asked.

Brianne murmured a noncommittal response. Because one glance at the man in blue told her he couldn’t hold a candle to Jake. Then again, she hadn’t expected him to. Brianne had a

hunch that Jake had set the standard by which she'd judge men for the rest of her life.

She turned to Sharon to ask if she'd had enough, when she caught sight of a pair of men standing by the elevator on the far side of the hall. There were many dark-haired men in the world, but only one with that rebel posture and rugged cutoff sweatshirt. Only one who made her heart race, made her blood pound and made her want to lose her clothes and fall into his bed.

And he was a detective who was so attracted to danger that he couldn't stay away. Not even when he was on injury leave. Not even when he'd been shot and wounded and hadn't completely recuperated yet. The disappointment racing through her system was strong as she accepted the truth: he was a man who would always place himself in danger on a daily basis, no matter what his occupational status.

Brianne's pulse began a thready beat and a wave of light-headedness assaulted her, a combination of shock, nerves and anxiety. Real anxiety, the kind she hadn't had in so long, but the kind she'd experienced again upon meeting Jake. She had no doubt she could overcome it; she just hated that she had to.

Jake. Their connection had been intense and emotional from the beginning. What she felt for him was so strong, so consuming, she was afraid to put a name to it. But raising an adolescent had taught her the value of honesty, and the least she could do was be truthful with herself.

Brianne was afraid she was falling in love with the detective. But love was everything about who a person was

inside as well as out. Jake's job was an essential part of Jake Lowell, the man. So how could she have such a strong, negative reaction to his career choice?

If she truly loved him, she had to love everything about him. And she didn't love his job. She admired it, and him—but she couldn't accept the circumstances that went with it. She *chose* not to accept it for herself.

She'd spent years forging a safety net for Marc and herself. And Jake, a narcotics cop, was as far from safe as Brianne could possibly get. Any foolish notions she'd held about making a long-term relationship with Jake work sank along with the elevator he'd stepped into.



JAKE AND VICKERS walked out of the building and into the hot, humid New York City air.

"I hate hospitals." Vickers gave a visible shudder.

"Then you're in the wrong profession, my man." A narc spent too many damn hours in hospitals.

"Well, I'm out of here. I've got some paperwork back at the precinct. I'll call you when the toxicology reports are in."

Jake nodded, swallowing around the last of the dry sandwich he'd picked up inside. While Vickers headed back to the precinct, Jake looked around for David. He found the man in his appointed spot, watching Brianne's back from a location outside the hospital. They'd agreed they couldn't cover all entrances and had settled for the one closest to Rehab. Since Jake couldn't have Brianne tailed inside the hospital without

her catching on, he had no choice but to trust she was safe in her daily routine.

He stopped near the sidewalk vendor who was selling hot dogs, hot pretzels and drinks from his cart. “I’ll take two colas.” Jake pulled some folded bills out of his pocket and paid the man, then walked over to David.

Jake handed a can of cola to his friend. “So what’s been going on?”

“Looks like your hunch was right. I saw your pal Ramirez taking a morning stroll outside the hospital about half an hour ago. Maybe he figured Brianne would be coming out for lunch.”

Although he’d suspected as much, Jake’s stomach clenched when he heard the news. “Damn,” he muttered.

“Don’t worry. He’s close but I’m closer.”

“Just keep it that way, pal. And remember, I’m trusting you with my life.”

“You mean *her* life,” David corrected him, but Jake heard the teasing in his friend’s tone.

“I never say what I don’t mean, so watch her back.” Jake meant no insult. He knew David would do his best no matter what, but telling David how strongly Jake felt about Brianne helped him entrust her life to someone other than himself.

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed Vickers. “Do me a favor. Turn around and come back,” Jake said without preamble.

He hadn't wanted to let the police in on Ramirez's interest in Brianne, but now he had no choice. He had to get the scum off the street for good, but he'd settle for Vickers keeping him busy while Jake checked out The Eclectic Eatery. The cops could pick up Ramirez for jay-walking and detain him for a little while. That was all the time Jake needed to do a little experimenting himself. He'd order off The Eclectic Eatery menu and, with a little luck, he'd score drugs. Then they'd be able to nail Ramirez and keep him in custody where he belonged.

Luck had better be on his side, Jake thought. Because if he came up empty and they had to let Ramirez go, Jake would have to tell Brianne he'd put her in danger—he'd have no choice. Without that knowledge, she wouldn't be aware and careful enough to protect herself inside the hospital. On trips to the ladies' room and supply closets, Brianne needed to be alert and on guard.

But he shuddered to think of her reaction. And he hated causing her pain or a return to the old fears she thought she'd put behind her. He knew Brianne was strong. She'd pull herself together enough to get through this. On a personal level, however, being honest with Brianne would mean not just the end of his summer fling, but losing her trust and faith in him, probably for good.



JAKE STEPPED INSIDE the too-quiet penthouse. With the silence surrounding him, he missed his apartment, a place where he could slam his front door shut in pure anger. Goddamn pansy

elevator and its easy glide did nothing to alleviate his frustration. Norton slid on his run to greet Jake as he entered the apartment.

Jake scratched the back of his ear, the same way he'd seen Brianne pet the dog. Norton wasn't satisfied and lowered himself to the floor, seeking a longer stretch of attention. No matter how much love and affection Brianne gave him at night, they were both still gone during most of the day. The pooch was obviously starving for affection if he sought it from Jake. He leaned down on his knees, gave the dog the petting he desired and got slobbered on for his trouble.

Before he could unwind and lose the tension of the day, Jake took Norton for a quick walk. Thank goodness, the dog cooperated, and he was back home before he knew it—home to mull over his unsuccessful trip to the gourmet shop where he'd failed to score. Of course, the order that signaled a request for drugs could change weekly or even daily. Jake had known that going in, but he'd still hoped this case would have an easy wrap-up. For Brianne's sake. He dreaded reigniting her anxieties, and now he had no choice.

The only thing he had going for him—*they* had going for them—was this secure building. As angry as Brianne might be, she'd be foolish to leave here and the safety it offered. At least Jake would still have the summer to get back into her good graces, while keeping her safe at the same time.

He walked down the short hall to her room, but the door was open. A quick knock and look inside told him she wasn't

there. He headed across the marble floor and toward the gym, but that room was empty, too. He cursed.

“Today’s the day for strikeouts,” he muttered.

After he couldn’t score the pills, he’d called Duke and discovered the Forensics results were in. Duke had met him on the street away from the precinct, where Jake found out that Marina and her boyfriend had ODed on Ecstasy, Ramirez’s stock-in-trade. As far as Jake was concerned, the information was one more nail in the scum’s coffin. All they had to do now was link the pills to The Eclectic Eatery and link Ramirez to the restaurant.

Jake’s gut told him it shouldn’t be difficult. He glanced at his watch and the late hour shocked him. How the hell had the night gotten away from him? He’d been so busy trying to figure out a way to link the pills to Ramirez, he hadn’t even noticed the time.

But he noticed now. Where the hell was Brianne? According to her weekly schedule, she was over an hour late. Although he reminded himself she’d been late before, that she could have gotten hung up with a patient or stopped by The Sidewalk Café on the way home, this time felt different in his gut. And Jake never ignored his gut.

He reassured himself that she had David watching her back and the PI would have called if there’d been a problem. If he *could* call. The hell with denim and velvet, Jake thought, and flung himself onto the sofa, grabbed for the magazine and forced himself to flip through the pages. But he couldn’t force himself to focus, not even on the intensely sexual pictures.

Anyplace in a photograph that was intended to be dark and sultry, instead reminded him of Ramirez and the possibility that he was lurking in shadows waiting to ambush Brianne.

More than once Jake reached for the phone, but telling himself he was overreacting, he sat on his hands. David would call, his mind insisted in direct opposition to his gut. Finally, when another half-hour passed, Jake no longer believed his own reassurances. He and David had agreed that if Brianne was running very late, David would get in touch. As far as Jake was concerned, going on two hours was very late.

With his heart pounding, he grabbed the phone and punched in David's cell phone number, only to hear a series of rings and a voice-mail greeting.

"Damn." Jake didn't kid himself. Ramirez had killed one cop already. He wouldn't worry much about taking out a civilian. He had no options left. A sound stopped his panic, and he glanced up in time to see the doors slide open and Brianne step inside. In her ugly green scrubs and ragged ponytail, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and relief poured through him—sweet and pure and as fast as the blood pumping through his veins.

Common sense told him to keep his hands off her and maintain a level head. Reason dictated he sit her down and explain the situation he'd gotten her into. But his heartbeat drowned out all rational thought. She was here, she was safe and while she was with him, she was his. And right now those were the only things that mattered.

He rose and stepped into her line of vision.

“Hi, Jake.” She eyed him warily, making him wonder if he looked as insane with worry as he felt.

He moved closer, his heart thudding, his need so great he couldn't control it. Jake ought to know better. Hell, he did know better. But not a damn thing could have stopped him as he reached out and pulled her into his arms.

Chapter Nine

“YOU’RE LATE.” JAKE spoke through clenched teeth while he held Brianne in a hug so tight she wondered if he ever planned to let go.

“I take it you missed me?” She forced into her tone a lightness she didn’t feel.

His big hands cupped her face and tilted her head back. “You don’t know the half of it.”

The intensity in his voice and the harshness of his features startled her and shook the rash decision she’d made earlier to call off the affair. After seeing him outside a victim’s hospital room with another detective by his side, she’d realized firsthand the danger he put himself into on a daily basis. She’d come far in the years since her parents’ death and she could cope with Jake’s job—*if* she decided she could handle returning to that kind of uncertain existence. She wasn’t sure she’d choose to live that way again.

But faced with reality—cradled in Jake’s strong arms, inhaling his masculine scent—her conviction wavered. Even as her more rational self fought against *this*, her emotional, heartfelt needs asserted themselves. She’d known he was a detective prior to going into this affair and yet she’d still agreed. Nothing had changed since then. He was still the man she desired as no other. Why not indulge during the short-term basis they’d agreed upon?

Because her feelings were stronger than the deal they'd made and her heart was at risk, that was why. But nothing seemed to matter when his lips covered hers and he demanded and received entry into her mouth. He devoured her with the same ravaging need that consumed her, his tongue tangling with hers and taking possession. But he gave of himself as well, and Brianne wanted more.

She thrust her hands into his hair, reveling in the way the thick, silky strands slid between her fingers, and she let herself slacken against him, feel his hard body mold to hers. The sensual awareness he effortlessly created rose to life, and a warmth started deep in her belly and pressed downward, creating a heavy, pulsing beat between her legs.

Having already made love with Jake, the desire was deeper and more meaningful than in the past. Her heart beat rapidly, but this time it swelled with emotion, too. Emotion she didn't want to deal with. Not now.

Now she just wanted Jake. To hell with the reality that could tear them apart. This was her summer fantasy and she planned to enjoy it while she could. Perhaps it was the knowledge that *they* could never be, or perhaps it was the danger she'd acknowledged he faced daily, but the rush of want was greater than ever before. She needed him inside her too badly to wait.

Words weren't necessary, not when his eyes spoke of his need and he seemed as eager as she was to get rid of his clothes. With shaking hands and Jake's help, she pulled at his shirt, slowing only to take care with his injured shoulder as she

slid his arm out of his sleeve. But once she'd lifted the shirt over his head and tossed it onto the floor, all bets were off. She slid her hands through the light sprinkling of hair on his chest, feeling the flex and pull of muscle beneath her fingertips.

Her palms brushed his hard nipples, and he let out a strangled groan, one that turned her insides to mush and caused a rush of liquid to pool and settle between her legs. As if he knew, he began to tug at her clothes, and soon her hospital uniform lay in a pile at their feet.

His steely gaze raked over her nearly naked body, taking in the sheer, skin-colored bra and panties. Then his hands went to the snap on his jeans. She noted with pleasure that he'd paused to grab a condom from his jeans pocket.

“Honest to God, I haven't carried these things around with me since I was a teenager, but when it comes to you, damn if I'm going to be unprepared.”

“I like the way you think.”

She liked it even more when she realized his hands shook as well. Within moments she found herself facing his nude body. She swallowed hard and glanced down, noting he'd shed his boxers along with his pants. He was erect, aroused and magnificently male. And he was hers—at least for the summer.

That was the thought that did her in. He extended his hands just as she came into his arms.

“I wish I could lift you up and feel you inside me.” He whispered the hot and needy words in her ear.

“Me, too.” She glanced behind him, hoping a chair had manufactured itself, but all she saw was Rina’s all-white furniture and crystal accessories.

She swallowed a cry of pure frustration as she felt Jake’s arm around her waist, urging her to follow him. She did, and soon he was seated on the ledge by the oversize window overlooking the East River, Brianne standing between his strong legs.

The sun was just beginning its lazy descent, and the sky had taken on a pinkish-blue hue. And because the building was the highest around, they had no neighboring buildings blocking their view or intruding on the serenity of their surroundings. Nothing to make her self-conscious or uncomfortable, she thought, and was amazed that, despite how sheltered she’d lived the past few years, being with Jake this way felt natural and right.

As long as she didn’t allow ugly reality to intrude, Brianne thought. And she wouldn’t, not as long as she had this moment.

He tilted his head back against the clear glass, his fathomless eyes staring into hers. “I want to make love to you with the city behind us,” he said in a husky voice.

His tone beckoned not only to the most primal physical part of her, but to her emotions. She trusted this man more than any other, and she needed him as she needed no other.

“I want us where no one can touch us.” His heartfelt words secured her feelings and erased any hesitation she might have had. Without instruction, without being asked, Brianne eased

herself up so her knees were on either side of Jake's thighs and her femininity was poised over his waiting erection.

She held her balance with only her knees on the ledge and Jake's hands, warm and secure, on her waist. "I feel like I could fall," she said with a shaky laugh.

"Then, by all means, let's anchor you." A naughty smile lifted the corner of his mouth, and Brianne knew exactly what he meant.

Heart pounding in anticipation, she eased herself up and, with a little help from his nimble fingers, she slid down, his enlarged member penetrating her and filling her.

Completion. There was no other word for what she felt, and the truth frightened her. Though she hoped to hide her frantic, overwhelmed emotions, one look into his eyes told her he felt it, too. And Brianne was far from ready to deal with his feelings. She could barely cope with her own.

So she did the only thing she could. She began a steady rocking of her pelvis, shifting her hips and rubbing her feminine mound against his body with a precision that took her to soaring, peaking heights. That was the point—to avoid thinking, to only feel. And she did—his body inside of hers, taking her to a place she'd only imagined.

Her eyelids fluttered open. Big mistake, she realized as she looked into his deepened, darkened stare. Eye contact while making love should have been a distraction, Brianne thought idly. But when everything she saw in Jake's eyes was honest and real, she wasn't distracted. Rather, she was drawn more deeply into the vortex of emotion and desire.

Shook up by the intensity of emotion welling in her throat and the incredible feelings building in her body, she switched her gaze over his shoulder just as he lowered his head and latched on to one of her nipples. He pulled the taut peak into his mouth, alternately grazing with his teeth, then suckling and soothing with his tongue, until she was beyond reason.

Her bucking, shifting body was no longer hers, but rather something he controlled. And he did it well, his hips pumping upward, meeting every gyrating movement she made and matching it until the most incredible climax beckoned, just out of reach.

He switched his attention to her other breast, but instead of the frenzied need with which he'd started, he picked up a different tempo. Using a slower, circular movement, he laved her entire breast with his tongue. The cool air around them contrasted with his warmer mouth, and with each lap he took of her skin, her nipple tightened and peaked, begging for his attention with a pulling need that found a home between her thighs, where their bodies joined in the most intimate act imaginable. But still he persisted to tease her with slow, methodical strokes of his tongue that had her body writhing and begging for release.

“Open your eyes.”

She hadn't realized she'd closed them again, but his deep, husky voice brought her out of her desire-filled haze. She complied, once again meeting his penetrating gaze, and, as she did, he slowed the movements of his lower body until she

wanted to cry at the unfairness of his leaving her strung tight and needy.

“I want you to look at me when you come,” he said, his voice raw as he explained the answer to her unasked question.

He cupped her full breast in his hand, kneading the plump flesh for a moment. And then, as if she'd told him exactly what she needed, his thumb and forefinger locked onto her nipple and he began to roll and flick at the tender nub just hard enough to bring sensation to life once more. He pumped his hips in an upward, circular motion, never pausing to release his hand or stop the perfect rhythm he'd created. The waves began in earnest, a steady mounting of desire that encompassed her entire being.

And just as she crested, her eyes locked on his and his climax joined with hers. She came, her body undulating with wave after wave of rapid release. And as she fell, she caught sight of the skyline behind Jake and felt as if she were free-falling over the city. Like her emotions, she was tumbling, body, heart and soul, without a safety net.



HER BREATHING WAS rapid and her body still shook around him, as Jake's awareness returned. He couldn't breathe any better than Brianne and his body wasn't on any more solid ground. Neither was his mind, considering he'd avoided facing reality.

He'd needed to tell her she was in danger but, by the time she'd come home, he'd been so worked up and worried, he couldn't think let alone form a coherent sentence. One look as she'd walked into the apartment and all he could do was feel.

The relief in seeing her unharmed had been so great, he'd needed to release the fear and prove to himself she was alive. He'd done that all right. And though he should sit her down and talk now, he wasn't ready.

As long as they were inside this secure penthouse, they were safe. And as long as he had some more time before Brianne looked at him with disappointment and distrust in her beautiful eyes, he was damn well going to take it.

He brushed her hair over her shoulder. "You promised me a whirlpool," he whispered in her ear.

Her soft laughter found a home deep in his heart. "I said if you cooperated I'd *consider* the whirlpool."

"And I've been a very good boy." He didn't add a word about therapy because the time they'd actually spent working on his shoulder had been minimal and he didn't want her to call him on it just yet. Besides, it hadn't been intentional, and he would let her do all the physical therapy she wanted on his body. Later. Much, much later. When she had no more desire to be in his bed. He shook off that thought as best he could.

A husky purr escaped her throat. "You are *good*, I'll give you that."

She paused to take a nip on his earlobe, and the desire she created rocked him down to his toes. "So the whirlpool it is?" he asked.

"If I don't get out of this position I might never straighten my legs out, and those hot water jets sound awfully good right

now.” She winced, and he realized how much discomfort she must be in.

He braced his hands on her waist and helped her leverage herself off him and come to a standing position on shaky legs. His body definitely felt the loss, and he intended to make up for it as soon as they hit the whirlpool.

“I can think of many ways to stretch out your legs, and I guarantee you’ll feel much better.”

“I thought *I* was the physical therapist.”

“Just give me a chance to work those muscles of yours. You might be surprised at how proficient I am with my hands.”

Her eyes darkened at his completely sexual intent. At least there they were in perfect agreement, Jake thought. He held out his hand and she grasped it, not quite meeting his gaze.

He figured she had issues of her own to work out, and, considering the upheaval he’d be bringing into her life, he’d give her this time.

He knew it couldn’t last.



ON A ROOFTOP high above New York City, Jake led Brienne to the now infamous whirlpool. They’d grabbed towels from the apartment, and he’d taken her via the exclusive penthouse elevator to the private spa on the roof.

The view was incredible. White stars twinkled in the inky night sky and the outline of buildings and lights illuminated

the spectacular setting. But the Empire State Building lit up in its red, white and blue glory was the *pièce de résistance*, and stood out from all the more ordinary buildings surrounding them.

Brianne walked to the edge of the roof, and though she kept one hand on the towel around her body, she used the other to grasp the high railing so she could peer out for a better look. “This is almost surreal.”

Jake came up behind her. “Pretty amazing, isn’t it.”

She nodded. “And your sister owns this along with the penthouse? No one else in the building can come up?”

“No one.”

She let out a brief whistle. “I guess this is what they mean by wealth.”

“Guess so.” He propped one hip on a rung of the guardrail. “Nice life if you can get it.”

Brianne heard the chill in his voice and was reminded of the only time he’d frozen her out: when she’d verbalized the conclusion that he didn’t live in this apartment, that he was a visitor much like herself. She’d wondered then why he’d turned cold, and figured now was as good a time as any to ask.

“Jake?”

“What?” He stared out over the panoramic view of the city, obviously lost in thought.

She tried to come up with a way to formulate the question that wouldn’t set him off further, and realized there probably

wasn't one. "Why is money such a sensitive issue with you?"

He turned and looked at her. "I suppose when a guy's wife leaves him for what he doesn't have..."

"...he decides to paint all women with the same brush?" She finished the sentence for him, the conclusion not hard to figure out.

"I guess so," he said with a brief nod.

And it hurt, Brianne thought. For so many reasons. The first of which was that she hadn't known he'd been married. The thought of him in love with someone else stabbed her in the heart. Add to that the painful truth—she didn't know much about him at all.

Except how he'd been injured. What it was like to share living space. And the rapture of his body deep inside hers, intimate in a way she'd never felt before. She was wrong. She did know *him*, she just knew too little about his past. And she'd wanted to keep it that way, to avoid the pain of emotional connection.

But it was too late. She'd already entrusted him with personal insight—her parents' death, her difficulty dealing with anxiety and danger, and the frugal way in which she'd been forced to live in order to survive. She'd given to him emotionally despite the risk. It was time she let him talk in return.

But there was another reason his attitude about money and wealth hurt. She'd been open and honest about who and what she was but she'd never once given him the impression she'd

taken this job so she could live the good life. In fact, no matter how he looked at it, she was still working two jobs to make ends meet. “It’s not like I’m some gold-digging tramp,” she muttered.

“No, you are not.” He grabbed for her hand.

His low growl and warm touch snapped her out of her internal dialogue and brought her anger to the surface. “Then, why do I feel like you’re thinking otherwise?”

“My fault for overreacting.” He glanced down as he ran his thumb over her wrist and massaged the pulse point there in an erotic circular motion.

His touch felt wickedly good, but she was more interested in what he had to say. Forcing herself to ignore the sensations traveling from a place as mundane as her wrist to other more private parts, like her breasts, wasn’t easy. But she managed, and one second later she was glad she’d remained alert enough to hear his next words.

“And showing my fear.”

Her heart leapt in her chest. “Fear of what?” Because Brianne thought she held a monopoly on that particular emotion. Hearing that a big, tough guy like Jake could not only succumb to fear but admit to it was a revelation she couldn’t believe.

“Fear of your judging me and finding me lacking, for one thing.”

She felt her eyes open wide—along with the heart she’d tried so desperately to keep shut tight. She stepped closer and

found herself reaching for his face. A small voice in her head warned her she was treading emotionally deep waters, but she couldn't stop.

His deep blue eyes bore into hers, and she cupped his razor-stubbed cheeks in her palms, the abrading sensation both ticklish and yet subtly arousing against her skin. "How could any woman find *you* lacking?" she asked.

"Do you have any idea what a cop earns?"

A smile worked at the corners of her mouth. "More than I've had left after boarding school bills, I'm sure. But I've never been unhappy. Just overwhelmed, exhausted and cash-poor." She forced a laugh, then sobered quickly. "But if I've learned anything since my parents died, it's that we make our own happiness in life."

"My ex-wife looked to me to make her happy." He shook his head. "Scratch that. She looked to my bank account. The incredible thing is, she knew all about my lifestyle and what I could and couldn't afford when she married me. She was a teacher, which meant her salary wasn't over the top, either. I really did think we shared the fundamentals. Like the desire for a family."

Brianne's heart ached at the thought of Jake sharing anything with any woman other than herself. *Uh-oh*. "Did you have...kids?" She nearly choked on the word.

He shook his head. "But I wanted them."

Did he still? "What changed?" she asked, quickly denying herself the time to think through the notion of Jake with

another woman's baby. The idea was too painful.

"I still don't know. We moved to the suburbs, she met different people, more affluent couples—doctors, lawyers, businessmen." He shrugged. "Then Rina met and married Robert. That couldn't have helped."

"None of that should have changed how she felt about you. None of that should have altered who your wife was inside."

His eyes narrowed, and she could almost see the wheels turning inside his head as he sorted through his past. "Maybe that's it, then. I never really knew who she was inside. I never took the time to find out."

Her pulse picked up rhythm, if only because Brianne knew he'd taken the time to discover who *she* was. Enough to take her on a real date, to bring her ice cream because he thought that had been in short supply in her life. And to give himself, a warm, caring, loving man.

He may not have opened up before but he was doing so now, and she wasn't sure she wanted to contemplate why. He'd started in the permanently off-limits column of her life, and now she wanted to move him over, into the more stable, long-term column. A place he couldn't, wouldn't want to be. He'd made that abundantly clear at the outset.

"Did you love her?" Brianne bit down on her lower lip, wishing she could call back the too-personal, too-revealing words.

"I thought she loved me but it turns out she never fully accepted who I am. What I'll always be. She gave up on me

when she realized she couldn't change me.”

And that had scarred him badly, Brianne realized, enough to make him wary of other women and of the future. He had good reason. Brianne's reasons for being wary of the future were different but she hadn't fully accepted him and who he was, either. She'd admitted as much to his face. From the beginning, she wished she could change him from someone who loved danger to someone who preferred security and stability.

Is that what she still wanted? Because if she desired to change him, there was no chance for them or for the future. And a part of Brianne refused to accept that. Confusion twisted inside her.

He reached up and grasped her wrists. She hadn't realized she was still holding on to his face, so natural was the flow of conversation and intimacy between them. And wasn't that intimacy more indicative of what they shared than her dislike of his career? She felt the mental shift occurring slowly and knew she needed time to absorb the implications.

“To answer your question, I suppose I loved the person I married, not the person she became,” he said, speaking of his ex-wife. Jake's gaze held Brianne's, full of unspoken meaning. “I realize now that I never loved my ex-wife enough to change and grow with her.”

Brianne swallowed hard. “You couldn't have made her happy then, Jake. And vice versa. Money didn't have anything to do with it.”

“I suppose you're right.”

“I know I am. Look at my life. Money might have given me more free time but I’d still have been a too-young, single woman raising a teenager. All the money in the world wouldn’t change that. And it might not have made me happy. I was burdened, yes, but I was also happy.” She shrugged, feeling silly revealing herself this way, but not silly enough to stop.

Because this was Jake and he was listening intently, interested in what she had to say and how it related to his past and to them. She drew a deep breath and continued. “Any man in my life would build on the foundation that’s already there.” The way Jake had. Just the sight of him had lessened her burdens. Being with him lightened her load and made her more complete. She wasn’t ready to take those thoughts to their natural completion so she focused on his past instead. “Sounds like your wife didn’t have that foundation.”

Admiration filled his eyes along with deeper, more consuming emotion—part desire, but something more. Brianne knew because she felt it, too. “Anyone tell you you’re amazing?” he asked.

She shook her head and grinned. “Nope. Care to be the first?”

“Hell, yes.” Her first, last, always, Jake thought, and lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was deep and sweet, but for Jake, just the beginning. “I’m not letting you out of our deal. You owe me a leisurely soak in that whirlpool.” He pointed to the bubbling water that was probably as hot as the blood pumping through his veins.

“Then, by all means, let’s do it.” She inhaled for what he guessed was courage, then took a step back and dropped her towel, letting the fluffy white cotton pool at her feet.

He took one look, and his mouth went dry. She extended her hand, and he followed her to the waiting whirlpool, letting her get in first.

She lowered herself to a sitting position, the bubbling water floating just above her tempting cleavage. When the truth was out, Jake knew what his penance would be—to remember this, remember her and all they could have shared if he hadn’t gotten her involved in something guaranteed to bring danger and anxiety into her life, the two things she couldn’t and shouldn’t ever have to handle again.

Brianne was everything his first wife hadn’t been. She was honest, open and real, about herself, her feelings and about her take on life. And in being herself, she’d helped him see his own past more clearly. That was why he intended to savor this night and leave the revelations for morning.

She extended her legs and stretched out, leaning her head back and staring at the night sky. “Good Lord, this is decadent,” she murmured.

He settled himself in beside her and let one of the pulsating jets work against his shoulder. “You haven’t begun to see decadent. But you will. I promise you that.”

“Promises, promises.”

“Do you doubt me?” he asked.

“If I say yes, will it get you to move faster?”

His body heated from inside out in a way that had nothing to do with the hot water and everything to do with Brianne. The urgency of their limited time together fueled with his burning desire combined to create a need so strong that it threatened to consume him. “Did I tell you what the beauty of this whirlpool is?”

She shook her head.

“It’s got a bench that reclines.” He followed his words with his body, moving over to her and easing her down until she rested in the molded seat, her neck and shoulders above the moving bubbles.

She let out a high-pitched laugh. “Water’s hitting me from every angle.”

He grinned. “Like it?”

She laughed once more, causing him to shake his head in dismay.

“What’s wrong?”

“I want you moaning, not giggling. You do realize I’m going to have to do something about that?”

She leaned back against the rounded headrest, her auburn hair floating on the water’s surface. Green eyes, as deep as the water’s hue, stared back at him, hungry with desire. “I was counting on it.”

He leaned over her and his lips came down on hers, the kiss prolonged and sweet. Heaven couldn’t feel as good, Jake thought, and slid his tongue inside for a more thorough taste. She let out a soft groan and wrapped her arms around his neck,

pulling him on top of her and aligning their bodies in an intimate embrace.

His groin pulsed hard and ready against her bare skin, and her legs slipped open wide, letting him know she was just as ready as he. “One of these days we’re going to do this the right way.”

“And what would that be?”

“Me on top,” he muttered. The lack of strength in his shoulder hadn’t slowed him in many things, but making love to Brianne in that particular position had been a luxury denied him so far.

“Work out with me and I’m sure you’ll be ready in no time.” He couldn’t miss the challenging gleam in her eyes. “You know, the whirlpool will heat your shoulder well. We can fit in a session when we finish here.”

If she could think about working out, Jake figured he wasn’t doing his best to keep her distracted. He extended his hand, and she grasped it and rose to a sitting position. When they finished here, if she was in the mood for anything other than a warm bed and a good night’s sleep—tangled in his arms, of course—he’d eat his badge. Besides, she’d need a decent night’s rest to deal with tomorrow, he thought, then immediately pushed the troubling future aside.

With a gentle tug, he pulled her between his legs and seated her astride him on the submerged bench.

“Jake?” His name came out a gasp of surprise.

“Relax, honey.” He eased one arm around her waist to help her do just that. As she found a comfortable position, her behind pressed gently but insistently against his swelled erection. All his self-restraint went into staying in his seat and not entering her pliant, willing body.

She tensed against him. “You expect me to relax with you inches away from...”

“Yes. Relax and enjoy.” He spread his legs, and she went from sitting on top of him to sitting in the *V* of his thighs, his groin hot and hard against the small of her back.

“As if,” she muttered.

He chuckled and reached out to play with a few switches on the outside of the tub. Within seconds, the heated seat jets began to bubble away, forcing air upright from the seats into whatever lay directly above them.

From Brianne’s shocked gasp, Jake knew exactly where the spurts of air and water had found a home. She wriggled and tried to rise, but he held on tight to her small waist. “Just give it a chance, okay?”

“Okay,” Brianne said, but she had no idea how she’d survive it. The pulsating water was hitting her most sensitive, private flesh. And if that weren’t enough to drive her mad, she had Jake’s erection nudging her back, teasing her with what she couldn’t have, no matter how much her body thrummed with delicious, yearning need.

He moved slowly. His arms, no longer locked around her waist to keep her in place, now cradled her, while one palm

splayed across her stomach, his fingertips inching downward until he covered her feminine mound with his hand.

She sucked in a startled breath when he dipped one fingertip into her aroused flesh and found the most incredible pressure point in her body. He began a steady stroking motion, each long, slick slide of his finger bringing her higher and higher, until her hips were jerking upward of their own accord, seeking release. Combined with the water jets pulsating against and inside her, her body took over her mind, the need and want so incredible and intense she thought she'd die if the waves stopped—and if they didn't.

Without warning, he raised her higher, and she guessed his intent. Between the two of them, he managed to nudge his penis against her open, needy body. And as he slid her down on top of him, as she took him inside, she felt every hot inch filling her, every ridge of his velvet heat stretching her to accommodate the new but oh-so-incredible angle. Though she'd rather be facing him, looking into his eyes when they made love, ironically this position was intimate, too, more so because of the degree of trust it entailed.

She couldn't see his face or watch his features, and had to believe, to trust, he felt as much as she did.

When his arms wrapped more solidly around her and his hands came up to cup her breasts fully and completely, in what felt more like an expression of possession than lust or sex, Brianne knew that he was engulfed by emotion as well.

And then he began to thrust upward, and it didn't take long for him to lunge to his climax. One last thrust, and she let out a

shuddering moan, feeling as if she were flying upward into the night sky.

Heaven only knows how many minutes passed until Brianne's breathing returned to normal, and eventually she found the strength to climb off him and onto the whirlpool seat so she could cuddle in his waiting arms. She felt so safe there, it was hard to believe she'd spent the afternoon reminding herself of all the reasons he could jeopardize her future. Surely this man couldn't—wouldn't—harm her or her secure life in any way. In truth, she feared she was falling in love with him. Something that wasn't planned and couldn't last.

Her arms snaked tighter around his waist, harsh reality rising to surround her like the bubbles in the whirlpool. They'd been careless—not just with their time together, but by not using protection. Brianne understood why she'd allowed such an intimate act, because of how deeply she both trusted and cared for Jake. And it had been intimate and wondrous, feeling him inside her, no barriers between her body and his.

But it was foolish, anyway. They'd been acting as if they had their entire lives ahead of them instead of one short, blissful summer.



LOUIS SHOVED HIS hands into his jeans pockets. Staring up at the tall building, he wondered if the detective and his girlfriend were rocking the walls tonight. For Lowell's sake, Louis hoped so, because it would be the last time. Once any woman had a taste of Louis, she'd never settle for a pig again.

He let out a harsh laugh and lit a cigarette, then shoved the lighter back into his pocket. Yeah, he'd have the redhead and the money that was coming in from his new dealer. The owners of The Eatery had been happy to go into business with him, operating out of both their uptown and downtown restaurants. Things had been going smoothly, too, until that damn girl and her boyfriend overdosed. Those drugs weren't meant to kill, just to take them a little higher. Now he had Lowell on his back and a witness in the hospital. But if the cops hadn't arrested him by now, they didn't have a damn thing on him.

He shrugged. In the meantime, he was having a blast playing with the detective. Even if Lowell wasn't already uptight and worried about his girlfriend, he would be soon. By tomorrow Lowell would think the only place the beautiful Brianne was safe was his high-rise security building. An illusion Louis couldn't wait to shatter.

Chapter Ten

FROM YEARS OF training, Brianne had developed an internal alarm that worked like a charm and an uncanny ability to hear her beeper, even in her sleep. Only, she wasn't asleep when her cell rang, she was in the kitchen at seven a.m. pouring a glass of orange juice because she couldn't sleep. Her bag with her phone was in the living room where she'd dropped it earlier. Before she'd made love with Jake.

Though she'd rather dwell on every erotic memory of their joining, of soaring with New York City in the background, the persistent sound continued. With a sigh, she retrieved her oversize bag and dug through her things for her phone. She was a bit surprised because she wasn't scheduled with a patient until nine a.m.

She checked for a voicemail, found none and called the hospital back. Though Brianne normally had patients brought to her at Rehab, occasionally she had an immobile patient that couldn't be moved off the bed but needed strengthening therapy. Mrs. Cohen was one such patient, an elderly woman whom Brianne adored, perhaps because Brianne had no older relatives of her own. The woman had had a skin graft on one leg but still required upper arm workouts so she'd be ready to use her walker when she was allowed out of bed. But why would she need Brianne so early in the morning?

She called to find out, but the desk phone on the other end rang endlessly until the hospital's main switchboard picked up once more. The floor nurse could be with a patient or dealing

with an emergency. Brianne shrugged and hung up. The call couldn't be a mistake, not at this hour. She'd just toss on her clothes and head out early.

Tiptoeing back into her bedroom so as not to wake Jake, she pulled out a pair of black slacks and a white V-necked T-shirt, an acceptable alternative to hospital scrubs, but one she didn't use often because her uniform was quick and easy. She'd lived on the move for as long as she could remember, and she hadn't had time to think about how she looked. She didn't have the time now, either, but the difference was, she cared. Because of the man asleep in her bed.

She made her way to the queen-size mattress and lay down, allowing herself to snuggle beside him for a few precious minutes before leaving for the day. He groaned and pulled her into his arms. He felt so right, so good. She sighed, burrowing her face into his broad chest. He smelled of musk and man, and she'd never felt as safe and protected as she did right now. Ironic, considering he dealt with risk and danger every day.

But *she* didn't deal with that risk or danger. And that enabled her to breathe deeply and enjoy this moment. She shut her eyes and smoothed her hands over the strong planes of his back, memorizing the corded muscle and warm skin, giving herself memories to keep close to her heart while she was gone. Then, with regret, she rolled away. He reached out for her in his sleep, and Brianne felt the beginnings of a smile on her lips. It was easier to leave knowing he'd miss her, too.

She could get used to this too easily, and it could be taken away from her just as fast—by Jake’s belief that he didn’t want a long-term relationship. Or by a gunman’s bullet, Brianne thought with a shudder.

Maybe Mrs. Cohen’s call had come at the optimal time, after all. She’d planned on waking up next to him and making love to him again—with protection this time. Their foolishness in the whirlpool couldn’t be repeated, nor would she worry unless and until she had to. But making love with Jake in the morning was a luxury she couldn’t, shouldn’t, make a habit.

No matter how much she was coming to desire otherwise.



JAKE NORMALLY WOKE with the sun, but apparently the late-night activity had worn him out because when he looked up, the clock on the nightstand read 7:48. He felt the warm body heat nestled against him and rolled over, expecting to find Brianne and wanting to bury himself deep inside her again.

Unfortunately, he discovered Norton flush against him instead. “Oh, jeez.” He grimaced in disgust. “You are not the warm body I wanted.”

The dog didn’t move. Jake groaned and pushed himself to an upright position. He still had about fifteen minutes to catch Brianne before she left for work, and regardless of the fact that he wanted to make love to her, he knew he *had* to talk to her instead. Thanks to his stupidity last night, he’d added something else to his list of sins: sex without protection.

Without warning, his revelations to Brianne came back to him. He'd admitted wanting kids. What he'd omitted was that he'd never really been able to envision the family scene with Linda. Things between them had soured too fast. But Jake could too easily imagine it with Brianne. Waking to her warm body in the morning and falling asleep beside her at night. Watching her body change and grow with his child.

Jesus, where had that thought come from? He jumped out of bed, looked for her in the bathroom, then headed for the kitchen. Unfortunately she wasn't there, either. His heart skipped a beat, and the note propped against the coffee machine didn't calm his nerves: "Wish I could have shared the morning coffee with you but I got called to the hospital a little early. Have a cup for me. Brianne."

She'd left him with a full pot of coffee and a burning sensation in his gut. How the hell had he slept through a phone call?

As if on cue, his cell rang.

He snatched it up. "Brianne?"

"No, David. If she had to be at the hospital early, why the hell didn't you call me? I'd have tailed her or relieved you there."

"She's at work?"

"Yeah, she's there. But I can't do my job if you don't—"

Jake hit the button on the phone, cutting David off cold. "Sorry, buddy," he muttered belatedly. And he continued

muttering as he pulled on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and sneakers, grabbed his keys and ran for the door.

This woman would be the death of him. And he wanted to die every morning and every night with her in his arms. But he couldn't do that if she was wandering around, ignorant of the threat Ramirez posed.

He tipped the doorman and asked him to walk Norton, before hailing a cab and heading for Brianne. He'd put off the truth in favor of selfish need last night, but the morning had come and he had to level with her. Immediately.



BRIANNE RUBBED HER eyes and poured a cup of coffee from the machine in the lounge. She'd gotten here early, and apparently she'd been needed more for emotional support than physical therapy. Mrs. Cohen had become disoriented and had tried to leave her bed. Her family was away, and the name the older woman kept muttering was Brianne's. It was probably because Brianne didn't treat only a patient's body, she treated her mind. She talked to patients while she was working. And she often got the sense that too few people, doctors and family alike, did the same.

She pulled a couple of pink papers out of her pocket, glancing at her messages. One was from her old landlord asking her to come by and pick up her mail—he'd agreed to hold it for her instead of her switching things around for the summer and risking losing important bills and letters. She wondered if there was a reply from the Ranch and shivered.

She now viewed the prospect, which had once held great appeal, with increasing uncertainty. Because of Jake.

Brianne took a long, less-than-satisfying sip of the strong, caffeinated brew. She'd need the jolt if she was going to stay awake and on her feet after the night she'd had. And what a night it was—hot, sultry—and she wasn't talking about the weather. That was why contemplating the end of the summer or, worse, the end of her relationship with Jake was so painful. But the alternative was unbelievably confusing. She massaged her aching head once more.

If a summer affair was supposed to be straightforward and easy, why was Brianne so confused about so many things?

She'd always hoped that if she did get the California job, she would enjoy the same kind of warm rapport with the kids that she did with the elderly adults here. But she couldn't know for sure, and Brianne *liked* the geriatric patients she treated. More than she'd admitted to herself. They held a wealth of life history and love, even the cantankerous ones. They counted on her, and she prided herself on knowing she'd never let them down.

And then there was the biggest reason her upcoming move no longer held great appeal. She rubbed at her temples with her right hand. Even if another therapist could take her patients, Jake would still be in New York. Her insides churned, and Brianne understood the reason. She would be across the country, in California with the brother she adored. But he was becoming a man; Marc no longer needed her quite the same way he had when he was younger. She'd called him after

leaving Mrs. Cohen and he'd rushed her off the phone; meeting his friends was now more important than talking to his sister. He'd grown up.

Maybe it was time Brianne did the same. Did that mean considering a future in New York, with Jake? She shook her head. What was she thinking? He'd given her no indication he wanted more than a summer fling, and, besides, nothing about their differences had changed. Or had they? Perhaps a better question was, had *she* changed?

"Brianne?" Sharon burst into the room, a yellow, gold and orange bouquet of wildflowers in her hands. "Someone left this on the front desk. It's for you."

Surprised, Brianne took the arrangement and placed it on the table by the old couch.

"Secret admirer?" Sharon asked.

"I don't know." Actually, she did know, and warmth spread through her. She hadn't thought Jake was a flowers kind of guy but apparently she was wrong. She held the knowledge close, having no desire to "share" Jake, her feelings or his gift, by discussing him—even with a friend.

"They are beautiful," Sharon said.

Brianne glanced at the flowers. They were charming and perfect for her. She didn't know what they were called, but she adored the simple arrangement.

The phone in the lounge rang, and Brianne picked it up on the first ring. "Rehab, Brianne Nelson speaking."

“Did you like the gift?” asked a deep male voice with a trace of a foreign accent.

She gripped the phone tighter in her hand. “I think you have the wrong person.”

“You said this is Brianne Nelson.”

“It is,” she said warily, the memory of the man with the tattoo sneaking into her mind. “Who is this?”

“I thought a classy woman like you would have better manners. Don’t I deserve a thanks for sending pretty flowers to such a pretty woman?”

“Maybe I’d thank you if I knew who you were.” She heard the shaking in her voice and tamped down on her nerves.

But Sharon must have sensed her anxiety; she put a comforting hand on her back.

“No? Well, then you can thank me in person,” the stranger said.

“Who *are* you?” Brianne didn’t know if she was dealing with a benign secret admirer or a stalker. Despite her best efforts, trembling turned to shaking, and she eyed the flowers she’d once found lovely with anxious confusion.

“Hang up, Brianne.” At the sound of Jake’s voice, she whipped around, surprised he’d come to find her here, but not really surprised he’d be around when she needed him.

She didn’t question his right to give orders; she just slammed the phone into the cradle and took a step back, away from the floral bouquet.

“Can we have a few minutes alone?” Jake asked.

Brianne glanced at Sharon, who was staring back and forth between Brianne and Jake, obviously unsure of what to make of the situation. Brianne didn't know what to make of it, either.

“It's okay. I need to talk to him,” she told her friend.

“You've been holding out on me,” Sharon said, a curious yet in-awe expression on her face when she looked at Jake. “If you need anything, I'll be out front.”

“Thanks.” Brianne glanced at her watch, and though her breathing came in shallow gasps, she somehow managed to go through her schedule in her mind. “Sharon, could you please take my nine-thirty? I'll owe you, I promise.”

“Not a problem. You can repay me with information.” After another lingering glance at Jake, Sharon walked out of the lounge, leaving the two of them alone.

Jake stood in front of her and squeezed her trembling hands in his. “What happened?” He put an arm around her waist and led her to an old plaid couch.

She'd worked here for so long, yet the couch predated her. It was worn and familiar and gave her a steadying calm she desperately needed. She forced herself to recount her morning, something that helped to calm her nerves. “I missed an early call.”

“And I didn't hear it because...?”

“I was in the kitchen getting a glass of juice and you were still fast asleep. My bag with my phone was still in the living

room.” And she didn’t have to tell him why her purse had never made it into her bedroom last night. The darkening in his gaze told her he remembered everything about last night as vividly as she did.

“Okay, so you missed a call. Then what?”

“Is this what they call the third degree, Detective?” she asked lightly. She appreciated not just his concern but his very presence. Sexy razor stubble covered his cheeks, his hair looked as though he’d just tumbled out of bed and he was completely focused on her. He was her fantasy come to life—if the circumstances weren’t so unnerving, Brianne thought. At the reminder of that phone call, she shivered and sought to divert her thoughts.

He brushed her hair back from her face, calming her. “This is what they call concern. Now quit stalling and go on.”

Brianne had never underestimated his talent or ability as a law enforcement officer, and she saw now that she’d been right. The man was determined, and anyone who needed him would not be let down, but Brianne had no desire to fall into the needy category.

She’d been on her own and strong for too long to let one phone call turn her into a basket case. “I recognized the number and called the hospital to see what they wanted.”

“Is it unusual for you to be phoned so early in the morning?”

She nodded. “Unusual but not unheard of. It wasn’t the Rehab desk, either, so I knew it had to be important. I called

back, no one answered, and I figured it was a real emergency. I found out I was right.”

She told him about her elderly patient, and he listened with intense interest. “I told her stories about Marc and why I became a physical therapist to calm and distract her.”

“Not exactly in your job description.” Warm admiration filled his gaze.

She shrugged self-consciously. “What can I say? I’m a born nurturer.”

That she was, Jake thought. And he wouldn’t mind being the recipient of that caring. But with Ramirez closing in, Jake doubted the fates had that in store.

But hearing her talk about her relationship with her patients, a smile tilted his lips. “I think those are stories I’d like to hear myself one day.” A day when Brianne wasn’t in danger...and if she was speaking to him again by then.

“I have to warn you, my stories put Mrs. Cohen to sleep. Though the sedative might have had something to do with that.” She managed a laugh but sobered quickly, obviously remembering why she was relaying the story to him.

“I come from sturdier stock than your last patient. I’m sure I’ll manage to stay awake.” From his experience questioning witnesses and from his innate understanding of crime victims, he realized that if he let her continue on a tangent, she would. It was normal to want to focus on everything *but* the danger she was in.

He would have loved to let her push aside her fears, but he needed her information too badly. He squeezed her hand. “Go on.”

She sighed. “Well, after the sedative kicked in and she fell back to sleep, I called Marc. Then I came in here for coffee. Sharon brought me the flowers that were left at the desk. I thought the flowers were from you.”

“They were poppies,” he said.

She rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “Really? I had no idea. I’m a city girl, remember? I wouldn’t know one flower from the next.”

“Normally I wouldn’t, either.” But poppies were associated with narcotics, something any cop would know. The flowers themselves weren’t used to make drugs but the sap of an unripe seedpod was the source of heroin, opium, morphine, codeine and more. The flowers had been Ramirez’s calling card, something the slime knew Jake would recognize.

Brianne stared at him curiously. “Even a Neanderthal would know roses, but you recognize poppies? I’d never have guessed. The only thing I know about poppies is from *The Wizard of Oz* and the deadly poppy field...”

Her eyes opened wide, and Jake knew the minute she put two and two together, even before she verbalized her thoughts.

“You got shot trying to arrest a drug dealer. I saw you in the hospital yesterday on the same floor as the patient who overdosed.”

He inclined his head. Jake hadn't realized she'd seen him yesterday. He let out a groan. He should have known better than to think he'd gotten off easy. With Brianne, nothing was simple.

"Today's delivery of flowers wasn't a coincidence, was it?" she asked, dread showing in her face.

Even though her voice was strong, her cheeks had drained of color. His gut twisted tight. He only hoped she'd continue to hold it together when he revealed the rest, but given her history of anxiety and well-founded fear, he was concerned.

He hated causing her pain and drew a deep breath for courage. "It's no coincidence," he agreed. "And we're talking about the same dealer that shot me."

A visible shudder rippled through her. "And this involves me how?"

She narrowed her eyes, and Jake knew this was it, the time to level. No backpedaling, no ducking out. It was also, he realized, the defining moment in their relationship.

He took her hand in his and looked her in the eye. "You're being targeted by a drug dealer named Louis Ramirez, probably because he's figured out what you mean to me and sees you as a way to get to me." His growing feelings for Brianne had caused exactly what he'd wanted to avoid from the beginning—she'd become a valuable commodity to his enemy.

If anything happened to Brianne, it would kill Jake. Ramirez obviously knew enough to play a cat-and-mouse

game—a game Jake didn't appreciate. From the shocked, then angry look on Brianne's face, neither did she.

"I'm in danger because of you?"

He heard the betrayal in her voice, and it struck him like a blow. He nodded. "Indirectly, yes. It looks that way." Technically she was in danger because she'd accepted his sister's offer and moved into the penthouse. But he wouldn't upset her further by clarifying the situation.

From the moment Jake had heard of his sister's meddlesome plan, he'd been filled with dread. He'd just never envisioned Brianne being hurt in any way. If he had, he'd have thrown her out that first day, despite her having accepted Rina's job in good faith. No matter how much she'd tempted him. Jake glanced down at their intertwined hands and felt as if he was viewing his last link to the woman he cared so much about.

"This Ramirez. He has an accent?" she asked through clenched teeth.

Once again, Jake nodded.

"He...He said on the phone that I could thank him for the flowers in person." She yanked her hand free, and Jake felt a loss that went far deeper than the end of physical contact. "How did he know where to find me?"

"He's been watching you." He let his guilty gaze dart away from hers. "For a while now."

"The guy outside the coffee shop?"

"Yes."

She began to clench and unclench her fists, the only outward signs of the anger and betrayal he felt sure were simmering inside her.

“What makes you so sure it’s the same guy?”

As a cop, he appreciated her deadly accurate questioning, but as the man who’d violated her trust, he wished she wasn’t so quick to put the puzzle together. “The tattoo, for one thing. He’s also been seen around the streets outside the hospital.”

“Seen by whom?” Brianne asked. But as she spoke, she began to question more than Ramirez’s hidden agenda. She began to question Jake’s.

He was certain of too much to be coming into this situation fresh. Since awakening this morning, emotion and confusion had been her constant companions—her stomach rolled, her head ached. And she had a hunch things weren’t about to change anytime soon.

He inhaled deeply. “That’s where things get complicated.” He ran a hand through his hair and stood, then began pacing the floor in front of the couch. “Back when you mentioned you thought you were being followed, I got suspicious.”

“But you didn’t let on. In fact, you lied.” The hurt and the anger she’d been holding back rose to the surface.

“Yes. No.” He shook his head in frustration. “I *protected* you. You’d just gotten through telling me you had a well-founded history of anxiety. You equated me to your parents and admitted that when I entered your life, history of danger and all, I’d probably caused all those fears to resurface. I

couldn't bring myself to validate your feelings and upset you, or somehow set you off again."

"It's not like I'm some mental patient that needed sheltering! I asked for your professional advice. I didn't ask you to cushion me from the truth." She rose. "I thought I was being followed. I may not have liked it, but I could have dealt with it. I've dealt with a hell of a lot worse."

"That's bull." He shoved his hands into his pockets and met her gaze. "You've dealt with tragedy and come through stronger than you were before. But unless you've dealt with a psychotic like Ramirez, one who'd kill you as easily as he'd blink, you haven't dealt with worse. Not even close."

At his words, she jerked back, the truth striking her in the heart.

"I'm sorry to scare you, but I'm not sorry for laying out the facts."

"A little late, but you're right." She straightened her shoulders and found the inner strength she knew she possessed. "I haven't been through worse. This 'psychotic' has been following me. Didn't I deserve the chance to protect myself?" She pinned him with her glare. She wasn't about to let him off the hook for keeping such a serious secret from her.

He cleared his throat. "I made sure you were protected."

"Not very well if those flowers got through," she muttered.

"Hospital flowers are delivered all the time." He held his hands up in front of him in supplication. "But I'm not here to argue with you, okay?"

But she'd obviously hurt him, because a flash of pain crossed his handsome face. Still, she couldn't afford to feel sorry for him, not when she had a cop killer sending her flowers and calling her at work. A chill rippled along her spine. "Protected me how? And don't leave anything out."

"There wouldn't be any point to that now."

"But I don't know that for sure, do I? I don't see why you held out on me to begin with." She folded her arms across her chest, more to prevent the shaking than as a defense mechanism.

"I've had a detective following you," he told her. "And when he wasn't with you, I was."

His words shouldn't have shocked her but they did. She braced her folded hands lower, around her stomach, a way of offering herself comfort, although she found none. A small part of her wondered if Jake's recent interest had more to do with keeping her in his apartment than keeping her in his bed.

He'd been deep inside her body, and they'd made love many times, and so her heart rebelled against the idea. Her mind insisted he'd been drawn to her long before she'd moved into the penthouse and before she'd become a target. But her wounded pride and sense of betrayal still made her question his motives. She didn't want to believe he'd lie, not even in the name of protection.

And she didn't want him to see her as weak. "Okay, so now what, Detective?"

This time he flinched at her formal tone. “This isn’t official business for me, Brianne.”

“No, you’re on leave. But you just can’t seem to stay away from the danger. And this time your need for that adrenaline rush brought that danger right to my doorstep.”

“*Our* doorstep, or have you forgotten you moved in with me?” he asked through clenched teeth.

He was right. She was blaming him for things that were out of his control. She let out a slow breath. “Okay, so how close are the police to wrapping things up and getting this guy behind bars? Before he gets me, I mean.”

Once again he avoided her eyes. “Not very,” he admitted, and went on to explain the case as it related to the drug overdose patient in Emergency, including The Eclectic Eatery’s probable connection and Jake’s inability to score drugs there. “But we haven’t been able to link the overdose to the restaurant or Ramirez.”

“Great. So I’m a walking target.” The shaking returned along with the unsteady intakes of air until she felt light-headed and dizzy.

He must have sensed her distress because he placed a hand on her arm, but she shrugged off his touch and lowered herself onto the couch. During the course of her personal anxiety therapy, she’d learned intensive breathing that enabled her to create a calm, safe center deep within herself. She ignored Jake and concentrated on steady breathing until the room stopped spinning and she could focus once more.

She opened her eyes to find him staring at her, his blue eyes deep with concern. “Nothing’s going to happen to you as long as I’m around. And I’m not leaving your side.”

“Just what I wanted, a bodyguard,” she said wryly. Especially one who’d slept with her so he would know where she was at night, Brianne thought.

He moved to her side. His masculine scent was overpowering, seducing her with memories of last night. “You know I don’t find guarding your body a hardship.”

“So you like sex. That hardly makes me feel better right now.” But she was lying. Just knowing she had Jake by her side did make her feel much better. More confusion, she thought.

“I’m going to ignore that.”

But she didn’t miss the hurt in his tone. She knew she was being unreasonably cold toward him, but she couldn’t discount the fact that he’d let her wander the streets of New York, unaware that she was being followed by both a drug dealer and a detective he’d hired. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

His concerned gaze roamed over her. “You need to be careful, okay? Don’t go to the cafeteria or the supply closet or even the bathroom alone. Don’t walk anywhere by yourself, do you understand? I’ll bring David inside to meet you. He’s your bodyguard during the day. He’s smart and he’s good. What I’m saying is follow the rules and you won’t get hurt.”

She hugged herself. “And where will you be?”

“Getting Ramirez before he gets you.” He turned away.

“Jake, wait.” She grabbed on to his arm and held on fast. She didn’t want him putting himself in danger at all, but especially not for her.

Because she loved him. *Oh God.*

Love. She should have seen it coming and hadn’t. All she’d viewed was mountains of questions and hills of confusion. That hadn’t changed. She hadn’t a clue how she felt about loving this man who loved danger. She only felt an overwhelming need to protect him from himself.

He pivoted back to her. “What is it?”

“How? How are you going to get him?” she asked, her voice urgent.

“He wants me and he’s obviously using you to get to me. If I can’t get him for dealing, I’ll get him for attempted murder.”

Her heart skipped a beat and fear took hold. “Attempted murder of who? You? Who is that going to help?” Brienne asked. Because if anything happened to Jake, it wouldn’t help her. But it just might kill her.

“*Attempted*, sweetheart. He’s not going to hurt me, but he is going away. I want him behind bars where he belongs.”

She didn’t miss the fiery determination in his gaze or the absolute certainty in his voice. He’d get Ramirez and he didn’t care how. Brienne realized she was looking at Jake Lowell, the detective, and the thought of him putting himself on the line scared her more than being in danger herself.

She wanted to believe it was old habits returning. That she was experiencing the same fear she'd felt each time her parents walked out the door on a risky adventure, because she didn't know if they'd come home to her. But in her heart she now knew this was different. Jake was different and so were her emotions and the feelings she had invested in him. She wasn't experiencing a recurrence of old anxieties now. She was scared of losing Jake.

She squeezed his arm tighter. "You can't make yourself a target. Jake, please. Promise me you won't do that."

There was regret in his eyes and etched into his handsome features. "I can't make that kind of promise."

"Why not? There's an entire police force out there. You're injured and on leave. You aren't in top form. Let someone who's got full strength handle things for you." The pleading in her voice reminded her of the little girl she'd once been.

Mommy, Daddy, please don't go. What if the race car crashes? What if the cord breaks? What if...what if...what if...? So many variations on the same theme and none of them had made a damn bit of difference. They'd walked out on her, anyway, until one day her worst fears had been realized—they hadn't come back. From the uncompromising look on Jake's face, he was going to do the same thing.

And, without warning, Brianne realized she had to let him. Because she was no longer that scared little girl, but a woman who'd already undergone the very terror she feared. And she'd survived.

"I'm sorry, but I can't. I have to do this," Jake said.

“I know.” Though Brianne didn’t like it, she forced herself to admit she understood his reasons. Being a cop was part of who Jake was. He couldn’t walk away from a case. And she wouldn’t ask him to again.

“You understand?” His shock was tangible. His body jerked backward as if she’d slapped him.

She nodded. “Because I know you. It just couldn’t hurt to ask if you’d let someone else handle things.” The fact that she understood why he had to do this didn’t make it any easier to let him do his job, but she had no choice—just as she had had no choice but to pull herself together and raise Marc.

Until meeting Jake, Brianne had never acknowledged her inner strength, had never had a reason to face or begin to understand herself and the person she’d become. She’d always thought of herself as vulnerable, but she saw now that that was an illusion and she respected herself in a way she hadn’t before.

She met Jake’s stare. In the blue depths of his eyes, she saw a mixture of awe and uncertainty. He wasn’t sure he could trust her faith, and Brianne understood his reasons went beyond her dislike of his job. Jake’s ex-wife had bailed out on him—not just on his lack of money, but on *him*. Brianne couldn’t do the same.

She leaned over and brushed a kiss over his lips, a gesture meant as a show of faith. He grabbed on to her face and turned the kiss into something deep and meaningful. Or so she chose to believe—because she loved him, she thought once more.

And she refused to sit back and let him risk his life to protect her, not without a little help in return.

She lifted her lips from his. “Go do your stuff,” she murmured.

He glanced at her, his eyes wide. She’d shocked him again. She wondered if he’d expected her to fall apart; if he believed, because her anxiety had resurfaced, that she couldn’t cope at all. It was possible. After all, he’d withheld the truth and hired a PI behind her back. She waited for him to question her, but, without another word, he walked out of the lounge, and a few minutes later returned with her watchdog. David was a burly guy with a baseball cap perched over blond hair and unemotional brown eyes.

She shook his hand and turned away. Though she was grateful for his presence, she was too consumed with the notion of proving to Jake as well as to herself not only that she was strong, but that she was his equal, that she could deal with the Ramirez situation, too. And, in the process, she intended to make sure nothing happened to her fantasy man.

Because when this mess was over, she wanted him alive and well. Not dead on the street. Her stomach churned and dizziness fought its way back, but Brianne, through deep breathing and sheer force of will, managed to stay in control. She’d impressed herself, and a smile fought its way to her lips.

She didn’t have a clue how things with Jake would wind up. She still didn’t know if she could accept the detective and his lifestyle—for herself and forever. Whether he even wanted her beyond this summer was also an open question.

The answers would come, Brianne knew, after Ramirez was out of their lives for good.

Chapter Eleven

EVEN BEFORE JAKE left her at the hospital, Brianne realized the only way out of the situation was to face down her fears. Only then would she know if she could handle Jake's kind of life. Only then would she know if she had the courage to approach him and ask for forever.

An hour after Jake's departure, Brianne drew a deep breath and walked into Marina Brown's hospital room. The uniformed cop hadn't given her a hard time, other than to check her hospital badge against hospital records. Mentioning Jake Lowell's name hadn't hurt her cause, either.

"Hello?" Brianne called to the woman curled into a fetal position in the bed.

"Hi." The girl pushed herself up against the white pillows. "Are you another one of the Social Service people?"

Brianne shook her head. "No. I'm..." She swallowed hard. "My name is Brianne Nelson and I need your help."

Brianne figured if she heard Marina's story and discovered how the young woman had gotten drugs from The Eclectic Eatery, perhaps Brianne could attempt to do the same thing herself. It would take some doing, and she'd have to ditch her private investigator, but she'd manage. She'd worked in the hospital for years and knew every back alley and door. She could lose her tail easily. If she could actually get possession of drugs, she could prove the restaurant was the supplier,

something Jake said the police had yet to do. After that, the cops could link the restaurant to Ramirez and put him away.

And Brianne would have taken the first step in getting the drug-dealing criminal out of their lives. She didn't think she was smarter than New York's finest, she just needed to take back her life and her future. Ramirez had intentionally and nefariously stolen her freedom, while Jake's behavior—despite the best of intentions—had taken away her control. But between them they had brought back her worst childhood fears. The adult Brianne had to conquer them.

Fifteen minutes later, after an honest exchange with the young woman and a promise to visit tomorrow, Brianne had the general means by which to order drugs from The Eclectic Eatery. She just had no way of knowing which item on the extensive menu was the key. But she'd figure it out.

Brianne rubbed her palms up and down her forearms, then glanced back at the door, behind which the young girl lay with an IV in her arm. She also had a dead boyfriend.

Brianne refused ever to be in that same position. She wouldn't let anything happen to Jake.

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“YOU INVOLVED A goddamned civilian,” Lieutenant Thompson said in a low growl, eyeing Jake with fury in his eyes.

“Not intentionally, sir.” Jake remained standing before his superior, and waited for the smoke to clear and the older man's anger to blow over.

Thompson's face reddened and he kicked a metal garbage pail across the room and into the wall. Obviously the storm wouldn't end anytime soon. Jake didn't blame Thompson for wanting a piece of him. At the moment, he'd like to rip a piece of his own hide as well—for not leveling with Brianne the minute he'd realized Ramirez was tailing her.

But that was hindsight.

Now he acknowledged that Brianne was the strongest woman he knew. She'd overcome her past and raised her brother, and if she'd experienced a resurgence of any anxiety, she knew how to handle it. She'd proven that to him this morning. But at the time he'd realized Ramirez was watching her, Jake hadn't known how she would react; keeping her in the dark had seemed the best means of protection.

But he had another reason for remaining silent—one he didn't like admitting. The truth was that he hadn't wanted to give Brianne the chance to turn him away. She hadn't done it yet but she still might. It was something he wasn't ready to contemplate.

“You questioned a goddamn police witness while officially off duty,” Thompson snarled.

“I didn't question her, sir. We had a friendly conversation.”

“Friendly, my ass,” he muttered. “And your shoulder?”

“Hurts some.”

“I don't care how it feels. Is it operational?”

“Close enough.” Jake winced as the lieutenant took another shot at the garbage pail. “Did you ever play soccer,

Lieutenant?”

The older man scowled. “I don’t even want to know the reason you held out on me.”

Jake let out a groan and lowered himself into a chair by the desk. He might as well admit to the lieutenant that disillusionment had bit his sorry behind. “Ever since Frank died...” Jake began.

Thompson waved a hand in dismissal. “I said I don’t want to know. Not until this is over and Ramirez is behind bars. For now, get your ass into the physician’s office and get yourself certified as fit.”

Jake nodded, knowing he had no choice if he wanted in on the official end of busting Ramirez.

“Do I know everything now?” the lieutenant asked.

“Yes, sir.” Everything but the fact that Brianne was more than his physical therapist. If the lieutenant knew things were personal—and they were damn personal—he’d be even more furious than he already was.

This morning, she’d accepted him for who he was, cop and all. No woman had ever done that for him, not even the one he’d married. Jake hadn’t expected the gift from Brianne, not in light of her past, and certainly not after she’d discovered his betrayal. She’d deserved better from him.

“I want to talk to this Brianne Nelson.”

Jake started to argue, then shut his mouth. His gut reaction was to protect her, to leave her out of the loop. But he’d played the game that way once before and it had backfired. He

hadn't a clue if she planned to walk out on him when this was over, or what he intended to do about it. But he could only deal with the here and now. And Brianne could handle a talk with the lieutenant.

Jake planned to play things straight with her from here on out. "She gets off work at five. I'll bring her down then."

Thompson raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were her patient, nothing more. I'll have her picked up and brought down here. You don't need to act as her bodyguard."

Jake would guard Brianne's body with his last dying breath, but he wasn't about to fight with Thompson now. Jake ignored the comment and decided to spring his plan on the lieutenant instead. "Since I've been out asking questions and making his life uncomfortable, Ramirez wants me as much as I want him. I figure we can set me up as a target—"

The phone rang, interrupting him.

"Thompson," the lieutenant barked into the phone.

For the first time since Jake had walked into the office and leveled with his boss, the room grew silent. Finally Thompson said, "Well, I'll be damned."

He hung up the phone and eyed Jake with a glare that made the hair on the back of his neck prickle. "What's up?"

"We've got our link between the drugs and The Eatery. Looks like we can shut the place down."

Jake leaned his hands against the old metal desk and rose. "Let's go. I'd like to shake the hand of the person who scored."

“*I’m* going. You’re heading for a physical. But don’t worry. I’ll congratulate your girlfriend for you.” The lieutenant smirked, telling Jake he’d guessed about his personal relationship with Brianne.

“What?” The muscles in Jake’s back and shoulders tensed and his heart lodged somewhere between his chest and his throat.

“Apparently Brianne Nelson ditched the bodyguard you said was so good and went to The Eclectic Eatery, where she figured out the right request and scored. Then she called the cops. I don’t like a civilian involved, but we’re halfway home.”

The lieutenant looked damn pleased they’d connected the restaurant to the goods, but Jake’s gut clenched in pure fear. Brianne had put herself in danger, and if anything had happened to her...if he’d lost her before he had the chance to tell her he loved her...

He *loved* her. Why the hell hadn’t he realized it sooner?

“Your girlfriend’s got talent,” Thompson said.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Jake answered automatically, his thoughts still reeling from his realization. He ignored the lieutenant’s disgusted look. Jake never shared his private life, and despite his self-made promises to the contrary, he sought to protect Brianne now. Again, when it was obvious she didn’t need his protection. Hell, she probably didn’t even need him.

But he needed her. Hell, he loved her, he thought once more. Admitting it to himself wasn’t half as hard as it should

have been. The harder part would be admitting it to Brianne... and seeing if she walked anyway.

If she was alive and well. “Is she...”

“She’s fine. Safe and talking to our guys. But if she’s not your girlfriend then why do you look like you’re going to bust a gut unless you get the hell out of here? I knew there was more to this story. You’re holding out on me again, Lowell. And I don’t like it.”

Jake knew when to shut up, so he remained silent. It was the only hope he had of joining Thompson to see Brianne.

Thompson’s thoughts returned to the case. “With a little luck, any employee who’s scared enough of hard time will roll on Ramirez—if they can ID him. And we’ll have him behind bars.”

“If he doesn’t get Brianne first.” Jake started for the door.

“Stop!” Thompson barked.

Jake paused. “Make it quick, Lieutenant. Much as I respect you, I’m out of here.”

“If you want to return to this department—*ever*—you’re taking a physical. Now.”

In that instant, Jake’s dissatisfaction with his job and his intent for the future crystalized into one thought: *Brianne*. Jake hadn’t just been dissatisfied with his career, he’d been dissatisfied with his whole damn empty life.

He didn’t have time to think it through now, but he knew his solitary lifestyle and a cop’s frustrated duty were the core

of his restlessness—summed up with his unpredictable hours and cold meals eaten alone while struggling to nab scum like Ramirez only to have them go free. It had taken Brianne bursting into his life to show him the light.

Jake turned to his superior, a man whom he respected and who'd taught him everything he knew about good police work, procedure, leadership and even friendship. Thompson knew how to balance the two well. Jake would like to sit the older man down and break it to him gently but he didn't have the time.

“Sorry, Lieutenant, but to hell with the physical.” To hell with the department. The only thing that mattered was Brianne, and when Jake got his hands on her, he was going to kill her. Then he was going to kiss her and make love to her until she was too tired ever to move again.

The older man's eyes narrowed, and he pinned Jake with his glare. “I'm not having the Ramirez case thrown out again because one of my men put his dick before his brain and screwed up.”

Jake didn't take offense. Both men were taking a stand. “Then we're in agreement,” Jake said.

The older man slammed his hand down on the desk—a gesture of frustration, but also an expression of understanding because Thompson knew what was coming and didn't like it.

“I'm not one of your men anymore,” Jake said.

Thompson swore, but must have known Jake was serious because he didn't argue. “We're out of here. But we're not

through, Lowell.”

Jake nodded. He owed the older man an explanation, after he got finished with Brianne. Scoring drugs at The Eclectic Eatery! What the hell had she been thinking? He clenched his jaw until his teeth hurt. He didn't give a damn how much he loved her, he'd shake her until her own teeth rattled, he thought, overcome by both fury and fear.

By the time Thompson pulled his car up to the restaurant, now surrounded by cops, Jake was in a sweat. He grabbed for the handle, opening the car door before the sedan reached a stop.

“I suppose you're still going to try to feed me that bull about how she's not your girlfriend?”

Jake ignored the lieutenant. He jumped out of the car and ran to find Brianne.

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“IT WAS EASIER than I'd thought it would be,” Brianne told the uniformed cop who was watching her but not really listening. It was his job to guard, not to listen. Besides, she'd already given her story to the detective named Duke, who'd immediately called someone named Lieutenant Thompson. Brianne had a hunch it was only a matter of time before Jake arrived and wanted to strangle her.

She lifted her hair off the back of her neck. The heat was trapped inside the stifling police cruiser where they sat on a side street near The Eclectic Eatery. She'd called the police from a pay phone around the corner—after she'd ordered take-

out and discovered she'd actually scored drugs by asking for The Garden of Eden. The description had been simple: a bouquet of mixed greens, tomatoes, bean sprouts and flowers. After her delivery of poppies, the word *bouquet* had jumped out at her and she'd made sure to use it in her order, along with the salad's name. She'd guessed correctly, and in return she'd received a silent nod and, along with her order, little colored pills. She recalled Marina in the hospital bed, and shivered despite the heat.

The police were now waiting for a court-ordered search warrant, and then they'd close down the place for good. Would one of the employees rat out Ramirez? Brianne didn't know but, Lord, she hoped so. The thought of the man's voice and his ability to find her easily put her nerves on edge; she clenched her fists, resting them in her lap.

She still didn't know where she'd gotten the courage to walk into that restaurant in the first place. But somehow, she knew she'd succeed. God knows, she didn't look like a cop, so the restaurant staff shouldn't suspect anything. Still there'd been so many unknowns—was Ramirez already there or was he following her?—yet she'd ditched David, anyway. Not only because she wanted this situation over with, but because she didn't want Jake taking any risks on her behalf. Because she loved him. Her heart still rose to her throat when she admitted it to herself.

And when Brianne loved, she took over. She'd seen herself do it with Marc and now she was doing it with Jake. She put her head in her hands, knowing she still had to face him. In order to prevent him from making himself a target, she'd put

herself on the line instead. He'd be furious, she knew, but at least they were a step closer to getting Ramirez out of their lives. After they'd linked Ramirez to the drugs, the case would be over. But for Jake there would be another one after that, then another.

Could Brianne live the rest of her life wondering each day whether he'd walk in the door alive and well? Did he even *want* to walk in her door or was he still tied to the notion of a short-term affair? *Affair*. Such a cold word for such a hot relationship.

A loud thumping noise reverberated through the car, startling her, and Brianne jumped in her seat. She glanced up to see a man's fist pounding on the shatterproof glass window. "It's Lowell. Open up."

Brianne bit down on her lower lip and glanced at the cop in the front seat. Apparently he recognized Jake's voice because he unlocked the doors and stepped out of the car. Minutes later, the front door swung shut, the back door flung open, and Brianne found herself facing Jake.

His face was flushed with anger, his jaw was clenched and his blue eyes were blazing with banked fury, but he remained silent. She winced in anticipation of the tirade she felt sure would come. He lifted his hands and braced her cheeks more strongly than was comfortable but still he said nothing.

She needed to break the tension. "Jake?"

He responded in the least expected way. He sealed his lips over hers, his mouth hard, hot and demanding. He didn't ask, he took, and he pushed his tongue past her barely parted lips in

a masterful act of possession. One so strong, she felt the pull both between her legs and deep inside. Sexually, he'd aroused her in an instant, but emotionally he tugged at her heart.

Just as she melted into him, he jerked his head back, breaking the kiss. "I needed to feel you were alive and okay." He ran a shaking hand through his hair.

"I am."

"I know. And now I can throttle you. What the hell were you thinking?" he yelled, the anger she'd expected flooding out.

She blinked hard. He'd never shouted at her before.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?" Jake asked.

She shrugged lightly. "I did good, didn't I?"

He lowered his hands from her face, probably to stop himself from squeezing her to death, Brianne thought.

"You could have gotten yourself killed."

Her stomach churned at the thought.

"Why didn't you call me instead of the department?"

She understood his anger and frustration. But she'd entered that store in part to keep Jake out of danger and in part to make sure Ramirez stayed behind bars this time. Calling Jake would have been an emotional reaction, so she'd refrained.

"Because I was afraid Ramirez's lawyer would say any evidence I got was tainted. Is that the right word? You're not on official duty and you have a grudge. I didn't want him to claim entrapment and get off again." She shrugged, and when

he didn't reply, she continued. "I was protecting you and your case. And afterward, I wanted to call you but the police wouldn't let me. They said they'd handle things from here, put me in this patrol car and—"

His sharp exhale told her he'd accepted her explanation, although he was by no means calmer. "You need to give your statement, and then we're going home," he said tersely.

"I already gave information to an officer."

"Lieutenant Thompson wants to talk to you, and you'll need to give an official statement downtown. Then we're going back to the penthouse and you're not leaving there until Ramirez is behind bars."

"Now *that's* a little extreme, don't you think?"

"You don't want to test me right now, Brianne."

His anger was palpable. So was his fear. He braced one arm on top of the back seat and leaned close. His masculine scent wrapped around her, overpowering her in the confines of the small car.

"You want to do exactly as I say and let me take you home."

Her stomach did an excited flip at his insistent, severe tone. Reaching up, she touched her fingers to his cheek, then let them roam downward until she found the muscle in his jaw and massaged the side of his face. "I'm sorry I scared you," she said softly.

He remained outwardly unaffected by her touch. "Do you have any idea what could have happened to you if Ramirez

had gotten a hold of you?”

She shivered. “He didn’t.”

“He could have.”

Neither his tone nor his expression showed any sign of softening, and her heart pounded in her chest. “Jake...”

Just then, a thunderous voice called his name and pounded on the top of the car. “Lowell, get the hell out here.”

“Sounds like someone’s not thrilled with you.” Brianne tried to see who was out there and couldn’t.

“Pretty much how I’m feeling about you right now,” Jake muttered.

She cringed when another *thump* sounded on the roof. “Now,” the male voice yelled.

She crossed her arms over her chest, bracing her hands around her forearms. “You’re being summoned.” And none too soon, she thought.

Jake nodded, then jerked open the car door and jumped out, slamming the door closed before she could make an exit of her own.

That was okay, Brianne thought. She could use the time to figure out how to neutralize Jake’s fury. Though she felt awful about scaring him, she refused to back down as if she’d done anything wrong. She’d put Jake first, before her fear. If given the choice again, she’d do the exact same thing.



AFTER AN EXHAUSTING couple of hours at the police station, Jake took Brianne home to the penthouse. The cops had confiscated the drugs, more than they'd thought they would get in one take, had herded up the restaurant employees and taken them downtown for questioning. Both Thompson and Jake felt certain one of them would give up Ramirez. No doubt about it—thanks to Brianne, they were *this* close to nailing the ringleader.

But Jake was beyond furious that she'd taken the risk and had no intention of letting up on her until she understood the gamble she'd taken and the peril she could have put herself in. For a woman who'd suffered a childhood fear of risk and sought to back away from people who thrived on the same, she had done something shocking. But knowing how Brianne had always taken control of her life, he realized now that he shouldn't have been surprised—just pissed at himself for not out-thinking her first. Now he'd settle for dimming her enthusiasm.

Norton trotted beside them into the kitchen. Happy to see Brianne, he made himself her permanent shadow. “Good thing I got the doorman to take care of his walks,” Jake muttered. He was in no mood to take the dog out to do business now.

“You're still upset.” Brianne walked ahead of him and tossed her bag onto the table, then whirled to face him.

He held on to his composure by a slender thread. “Why would I be upset?” he asked with thinly veiled sarcasm.

Her green eyes met his. “I can think of a number of reasons.”

“So can I. For one thing I had to relinquish control of questioning the employees to Duke and Vickers.” But that was the least of his concerns, he acknowledged silently.

“I heard Lieutenant Thompson say that without a physical you weren’t going anywhere near this case again,” she said softly.

“Well, I can blame myself for that,” Jake said bitterly.

When he’d set out to rehabilitate in private, he’d known he was risking the official part of the job. Since in his gut he knew he hadn’t wanted to return, he’d thought the undercover work he’d accomplish in private would be worth it. But he hadn’t figured Brianne’s blasted independence into the equation. He hadn’t thought he’d need to.

“I can let them know how good you’re doing. How I think you could pass a basic physical.”

“Could I?” Their therapy sessions had been minimal. They’d opted instead for personal time.

“Let’s face it, Jake. Your shoulder’s doing better than I thought. You don’t really need private, daily therapy. I can help quicken your path back to work.” She offered him the solution with hope shining in her eyes. “I’d do that for you, no matter how I feel about your putting yourself in danger.”

He didn’t want her in danger, either, but she didn’t seem to comprehend that. But he recognized her selfless offer and he groaned. He didn’t want his feelings for her to soften. Not while he was still justifiably angry.

“Thanks for the offer, but no thanks.”

He didn't need her help getting him back on a job he didn't want. It was just the Ramirez case he'd needed closure on.

"Suit yourself." Brianne moved closer.

His sister had a huge penthouse with Lord knows how many rooms, but the kitchen was too small to hold Jake and Brianne. Not without a lot of sexual awareness flowing between them, anyway. She took another step toward him. He held his ground but he wasn't happy. Her strawberry scent hit him like a punch in the gut.

So did her pleading words. "Don't be angry with me, Jake. I didn't get hurt and I knew what I was doing. I had a plan, I had pepper spray—"

"Which would have done you a lot of good when facing a drug-dealing cop killer!" His stomach turned over, and he gripped the nearest chair with both hands.

Her eyes blazed bright, alive with the knowledge of a job well done and a sense of accomplishment. Jake ought to know. He recognized what she was feeling, having experienced the rush often himself. If he'd thought he had a chance of making her see reason, she'd killed that hope.

"Do me a favor?" he asked.

Her eyebrows lifted in question.

"Keep quiet. Because every time you speak, you make things worse, not better."

A muscle ticked in her jaw. "You're one to talk. You're the one who's willing to make yourself a walking target for Ramirez. Now you're angry I did the same?"

“You’re damn right I’m angry. If I’d gone after Ramirez, I’d have been doing my job. You were an inexperienced civilian ducking out on a bodyguard hired to protect you.” He forcibly stopped himself from pointing his finger at her or reacting in any other physical way.

But he realized he was yelling and took a step back. His behind hit the counter, and he found himself trapped between the cabinets and her lush body. A body he wanted even now, despite—or was it because of—the heated argument.

Apparently unaware she was crossing a boundary, she pointed her finger at him. “You’re on leave.”

That she didn’t hesitate to remind him or incite his anger further told him much about her current state of mind. She wasn’t falling back into trembling or fear. She wasn’t having an anxiety attack. She was enjoying herself—both catching Ramirez and arguing with Jake.

Jake had to admit that a part of him was enjoying it, too. And he was turned on by her strength as well as her beauty. However, he was still angry and needed her to understand the seriousness of her situation. Now that they’d closed down Ramirez’s shop, the dealer would feel cornered. He wouldn’t know which of his flunkies was rolling over on him, or who he could trust.

Ramirez would have no qualms about lashing out, especially at the cops, and at Jake—which meant Brianne had to be careful. The lieutenant had doubled the protection on Frank’s family, and he’d agreed to have Rina checked out in Italy to be certain. That left Brianne. She had to accept

backup. She couldn't run off on her own again, and Jake intended to make that clear.

But the ringing of his phone prevented him from speaking. He reached for it. "Lowell."

"It's Vickers."

Brianne glanced at Jake and mouthed, *Who is it?*

He raised one silencing finger in the air. "I'm listening," he said.

"The chef turned on Ramirez. We got his statement and the address of his new lab. Then just as we're ready to go on down there, Ramirez calls us. Says he'll turn himself in."

Jake was suspicious. "What's the catch?"

"You're it, buddy. He wants you in residence. Says he won't risk walking toward us while you put a bullet in his back."

Only a coward would shoot someone in the back, Jake thought. And only a coward would worry about someone doing it to him. "I'm there," he told Vickers, and hung up.

Jake turned to Brianne. "I have to go to the station."

She nodded. "Ramirez?" she asked.

"Yes." For a split second, he saw a hint of the old fear in her eyes before she quickly masked it. But her determination to fight her fear and her proven willingness to take chances led him to the conclusion that he couldn't trust her on her own. Not without a promise in return.

"What's going on exactly?" she asked.

“Give me a minute.”

“Okay.” She nodded, wary but willing.

Brianne lowered herself into the kitchen chair, while he disappeared out the doorway. She figured he had some things to get from his room, and that was fine. She started to bite her nails, something she’d never done before, while she sought to figure out a way to get him to either tell her what was going on or take her along with him.

He returned, looking sexy and all male in his faded denim jeans and a black T. She jumped up from her seat and grabbed his arm.

“Relax, okay? I’ll be back in a little while.”

His words did little to calm her nerves, but she sat back down. “Where are you going?”

He narrowed his gaze. “If I tell you, will you promise to sit tight while I’m gone?”

She let out a huge sigh of frustration, knowing she could do no such thing. “How can I promise when I don’t know what you’re going to tell me?”

“Brianne, please make this easy on me. I’ll tell you the truth and you’ll promise to stay here where it’s safe.” He pinned her with those gorgeous eyes—eyes that were pleading.

She wanted to agree and knew that she couldn’t. If he was so desperate to extract this promise, she felt certain he was going to put himself in danger. There was no way she could sit around and wait while he did. “Tell me where you’re going

and let me judge for myself whether or not I can make that promise.”

He rubbed his neck. “Ramirez is going to turn himself in. I’m going downtown to meet him.”

She was surprised that Ramirez would give up so easily and shocked that Jake had entrusted her with his destination. And then his words sunk in. “You’re going to the station? I thought you were on leave and forbidden from going anywhere near the wrap-up of this case.”

He rolled his eyes. “Dammit, did you have to be so smart? I don’t have time for this. Ramirez wants me there when he turns himself in.” He leaned over her, obviously taking advantage of his size and making use of police intimidation tactics. “Now promise me you’ll stay put till I get back.”

“No.” She wouldn’t let herself be bullied any more than she’d let him walk into danger alone.

“I don’t know when you developed this stubborn streak...”

“I’ve always had it. When I love someone, I stick by them. Just ask Marc.”

His eyes opened wide but he didn’t say anything, and Brianne refused to take back the words she’d tossed out. They weren’t careless or spoken in haste. She meant them and saying them aloud confirmed her feelings.

“Take me with you.” Her pulse pounded out a rapid beat.

“No. Last chance, Brianne. Promise me you won’t leave, and I promise I’ll be back soon.”

They were at a stalemate. “I want to but I can’t.” She grabbed on to the chair and started to rise. “Please understand.”

“I hope you do,” he muttered under his breath, and reached behind him. “Because I can’t risk something happening to you, like what happened to Frank.”

His dead partner, Brianne thought. And the next thing she knew Jake had snapped a pair of handcuffs around her wrist and shackled her other hand to the chair. Her gaze darted in disbelief between the cuffs and his pained face. “You wouldn’t.” But he just had.

“You left me no choice. You’ve already proven you’ll go off half-cocked if left alone. If you’d promised, I’d have taken your word.” He held his hand out in front of her in complete supplication.

He picked his keys up off the table and flicked on the small television in the kitchen, then handed her the remote control. He walked out, only to return a second later with a magazine that he placed in front of her on the table. “I’m sorry, but you gave me no choice.”

“Tell it to someone who cares,” she muttered.

She watched him leave, and betrayal lay like lead in her stomach. Brianne didn’t give a damn that he obviously felt bad or that he’d apologized. She also didn’t give a fig that she’d brought this on herself by refusing to promise.

If she had, she would have been lying, and she refused to lie to Jake. She yanked hard, but the metal cuffs were attached

to a metal chair and neither would budge. Furious, she grabbed the magazine and began flipping through it, not really paying attention to what she saw. But when the minutes ticked by and Brianne realized he wasn't coming back, she had no choice but to settle in for the duration.

From the mailing label on the front, Brianne knew the magazine belonged to Rina, and she hoped for some interesting reading. She glanced at the television. Trashy talk shows weren't going to be enough of a distraction. She swallowed over the pain in her throat.

She crossed her legs and began to flip through the pages once more, stopping only when she reached the article entitled, "Sexy City Nights." "Lovers in New York City." "Hot Spots, Hot Nights, Hotter Sheets." Brianne laughed despite herself, but when she caught a glimpse of the photos, she stopped and looked closer. In the first, dusk was setting around a couple outside an ice-cream shop, and memories of Brianne's night at Peppermint Park with Jake came flooding back into her mind.

When she thought of that night, it wasn't the sex that stood out, although it had been incredible. And it wasn't the dessert, although the rich treat had been delicious. What stood out was how hard Jake had tried to pick a place that would mean something to her. How he'd attempted to give back what she'd been deprived of in the past. And how he'd believed her when she'd questioned him about being followed. He may not have revealed his suspicions, but he hadn't discounted hers, either. Not the way her parents had, way back when.

Because he cared.

Not that his caring meant she'd forgiven him for cuffing her to this damn chair, but if his reasons mirrored hers for walking into The Eclectic Eatery in the first place, she could begin to understand.

Caring. Love. A future? All things she now knew she wanted. She couldn't stand by and watch him walk out of her life without a fight. Losing him that way wouldn't be as bad as losing him to a bullet—because he'd be alive—but he was worth fighting for. *They* were worth fighting for. She realized now that she could live with his risky life because she didn't want to live without him. Not if she had a choice.

She studied the pictures on her lap. Interesting, erotic images of ecstasy. Without warning, Norton lifted his head and stood, then began barking and bolted for the other room.

“Traitor,” she muttered. “Jake?” she called. She rose and started to walk, but the chair and the cuffs held her back. “You're going to pay for this,” she yelled out in frustration.

She heard the heavy tread of footsteps coming toward the kitchen. “Come uncuff me, will you?” Then maybe she could work on the forgiving angle. Maybe.

“My pleasure.”

Brianne turned toward the open doorway of the room in time to put a face to the voice—the accented voice of a man who couldn't be anyone other than Louis Ramirez.

Chapter Twelve

HE'D ACTUALLY HANDCUFFED Brianne. And guilt lay like lead in Jake's stomach. He took the elevator down to the lobby. He waved to the doorman who followed him out, holding the door open as he exited the building. Jake turned right at the corner and headed for the subway, but the entire time his conscience and his heart told him to go back. So did the niggling in his brain that had begun when Vickers called and told him Ramirez was turning himself in.

Jake shook his head at his thoughts. He was just preoccupied with Brianne, as usual looking for any excuse to put her before this case. He couldn't believe she wouldn't do something as simple as promising him she'd sit tight. And he reminded himself she wouldn't be tied up now if he'd been able to trust her. Stubborn, headstrong woman. She'd already proven she'd take dangerous risks, given the right incentive.

The right incentive. Jake paused at the top of the steps leading down to the subway. *When I love someone, I stick by them.* Her words came back to him—Brianne's incentive for making that trip to The Eclectic Eatery. *When I love someone...*

His heart squeezed tight in his chest, and Jake slapped his hand against the hard metal railing. How the hell had he let those words slip by him unnoticed? Because for the first time since meeting Brianne, he'd been a cop before a man. A detective before the man who loved her in return.

He'd turned a deaf ear to her words and her pleas. He'd cuffed her to a chair and left her alone...so he could watch Ramirez walk himself into a police station and willingly give up?

Not likely. Jake shook his head as reality reared its head. There wasn't a chance in hell Ramirez would willingly admit defeat and surrender. No possibility at all. Which meant...the phone call to the cops had been a setup.

"Shit." Jake turned and hit the street at a dead run. He only hoped he wasn't too late.

A few minutes, but what felt like hours later, he re-entered the building—and the doorman was nowhere in sight. A quick glance behind the desk confirmed Jake's worst fears. The man lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. The *whoosh* of revolving doors sounded in his ear, and he turned around in time to see an unfamiliar couple walk in the door.

"Where's Harry?" the woman asked.

Jake didn't think she'd like his answer, so he dug into his pocket and flashed his badge instead—a move that stopped both people cold and had them exchanging wary glances.

Jake reached behind the desk for the telephone and pulled it onto the high counter. "Call 911. Give the police the address and tell them it's the penthouse," Jake called over his shoulder as he ran for the elevator.

During the silent ride up to the apartment, Jake's life passed in front of his eyes. It was a cliché he'd heard other cops describe, but it was real. And everything he saw,

everything he wanted now and in the future, included Brianne —if Ramirez hadn't hurt or killed her already, he thought fearfully.

Moving on autopilot, he removed his sneakers in order to maintain the element of surprise. He positioned himself flat against the side of the enclosed area, a place that he hoped hid him from immediate view. At last, the elevator doors slid open. A quick glance told him Brianne and Ramirez weren't in the open entryway.

Gun in hand, he crept silently into the apartment. He knew better than to call out, but damn he wished he knew where to check first. Though he'd left Brianne in the kitchen, it seemed unlikely Ramirez would keep her in the open, unlocked room. Then again, he'd have to move both Brianne and her chair, something Jake knew Brianne wouldn't allow. Not without a kicking, screaming fight.

He started toward the kitchen, just as Norton ran into the room, doing his infamous run-and-skid routine. The dog normally saved the bit for Brianne. Norton being happy to see Jake when Brianne was around was unusual, and the knot in Jake's stomach tightened.

He knelt down beside the excited dog. "Come on, boy. Where is she?" he whispered.

Norton nudged Jake's leg and started running. Jake mentally took back any bad thing he'd ever said or thought about the dog. In Jake's book, loyalty to Brianne counted for everything. The dog led him to the kitchen. As Jake got closer, he heard the sounds of a scuffle.

No matter how much he wanted to storm into the room, he had to know what was going on first. Jake paused alongside the wall to the left of the entry and looked around the corner and into the room where he'd left Brianne. He nearly lost control at what he saw.

Ramirez loomed over Brianne. Her blouse was torn, and Ramirez rested his hand, which held a gun, on her shoulder, while his free hand hovered over her breast. Fury and a possessiveness unlike any he'd ever known ripped through Jake, but the other man's gun kept him silent. He knew he didn't have a clear shot at Ramirez as long as the thug stood in front of Brianne.

Taking a gamble, Jake walked into plain view and leveled his gun at the other man. "Let her go, Louis."

Ramirez rose to his full height and turned, but kept his weapon on Brianne's shoulder, aimed at her head. "Welcome home, Detective."

Jake's aim didn't falter, either. "Drop the gun."

"As if you're in any position to be giving orders." A smirk pasted on his face, Louis cocked his weapon.

The noise echoed loudly in the room and even louder in Jake's head. At the offending sound, the blood drained out of Brianne's face. Her green eyes were wide, yet, at a glance, he saw the hidden strength he'd always known she possessed.

Hang in there. He tried to communicate silent support and a promise. He'd gotten her into this. He'd get her out. His

heart rose in his chest, making his throat as raw as his emotions. He couldn't lose her.

And he wouldn't, Jake thought, immediately shifting his stare back to Ramirez.

"This is between us. Leave her out of it."

"He sent me flowers, remember, Jake? I think that makes me part of things," Brianne said.

Jake muttered a curse and started to sweat. He didn't know what she was up to, but her odds of escaping safely rose only if she kept her mouth shut. He didn't want her trying to elicit a confession or making herself even more expendable in Ramirez's eyes. At this point, they'd have Ramirez on a good number of charges. Jake couldn't give a damn about the drugs. All he wanted was an easy shot that didn't put Brianne at risk of taking a bullet at the same time.

"Beautiful flowers for a beautiful woman. Did you like them? It galls me to admit it, but you've got taste, Lowell. I wanted a bite for myself." He ran the butt of the gun down Brianne's cheek, and she stiffened in her seat. "It's a pity I'm going to have to miss out. Screwing her would have been screwing you at the same time." Ramirez laughed, the chilling sound a knife in Jake's gut.

Brianne shuddered with a revulsion she couldn't hide.

"Come on, Louis," Jake said. "If you kill another cop, you won't walk on a technicality this time." And if he killed Brianne, Jake would make sure he took Ramirez out before going down himself.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Ramirez said.

Brianne glanced at Jake and silently implored him not to do something rash. She knew he longed for a deadly shot at Ramirez. One that would end things for good. She swallowed over the lump in her throat and refused to look down at her torn shirt.

But she knew, as if she could read his mind, that he blamed himself for her situation. He believed she sat in this chair with Ramirez holding a gun to her head because Jake had cuffed her and disappeared.

She couldn’t tell him now and might never get the chance, but she forgave him. Whether or not he loved her the way she loved him—and the jury was still out on that one since he’d had no reaction to her declaration earlier—she wouldn’t hold it against him. She understood that she’d cornered him until he had no choice but to protect her from herself.

He met her gaze again, and, in those brief moments, Brianne felt an unspoken shift in their relationship. An acknowledgment of emotion that would have to be dealt with—if they got out of this alive.

She gripped the seat of the chair with one hand; the other one was still cuffed to the chair and sore from being held back in an unnatural position. But Ramirez wasn’t allowing her any leeway.

“What about the guard you decked downstairs?” Jake asked, and Brianne realized Jake was trying to keep Ramirez talking and not shooting.

Ramirez shrugged as if the injured man were of no consequence. “How can anyone explain what a burned-out cop will do when he loses it?” he asked.

“You think the cops’ll blame me?”

Brianne remembered her self-defense class and gauged the angle from the bottom of her foot to Ramirez’s groin, but she still didn’t have a good target. And neither did Jake. Ramirez stood too close, partially blocking Brianne and definitely able to get a round off if Jake fired first. She wanted to cry in frustration.

“Ask me if I care,” Ramirez said. “As long as they can’t trace me to this apartment I’m fine.”

And he wore clear rubber gloves to make sure he got away clean, Brianne noticed. She looked around for a way out and saw Norton pacing by Jake’s feet. The dog had been agitated since Ramirez’s arrival, but he was no threat and the man obviously knew it because he’d left Norton unharmed. Thank God. But threat or not, the dog was definitely a potential distraction.

She tried to calculate the last time he’d been outside to do business and couldn’t remember. Her mind was too muddled with fear. Anxiety was only a breath away. Her breathing came in orderly succession only by sheer force of will. She couldn’t afford to become light-headed or pass out.

She glanced at the pooch and prayed Norton was in a complying mood. Brianne cleared her throat. Just as she hoped, the noise got the dog’s attention and he bounded from behind Jake, coming up in front of her and Ramirez.

“Get the damn dog out of here,” Ramirez said, but never dropped his weapon from its perch on her shoulder. “Before I shoot him myself.”

“No!” Realizing she’d yelled at the man holding a gun, she cringed. “I mean, please don’t. He’s harmless, okay?” She watched the dog pace in nervous circles at their feet. “He’s just doing his job. I mean, Norton does his business. He thinks he’s protecting me, don’t you, boy? He’s just doing business.”

Brianne met Jake’s stunned gaze and realized he understood what she was up to. *Please don’t let him get hurt*, Brianne prayed silently because she’d never forgive herself if anything happened to the dog because of her.

“Enough talking!” Ramirez said, glancing back and forth between them. “It’s time to get this over with.”

And just as he spoke, Norton did what Rina had trained him to do. He lifted his leg and did his business on Louis Ramirez’s leg and shoes.

Ramirez glanced down, and fury filled his already hate-filled face. “Fucking dog.” He jumped back and kicked out his leg to get Norton away.

In the split second the gun wasn’t trained on Brianne, she leaned back, lifted her foot and kicked Ramirez in the groin. The force of the movement toppled her chair backward. When her head hit the floor, she thought she heard the sound of a gunshot rent the air. Jake’s gun? Ramirez’s?

She didn’t know, and from her awkward angle, she couldn’t see. She attempted to roll and lift herself up, but her

arm was caught at an awkward angle; if she moved, she was afraid she'd break it. Her heart pounded in her chest, and Brianne shut her eyes tight, praying that the next voice she heard would be Jake's and not Ramirez's.

“Brianne?”

Jake. Emotion swept through her as quickly as the bullet had flown through the air. “Are you okay?”

He didn't have a chance to answer. A herd of footsteps sounded from across the apartment, and, within seconds, the room filled with police.



“I WANT BOTH of you downtown first thing tomorrow morning, you understand?” Thompson ordered.

“Yes, sir.” Jake glanced over his lieutenant's shoulder at Brianne.

She stood in front of the high windows in the living room overlooking the city. She'd picked up Norton and perched him on the wide windowsill and was running a hand over his head. Wasn't that like Brianne? Reassuring the dog when no doubt she was in need of reassurance herself.

Jake hadn't had a word alone with her since the cavalry had arrived. He wasn't sure why Thompson was giving him the night's reprieve before taking statements, but he had a hunch the older man's soft spot was showing.

“Why are you being such a human being about this, Lieutenant?” *This* being both Jake's need to be alone with

Brianne and Thompson's unspoken understanding that Jake had officially quit the force.

The Ramirez case was over. Unable to walk, Louis had been taken out of the penthouse on a stretcher, after being read his rights with no error. Accompanied by Duke and Vickers, he was on his way to the hospital, courtesy of Jake's bullet. When Brianne and Norton had made their move, Jake had had milliseconds to push the memory of the man's hands on Brianne out of his head, and take his one shot. Ramirez had dropped before he knew what hit him.

But a lot had happened since then, Jake thought. Recalling the tense minutes in the kitchen, every nerve in Jake's body now screamed for release—the kind of release only Brianne could provide. But she hadn't said two words to him since, and, though he'd like to blame her silence on the commotion following the police raid, he had a gut feeling she was still furious over the handcuffing incident.

"Shit, Lowell. You're not listening to a damn thing I have to say," the lieutenant muttered, his gaze settling behind him on Brianne.

"Maybe because she's better looking than you are, sir." Jake grinned despite the uncertainty surrounding his future with Brianne.

The lieutenant frowned, but Jake saw the humor there as well.

"Ten o'clock tomorrow, Lowell." Thompson left, taking the rest of the cops with him.

The kitchen was a shambles, taped off for further investigation. Nothing needed Jake's attention now, except Brianne. Nothing and no one else was more important.

But when the elevator doors slid shut and they were alone, words failed him. What did he say to the woman he loved? He'd left her alone and defenseless, at the mercy of a cop killer. He wouldn't blame her if she still wanted to join her brother in California and put Jake and their entire summer interlude behind her. But he planned to do his damndest to talk her out of it.



BRIANNE FELT JAKE come up behind her. He was warm and masculine and overpowering in his intensity. But he didn't frighten her. Not even after the episode with Ramirez.

She picked up the forty-pound lug of a dog and placed him on the floor before turning to Jake.

"I'm sorry." His voice was gruff with emotion.

"I forgive you." She stood with her hands behind her, her eyes meeting his serious, penitent ones. "I even understand why you felt you had to do it." She shook her head and laughed wryly. "Like you said, it's not like I gave you a choice."

He inclined his head, his eyebrows lifted in surprise. "That's pretty generous considering you never bargained for this when you accepted Rina's job offer and place to live."

"Life's full of surprises. I learned that young."

“And you wanted nothing more than to banish those surprises in favor of a little stability.” He brushed a lock of hair out of her face, his callused fingers lightly abrading her skin.

A tingle of sexual awareness started immediately. She wasn’t shocked. There were few things in life she could count on, but Jake and their overwhelming chemistry were two of them.

“I think I had a naive view of the world.” It was something Brianne had discovered since moving into the penthouse and becoming a part of Jake’s life.

“I take it I’ve broadened your horizons?” A crooked smile touched his lips—lips she longed to kiss and possess, but not just yet. There was too much unspoken between them.

“You broadened them all right, in ways I never imagined.”

And probably hadn’t wanted to, Jake thought. Fear gripped his heart as he composed his next thought. He didn’t want to put ideas in her head but he needed to lay things on the line, and soon. He couldn’t take the uncertainty, not where Brianne was concerned. “I’m surprised your bags aren’t packed and ready to go.”

She swallowed hard. “Is that what you want? For me to leave?” Her green eyes were huge, and she seemed to back away, closer to the window—farther from him, when he wanted nothing more than to be as close as was humanly possible.

“Hell, no.”

He'd never wanted any woman as badly as he wanted Brianne, never wanted any future as badly as he wanted one with her. And he'd never had so much to lose before. His heart beat out a rapid rhythm.

"That's not really telling me much, Jake. You don't want me to go now or you don't want me to go—"

"Ever."

She bit her lower lip, watching him warily. She'd heard the word, but she obviously didn't believe him. "You said you weren't looking for a long-term relationship."

He grinned, feeling on stronger ground. "You said it first. I thought it prudent to agree. I probably meant it—at the time. But then, you said you wanted to move to California."

She nodded. "I said it and I meant it—at the time." Her smile grew wider, matching his. "Marc is old enough to go without me. He never wanted his big sister going along, anyway."

As long as he'd pushed this far, Jake figured he might as well go all the way. "You don't want a life with someone who takes risks."

She glanced down. "I don't. I don't want a relationship with someone who'll put himself in danger for the fun of it, who puts risk above his feelings for me."

Jake held his breath. For all the light teasing, he knew this subject was deadly serious. His future with Brianne hinged on her answer, for as much as he loved her, being a detective *of some sort* was in his blood.

He might forgo law enforcement in favor of becoming a private investigator—something he'd considered after hiring David. His career wouldn't change, no matter who he answered to. Brianne had to accept that. She had to accept and be able to live with him or—

“I watched you with Ramirez today.” Her soft voice cut off his thoughts. “You never acted foolishly or without thought. You never tempted Ramirez to take a shot at you instead of me, not even when you walked in and found him tearing at my...blouse.” She choked over the word and the memory.

He grabbed her forearms and his thumbs stroked her soft flesh, wanting to replace the bad memories with more pleasant ones. “But I wanted to. I wanted to shoot first and question him later. I wanted to throttle him with my bare hands, choke the life out of him and then shoot him again for good measure.”

A sheen of moisture filled her eyes. “But you didn't and that proved something to me. Something I should have known about you all along.”

“What's that?” He tipped his head down and their foreheads met and touched.

“You aren't in it for kicks. Whatever you do, it's justified and honorable. I can live with that.” She stared up at him. “If you want me to.”

If he wanted her to. Jake shook his head and looked at the woman who held his heart in her hands. The irony was, she didn't even know it. “Sweetheart...”

Brianne held her breath. She'd laid her heart out to him again, only this time Jake didn't have any place to run off to. No excuse not to answer. The grim look on his face didn't bode well for her hopes and dreams, but she forced herself to meet this last challenge with her head held high.

She'd deal with the pain of losing Jake when she was alone. After all, she'd agreed to a short-term affair. It was unfair of her to change the rules now.

She'd reached the point of no return, though, Brianne thought. Or maybe that had come the night Rina made her generous, albeit manipulative, offer. The woman had altered the course of Brianne's life. She now had both frightening and wonderful memories that she'd have to learn to live with. Even if memories were all she had.

“What is it, Jake?”

He ran a hand through his already messed hair. “I live in a one-bedroom apartment on the West Side.”

That wasn't the response she'd expected, and she narrowed her eyes in confusion.

“Between us, we can probably afford two bedrooms, unless, of course, you want to move out of the city. Or if your heart is really set on California, once Rina's back and I know she's okay, we can consider that, too.”

Brianne laughed, her heart suddenly lighter than any time in recent memory. “The only thing I'm understanding in that sentence is the word *we*. And after all that's happened, I'll take it.”

He grinned and wrapped his arms around her neck, holding her tight. “I love you.” He nuzzled his face into the side of her neck, his breath warm on her skin.

Brianne’s heart was full. She had all the security and love she’d ever wanted in life. “What about that family you once wanted?” she asked a little breathlessly.

“Sweetheart, I want that more than anything. With you. And if we happened to miss that time in the whirlpool, I’m more than willing to start trying right now. I love you,” he said again, his lips hot and moist against her neck. “I should have told you before I walked out earlier.”

She swallowed over the lump in her throat. “I love you, too. I always have and I always will.”

“I’m sorry I cuffed you.” His hand slipped beneath the new shirt she’d changed into after the police had freed her, and slid over her back in a hot caress.

“How sorry?” She tilted her head back and smiled coyly.

Jake didn’t miss the mischievous glint in her gorgeous eyes. “How sorry do you want me?”

She brought her hand out from behind her and dangled his handcuffs in front of him. “I want you contrite. I want you shackled.” Her eyes darkened to a stormy green. “But most of all, I want you mine.”

Epilogue

RINA STRETCHED HER feet out in front of her in the first-class cabin. She toed off the new designer sandals she hadn't needed to buy and lifted the glass of Perrier the flight attendant had given her prior to takeoff. As she took a sip of the bottled water, she wondered why regular tap water was something the wealthy disdained, along with honesty and frank talk. Thank God, she was going home.

Mixed emotions flooded her at the thought of returning to New York and the mausoleum of an apartment she'd left behind. Though she'd never admit it to her know-it-all older brother, he was right. The place was a palace and it had only been her home when Richard was there, filling it with warmth. Now the penthouse was as cold as her husband's body.

Rina shivered but refused to shy away from the truth. After all, this trip had been as much about recovery as self-discovery. She pulled a sheet of paper from her purse. "Number one, list penthouse with Realtor," she wrote. Satisfaction replaced the yawning emptiness. She'd taken the first step toward a new life.

Just like her brother had, thanks to her. When she'd hired Brianne Nelson as Jake's physical therapist, she'd hoped she'd be giving them both a summer of fun. *Sex and fun*, she amended. Even if Rina was in mourning, that didn't mean Jake had to be. Only a statue could have missed the sexual tension humming in the air around Brianne and Jake, but neither of them had had the guts to act on the attraction. Enough was

enough. She'd planned to hook them up for a sexual diversion, but after meeting Brianne, Rina had hoped that her stubborn brother wouldn't blow it and that the two of them would end up together, for good. Rina knew better than to say or think "forever."

She'd been down that foolish road once before, when she'd met Richard. But since his accident, the blinders were off. Only fate knew how long two people would have together, which was why she was grateful her plan for her brother and Brianne had worked. They were waiting for Rina's return to get married, and she knew without a doubt her brother had chosen right this time.

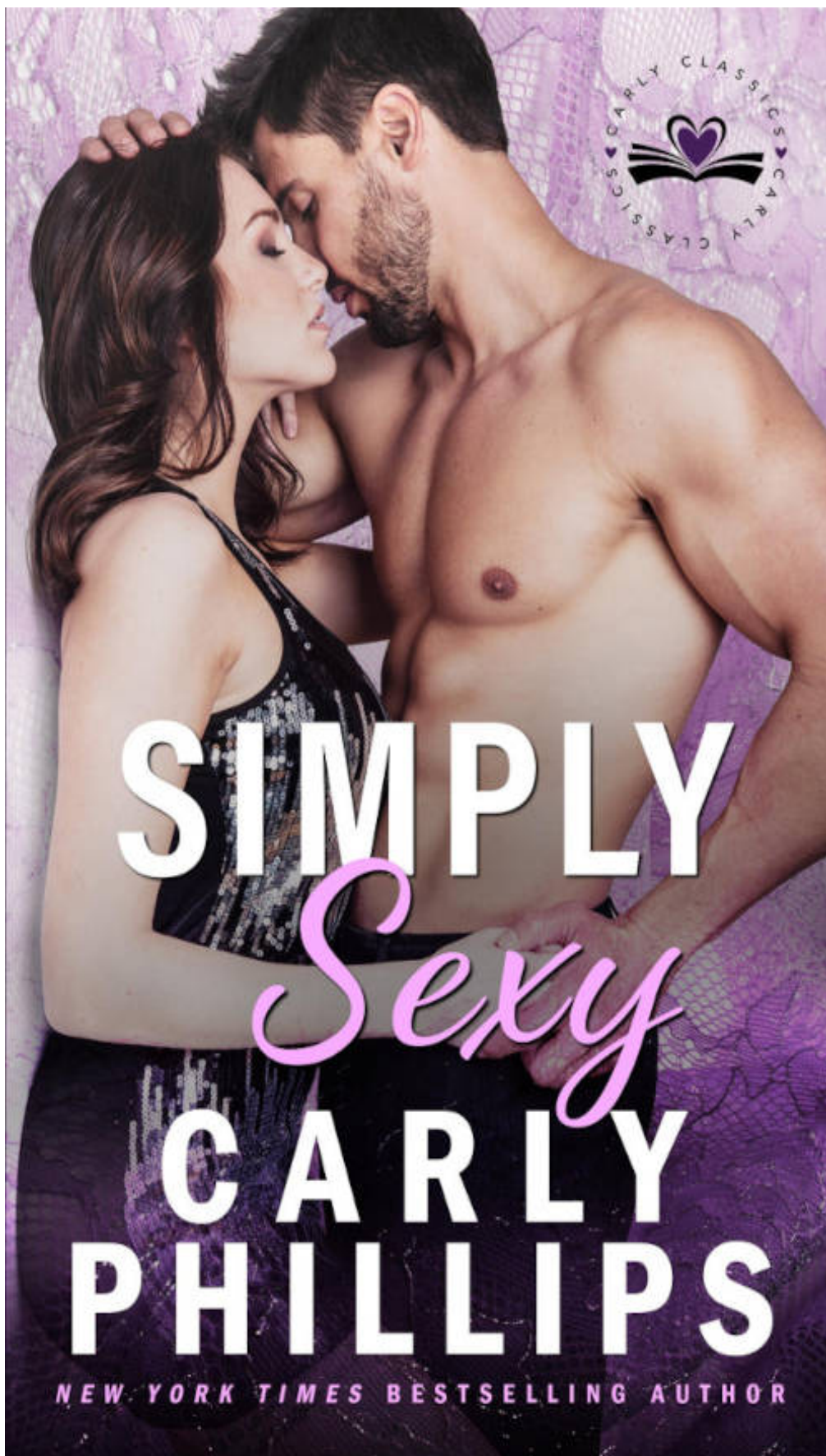
As for herself, Rina had done a lot of soul searching while she was gone. The money Richard had left her would keep her in luxury for the rest of her life, but what would keep her happy and sane?

Living off Richard's wealth and sitting idle would lead to boredom, and that would kill her. Her parents had instilled a strong work ethic in their kids. Because he'd seemed to want a stay-at-home wife, Rina had complied—and enjoyed it in the beginning. But boredom had set in and, thanks to the fact that she didn't need to work, she'd begun talking about starting a new career. Before she married, Rina had always wanted to write, but because freelancing articles for magazines and websites wouldn't pay the bills, and her job left her too tired at night, she'd never made the attempt. Richard had humored her talk of writing, treating it as a whim that would pass. He'd never taken her seriously. Not since he'd swept her off her feet, out of his office and into his bed.

She had adored him. But she wondered what kind of future they would have had once she let him see how tired she'd grown of doing nothing except waiting for him to come home. Guilt swamped her at the traitorous thought, at the admission that her marriage hadn't been the blissful state she'd pretended it to be. But she forced herself to acknowledge that, much as he'd loved her, too, he hadn't understood her. How could he when they'd come from two different worlds?

Then again, didn't all men and women come at life from different perspectives? she wondered, thinking of Brianne and Jake. Rina flipped her paper over and started making notes, her pen moving quickly over the page. Question: What did men want? Answer: A woman. Question: What kind of woman?

In short, Rina wondered, what turned a man on? Excitement grew inside her, and she knew she had the makings of her first story. But first she'd have to do the research...



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Prologue

EMMA MONTGOMERY STOOD by the window in the newspaper offices and tapped her manicured nails impatiently. Snowflakes told her Christmas was around the corner, and she adored the holiday, the cheer, the parties. She had no patience for imbeciles, a thought which reminded her to look back at the road. Still no sign of her driver. The man came and went on his own schedule. She wished she still had her license, but those days were gone. Thank goodness, she had other skills that hadn't dwindled with age. Matchmaking was her specialty and obviously, Corinne, the present publisher of the *Ashford Times*, had recognized her talent.

Emma was now the columnist for the *Ashford Times's* "Meet and Greet" column, published in print and online. And she couldn't forget that this job had also saved her elegant behind from a nursing home. Her son, the Judge, had had it with her parties and antics, and if she didn't get busy with something, he'd threatened to put her in an senior living home.

She shivered, blaming the cold seeping in from the window. But the Judge's bellowing had done her a favor. She loved this job and the people here appreciated her talent and humor.

"Oh, Rina!" Emma called out to the only employee left in the office, the new girl named Rina Lowell.

Pretty name. Pretty woman. No makeup, but if Emma had that gorgeous skin, she wouldn't bother with blush, either.

Rina glanced up from her desk where she was typing away on her computer. “Yes, Emma?”

“You know that expression, all work and no play makes Rina an old fuddy-duddy?”

“I don’t think you quite nailed it.” Rina laughed, a light sound that would be musical to a man’s ears. “Are you saying it’s time I went home for the night?”

“Goodness, no!” Emma waved her hand in the air. “I’m saying we should hit the town and celebrate the new lives this news outlet has given us.” Emma had been working for a few months and Rina had just recently started.

The young woman obviously wanted to make a good impression, arriving early and leaving late. But even the most dedicated worker had to have some fun.

“What did you have in mind?” Rina asked.

From the corner of her eye, Emma saw her car approach with her good-for-nothing driver, hired by her son, at the wheel. She might as well make use of his time and let him earn his money. “I thought we could go to O’Dooley’s and have a beer.”

Rina burst out laughing. “I’m sorry. I just can’t picture you drinking beer.”

“Phooey. You shouldn’t make fun of an old lady. Would you prefer I have a shot of tequila?”

“I’ll do one with you,” Rina offered, her eyes twinkling with the challenge.

“You’re on.” Emma stuck out her hand for a shake. “At least I don’t have to worry about drinking and driving. And if you come with me neither do you. Leave your car here. I’ll drop you off at your home tonight and pick you up on the way to work tomorrow.”

Rina pretended to give the idea some thought, but Emma caught the smile on her lips and knew the young woman had already decided.

Finally, she nodded. “Okay. I’m up for partying.” She slid her chair back so she had room and pushed herself in a circle, hanging her head back and spinning the chair around before letting loose a loud whoop.

“What was that for?” Emma asked.

“I just wanted to act as free as I feel.” Rina giggled. “I’m just *so* happy to have this job and so excited to start life over in Ashford.”

Emma took in the young woman’s pink flushed cheeks and wide smile. With her carefree attitude, she was the perfect candidate for Emma’s matchmaking skills. She rubbed her palms, warming them together. “So, we’re off to O’Dooley’s.”

“Do you think we’ll meet any men t?” Rina asked as she pulled her purse out of the drawer in her desk. “Because with my new ‘Hot Stuff’ blog, I could use some good interaction.”

Rina might claim her interest was in work, but Emma didn’t miss the sparkle in Rina’s gaze at the mention of meeting a member of the opposite sex. Oh, this was going to

be fun, Emma thought. “With your cheekbones, you’d meet men anywhere.”

“Why, thank you, Emma.” Rina fluttered her mascara-free lashes with obvious exaggeration, then grabbed her winter coat from the back of her chair.

Emma wrapped her heavy shawl more securely around her shoulders. Together, they started for the door, but as they walked by the empty desk beside Rina’s, Emma paused. “Can you believe the news?” she asked.

Rina shook her head. “I came in late today and worked all afternoon.” She pointed to the earbuds she often wore when deep in thought. “What news?”

“The prodigal son has returned.” Emma ran her hand over the old, empty desk. One no one was allowed to take in case Colin Lyons should return.

“I don’t understand,” Rina said.

“You already know that Corinne took over the paper from her sick husband, Joe.”

The young woman nodded. “He’s in the hospital and Corinne’s worried.”

“Right. And so is Joe’s son. The man’s a wanderer. He never stays in one place, to his poor father’s chagrin.” Emma placed a hand over her heart, knowing how she loved having her children and grandchildren around her. Even New York, where her granddaughter, Grace, lived, was too far away from Emma’s home in Massachusetts. She couldn’t imagine having a world traveler in the family. “But he’s home now. And

Corinne said he'll be working here." Emma pointed to the empty chair... a chair a few feet from Rina's desk.

The possibilities flitted through Emma's mind, giving her an adrenaline rush. Colin was a gorgeous man with sparkling blue eyes and the most amazing smile. But he'd never stick around for longer than he had to. Emma knew this because he'd been her grandson Logan's college roommate. She loved Colin like he was her own grandchild but felt he was missing out on so much that life had to offer. A warm bed to come home to, a good woman...

A woman like Rina.

Emma pursed her lips in thought. This was definitely something to consider. "Let's get going and I'll tell you all about Colin," Emma suggested.

"Sounds like a good plan." Rina headed out first, holding the door open for Emma. "Is he cute?" Rina asked.

"Gorgeous."

She raised an interested eyebrow. "Attached?"

Emma shook her head. "Completely free," she said and hoped she wasn't lying. She hadn't heard much about Colin's personal life lately. She'd have to ask Logan.

"Hmm."

"What does *hmm* mean?" Emma asked as she pressed the elevator button. She needed to know that Rina was open to a short-term relationship before she hooked her up with Colin. She'd never intentionally set anyone up for heartache, and though Emma would work toward something more permanent

with these two, she couldn't be certain Colin would ever settle down.

Rina shrugged. "Just hmm." She tipped her head to the side. "You know, with this new job and new life, I can't help but think a little fun and excitement with a man ought to follow." She wriggled her eyebrows playfully. "You know what I mean."

Emma nodded. She certainly did. *Fun* meant something short-term. If Rina meant anything else, she would have chosen the word *relationship*. "You're horny."

"Emma!" Rina blushed a deep crimson. "You're terrible."

"I beg to differ. Holding back your thoughts is terrible. Speaking your mind is completely appropriate. Well, when among friends. And you are my friend." She put a hand on Rina's arm. "Something about you reminds me of my granddaughter, Grace. Or, at least, the way she was before I sent Ben to look after her. All this youthful exuberance and pent-up energy. All you need is the right man to let loose with." Emma nodded, certain she was correct.

"You think I'm horny, huh?" Rina laughed. "Believe whatever you want, but you're right about one thing. Letting loose is exactly what I have in mind."

Chapter One

One Month Later

“MARK MY WORDS, Joe. Sex will lead to the end of the world as we know it.” Colin Lyons glanced at the hospital bed where his adoptive father and mentor lay sleeping.

Asleep, not dead. Thank God. After finding out Joe had had a stroke, Colin had hightailed it home from South America. He'd been covering a rigged election in a country where money laundering commingled with drug trafficking and guns blazed on the sunbaked streets. Now, one week later, Colin sat in the quiet hospital room watching the monitors prove to him Joe was alive. In the background, snow fell outside, a serene and peaceful reminder of winter. Of Christmas, of life, and hope.

Colin had taken leave from his job to come home and run Joe's beloved *Ashford Times* until the older man recovered, only to discover that he'd been usurped. Prior to his stroke, Joe hadn't been feeling well. Yet instead of calling on Colin, Joe had given his second wife, Corinne, power of attorney, which she'd used to almost run the newspaper—and Joe's legacy—into the ground. Colin's stomach cramped and twisted with guilt because he hadn't been around when Joe needed him. Worse, Joe hadn't thought his health was important enough to bother Colin with while he was on assignment.

He glanced toward the bed. A loud snoring sound reassured him that Joe wasn't down for the count. The doctors promised a full recovery, and he'd already begun the slow road

toward recuperation. But time was something neither Colin nor the *Times* had on their side.

“Do you know that Corinne’s turning the paper into a fluff-fest?” he asked, wondering if his words would penetrate Joe’s sleepy fog.

They didn’t. Joe’s mouth opened wider in slumber as the clock on the wall ticked away the minutes of the day. Colin didn’t mind. “There’s a new blog on the online site called ‘Meet and Greet: Matchmaking for the Aging but Still Sexually Inclined.’” Colin didn’t expect a reply and wasn’t surprised when he didn’t get one.

He not only blamed Corinne for the beginning of the paper’s change away from hard news but also for squandering the bank account, not keeping up with advertising, and her general lack of oversight. She’d brought the paper to the brink of bankruptcy, then foolishly thought she could fix things herself. Beginning by moving Emma Montgomery, a spunky senior citizen and his best friend’s grandmother, from a desk job to a columnist.

He leaned back in his chair. “Emma means well but she takes this matchmaking thing too far. It’s Christmas season, right? I had to stop her from hanging mistletoe and us getting slapped with a sexual harassment lawsuit.”

Colin doubted Joe knew how bad the *Times*’s financial situation was, and telling him would only add stress and compromise his recovery. Besides, Colin already had things under temporary control.

He'd borrowed money from Ron Gold, an old friend of Joe's who believed, like Colin, that the paper had to return to the hard news that had made it a success to begin with. Based on a gentleman's handshake, Colin had promised to do everything in his power to shift things back.

Colin could handle working on Corinne to affect a change, but he needed time. Ron Gold understood. The paper's biggest advertiser didn't. They demanded Corinne's promise in writing to turn things around—focus on the news and get rid of the—in their opinion—“risqué” columns that now graced the front page and the main page online.

Otherwise, they threatened to pull their new ads scheduled for the first of the year, and the *Times* would lose its largest source of funding. Then even Ron Gold's loan wouldn't save them. Colin had until January 1. No longer. And he had no idea how to accomplish his goal with a woman who wouldn't listen to reason.

“Hello, Colin.” Corinne breezed into the room, bringing with her the scent of heavy perfume. “How is he?” She walked over to the bed and stroked Joe's forehead.

Her gentle treatment of Joe didn't mesh with Colin's perception of her as being cold and self-absorbed. Then again, he hadn't been home often enough in the last couple of years to know her well. “He's sleeping.”

She nodded and shrugged her jacket off her shoulders, revealing a low-cut, designer suit. Like the direction she was taking the paper, Corinne, her exposed cleavage and outward demeanor, oozed sex.

He glanced at his watch. Nearly three. “Long day at the office?” he asked.

“No, a fabulous one.” Her eyes lit up as she spoke. “Wait until you read Rina’s first column,” she said of her newest addition to the *Ashford Times*’s staff.

Rina Lowell, a woman who Corinne had hired to write a weekly column with the heading “Hot Stuff.”

A woman who intrigued him on many levels.

She had a creamy complexion and didn’t bother with makeup to enhance her image. He was fascinated by a female comfortable in her own skin. Her hair was pulled into a conservative bun he was dying to undo and see just how far the strands fell down her back. Her bare, naked back if he had his way. She possessed a husky voice with a New York accent she’d refined and hid her assets beneath bulky sweaters and baggy pants.

He had no idea what lay under the packaging but damned if he didn’t want to find out. Hell, his fingers itched to strip off the thick layers and explore, inch by tantalizing inch.

Even with her eyes hidden by a pair of black-rimmed glasses, it was obvious that she thought and felt deeply. Rina got to him in a visceral sort of way and incited his journalistic blood, making him wonder what secrets she hid behind her intelligent brown eyes.

“Do you want a preview of what Rina has to say?” Corinne asked, breaking into his thoughts.

“Go ahead. I’m sure it’ll be the highlight of my day.”

“It’s simply sexy,” she replied, either missing or ignoring his sarcasm.

Her excitement over her new employee was almost tangible, reminding him of why he needed to steer clear of Rina Lowell. She sided with the opposition and contributed to the fluff Corinne still seemed to think would sell papers.

That alone put Rina off-limits. “What’s simply sexy?” he forced himself to ask. “Rina’s column?”

“No, the title of her series of articles is *Simply Sexy*.” Corinne shook her hair, deliberately letting her blond mane flow over her shoulders. “Simply fabulous if you ask me. She’s going to bring in a whole new set of readers.” She still sounded so certain despite her track record of mistakes in the past few months.

He shook his head, amazed reality hadn’t set in. She hadn’t conceded defeat, not even when forced to accept Colin’s check to keep the paper afloat for an extended period of time.

“Corinne, people subscribe for one reason. To read the news.” He figured he’d try one more time to make his point.

“The news is everywhere. Television, radio, even on people’s computer screens. They can buy the *Boston Globe* for news. I want to give them something different.” She waved her hand for emphasis, and her gold bracelets clinked together.

Surprisingly, Joe didn’t react. It was a noise he must be used to hearing in his sleep.

“I admit I started off slow and on the wrong foot, but with Rina and Emma on board, I’m getting there. People may be

resistant to change, but that doesn't mean I can't win them over," Corinne insisted.

Colin groaned, resigned to the inevitable. She wasn't ready to cave in yet. But no matter how hard Corinne tried, sex wouldn't sell newspapers.

It wasn't that Colin had anything against sex. Hell, he was a man, wasn't he? But sex had its time and place. And it had been sadly lacking in his life, he silently admitted. The dry spell had gone on too long. Still, he wasn't about to embark on a meaningless fling. Casual sex was neither smart nor satisfying, and travel didn't lend itself toward establishing long-term relationships.

Apparently, neither did sticking around. His marriage had bottomed out fast because his wife didn't know the meaning of fidelity. She'd cheated on Colin. Twice. Two different men, Lord knew how many times with each. Colin had left town soon after the discovery. Sick of the reminder of past failure, he'd booked a flight to Europe, trading in a local TV anchor job for one abroad.

"I'm going to make sure Joe's doctor knows to stop by and talk to me before he leaves the hospital tonight," Corinne said as she walked toward the door.

"That's fine. I'll stick around until you get back." He wanted the older man to know he had people by his side and a family to return to when he walked out of the hospital even if Colin wasn't sure Joe knew that anyone was in the room.

Corinne disappeared out the door just as Joe's snoring became obscene. Colin grinned, the sound calming him in

ways only his heart understood. Joe and his first wife, Nell, had taken Colin in when his parents died. At twelve, he'd been a pain-in-the-ass kid who thought he knew best and resented the world because his parents were gone. But Joe and Nell understood. They gave him time, space, and a home in which to adjust. Later on, they'd adopted him, even knowing he couldn't bring himself to call anyone but his birth parents Mom and Dad. They'd just wanted him to feel loved and know he had family. The same thing Colin wanted for Joe now. Which was why he forced himself to get along with Corinne even if he wanted to throttle her.

Joe's snoring continued and Colin laughed. When Joe wasn't at work, he'd always spent a great deal of time snoring in his old recliner chair. A chair Corinne had dragged to the street corner the day she'd said, "I do." Colin didn't know what possessed Joe to marry a woman the complete opposite of Nell. But he had.

"I'm back." Corinne carried two soda cans in her hand. "I brought you a cola."

Again, Colin was struck by the incongruity of her actions. "Thanks," he muttered. Obviously, Joe had seen something in her, which was another reason Colin wanted to give her a chance.

Just not where Joe's beloved paper was concerned.

"When you get back to the office, take a look at Rina's column. I promise you'll be impressed," Corinne said, taking his place in the chair by Joe's bed.

Colin forced a nod. But at the reminder of what he had waiting for him, he snorted in disgust. Matchmaking ads, self-help articles, and a series on what men want? He was beginning to doubt either Corinne, Rina Lowell, or any other woman had a clue.

He let himself out of the hospital room and leaned against the back wall next to a utility cart. Corinne had already told him she didn't believe their advertiser would pull their new ads, not once they saw how readers reacted to Rina's first column and the other assorted new things she had planned. Reality wasn't a part of Corinne's thinking, and Colin's frustration flew as fast and furious as his thoughts.

Corinne was so caught up in her newest scheme she didn't care or understand that her livelihood and Joe's legacy were at stake. How the hell could he reach her? She was so damn excited about Rina's new series she wouldn't listen to reason.

He ran a hand through his hair. And the solution dawned.

Rina. Corinne's newest flavor of the week. An employee she obviously trusted. Someone with whom he'd heard Corinne shared a family connection. A bond. Rina Lowell might be the only person who could make Corinne see the error of her ways. *If* Colin could get Rina on his side.

He'd have to spend time with her in order to subtly sway her to his way of thinking. Considering she'd piqued his interest from day one, being with Rina would be no hardship. But gaining her trust under false pretenses didn't sit well with him, and guilt gnawed at his insides. He'd be pursuing

friendship, all the while knowing he was plotting a return to hard news at the expense of her job.

He attempted to assuage his guilt with the facts. Rina would be out of a job whether Corinne ran the paper into the ground or Colin got things back on track. But if he got to know her first, if she believed he wanted what was best for all involved, maybe she'd be willing to help him talk Corinne into accepting the best of all possibilities. They could save the paper, and in return, he could promise Rina a good recommendation for another, more appropriate job.

He groaned, still feeling like a shit for considering the plan. But feelings didn't change the fact that the *Times* was a newspaper, not a woman's magazine, something the advertisers—and now Colin's lender—understood. The money he'd contributed would only hold out for so long. They needed positive cash flow again soon.

A smart man would hop on the next plane back to South America. But Colin couldn't. Not yet. Financial debt and gentleman's agreement aside, Colin had more compelling reasons to stay. He hadn't been here when Joe first got sick, and Colin lived with that knowledge every damn day. He loved, respected, and owed the man. Joe had given him a shot in life, and Colin wouldn't betray him now.

Colin wouldn't allow anyone to destroy the paper Joe had built. He'd do anything he had to for the older man. Even if it meant using Rina Lowell.

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RINA WATCHED WITH amusement as the head of the maintenance crew tried to hang mistletoe according to Emma Montgomery's direction. The older woman had already hung sprigs in unsuspecting places around the *Ashford Times's* offices and had taken to adding a bit more each day. Of course, she did her decorating after five, when the core staff had gone home for the day.

"A little more to the left. No, to the right. Left. No, right." From her seat, Emma tried to choreograph everything and everyone in her sphere of influence, a mean feat for an eighty-year-old woman. At least, Rina thought she was eighty. Emma never discussed her actual age.

"Geez, lady, make up your mind." The man's weight tipped the ladder precariously with each stretch of his arm in a different direction. "I haven't got all night."

Emma sniffed. "That's the problem with today's generation. Everyone's in such a rush. What do you think, Rina? Come here and check it out from my perspective."

Knowing Emma wouldn't be satisfied unless she complied, Rina shut down her computer for the night and joined the older woman. She glanced upward at the ceiling. "Looks good to me. Want to test it out? Emma's willing," Rina jokingly told the maintenance man.

He glared, obviously not enjoying his role in holiday merrymaking.

Emma laughed. "You need holiday spirit," she informed the man, then squinted upward once more. She nodded at last. "That's it then. Leave the mistletoe there."

Directly over Colin Lyons's chair. Despite Corinne's warning, his return had shocked the staff. Those who knew Colin had expected his long absences to continue. Instead, as soon as he'd arrived home, he'd come on board at the paper. Corinne had agreed to let him take over the small news department, admitting that wasn't her forte. But even she didn't think he'd stay. According to office gossip, he never did.

Rina glanced at the greenery over his seat and grinned. "You are one wicked woman, Emma."

She rubbed her hands together with glee. "Tell me you wouldn't love to get that man underneath the mistletoe."

Of course, she would. But Rina wouldn't be admitting anything to Emma. No way would she give the queen of the "Meet and Greet" column a cause to focus on. She could handle her own affairs, thank you very much. Because if Emma discovered that Rina was attracted to Colin—incredibly attracted, in fact—she'd pull out all the stops to get them together. And the timing was all wrong for Rina to find herself on the receiving end of Emma's renowned matchmaking skills.

With her series coming up, she had put together a plan to decipher what the opposite sex wanted. She couldn't have Emma meddling in her social life. Not now.

Even if Colin did light megawatts of electricity inside her every time he walked into the room. Those arresting blue eyes, that thick black hair, his distinctive masculine scent all set off heavy-duty sparks of desire. Instant sexual attraction, she thought. And female intuition, plus the fact that she'd often

caught him staring, told her he felt the chemistry between them, too.

Emma narrowed her gaze. “Silence is an answer in itself.” She patted Rina’s arm, rose, and headed slowly back to her own desk.

“Come on, Emma. Pick on someone your own age,” Rina said.

The older woman laughed. “You’re a challenge, Rina. I thrive on challenges and I live to matchmake. What exactly do you live for, dear?”

“Until lately, not much,” she admitted. After her husband’s death, guilt had consumed her. He’d been rushing home from a business trip in the pouring rain, coming to be with her instead of sensibly spending the night at a hotel.

For a long while after, Rina hadn’t thought life had much to offer. But after some soul-searching, she sold the New York City penthouse she and her husband had shared and decided it was time to live again. Financially secure and free to do whatever she wanted, Rina had had no desire to return to her job as a legal secretary. It had been a decent means of earning a living, but it didn’t satisfy her.

She’d asked herself what would, looking inside herself for answers. She’d always been curious about human nature, drawn to people and relationships. Like Emma, she’d even indulged in matchmaking with her brother, Jake, and his wife, Brianne. She’d decided to use her people skills and her childhood habit of writing and documenting ideas and put them to good use.

And now, she had her column. “But my outlook is fresh and new since moving to Ashford,” she said, meaning every word.

Emma nodded. “Good thing you packed up and moved on.” She studied Rina with eyes full of wisdom.

“Amen, sister.” Rina grinned and hit Emma’s hand in a high five, laughing at the older woman’s spunk.

Rina had no doubt Emma had seen a lot in the decades she’d lived, and she’d obviously learned how to get the most out of every person she met and opportunity she saw, a philosophy Rina had adopted, too, from the minute she’d decided to sell the penthouse and move on. So what if she’d had to pull a few strings to get this job?

Corinne’s father lived in the same retirement community as Rina’s parents. Of course, Corinne’s father was much older than Rina’s parents, but in Florida, if a man had teeth and the ability to walk upright, golfing and bridge buddies formed. When Rina learned that Corinne had taken over her husband’s newspaper, she picked up the phone, the two women hit it off, and Rina had herself a job. One she wouldn’t hold on to if she wasn’t successful.

But she would be.

“Ah. More silence. You’re thinking. That’s okay. As long as you speak wisely to yourself, that’s what counts.” Emma broke into Rina’s musings. “But if you should want to share your thoughts, I’d be more than happy to listen.”

“You’re so nosy.” Rina glanced at Emma with all the warmth she felt toward her. “Not to mention perceptive.”

“Live as long as I have and you’d better have learned something,” Emma replied with a wink. “Now, I want to hear more about your upcoming series. Did I mention that I admire your gumption?”

“Not lately,” Rina said wryly.

Ignoring the writing implement tucked behind her ear, Emma picked up a pencil and tapped the eraser against the desk. “Catching a man is so much more complicated today than in my youth. Instead of pinching cheeks for color, you swipe on blush, and in place of tissues, implants are all the rage now.” She paused for an obvious inspection of Rina’s attributes.

Rina shook her head. The older woman was unbelievable.

“What do men want? Pfft,” Emma said. “You’ll never know because they’ll never tell.” She waved a regal hand in the air, dismissing the notion out of hand.

“I don’t want them to tell me, I plan to use my powers of observation to figure it out. Methodically.” Rina pulled out her phone and glanced at the list she’d compiled in her Notes. “And it’s not just appearance. It’s also in how a woman acts, walks, and talks.” She swiveled her hips for effect.

“More movement,” Emma suggested.

Rina sashayed her waist and ended with a rendition of Britney Spears that would do any twenty-year-old proud. From

across the room, one of the remaining layout editors who was just putting on his jacket applauded.

Rina grinned and bowed. “You see? Attitude makes a difference,” she said with a nod. “The question is what’s more important? Attitude or intellect? Wouldn’t a smart man want a woman with whom he can carry on a breakfast conversation?” she asked Emma.

“No. Men want arm candy.”

Rina cocked her head to the side. “Come on. They can’t all be that shallow a species.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Get with the program, Rina. All men want a woman they’re proud to display on their arm. It’s the male ego, dear.”

“That’s true.” Much as she hated to admit it. Take her deceased husband. After their marriage, he’d ostensibly fired her as his legal secretary, giving her a life of luxury most women would love. In exchange, he’d wanted a stay-at-home wife, one who was comfortable entertaining guests and who dressed well so he was proud to have her by his side. “You do have a point.”

“And trust me,” Emma said. “The reason you’re still flying solo after being in this town for three months is because you’re doing nothing to enhance your appearance.”

Rina put a hand to her unflattering bun and grinned. “I know.”

“Forgive me, but I simply don’t understand.” Emma shook her head, her look of confusion obvious. “I can see your

potential. I've offered to have my limo driver take us to Bloomingdale's for a clothing makeover, offered to have my stylist come do your hair. You refuse. Care to tell me why?"

"Corinne hired me to bring life to the paper with my series idea. I can only do that by giving my readers personal experience. So, I started by establishing myself in town as a quiet, inconspicuous woman."

Emma pursed her lips. "Go on."

"I've been researching from day one here. Recording men's reactions to this Rina." There hadn't been much attention paid to the woman who wore baggy clothes and no makeup, one who possessed a mild-mannered personality. Although Colin's heated gaze more than made up for the other men's lapses. "So, now I'm going to alter my appearance and actions and see what kind of changes men react to. So I can impart firsthand wisdom to my readers."

"You're going to strut your stuff." Emma grinned. "I like that."

"You would."

"Can I help it if I've got my finger on the pulse of male-female relationships? Why, just look at Logan and Cat," she said, referring to her wealthy grandson and his beloved wife.

Rina knew Emma credited herself with that pairing.

"Then there's Grace and Ben. If only they didn't live in New York," Emma said wistfully. "You'll meet Logan and Cat at the Christmas party Saturday night, but you'll have to look up Grace next time you return to New York for a visit."

The older woman also took responsibility for her granddaughter Grace's marriage to the detective Emma had hired to look out for her in New York City. Rina suspected that both of her grandchildren would have succeeded without their grandmother's help, though Rina had to admit they wouldn't have met without Emma's meddling.

"So, we're talking a random sampling of men?" Emma asked.

Rina nodded. "Anyone and everyone, including the deliveryman. And the pizza guy is particularly cute." Not that he'd been attracted to Rina and her plain, unflirtatious side, but the time had come to change her attitude. Because not only was this series her journalistic debut, but it also marked her return to the social scene.

She was ready to begin flirting again, testing her wiles on the opposite sex. The best part was that she'd been able to use her daily life as research since she met men at the coffee shop next door and at the bar favored by her downstairs neighbor, Francesca—Frankie, for short. They both rented apartments in a Cape house Rina had heard about from Corinne. One look and Rina had fallen in love with the house and made friends with Frankie, whose favorite pastime was discussing dating in Boston. They shared information, and Rina's ideas flourished. She'd already outlined her series and written most of the first week's draft.

With work put aside, she could focus on her private life. And Emma had been right on when she'd called Rina horny. She hadn't been with a man in years, and she was finally open

to the concept of monogamous sex. She wasn't ready for a relationship, but a satisfying fling appealed to her new independent streak and resolve to live life on her own terms.

"Any ideas who should be your first guinea pig?" Emma asked, obviously referring to Rina's column.

Rina, on the other hand, contemplated what kind of man she'd like in her bed. "A dark-haired, blue-eyed Mr. Perfect," she said dreamily. An attentive man who catered to her every need and desire.

"Afternoon, ladies." As if she'd conjured him, dark-haired, blue-eyed Colin Lyons appeared near where Rina stood. She hadn't noticed him come in, but she was very aware of him now.

She inhaled and smelled the musky scent of his cologne and her stomach curled with delicious warmth. She told herself it had to be the thought of sex that had her hot and bothered, but she knew she lied. Just looking at Colin elicited a definite chemical reaction inside her body, obviously short-circuiting her brain.

"Hello, Colin. I take it you were at the hospital again?" Emma asked, knowing Colin had visited Joe every afternoon since his arrival the day of the publisher's stroke.

Colin nodded.

"How is our dear Joseph?" Emma asked.

"Resting more comfortably today."

"That's wonderful. I know Corinne's worried about him," Rina added, joining the conversation and trying to act polite,

not like the oversexed female he inspired her to be.

“Corinne’s got a lot to be worried about,” he muttered, then turned to Rina. “But I appreciate you asking. I’ll be sure to tell Joe you care,” he said, his voice warm.

As usual, his attention set off a tingling reaction. “Emma asked about Joe first,” she reminded him, trying to deflect attention from herself. Surely, Joe would rather hear about Emma’s concern than an employee he hadn’t even met.

“She did. But so did you, and as Joe’s family, I appreciate it.” A smile tilted Colin’s lips into a lopsided grin, and Rina forgot to breathe.

A former local newscaster, he had the chiseled features television adored, dimples, and a gleaming white smile made more charming by the slight overlap of his two front teeth. Razor stubble darkened his cheeks, and that hint of musky aftershave enhanced his potent allure. Her gaze traveled downward. Even his fisherman sweater and worn jeans added to his rugged appeal.

“See something you like?” he asked, arms folded across his broad chest.

“Everything,” she said, immediately biting her tongue, but it was too late. The word had escaped.

Caught, she flushed and quickly transferred her gaze to Emma. Rina tried to look innocent. She really did. But when Emma nodded Colin’s way and murmured, “I agree, he’s hot, but put your tongue back in your mouth,” the slight flush in Rina’s cheeks started to burn.

“You’ll have to forgive Rina. She’s off-balance,” Emma said to Colin. “And I can’t really blame her, considering.” She propped an elbow on her desk.

“Considering what?” Colin spoke to Emma, but his blue-eyed gaze never left Rina’s. He hadn’t stopped staring since her blunt admission.

Emma sighed. “Young people. You never take time to look around you and appreciate the scenery.”

Oh, if Emma only knew how wrong she was, Rina thought wryly, realizing Colin’s eyes had small laugh lines surrounding them, a sexy attribute that added character to an already amazing face.

“Look up, children. You’re both standing under mistletoe,” Emma said with glee. With a huge smile on her face, Emma pointed up.

Rina groaned, and Colin, one eyebrow raised, followed Emma’s lead to look at the ceiling. Sure enough, the green sprig hadn’t moved, changed, or fallen to the floor. And neither had Rina since the time Emma had called her over to Colin’s desk.

She’d been had. A notion the older woman verified when she not so subtly picked up her purse.

“Well, Colin?” Emma asked. “Aren’t you going to follow tradition?”

Rina knew from experience life rarely doled out second chances. Standing under the mistletoe with Colin was a one-time opportunity. She’d been doing a lot of talk about living a

new life and starting over. True, she was in the office but she didn't feel there was any pressure on either side.

She glanced up at the mistletoe that teased her and tempted her to follow her most erotic impulses. Emma had obviously caught the sexual undercurrents that had been running between Rina and Colin since day one.

No sense trying to hide them now.

“I wonder,” she whispered softly, for Colin's ears only. Taking advantage of the new, liberated Rina, she leaned forward, closer to Colin and those super-sexy lips. “Do you have the nerve?”

Chapter Two

FROM THE CORNER of her eye, Rina saw Emma slip out the door.

“Emma’s gone,” Colin said. He sounded as stunned as she felt at this sudden turn of events, and his voice held a husky, low timbre that resembled rough whiskey.

“And she definitely left some excitement in her wake.”

“Is that what you’d call it?” He studied her shamelessly as if taking her measure. Looking for what Rina couldn’t be sure, but with each passing second, those blue eyes seemed to see inside her.

To read her mind. If he could, he’d know she took this tradition seriously. Now that Emma had put the idea in her mind, she wanted to know what it would feel like to be kissed under the mistletoe. Right now. By Colin.

His hands came to rest on her shoulders, his palms hot and strong. Heat burned within her and her stomach curled with silken anticipation as the need to taste him grew.

“Rina?”

“Yes?”

He removed her glasses, placing them on the desk, and stared. “Did you know you have golden flecks in those brown eyes?”

Unable to speak, she licked her dry lips and was rewarded when his hungry gaze followed the movement.

“Reminds me of sunshine.”

Warmth tingled through her veins. Born and raised in the Bronx and a New York girl at heart, Rina wasn't shy about asking for what she wanted. And she wanted her new life to begin now. Despite barely knowing Colin, she was going to test the waters. Take whatever he was willing to give. “You should know I'm not one to let a mistletoe moment pass.”

“And you should know I'm not a man who takes a challenge lightly,” he said, obviously referring to her earlier question. Did he have the nerve to kiss her? “However, I'm not up for a sexual harassment lawsuit from an employee.”

She respected that. “But I asked you.” She raised an eyebrow, challenge continuing.

“Then far be it for me to defy tradition. No matter how unexpected,” he whispered an instant before he lowered his head and his lips touched hers.

He'd called her bluff, taken the initiative, and now he toyed with her, playfully testing, learning the feel of her mouth, and letting her discover him. Then his tongue slid briefly, seductively, over the seam of her lips, electrifying her with his touch until their tongues lightly met.

The experiment yielded high-impact results. Colin tasted of pure male desire, a flavor that stirred a hunger long-denied and awakened passions she'd never experienced before. Passions she'd never thought existed before now. She trembled, and in response he squeezed her shoulders, his fingers biting into her skin, providing a carnal awareness of the fact that she affected him, too.

But from deep inside, caution clawed its way to the surface, breaking through the surprising desire that still burned hot inside her. She'd been floored by a simple kiss.

As if anything about this kiss—or Colin—was simple.

She lifted her head, breaking the kiss but not the awareness. He met her gaze. Heat flared bright in his eyes and flushed his cheeks, and the shock that reverberated inside her was evident in his expression. Another emotion shared.

She stepped back and ran trembling fingers over her lips. “That was...”

“Fun.”

Not exactly the word she'd have chosen, and Rina blinked, startled.

“Isn't that what kissing under the mistletoe is supposed to be?” Colin shot her a boyish grin.

She wished it was as easy for her. She exhaled hard and forced a casual smile before meeting his eyes. “Of course, it was fun. Emma set us up and we responded like any two adults caught under the mistletoe would.”

She took a step backward, then another. A few more and she made it to her desk so she could regroup, leaving Colin alone under the mistletoe laden with tradition.

“Fun's meant to be repeated.” His expression still showed shocked surprise, but he couldn't hide the warm appreciation in his gaze.

She reached for her jacket, caught off-guard when he stepped forward and helped her slip on her wool coat. His hands were gentle as he adjusted her collar, and his calloused fingers brushed her nape, eliciting a tingling sensation that shot straight to her toes.

She hadn't known he was a gentleman. "Thanks."

"My pleasure."

Without turning, unwilling to look into those blue eyes once more, she barely managed to grab her series folder, call a quick goodbye, and beat a hasty retreat to the door.

"Rina, wait."

She turned, her heart pounding hard in her chest. "What?"

"You forgot something."

She accepted her glasses and bolted into the cold night.

As the icy whip of wind hit her cheeks, it was easier to think clearly. With that kiss, her experiment had taken on even more exciting, somewhat illicit overtones.

She still planned to experiment for her column. Starting tomorrow, she'd test out men as a group in general. But when it came to Colin, she was fully aware of his impact. With a single kiss, she'd learned he wielded power. Sexual, seductive power, and she found that lure thrilling.

Before tonight, she'd merely toyed with the notion of a fling, but now the idea of an affair took on real possibilities. Colin possessed enough sex appeal to light Rina's fire. He also used jet fuel to propel his frequent departures. Colin wasn't a

stick-around sort of guy. If she were looking for a future, he'd be the last man on her list. But after losing her husband, she was wary of a long-term relationship and was no longer sure she believed in forever. Which made a fling the perfect solution.

And Colin the perfect man.



COLIN KICKED BACK, propped his feet on the desk, and watched the door slam closed behind Rina Lowell, the woman he'd just kissed under the mistletoe.

He'd been given an unexpected opportunity, and being human—as well as damned attracted to Rina—he'd kissed her. He shouldn't have. Through Rina, Colin hoped to understand how to get through to Corinne, but he'd never intended to take advantage. Especially since he held her career in his hands. True, she'd not only started it but assured him he wasn't taking advantage, but it hadn't been smart. For many reasons.

Getting involved with Rina would tear at his loyalties, though he had no doubt who would win. Colin had let Joe down once before. He refused to do it again, so Joe and his paper had to come first. Yet the paper had been the last thing on his mind when he'd had Rina in his arms.

And now, he was in deep. Because he hadn't counted on being completely seduced. And from the moment he'd opened the doors to the office and seen Rina shaking her hips and shimmying her body, he *had* been. Enough to make him watch like a damn voyeur as she'd continued her conversation with Emma. She'd called out to him, luring him in, and by the time

he'd walked over to the desk, he'd been entranced by her combination of natural beauty and erotic movement.

He couldn't delude himself into thinking he'd imagined the combustion they'd created together. The heat. The texture. The intensity. The unexpected *connection*. She'd felt it too or else she wouldn't have run far and fast.

He rubbed his hands against his jeans and groaned. In the aftermath, she'd stared at him warily, shock in those huge brown eyes. She didn't know what to make of him.

Unexpectedly, that bothered him.

Guilt nudged at him again, stronger now when he contemplated his need to dethrone Corinne and her new entourage of employees. He *liked* Emma. And Rina... Well, he'd more than enjoyed her. His gut told him not to mix business with pleasure, and everything about Rina screamed pleasure.

But Colin was a man cornered by necessity and all out of options, save one. A gorgeous brunette named Rina Lowell.



THIS WASN'T RINA'S first day of work, but excitement rushed through her veins. She was on a dual mission today, beginning her experiment at work and laying the groundwork for seducing Colin. She tried to swallow but her mouth had grown dry.

The day started like any other. Her first stop was the coffee shop downstairs from the office. Because Ashford was a wealthy oceanside community, the café was an upscale place

offering a variety of designer drinks. The owner, a good-looking man in his mid-thirties, greeted everyone with the same compulsory smile. Rina had made many conversational openings in the past, but he'd never reacted or picked up on any of them. Yet she'd heard through the building grapevine that the more attractive women were offered an extra shot of caramel or mocha in their lattes, free of charge. Plain Rina had always paid for hers.

She'd only worked on some subtle physical changes today as she was saving the big guns for the Christmas party over the weekend. She didn't expect any special treatment just yet, but she intended to find out if makeup, even light brushes of color and hue, made a difference in how men treated women. And she planned to impart that wisdom in her next column.

"Next." The man wiped down the counter and glanced at Rina. "What can I get for you?"

Coffee, tea, or me sounded too clichéd, so she opted for a straightforward, "Whatever you do best will suit me just fine." She tipped her head, letting her ponytail hang down over her shoulder. Same head-tip she'd given him when she'd worn her plain old bun. But today, it was no coincidence that her hair dangled just over one breast.

He leaned down on one elbow, getting closer and meeting her gaze. Up close, he was too pretty for Rina's taste. She preferred a dark-haired, masculine man whose kiss lingered and who'd starred in her late-night fantasies. At the thought of Colin, she could have purred out loud.

“Dave’s special is chocolate malted cappuccino,” he said with a ridiculous abundance of pride.

“Which means you’re Dave.” Rina forced a welcoming, wide smile for a man who did nothing for her. “Make mine with extra chocolate and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

Five minutes later, she walked back onto the snow-covered street with an extra-large chocolate malted cappuccino for the price of a regular-size latte in one hand, a black coffee in the other, and a date request for Saturday night. Thank God she’d had Emma’s Christmas party as an excuse to decline.

Score one for men being visual animals, Rina thought. Dave had reacted to her looks, or maybe it was the hair. He’d hit on her today when he hadn’t given her a second glance yesterday. In this case, chemistry didn’t matter as much as superficial impressions. If she had a free hand, she’d jot notes on her phone. She decided she’d handle it upstairs. Rina had no doubt she wouldn’t forget details about this particular outing.

She turned and headed inside her office building. Rina knew most employees’ schedules as well as she knew her own. Colin tended to arrive early in time to get Marty’s freshly made coffee before it’d had a chance to gel and petrify. She strode through the office, a room comprising desks, computers, and an occasional portable divider for the more senior editors. And she immediately noticed that Colin was already in his chair but he didn’t have a mug in front of him. Yet.

Instead, he sat flipping through mail and muttering to himself. Even aggravated, the man was so damned sexy. It wasn't just the black leather jacket that hung on his chair, though it added to his rugged appeal. And it wasn't his windblown hair or the intelligence lurking in his blue eyes. His allure came from somewhere deeper, somewhere inside him. Intensity defined Colin Lyons and every move he made.

She paused a moment, gathering her courage, and when she bit down on her lip, she tasted lipstick, a reminder of today's changes. Like Dave, she expected Colin to notice and react. Her heart rate picked up rhythm at the prospect. Taking the coffee she'd purchased, she strode to his desk, coming up beside him.

He leaned back and glanced toward the corner, oblivious to her presence. "How is it I barely recognize this place?" he asked himself.

His dark tone didn't bode well for her plan to dazzle him. Taken with the depth of his feelings, she felt an unexpected tug at her heart. She glanced around, wanting to view things from his perspective and see just what was upsetting him. Mistletoe still hung from the ceiling and a gorgeous tree stood in the corner adorned with gold and silver tinsel and exquisite decorations.

Yet despite the holiday cheer, he'd sounded distressed.

"That sounded depressing. Do you have something against Christmas?" she asked.

"Against the holiday? No. Against the tree? Hell, yes." He didn't turn to face her.

As someone who'd grown up with handmade ornaments, then progressed to the expensive, exclusive store-bought kind when she married, Rina recognized Corinne's tree as the latter version. That obviously bothered Colin, though Rina couldn't imagine why.

Despite all the reasons not to get emotionally involved, she wanted to know what he was feeling and why he was feeling it. "What do you have against some poor defenseless tree?"

"That corner is usually reserved for Joe's hand-cut pine." Colin's voice held a hint of gruffness combined with tender emotion.

And this poor tree had obviously replaced Joe's. "I'm sure Corinne meant well. Maybe she thought some tree was better than no tree," Rina offered, trying to soothe the sting he suffered.

"Corinne didn't mean anything except satisfying her own personal need to spend."

It was the first time she'd heard him attack Corinne, and the shock rattled her. Though she didn't know the other woman well, Rina had always been a decent judge of character, and Corinne seemed to genuinely care about people in general, her employees and especially her sick husband.

He shook his head. "Never mind. I didn't mean that the way it came out."

"Maybe not, but something's bothering you. Whatever it is, you need to get it out."

"And you want to hear?" He sounded surprised.

Was it so shocking that she wanted to help him? They were strangers, but the holidays often brought unexpected people together, and the mistletoe *had* begun their journey.

She nodded, then, realizing he couldn't see her, she answered with a soft, "Yes. I'd very much like to hear."

He leaned back in his seat. Silence reigned. Maybe he was considering whether he wanted to share.

"We had a yearly tradition, Joe and I," he said at last.

Rina released the breath she hadn't been aware of holding.

"It started the year Joe and his first wife, Nell, took me in after my parents died in a car accident. I was twelve at the time."

Having grown up with both parents and having lived a decent family life, her heart squeezed tight at the admission that he'd lost his parents young. Family was important to Rina and she found herself glad that Colin had had Joe and Nell to compensate for his loss. "I didn't know."

"No reason you should. Joe and Nell ended up adopting me. And since it's part of Joe's earlier life, it's probably not something Corinne likes to discuss."

Rina doubted that, but Colin obviously had issues with his adoptive father's young wife. It was the story of many families, so she chose to listen rather than defend Corinne now. "I'm glad you had people to turn to," she said lightly.

"Me, too."

His harsh profile eased, along with something inside Rina. Something warm, compelling, and far more dangerous than pure sexual desire. Which didn't bode well for an emotionless fling. "Want to tell me about this tradition you two shared?" she asked despite her better judgment.

Standing, he walked to the big window overlooking a neighborhood park. She left the now-cold coffee on the desk corner and followed. In silence, she glanced out over his shoulder. Snow covered the ground and trees in true holiday tradition. There'd be a white Christmas this year, Rina thought.

"Joe's as close to a father as I've got," Colin's voice intruded on her thoughts. "And every year since he took me in, we'd go stalking through the woods in search of the perfect tree."

"You didn't shop for one?" she asked. "Because where I grew up, we chose the cheapest tree off the neighborhood supermarket parking lot."

His deep chuckle warmed her. "No, we played mountain man. We'd go to the far end of Joe's property, which included forest, and we'd pick and cut our own tree." He shoved his hands into his back pockets, staring, she assumed, at the pines behind the building. "We never missed a year, either."

"Until this one," she guessed.

She heard his unspoken words and felt the empty space in his heart as if it were her own. He was still the little boy who'd lost his parents and only had Joe to turn to.

Unable to stop herself, she lifted her hand, letting her palm rest on his shoulder in a gesture of comfort. Heat sizzled on contact, traveling faster than an electric current through her veins, creating a heaviness in her breasts and a slow simmer low in her belly. She should have been prepared.

Instead, she struggled for an even breath. “Corinne says Joe’s prognosis *is* good,” she said, fighting even harder to concentrate on simple conversation.

He touched her hand briefly, acknowledging her compassion. “It is. But it’s hard having him out of commission. A lot of things are tough these days.”

His voice was as rough as his skin, both conjuring images of hot nights as his hands skimmed her bare flesh and he muttered raw, sexy words in her ear. She trembled at the carnal, erotic thoughts. Not unexpected for a woman who’d decided she wanted a sexual encounter with the man standing before her. But strange thoughts for a woman who’d liked sex yet had never before *wanted* it this badly.

And she needed him to know she understood his emotions, too. “It’s not the same thing, but I know what it’s like to miss someone you care about. My brother lives back in New York.”

“How many siblings do you have?”

“Just Jake, and believe me, having a cop for an older brother makes up for any other watchful eyes. You try making out on the doorstep after a date while your older brother plays unwanted bodyguard.”

Colin laughed and she was grateful to hear the sexy sound. “Something tells me you’ve been a handful for him.”

His teasing words, along with the rebirth of his light, flirting tone, reminded her she was on a mission. A professional mission to test Colin’s awareness of any changes and a personal one to tempt him into being the man with whom she’d begin her affair.

In favor of getting to know Colin and easing his obvious pain she’d almost forgotten her agenda, and as a result, she’d grown closer to him. Emotionally closer, something that hadn’t been part of the plan.

But now that he seemed back to his teasing self, she intended to control her feelings better, too. “I’ve given Jake a run for his money a time or two,” she said, keeping things light.

“I just bet you have.” He turned her way at last.

She let out a flirtatious laugh before pursing her heavily glossed lips. Like a magnet, his gaze zeroed in on its target and the temperature in the room soared upward. Mission accomplished, she thought. He’d noticed her, though she wasn’t certain exactly what had drawn his attention.

Continuing simple conversation wasn’t easy with the awareness simmering between them, but she managed. “There was the time I took a vacation,” she mused, pretending to concentrate solely on her story. “Then I left him to apartment-sit and neglected to mention I’d invited someone else to join him.”

Remembering how Jake and Brianne had gotten together sent shivers of happiness through her. They were proof that two different people could join on an equal footing. Jake allowed Brianne the freedom to be herself while Brianne put up with her brother's macho demeanor without giving up any of her independence in the process.

“Good thing he's a cop. At least he's trained to keep a step or two ahead of you.” Lightness shimmered in his expression in complete opposition to his earlier black mood.

If she'd brought him out of his funk, she was glad.

“Jake's got an edge over us poor civilians who you manage to take off guard,” he continued.

“I'm easy enough to read.”

His gaze roamed over her, settling again on her face. “Oh, no, you're not. Something's different.” He studied her, deliberately taking his time and playing her game, a grin on his face. “Same glasses, same type of large, comfortable sweater.” He shook his head and Rina held her breath.

She wanted details. What did he notice? What did he like best about the subtle changes? Dammit. She shouldn't care so much. At the very least, she should view him as another means to document results for her column. But unlike the guy at the coffee shop, she did care what Colin thought.

And her body tingled with anticipation and hope that he'd like what he saw. “Come on. You're a reporter. I'm sure observing is your specialty. So, what do you see?”

He raised an eyebrow, then lifted his finger to her cheek, his touch gentle as he glided over her skin. He turned his hand toward her to reveal the combination of foundation and blush that had transferred onto his skin. “What I see is that you look pretty, Rina. Then again, you always do.”

The compliment, one that encompassed yesterday’s Rina, too, sent nervous flutters to her stomach and a ridiculously pleased rush to her heart.

“But you don’t need makeup to enhance what’s already beautiful.” Male appreciation flickered in his gaze as he leaned forward, those delicious lips a kiss away. “But I have to know. Was the change for me?” he asked.

“You wish,” she teased. “I’m experimenting for my column. Just call yourself one man with brilliant powers of observation, that’s all.” She hoped she sounded nonchalant, though she felt anything but. She *had* thought of him when applying the light shades of color and fixing her hair. Rina swallowed hard. “I already know the guy in the coffee shop downstairs reacted. I just wanted to see if the rest of your species gets as high a grade.”

He raised one eyebrow. “You’re going to make me compete for your attention?”

“Any reason why I shouldn’t?” she asked, deliberately playful. The ability to flirt had returned, Rina thought. And she was enjoying it very much.

“Because I’m not a man who shares easily.” His deep gaze told her he was serious.

And now her insides were quaking. He didn't care whether or not she altered her appearance with makeup. He was attracted to her anyway and considering he'd always stared hard and seemed interested, she knew he wasn't lying. But he was screwing up her results for her column and wreaking havoc with her body and her brain.

"Come with me to Emma's Christmas bash Saturday night," he said, changing the subject.

His words surprised her. "As colleagues or something more?" She wanted the rules spelled out, no misunderstandings allowed.

"Call it what you want," he said in a determined voice. "I'll pick you up at eight."

She wanted to go with him, but something about the way he'd ordered her around didn't sit well with her. "If I show up with you, I can't mingle with other men, and the opportunity to research is lost." She treated him to a pout for effect.

"That's the point." Biting back a grin, he folded his arms over his chest. "I want you to myself. Besides, you said yourself you're alone for the holidays."

Actually, she'd only said her brother lived in New York. He was coming to visit next weekend for Christmas Eve, but that didn't seem relevant right now.

"With Joe in the hospital, I'm solo, too. Are you going to make me spend the holidays alone?" Colin's eyes twinkled as he obviously played his trump card.

He knew it, so did she. How could she turn down a man she'd seen in real pain over his father's stroke and the changes Corinne had brought to the office?

"Come on, Rina," he said, resorting to shameless pleading. "Emma's grandson was my college roommate. I know from personal experience the Montgomery family bash is enough to brighten anyone's holiday. It's an event you have to see for yourself. But not alone," he quickly added before she could jump in with that very suggestion.

She eyed him warily.

"If I promise to leave you alone long enough to work your wiles on the unsuspecting men there, will you let me pick you up at eight?" he asked, *giving her a choice*.

She expelled a breath of air. Until that moment, she hadn't realized she'd really been about to say no. Because his pushing, no matter how flirtatious, made her feel cornered when she wanted to make her own decisions. His insistence, she acknowledged now, had reminded her of Robert, of the times he'd wanted to go to a legal benefit of some sort, and she'd preferred to stay home. Back then, there had never been a compromise. Her husband's way had always prevailed.

The realization surprised her, and she rubbed her hands over her arms, shocked that Colin had provided a parallel to her marriage. An unflattering one at that. But Colin had offered her a real choice now. He honestly cared about her feelings.

Which allowed her to say yes. Pleased and suddenly excited, she met his patient stare, letting her smile grow before

she spoke. “Okay. Eight’s fine.”

His eyes widened. Apparently, she’d surprised him. “I’m glad,” he said.

“You’d better be prompt.” The night would give her even more opportunity to implement changes and ply her charms on the upper crust of Ashford society. As well as on Colin, she thought with yearning and anticipation.

He grinned. “I wouldn’t miss one second of our time together.”

Neither would she, and she wondered what other surprises the holidays had in store. “I need to get back to work.”

He inclined his head toward her desk. “I’m not stopping you.”

Yes, he was. Just by being in the room. She started for her work area, ignoring the curious stares and the feel of Colin’s gaze branding her back. For the first time, she realized they’d created a world apart in the crowded office. Talking as if no one else in the room existed. She trembled at the discovery. If he had the power to entrance her so thoroughly in public, she wondered what he’d do if he got her alone. She had this weekend to tease herself with all the exciting possibilities.

And she had Emma’s party at which to find out. Because if she had her way, she and Colin I-don’t-stick-around Lyons were about to embark on a brief but oh-so-very-satisfying affair.

Chapter Three

SO, RINA CLAIMED the makeup was part of her experiment for her column? Like hell, Colin thought. He'd prefer to think it had something to do with him.

It was no secret he'd been attracted to her from day one, but he hadn't known anything about her. In one brief talk, he'd learned plenty. She'd shocked him by being so down-to-earth and understanding, so interested in his life and his past. He'd turned, intending to thank her. Instead, he'd been surprised by her new look. Rina didn't need makeup to turn him on. But he couldn't deny that her newly made-up face, glowing skin, and full, pink, made-to-be-kissed lips had entranced him anyway. And he wanted to taste that glossy pout again now.

Ever since he'd let down his guard for that kiss, he'd been in a constant state of arousal. And from the minute he'd seen her today, long strands of hair hanging down her back, he'd wanted her even more. Unbelievable but true. He swallowed a groan, feeling as though he'd been sucker-punched because it didn't end there. When she'd let down *her* guard enough to listen to his problems, lust had turned to something a little more. She'd crept under his skin.

She was the first woman who'd affected him on a gut level. Even now, back at their desks, his horizontally next to hers, they sat in aware silence. Every so often, she'd glance his way, her eyes opened wider than usual. And even through the eyeglass lenses, their golden sparkle twinkled at him,

extending an invitation, one he wondered whether she was even aware of issuing.

Though he should have invited her to Emma's party as a means to feel her out on the subject of Corinne, his initial reasoning had been far different. He'd be damned if he'd let her spend the holidays alone in a new town, no family, few friends. Not after she'd been there for him at the awful moment he'd been forced to acknowledge Corinne's expensively decorated tree.

When was the last time he'd trusted a woman with his feelings? Certainly, his ex-wife, Julie, had taught him the pain inherent in sharing and the benefit of accounting to no one. After his parents died, travel had always beckoned to him. It didn't take a shrink to figure out that he was running from the pain, but there wasn't a damn thing he could do about his overwhelming desire to go.

As he matured, he'd realized that he could do some good by combining travel with his journalistic talent and bring world news back home. When Julie had cheated on him, leaving him emotionally as well as physically just as his parents had, it was time to move on. Colin had quit his day job and left the country.

He'd never gotten close to another woman since, yet here he was, sharing his pain with Rina, a woman he barely knew. Ironically, he felt as if she understood him better than Julie ever had. But he had a paper to save, and he couldn't forget his mission again. Couldn't let his goal drop in favor of enjoying Rina's warm, giving personality or sexy new look. If the time

seemed right to question her about Corinne, he'd damn well better do it since he had a phone message on his answering machine from the CEO of Fortune's Inc. asking about progress. In reality, the clock was ticking down.

And psychologically, the situation settled on Colin's shoulders in a different way. Both Ron Gold, the lender, and Bert Hartmann, head of Fortune's, their biggest advertiser, were old friends of Joe's and had helped him fund the paper back in its early days. Hartmann currently brought in a huge chunk of change for the paper every year, and the *Times* couldn't afford to lose the company's support. Nor did Colin want to disappoint Joe and have him come back to a sunken ship and lost respect in the eyes of his colleagues. Colin was determined. If nothing else, the *Times* would be on the road to recovery by the time Joe left the hospital.

"'Tis the season to be jolly, fa-la-la-la-la, la-la, la-la." A distinctive, high-pitched voice traveled into the room, and Colin cringed as Corinne, decked out in a designer coat that he knew hadn't come cheap, sauntered through the place.

She swirled through, dispensing tinsel in her wake, and he picked a gold strand off his black sweater.

"I've come to invite you all to a Christmas party," she said.

Her voice grated on his nerves. So did her words. "Emma's family is having a party Saturday night." His objective was to bail out the paper. He didn't need her spending any more cash they didn't have. "We're all invited, so why don't you save money and celebrate there?"

“Oh, don’t be a spoilsport, Colin,” Rina said. “It’s nice of Corinne to want to show her employees holiday spirit and a good time.”

Which cemented for him whose side Rina was on. Of course, he doubted Corinne had informed her of the paper’s precarious financial position. He couldn’t fault Rina for having holiday spirit and let her comment slide. But after their talk today, Colin understood Rina a little better, too. She hadn’t grown up wealthy. That put him in a better position to appeal to her regarding Corinne’s excessive spending—once he felt more sure she’d trust where his interests lay.

“Rina’s right.” Corinne smiled and readjusted the collar of her coat. “I’m glad to see someone here appreciates me.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Corinne. I appreciate you and everything you stand for,” Colin muttered.

Rina coughed and he glanced over. Her eyebrows were raised but she said nothing.

Intelligent and circumspect, she’d obviously picked up the undercurrents and decided to let things play out without interrupting.

“Everyone, listen.” Corinne clapped her hands and all heads lifted from computer screens, keyboards, and layouts in order to glance up. “We’re having a party Friday night at the Seaside Restaurant. Guests welcome.” With another toss of tinsel, she started for the door.

“Corinne, wait,” Colin called.

She turned.

“Where are you going?” he asked mildly.

“To plan the menu.” She hiked her bag back onto her shoulder. “I also want to buy token appreciation gifts for the staff. Joe would want that.” She sniffed and lifted a hand as if to blot a tear from her eye.

Colin couldn’t tell if the sentiment was real or phony. With Corinne, he didn’t know her well enough to be sure. “You’d do Joe more good by staying at the hospital instead. Be with your husband.” Corinne was supposed to take the morning shift while Colin covered afternoons. “And while you’re at it, ask Joe if he’d want you spending what’s left of the budget on a party,” he said so only she could hear.

She waved a hand, dismissing his concerns. “I refuse to bother Joe when he needs his strength to recover. Besides, you worry too much.”

“And you don’t worry enough. Bert Hartmann called, reminding us of Fortune’s Inc.’s deadline. You need to get Joe to transfer power of attorney back to me or sign a good-faith promise to change the paper’s direction.” He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “Hell, Corinne, just start running legitimate news. That’ll get us through the new year without losing our biggest advertiser.” He heard the pleading in his voice and didn’t care.

She shook her head. “It’d be based on false pretenses, Colin, because I believe in my vision.” Corinne turned away, effectively ending the conversation.

Which was just as well. If she continued, he might throttle her. He didn’t need to wonder why he rarely came home when

the frustrating reason stood in front of him.

“Emma,” Corinne called as she started for the door. “Colin seems a little stressed. Maybe you could work on fixing *him* up next.”

He rolled his eyes.

Emma laughed, rubbing her hands together in a sure sign of trouble.

And Rina pursed those luscious lips in blatant disapproval at Corinne’s suggestion. Just the sight of her eased the tension in his neck and shoulders, making him think of more pleasurable things. Like her warm body in his bed, writhing against his cool sheets.

“I’m sure Colin can choose his own women,” Rina said, more possessively than he’d expected.

He grinned. “What’s the matter? Worried Emma will find someone who’ll distract me from you?”

She tossed her head. “Not a chance. I’m secure enough in what I have to offer.”

He met her gaze, holding on and not letting go. “That’s good to know. But even if you weren’t, you have nothing to worry about. Once I set my sights on a goal, I’m totally focused.”

And his goal was now twofold. On the one hand, he had to live up to the standards Joe had set and to make sure he even had a paper left when he recovered. And in doing so, he’d prove to himself that he hadn’t let the old man down.

But where Rina was concerned, he couldn't discount the attraction. He wanted more from her than to be colleagues who'd kissed once.

How much more remained to be seen.



ONCE I SET my sights on a goal, I'm totally focused. Days later, Rina couldn't shake Colin's words from her mind because his steely gaze told her he *was* focused—and *she* was his objective. She shivered, unsure if it was chemistry and excitement fluttering inside her or pure nerves because tonight was Emma's infamous party and Colin was her date.

She'd had the whole week to anticipate this one night. Friday evening she'd gone to Corinne's party expecting to see Colin. Instead, he'd been a no-show. Considering his negative attitude toward Joe's wife, she didn't have to wonder why he'd skipped the event. Apparently, if something made Colin uncomfortable, he opted out. Out of the event, and sometimes out of the country. She couldn't afford to miss him too much.

At the office holiday party, most of the men at work were married or otherwise taken, so Rina had socialized with the women. She'd used the night wisely, taking notes on their views of what men wanted and what would attract and keep the opposite sex interested. Most women agreed that while men were attracted to packaging, only something deeper and far beyond chemistry would keep one around.

But packaging most always jump-started a relationship, and her first column in her *Simply Sexy* series, entitled "Sex Appeal," had run on Thursday. If the e-mails and phone calls

were any indication, she'd made a huge impact on the reading audience already.

As she'd emailed the link to the column to Jake and Brianne, pride had swelled inside her. So had new and revealing feelings. This job filled an emptiness within her, and she owed Corinne a huge debt for giving her this chance.

Next week's article was called "Strut Your Stuff." The title was courtesy of Emma, the idea something Rina had learned how to do during her years in New York. She'd been a single woman in Manhattan, and her married life had consisted of parties, social get-togethers, and business dinners. Her past provided her with a solid knowledge base. She knew how to act in order to attract a man as she'd proven with the coffee shop owner the other day. Her conversations with women both in the past and the present provided added insight.

Once she'd been able to put Colin out of her mind, she'd gotten a good, strong start on her series. But Colin never left her thoughts for long. They'd connected on a deeper level, proving that the dance they'd begun could be more than just hot. An affair with Colin could be dangerous if she didn't keep her emotions under lock and key.



A SMART MAN knew when to give a woman space. Colin prided himself on possessing enough intelligence to stay the hell away from Rina until Saturday, letting the anticipation build. Besides, he didn't want to give her the opportunity to break their date and ruin any chance he'd have to learn more about her.

She rented a small upstairs apartment in a Cape-style house. He knew this because Emma had handed him Rina's address along with directions. "In case you get lost. Wouldn't want you driving in circles all night when you could be with Rina," the older woman had said, winking. Clearly she knew nothing about navigation systems in cars and on cell phones.

At eight sharp, he rang Rina's doorbell. The last thing he expected was to be greeted by a barking dog. From behind the door, he heard Rina's command. "Norton, sit."

Norton? What kind of name was Norton?

She opened the door, but before he could catch a glimpse of Rina, he was attacked by the dog, who jumped up on his hind legs and placed his front paws on Colin's lower thighs.

"Norton, down!" Rina grabbed the dog's collar and jerked him off.

Norton complied with a sad whine.

"I'm sorry," she said. "His manners are usually better than that."

Colin laughed. "At least he has some manners." He glanced down at Norton, seeing him for the first time. "A shar-pei?"

She pet the dog's tan head, then meshed her fingers through the wrinkles on his back. "What was your first clue?" she asked wryly.

He'd never seen the breed anywhere except television and knew nothing about them except they cost a pretty penny.

He'd never pictured Rina with this kind of breed, but he liked the dog immediately. "He's a gorgeous animal."

She smiled. "He was Robert's dog before I ever came along. Now he's mine."

At the mention of a male name, one said with a sadness tinged with regret, Colin's stomach twisted. He couldn't remember the last time any woman had evoked jealousy inside him, not even Julie. Rina was different, as his churning insides reminded him.

Had she left a man behind in New York? At the thought, the pain in his stomach became acute. "Who's Robert?" he asked, his jaw aching from the tension of gritting his teeth.

"My husband."

His gut clenched violently. "You're—"

"But he died," she added quickly. "I just hate the word *widow*."

That took some of the wind out of him. He started to reach for her, then, unsure the gesture was appropriate, merely said, "I'm sorry."

"Thanks." She patted Norton and rose. "It's been a while now."

As soon as she'd removed her hand from the dog's collar, Norton walked over to Colin and began sniffing at his feet.

"Uh... you should watch out. He peed on my brother's sneakers the first time they met. He's particular about who he likes."

Colin laughed, and the tension broke, but he stepped back just in case. Norton followed, rubbing his head against Colin's pant leg. Following the dog's lead, Colin gave him the attention he desired and scratched the dog's head. In response, Norton flopped into a prone position before rolling onto his back, legs spread open wide.

"Ugh. Norton, have some class," Rina groaned. "He likes to expose himself. It's embarrassing."

She met his gaze, amusement and something more bubbling in the brown depths that he just now noticed weren't covered by the black-framed glasses. He stepped back to admire the change. Her face had the same minimal makeup as he'd noticed the day before, but without the glasses, he got an unobstructed view of those gorgeous eyes—and he liked what he saw.

"I hope you don't mind, but I need to walk Norton before we go. I'll dress for the party as soon as we get back." She turned toward the coatrack and the ponytail swung behind her, hitting the center of her back. "My landlord's washing machine broke while I was doing laundry and I spent the afternoon at the laundromat," she explained. "I never had time to change." Reaching for her jacket, she shrugged it on over her shoulders, then grabbed Norton's leash.

"I'll go with you to walk the pooch," he offered.

Sixty minutes later, they finally returned home with Norton in tow. Colin's fingertips were frozen and his nose was numb. "You did this on purpose, didn't you?" he asked.

"Did what?"

Her wide questioning gaze might have fooled other men but not one with a reporter's instincts. "You waited for me to walk Norton, knowing it was an hour ordeal so I could freeze to death along with you," he said wryly.

Not that he'd minded their time walking, talking and just getting to know one another even more. If anything, she'd defeated her purpose. He felt closer to her now than ever before. The one thing he hadn't been able to bring up was the subject of Corinne and the paper since Rina had dominated the conversation with stories of her childhood Christmases. Even with little money, they'd always had warm, family times.

Something Joe and Nell had tried to give to him. Looking back, he hadn't made it easy, going so far as to stay at friends' homes to avoid the stark reality of his parents' absence. Listening to Rina, her easy chatter and comfortable silences, allowed him to reflect, to acknowledge his actions and regret them. But it was Joe who needed to know his feelings, and while he was home this time, Colin intended to make amends.

"I just wanted you to share the fun Norton brings to my life." She met his gaze, amusement and happiness in those brown depths.

She made him feel good. "You mean his unique quirks. He hates the ice-cold street so much that he tries to dive for shelter into any home we pass. Doing business is the last thing on his mind."

"He might have a slight problem with weather extremes," she admitted.

"Which prolongs his walk."

She bit the inside of her lip. “I didn’t say that.”

He let out a feigned groan. “You didn’t have to. I figure you wanted my company on Norton’s long walk.”

“My brother always says I’m chronically late, so you really can’t think I stalled walking him on purpose.” Her lips twitched, a sure sign she’d been caught.

The desire to kiss those lips grew stronger inside him. He wanted to linger here and to hell with Emma’s holiday bash. “Any chance you’d go change so we can get going?”

Because if she didn’t, he’d act on his impulses, carrying her to the couch across from the TV and kissing her again. Only this time, he wouldn’t stop with her lips. He’d feast on her skin as well and hoped she’d do the same on his.

“I’ll be ready in five minutes.” Her voice brought him out of his fantasy.

“I’ve never known a woman yet who could be ready that fast, especially one with a chronic lateness problem.”

She laughed. “Just watch me.” Catching her turn of phrase, she blushed. “I didn’t mean literally watch me. I meant just wait for me. And see.” She started for the open door on the other side of the room. “Norton will keep you company.” Then she slipped inside and slammed the door shut behind her.

He refused to let his mind wander to thoughts of her undressing in the next room. He couldn’t if he wanted to be able to walk into Emma’s party. Instead, he shot a sideways glance at the pooch who sat at his feet, black tongue hanging out as he panted from the exertion of his walk. “I’m sure

there's water for you somewhere." Colin headed for the kitchen, a small room off the living area.

Norton followed, and sure enough, his bowl sat in a corner and he ran for it, devouring the water in thirsty laps. With the dog occupied, Colin went back to the family room for a better look into who Rina Lowell really was.

In a bookcase, he found mystery novels, which didn't surprise him since the woman appeared to be an enigma herself. He also discovered a framed photo of a dark-haired man and a woman with her arms around his neck. Since the man had similar features to Rina, he assumed the guy was her brother, Jake, and the woman his wife, Brianne. An older couple with palm trees in the background waved for the camera. Her parents, he assumed. And finally, another of Rina, hair pulled back as usual, her arms around Norton. Colin grinned, liking the mix of family photos. His own rented condo held similar ones. An old shot of his parents and more recent ones of Joe and Nell. It seemed both he and Rina had a soft spot for family.

Already and without trying he'd discovered common ground. The explosive, hot chemistry they already shared went without saying. Their caring for family was a strong indication that they shared other needs as well. Needs he'd be only too happy to cultivate while satiating their mutual desires at the same time.

It didn't escape his notice that he hadn't seen a picture of her late husband, and his curiosity grew. The corner of the room had a small wooden desk. A small photo sat on the

corner and he found himself drawn there. And because the picture was a small, framed, wallet-size one and set apart from the photos in plain view, a twinge of guilt nudged at him, but he picked up the picture anyway.

A too-good-looking guy stared back at him. Colin hadn't known Rina long, but he didn't see her with the suit-and-tie, corporate type. Then again, he wouldn't have envisioned her with a shar-pei, either, and the dog was back, slobbering at his feet. Proof that where Rina was concerned, he should expect the unexpected. He liked the intrigue and challenge she presented.

Why not? He was a man who thrived on extremes. Rina, who lacked artifice and possessed extraordinary depth, offered him many layers to uncover and revel in.

He replaced the picture and stepped back to the center of the room just as Rina reentered. He took one look at her and his libido, which he'd been barely controlling, kicked into high gear. How was it this woman managed to look sexy in a tuxedo?

Colin wore black pants and a sport jacket with a mock turtleneck sweater beneath, the most he'd do in the way of dress-up. Rina had her own mode of dress. His gaze traveled from her black pumps, up her tailored slacks, to the white-collared shirt with suspenders and red bow tie. His exploration didn't end there but continued to her face, adorned only by the sheer foundation and blush, her wide eyes, which had some shadow and mascara, and settled on her red lips. She wasn't in

a sexy dress nor did she display ample cleavage, yet she simply took his breath away.

Was it his imagination or had the oxygen been sucked out of the room? He drew a shallow breath.

“I’m ready to go.” She glanced at her watch. “With thirty seconds to spare.”

“And a damn fine job you did in those five minutes.” He extended his hand, and she came toward him.

“Well, thank you. Did I mention you dress up nicely yourself?”

He grasped her elbow, then without warning he realized what else was different about her tonight. “Your hair.”

“It’s still here, right? I haven’t gone bald since I left you earlier?” She lifted a hand to the shoulder-length strands and laughed.

“No, but it’s a damn sight shorter than the ponytail led me to believe.”

“The art of illusion, Colin. Women are masters. I take it you liked my extension?”

Enough to give him a damn hard-on as he’d daydreamed about wrapping himself in the silken mass. “I liked it,” he said blandly.

She leaned closer and a hint of peppermint drifted toward him. He wasn’t sure if it came from her toothpaste or her shampoo, but she smelled fresh, clean, and distractingly sexy.

No expensive perfumed scents for Rina. And Colin found himself even more aroused by her natural scent.

“Liar,” she said softly in his ear. “You *loved* the ponytail. Because men love long hair. It’s the stuff of fantasies.”

“Says who?” He folded his arms across his chest in a deliberate attempt to play dumb. He might act like a stereotypical male but damned if he’d admit to it. Besides, the feelings she aroused in him weren’t contingent on what she wore or how she looked.

“Every woman’s magazine printed.”

“Oh, yeah? Then why does this shaggy hairdo turn me on?” He went for the personal question instead of pursuing his professional agenda. Rather than jump on the opportunity to ask if she’d ever considered taking her talents to a more appropriate venue like one of those magazines she’d mentioned, he opted to let her know what she did to him. He turned her way, capturing her between his body and the wall, not allowing her room to maneuver away.

She sucked in a breath and her nipples tightened, pressing into his chest. He wanted desperately to run his fingers through her tousled hair but refrained, knowing they were ready to leave and he’d cause yet another delay if he did. “You could test a saint,” he said with a low groan.

“I’m not trying to test a saint,” she said in a teasing voice. “I’m trying to test you.”

“And you’re doing a damn good job.” But this physical thing between them had to wait. “Time to party.” He held out

his hand.

Confusion settled in her eyes.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to use Emma’s family party to research?”

She nodded. “I did.”

“Well, I don’t want you to resent me because you didn’t get your job done.” He didn’t want to give her an excuse to push him away—and not just because Joe’s legacy was at stake. He wanted Rina to believe what she wanted and needed was important to him. Because suddenly, it was.

She tipped her head to the side. “Are you for real?”

“Last time I looked.” Though he admitted to himself that he was sure off balance now. He had a job to do and he couldn’t afford to care for Rina or her needs.

Unfortunately, he already did.

Chapter Four

AFTER THE HEATED sexual tension in her apartment and later in the car, Rina welcomed the relief brought by the cold winter air. Snow flurries fell around them, making it feel like Christmas. With Colin at her side, his hand beneath her elbow, she walked into the Montgomerys' incredibly beautiful Tudor-style home.

She'd looked forward to the huge party both Emma and Colin had described, but when she stepped into the marble entryway, instead of joyous holiday spirit, an uneasy sense of déjà vu enveloped her instead. The Montgomery mansion reminded her of the New York City penthouse she'd shared with her husband. The place her brother, Jake, called the mausoleum because of the marble floors and the crystal and china decor. She'd always known the apartment wasn't her style but seeing this mansion with distance from her past life cemented the notion. She much preferred the homey upstairs apartment she rented. But she had Colin by her side to take away the past, and she intended to enjoy the here and now.

"Coatroom's this way," Colin said, oblivious to her inner turmoil.

And Rina intended to keep it that way. She accompanied him to where a woman dressed as one of Santa's elves sat taking coats and handing out numbers, and she checked her wool coat.

"Isn't this place something?" he asked.

She hoped he wasn't as impressed as he sounded. "Beautiful, but too... everything," she said, unwilling to put her feelings into words.

"Yeah. I couldn't see myself growing up in a place like this." He glanced around and shuddered. "Too many damn things to break."

She laughed, relieved he wasn't comfortable, either. "Why can I see you throwing a ball in the house and getting grounded?"

He leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Because I'm a bad boy?"

His voice was deep, his breath warm, and a rush of air trickled over her skin and her stomach fluttered, settling low with damp heat.

"I like bad boys," she murmured, and his gaze dilated with desire. Then, because they were in public, she stepped back and looked around her. "This isn't a place to raise kids, that's for sure."

"Kids, huh?"

As soon as the words escaped, she'd wanted to snatch them back, the notion too intimate to discuss with the man who made her libido jump. Who had her thinking illicit thoughts, like what it would feel like to run her hands through his windblown hair and warm her chilled body by cuddling naked with him. And when those blue eyes stared into hers, she had a hunch he saw the feelings and heard the thoughts she'd imagined but hadn't spoken aloud.

She shrugged, trying to keep things light. “What can I say? This place doesn’t exactly inspire the image of hearth and home.”

Rina wasn’t sure if she’d ever remarry let alone have children, and considering her current fear of emotional involvement, the prospect seemed unlikely. But Jake and Brianne planned for kids and Rina wanted to be an aunt who had sleepovers and provided fun and a safe haven, not a place where they had to tiptoe and be quiet for fear of breaking something.

She glanced around once more, taking in the Christmas decorations. An exquisite tree sat in the corner and red satin bows covered the circular staircase. Her New York apartment had once been wrapped in similar red satin, she thought, remembering. A professional Robert had hired chose the holiday decorations for the penthouse. To make her life easier, he’d said. In order to impress friends and clients, she’d thought. And Rina had missed the down-to-earth Christmases she’d shared with her family.

“Take a look,” Colin said, pointing to the elves in green serving hors d’oeuvres.

Rina laughed, her mood lightening. “The party theme seems more down-to-earth than the decor or the furnishings, if that makes any sense.”

“That’s because the caterer is as down-to-earth as you can get. Emma’s granddaughter-in-law owns a company called Pot Luck. That’s how they met, and she’s been doing the parties here ever since. They’ve been together ever since, too.”

“Sounds as if you like her,” Rina said.

He nodded. “I do. Cat’s special.”

“I see.” She didn’t like hearing him gush about another woman’s charms, not one bit. Not even if said woman was married to his friend.

“Do you? Actually, Catherine Montgomery is very much like you.” A smile twitched at his lips, but before he could say more, Emma padded up to them in her gown and ballet-type slippers at a near run. Considering the gleaming marble floors, Emma possessed amazing agility for a woman her age.

“There you are! And not a minute too soon. I need you to hide me,” Emma said.

“Excuse me?” Rina couldn’t have heard right.

“Hide me. I’m being followed by a lecher.”

Colin rolled his eyes and laughed.

“Gran, you get back here,” a male voice called as a good-looking man with dark hair joined their growing group.

“Hey, Logan,” Colin said.

“Logan, Emma’s grandson?” Rina asked. Though now that she studied him, she recognized him from the photos on Emma’s desk.

“The one and only. Who’s this pretty lady?” he asked Colin, but his gaze remained locked on Rina.

Heat rushed to her cheeks at his compliment and her newly acquired professional instincts rushed into high gear. Logan Montgomery had manners and a wedding ring on his hand.

Still, Rina couldn't discount the approval in his gaze when he studied her. She'd seen the same admiration in the eyes of the parking attendant when he'd helped her out of Colin's car. Attitude plus appearance equaled attention, Rina thought and made a mental note to mention the dual impact in her next column.

Before her manners deserted her, she turned back to the people surrounding her. "I'm Rina Lowell."

"I've heard so much about you." Logan took her hand. "Gran adores you and I can see why."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Montgomery." She fluttered her lashes at Logan and graced him with a smile.

"You're quite welcome."

"And you're quite married," Colin muttered and not-so-discreetly slid his grasp to her hand, disengaging Logan's grip and marking his territory.

She tried to tug her hand free, but he held on fast. "I didn't know you were the jealous type," she said under her breath, suddenly enjoying his possessiveness.

"I didn't know that about him, either," Logan laughed.

And though Rina recognized good-natured ribbing between friends, she had the unexpected urge to protect Colin from any jokes directed his way. "I've heard so much about you from Emma, too. Where's Catherine? I've been looking forward to meeting her."

"Her company, Pot Luck, is catering this party." Pride filled his voice, and it was obvious no woman could compete

for Logan Montgomery's affection except his wife. "She's going crazy keeping things running smoothly, but as soon as she comes out of the kitchen, I'll bring her by."

"Please do." It was a lucky woman who had not just her husband's love but his approval to do or be anything she wanted. Catherine had both, and even without knowing the other woman, Rina was glad.

"As for you, Gran..." Logan turned to his grandmother.

"I'd hoped you'd forgotten all about me," Emma said, a wistful note in her voice.

"Stan Blecher wants to take you to the Boston Pops and you can't keep running off and ignoring the man. He's a federal court judge, and much as I don't get swayed by status, you can't be rude. You'll dig a hole for the judge and for yourself," he said pointedly.

Rina sensed the friction and undercurrents between grandmother and grandson but wasn't sure of the cause. As if sensing her unasked question, Colin leaned in closer. "Emma has problems with her son. They call him the judge. Logan asked me to get Emma a job with the paper so the judge wouldn't put her in a retirement home," he whispered.

"*You* got Emma a job?" Rina asked, surprised by the news.

"He did it as a favor. Because my son's a stuffed shirt." Emma sniffed, her regal nose in the air, yet her caring tone proved she loved her only child anyway. "But his colleague's a lecher."

Logan shook his head. “Not accurate, Gran. His last name’s Blecher, and you’re just being rude. Now, come back inside before Dad gets wind of this.”

“Oh, all right. But I’m going to redirect his attention, of that you can be sure.” Emma placed her weathered hand on Rina’s cheek. “I’m so glad you’re here. We’ll talk later.” She sashayed away with grace, her dress trailing on the floor behind her.

“I should go watch out for her,” Logan muttered. “I’ll find Cat and we’ll meet up again soon,” he promised Rina, then disappeared into the crowd.

Rina smiled. “I love Emma and Logan’s family dynamics. And as for your connection to them, I didn’t know you’d gotten Emma her position at the paper.” She met his gaze, knowing it was impossible to hide the respect she’d just gained for him and not caring if he saw.

“Are you saying you didn’t know I had a kind streak?” His husky voice reverberated in her ear.

“Not any more than I knew you had a jealous one.” She just now realized he still held her hand in his grasp, his thumb tracing erotic circles inside her palm. She shivered, unable to control the impulse.

“I enjoy your sense of humor, Rina. And I enjoy you.”

And she enjoyed him. Too much, she thought. Though she’d already chosen him as the man with whom she’d set herself free, she still needed to protect her heart. No matter

how charming, the man was a wanderer capable of leaving on a whim.

Already, she knew Colin wouldn't be a man easy to forget. "I need a drink."

"Cat makes a delicious punch. Come on."

After finishing a sherbet-and-champagne-laced drink, Rina relaxed. She held another glass in her hand, and with Colin close by her side, she was enjoying the party. "So, tell me more about getting Emma that job."

"What's to tell?" Colin shrugged. "About a year ago, Logan called and asked me for a favor. Everyone adores Emma, so I talked Joe into hiring her."

"You did more than that. You saved her from her meddling self."

He shrugged, obviously unwilling to admit that he had a caring nature, one that extended beyond Joe, beyond family. With each new fact she learned about Colin, she discovered an intriguing side, making her want to know more.

"I got her a desk job. I didn't know she'd end up writing a singles column, though." His eyebrows furrowed, aggravation plain on his face.

She didn't understand why. "Something wrong with what Emma writes?"

"It's just an unusual slant for a newspaper to take."

She nodded. "I thought so, too, the first time I heard about what Corinne was doing with the *Times*." During their initial

conversation, Corinne had explained her vision of using the paper as a means to bring the town together. She believed that in today's world, people needed more warmth and compassion and less harsh reality.

Under her leadership, the *Times* would advertise where people could meet. Men and women would learn how to relate to one another better when they did mingle at a social event. While the paper would still be reporting some news, the focus would be on people. Listening to Corinne's excitement, Rina knew she'd found a place to call home.

Colin folded his arms over his chest. "So how did you come to work for Corinne?"

"Hors d'oeuvre?" An elf stopped by with a tray in hand.

The delicious aroma tickled her nose, but Rina was more interested in her conversation with Colin than with the food on the plate. "No, thank you."

Colin shook his head and the woman in green took her leave.

"You were telling me about how you came to work for Corinne?" he prompted the moment they were alone again.

"Oh, it's a long story. Basically, my parents knew hers. I heard about Corinne taking over her husband's paper, thought my writing would interest her, and I called."

"You pursued your goals," he said with approval. "Did you always want to be a writer?"

She shook her head. "No, I took the long route. I used to be a legal secretary. The hours were decent, the pay was

guaranteed, and so was the overtime. It covered the bills, but I'd always been more a people person than someone who liked being holed up in an office."

"That much I can believe." His warm gaze met hers, mesmerizing her so much it was hard to realize they were still at a party surrounded by people.

She tipped her head to one side. "I'm hoping that's a compliment and not a dig at my curious nature."

"I admire you, Rina."

The husky tone in his voice sent shivers of awareness down her spine. "Thanks," she murmured.

"And your writing..."

"I always took notes, wrote stories. Anecdotes." She shrugged, remembering. "After I got married, I had a lot of free time to fill pages in a journal."

At first, she'd used her new surroundings and her husband's new friends as subjects. She'd been amused by the for-show marriages she'd witnessed and enthralled by the real relationships, like her parents', that had lasted for years. Her observations had become humorous slice-of-life stories that kept her busy while home alone.

"You stopped working?" he asked, apparently truly interested in her past.

Why wouldn't he be? She was equally interested in his. "My husband wanted to give me the life he thought I always wanted. But staying home and spending money I hadn't earned, well, that just wasn't me."

But to please Robert, she'd eventually accepted the lifestyle. After all, most women would have traded anything to be in her position, or so she'd been told at the going-away party the other secretaries had thrown on her last day of work.

"I can't see you staying at home and eating bonbons, either."

"What can you see me doing?" She wondered how he viewed her.

He shrugged. "A headstrong, determined woman like you? I can see you dissecting what men want." His lips twitched in a wry grin. "The question is whether you'll get it right."

"You're just worried I'll get inside your head."

"You already came close. I read your first article."

"And?" she asked, knowing that right or wrong, his opinion was important to her.

"You made some very valid points. Men *are* visual animals. We see, we react."

"Basic chemistry."

He nodded. "Lust." His voice grew deeper.

"Not enough for anything meaningful or lasting." She cleared her dry throat. "Which is why I have to dig deeper."

"I'm certain you'll dig into both men's and women's psyches." His eyes danced with certainty.

"You think you know me so well?"

He nodded. “I know I do.” But he frowned, seemingly not thrilled with the notion.

And Rina thought she knew why. Despite the banter, the notion of getting past lust and digging deeper made him uncomfortable. He wasn’t looking for anything more serious than she was. Yet in the short time they’d known one another, he understood her better than Robert ever had. Her husband had loved her and given her everything—except the freedom to be herself. The more time she spent in Ashford, the more time she spent with Colin, the more self-awareness she gained and the more she felt she had to contribute to her work. Not to mention she was coming to enjoy herself. A lot.

“Tell me something. Doesn’t it strike you as odd that a newspaper has two relationship columnists?” he asked. “I mean, why write what you do for a paper?”

She really didn’t understand what he was getting at. “As opposed to what?”

He shrugged. “An online blog? A magazine, print or online, maybe? There are plenty of those in Manhattan.”

“I needed to get away from the memories. To start over fresh. Plus, I had no connections with the publishers there. Corinne was willing to give me a chance. And I liked her vision. She wants to bring people together and is using the newspaper to do it. My writing fits in well here.”

He exhaled hard. “But you don’t think her *vision*—the subjects she wants to focus on—is odd for a newspaper?”

“Slightly unusual, maybe. But then, so is the world lately. Besides, many papers, online or print, have articles and columns in the lifestyle section geared toward relationships or other things.”

“True. But those papers have an abundance of sections and space. The *Times* is small paper. Space is limited. By adding more frivolous things to it, other sections have to go.”

Rina bit her lip and nodded. “I suppose. But Corinne said the *Globe* outsells the *Times* anyway,” she said, speaking of the larger competition. “Which freed her up to try something different. All I know is, I owe Corinne for giving me a new start and a new life. And you can’t imagine how badly I needed that new life.”

He glanced out into the crowd for a moment. “Rina...”

She followed his gaze and realized Emma was barreling through the crowd toward them, an older gentleman hot on her heels. “I wonder what she’s up to.”

Rina barely got the words out when Emma reached their side, tripped, and knocked her full champagne flute forward. In shock, Rina put up her hand to ward off a spill and ended up tipping the glass onto Colin, too, so they were both covered in champagne.

Rina pulled at the damp shirt, lifting it off her skin. But the damage had been done, and when she released the fabric again, her sheer, lacy bra showed through. The one Rina wore for herself and not for her column and experiment. The one not meant to be seen by the public at large.

Rina didn't know who took notice because she was too caught up in Colin's openmouthed stare as he took in her now-damp, see-through blouse. As if they were alone and not in a room full of people, her nipples puckered in pure female reaction.

"Oh, my, I'm sorry." Emma began fluttering around Rina, ignoring the man by her side who had to be none other than Stan Blecher.

Rina lifted her hands to cover herself. "It's fine, Emma, really."

"No, no, it's not okay. Let me take you up to dry off."

"Emma..." the man said, clearly wishing a moment of her time.

Rina studied the gentleman. He was tall and stood proud, with a full head of white hair and a nice smile. Dentures or real teeth, he cut a dashing figure. "Emma, come on. Give the man a chance," Rina whispered in her ear.

"Nonsense. Grace left some old clothes in her closet. I'm sure we can find a top for you to wear. And for you, Colin, Logan has a sweater or two I can surely scrounge up. Come, come." She motioned with her hands and turned her back on Stan.

Knowing Emma wouldn't be deterred, Rina shrugged and motioned for Colin to follow.

"I'll be here when you get back," Stan called.

"Lecher," Emma muttered.

“I think he’s cute,” Rina said on her way up the stairs.

Emma ignored her. Apparently, like Rina, the older woman preferred to be the matchmaker, not on the receiving end.

“Colin, this is Logan and Cat’s room when they stay here. Which isn’t often, but still... Feel free to go into the closet and find a shirt.” She opened a door, pushed Colin inside, and slammed the door shut behind him.

“You’re a bulldozer, Emma. And you can’t run from Stan forever. What’s wrong if you have dinner with the man?” Rina asked.

“I’ve been on my own too long.” Emma paused at the next door in the long hall. “This is a bathroom. Go on in here and I’ll bring you a shirt of Gracie’s, okay?”

“That’s sweet, Emma. I’d appreciate it.” Before the older woman could walk out, Rina felt compelled to add something else. “Remember that alone’s lonely.” And she wondered if she was speaking for her own benefit as well.

Two minutes later, Emma returned with a white oxford shirt, as close a match as she was likely to get. The older woman excused herself, then said she’d meet up with Rina again downstairs.

Rina locked herself in the bathroom and began unbuttoning the wet blouse, parting the material. She found a guest towel she could dampen and turned on the water to wipe the stickiness off her chest when, without warning, a loud creaking noise startled her. She jerked around toward the sound, which had come from behind, only to discover the door

didn't lead to a linen closet as she'd originally thought but to the bedroom next door.

And the person who'd entered wasn't Emma but a shirtless, breathtaking Colin.



BEFORE EMMA HAD doused them with champagne, Colin had been trying to get his mind around the concept of how important this job was to Rina and how he could accomplish *his* goals without hurting her. He'd thought to get close enough to divulge the problems with the paper and see if she could give him insight into bringing Corinne around. But both women seemed to need this direction the paper was taking, and damned if Colin knew what to do about it.

Then fate had interrupted in the form of an aging whirling dervish and all conversation and thought stopped, especially when he'd seen Rina in that see-through blouse. He'd broken into a sweat at the sight of all that lace and skin.

By the time he'd stepped into the bathroom to splash cold water on his chest to wash off the sticky champagne, he thought he had himself under control. He hadn't expected to find Rina there. Now that he had, one look and never mind a splash of water, he needed a full-blown, cold shower.

He'd wondered what she hid beneath her bulky clothes, and though tonight's blouse had given him a hint, he hadn't been prepared for the impact. White lace peeked out from behind a hand towel, and thanks to her bra of choice, small but sensually rounded cleavage pushed upward in a tantalizing, tempting V. He tried to swallow but his throat had grown dry.

“A gentleman would say excuse me, turn around, and walk out,” Rina said wryly, not a hint of sincerity in her voice.

Even her attempt at covering herself had grown pathetic. Her hands trembled slightly and the towel revealed more than it hid. Her trousers were low-cut, allowing him a glimpse at her creamy skin, and the waist hit just below her belly button, teasing him with a slight indentation tailor-made for a man’s tongue.

His tongue, Colin thought. He stepped into the bathroom, closing the door behind him and pushing the lock shut tight. “I don’t remember claiming to be a gentleman. Especially when you’re around.”

“I need to understand this,” she murmured.

He liked her intellectual side, the side that refused to give in to instinct without rationale. “What’s so difficult to understand? You’re a beautiful woman and I’m attracted to you.” He took a step closer, inhaling the scent of champagne, wanting to lick the flavor off her skin.

“And you don’t care which Rina you’re looking at, the one with makeup or without, the one with the long hair or this *shaggy* look.” Her voice caught, a hint of awe in her tone.

“That’s right. And it’s the woman who’s researching your column who’s surprised. But the woman in here—” He touched her chest with his calloused finger. “That’s who you really are. And you know me—just like I know you. And I wouldn’t lie just to...”

“Get laid?” she asked, tongue in cheek. “No, I don’t think you’d do such a dirty, despicable, male thing.” Her lips twitched and a sparkle lit her gaze.

She laughed, and he was glad she had a sense of humor about something many women would make an issue of. He closed the distance between them. They were alone in the small bathroom, not another guest within hearing distance. If Colin had to guess, even Emma was long gone by now. He was certain she’d somehow set them up or at least allowed them time to take advantage of the proximity she’d provided.

Something he had every intention of doing if the woman beside him was willing. And he intended to find out.

Chapter Five

SHOULD SHE OR shouldn't she? Rina didn't want to think any more than she wanted to hesitate. She'd hoped for this moment, and fate only provided so many opportunities. She wanted Colin, and it had been too long since a man had made her feel so desired, so needed. Gathering her courage, she dropped the towel and backed toward the vanity, grasping onto the Corian countertops with both hands. Her position had the erotic effect of pushing her breasts upward in silent invitation.

His gaze slid down to her chest and he let out a slow groan. "Honey, that's going to have to mean yes."

"Yes" to what, she wasn't certain, and at the moment she didn't care. Arousal settled low and dampened her panties, excitement a companion she barely recognized, it had been so long. "I'm so glad you're a man who knows how to read a woman's signals," she said at the same moment he dipped his head, nestling his face between her breasts.

He exhaled slowly, the warmth of his breath hitting her skin as he began to taste the champagne with luxurious laps of his tongue. Starting in her cleavage, he worked his way outward, teasing her with nibbles and tastes until her nipples tightened into rigid peaks begging for equal treatment. He was tormenting her, taking his time, making a slow feast of her flesh until every nerve tingled and desire so overwhelmed her, she whimpered aloud.

He lifted his head, his blue eyes glittering with banked desire. "Tell me what you want."

“Is that what men like?” she asked. “To be told?”

“I’m not going to answer so I can be the subject of some damn article.”

His jaw clenched and Rina realized she’d stepped over the line—or, at least, he thought she had. The article was the furthest thing from her mind. Without thought, she ran her fingers through his hair, settling her hands in the silken strands. “That’s not why I asked.”

He cocked his head to one side. “Why then?”

“Because...” How did she explain what she barely understood herself? “Because I’ve never...” She grappled for the right word. “I’ve never played that way. With a man, I mean. It’s always been pretty straightforward, them doing what they wanted, and it either felt good or it didn’t.” Her past consisted of a sort of satisfying sex life. Satisfying but nothing like the intensity and steam she was experiencing with Colin. She shrugged. “I never had the courage to ask for what I wanted.”

And no man had ever asked. Another contrast brought to life by Colin. Another place where Colin stood head and shoulders above the rest. In one breath, she wished he weren’t so compelling, in another, she thanked her lucky stars she’d found him and they’d share whatever moments fate allowed.

“So, I was wondering. Did you ask what I wanted so you could please me?” She rolled her eyes, embarrassed by her naiveté. “Or because you just liked to hear, oh, I don’t know, sex talk? Which I’ve never done and don’t know if I’d be good

at. Any more than I'm good at this." She gestured around her. "God, I'm killing the mood, aren't I?"

He laughed, but she sensed he wasn't laughing at her. "Trust me, there's nothing you could do to kill this mood." He grasped her hands and brought them to his lips for a kiss, then he replaced each hand by her side on the counter once more. "You need to know that I asked because I want to please you. But—" His lips twitched and he grinned. "I wouldn't mind hearing some sex talk from *your* lips."

Settled back with her breasts thrusting upward, Rina felt a little wanton—and a lot daring. He picked up where they'd left off, his tongue embarking on another sensual exploration, and her body responded immediately. Hot darts of desire flickered through her.

"Now, tell me what you want." His roughened voice hit her already-sensitized nerves and made her bold.

"I want you to stop teasing me."

In response, his tongue swirled in circles around one nipple, heightening her arousal and causing her body to shake and her hips to pivot back and forth in search of something even more fulfilling than the treatment she was receiving now. But he didn't give in, didn't offer her what she desired. Instead, he just slowly teased her distended nipple, never providing her the relief she sought.

He lifted his gaze, stopping the arousing sensations, and she wanted to cry out in frustration. "Trust me enough to tell me what you want," he coaxed, holding her gaze.

“Take me into your mouth.” She struggled for an even breath. “Hold my breast in your hand and take my nipple into your mouth.”

His pupils dilated and his eyes burned hot, as hot as the flame he ignited inside her. “Like this?”

He cupped her breast in his palm, kneading the soft flesh and plumping it in his hand.

“Mmm.” She leaned her head back and moaned. “More.”

And then, finally, he drew her nipple into his hot, wet, greedy mouth, biting down lightly with his teeth. Alternately grazing, then soothing with his tongue until the fire he lit exploded in a haze of passion. Her hips began gyrating of their own accord. She needed to ease the ache, and he understood.

This time, he didn't wait for her to ask, just lifted her so she could wrap her legs around his waist and thrust the most needy part of her against his thick shaft. Her body soared at their first intimate contact, which felt so good yet wasn't nearly enough. She bucked against him, her hips pushing, writhing, and gyrating into him until her world exploded in a sensational climax she hadn't expected. One unlike any she'd experienced before.

The contractions shaking her body were as strong and vigorous as if she'd taken him inside her. She was still trembling as he set her down on the counter between the sinks. “Oh, God.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “That about sums it up.” He stepped back and leaned against the flowered wallpaper

behind him. “You sure know how to knock the wind out of a guy.”

Glancing down, she realized that although she’d been satisfied, he’d been far from it. “Colin…”

He waved a hand in the air, cutting her off. “Don’t even suggest it. The first time’s going to be the right way, honey. Not with you trying to give me something back just because I made you come.”

She blushed at his blunt words, but before she could conjure a reply, he picked up the shirt she’d left on the corner counter, holding it out for her to slip into.

Her heart pounded in her chest and her legs felt like Jell-O as she stood and let him help her dress. As he buttoned her blouse, the act of him dressing her felt more intimate than what he’d just done to her, and the incongruous thought made her smile.

“Something funny?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’m just thinking.”

“About?”

“Just that I picked the right guy to get back into the swing of things again.”

He tangled his hands through her hair, groaning as he fingered the tousled strands she’d taken great pains to create. “Why’s that?” he asked.

“Because you cared about what *I* wanted. No man’s done that for me and it’s a gift I’ll always remember.”

“Rina, I—”

A loud knocking sound interrupted them. “We’ll be right out,” she called.

Colin clamped his hand over her lips. “I’ll,” he mouthed, obviously wanting to protect her reputation. “I’ll be right out,” he whispered.

“I’ll be right out,” Rina called, a heated blush rising to her cheeks. “Do you think anyone will know what we’ve been doing?” she asked softly.

“It’s Corinne. Emma said I could find Colin upstairs,” a familiar female voice called.

He muttered a curse. “I don’t want her finding us like this. It’s not fair to you.”

Rina cared more about how much she liked the sound of *us* rolling off his sexy lips than she did about what Corinne thought. But she appreciated that he cared.

He started for the door she’d thought was a linen closet. “I’ll catch up with her in the hall.”

“It’s about Joe,” Corinne called when no one answered her.

“Uh... Colin’s in the room next door,” Rina replied.

“You get dressed and I’ll meet up with you downstairs.” He offered her a quick wink and he was gone.

But her body reminded her he wouldn’t be forgotten.

◇ ◇ ◇

HE SHOULDN'T HAVE touched her. Knowing they were on opposite sides, knowing he had to convince Joe to ax her beloved job, Colin should have walked out of the bathroom without looking back. He couldn't, of course. He wanted to be with her too damn badly.

And now that he had, he was shaken. During their intense conversation at the party, they'd connected as though no one else was in the room. Once they were alone, that connection had deepened, both physically and emotionally. When she'd admitted that she'd never asked a man for what she wanted, not even her deceased husband being the implication, Colin had been compelled to put her feelings before his own. He wanted to be the first man she trusted in such an intimate way, and she hadn't disappointed him.

But now, he faced a more difficult truth. Rina was the first woman he was scared to lose.

A knock sounded loud again, drawing him from his thoughts. Buttoning the shirt he'd grabbed from Logan's closet, Colin stepped into the hall to head off Corinne.

"I could hear you banging from in here." He left the bedroom door open so she could glance inside and see he was alone. Although he wished he wasn't... But he meant what he'd said to Rina, and any satisfaction he received wouldn't be found with her hand. "What's wrong with Joe?" he asked Corinne before his damn erection became obvious again.

"He had a ministroke."

Colin's stomach plummeted. This wasn't news he wanted to hear.

“The hospital called my cell phone and I’ve been searching all over the house for you.”

For a brief minute, Colin softened toward the woman who not only looked extremely upset but who’d bothered to take the time to find him before heading out for the hospital. “Thank you. Can I give you a lift there?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’m too upset to drive.”

He grasped her elbow and started for the stairs. Corinne was an enigma, a woman he didn’t understand. One minute, her feelings for Joe seemed genuine, the next, she acted erratically without thought for Joe’s wishes. Colin groaned, knowing Corinne and his feelings about her weren’t important. Joe’s health was. “What did the hospital say?” he asked.

“Just that he was stable,” she said as they rushed down the long, circular stairs.

He retrieved their coats. “Wait here,” he told Corinne.

Colin sought out Emma and Logan to make sure one of them let Rina know why he’d disappeared and covered her ride home. Though he could wait and tell her himself, he didn’t want to waste a minute getting to Joe nor did he want to give her some explanation that was bound to be awkward after what had just transpired between them.

He couldn’t spare the time to make her feel special and he would have to make it up to her later for leaving. But Corinne had given him an excuse to run now, and he grabbed the chance.

Because Joe's scare came at an opportune moment, at a time when Colin needed space.

He was a man who always left before things became intense, and he didn't know what to do with his craving to be closer to Rina. He felt crowded by his emotions because never in his life had he connected with a woman on such an elemental level.

Rina humbled him. He'd had more invested than just sex in that one encounter, all the while knowing he'd hurt her in the end. Hurt himself as well since losing her was inevitable.

For himself, it was better he build in some emotional distance now. For Rina, it was better she know up front that she couldn't count on him for the long run.



RINA ACCEPTED ANOTHER glass of punch from the server and turned to the good-looking man who'd approached her then proceeded to talk about his portfolio for the last fifteen minutes. He bored her to tears but at least he was paying attention to her.

Unlike Colin, who'd ditched her. He could have waited and told her about Joe himself or taken her with him to the hospital. He could have done many things. Instead, he'd opted to leave her at the party alone. His actions spoke volumes about something she'd known all along. Colin Lyons was the love-'em-and-leave-'em type. As hurt as she was, she reminded herself she'd wanted a fling, and Colin had just proven he was the right man for the job.

Rina squared her shoulders, determined to make the best of the party and gather information for her column. “So, tell me,” she asked Edward Worthington III. “Is your portfolio really as large as you claim?” She leaned in closer and batted her lashes.

He leaned closer. “Come home with me and I’ll show you,” he said, his implicit meaning obvious.

“Rina already has a ride home,” Emma said, grabbing her by the hand and pulling her away. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Research. And tonight, I’ve discovered that men like outgoing, friendly women.”

“Men like to think they’ll get lucky, and Edward is out to prove himself ever since his fiancée dumped him because his mother took over their wedding plans. Now, wave goodbye and let him move on to someone who’s really interested.”

Knowing Emma had a point—she always did—Rina waved goodbye to Edward. She’d only been flirting to take her mind off Colin, anyway. The column was the last thing on her mind.

“Research my patootie,” Emma muttered. “You’re sulking because Colin left, and that’s completely unbecoming.”

Rina agreed with the unbecoming part, but since she refused to enlighten Emma as to what had transpired in the bathroom, she clenched her jaw shut tight and followed the older woman into the foyer.

“My driver is ready to take you home,” Emma said, patting her hand. “We’ll talk more tomorrow when your head is clearer.”

“Nonsense. I’ll drive Ms. Lowell home.” Stan Blecher stepped up beside them. “I heard you tell your driver where she lives and it’s on my way home.”

“Eavesdropping’s rude,” Emma muttered.

“So is your attitude, but you don’t see me complaining,” the older gentleman said.

Rina had never seen Emma put in her place before and bit the inside of her cheek to contain her laughter. “If you’re sure you don’t mind, I’d appreciate the ride,” she said to Stan.

“Of course not. It’s been ages since I had someone as young and beautiful as you in the seat beside me.” He glanced at Rina and winked. He obviously wanted to make Emma jealous.

“I told you he was a lecher.” From the sulking pout on the other woman’s face, his tactic had obviously worked.

“He’s a gentleman, Emma,” Rina said softly.

“Then let him take you home. I don’t give a fig if I ever see him again.” With a haughty raise of her chin, Emma pivoted around and walked away. But not before adding, “Colin’s a little boy at heart, Rina. Give him the chance to explain.”

Rina rolled her eyes because she didn’t see her friend giving Stan any chances at all. She met Stan’s gaze and

shrugged, unsure of what to say now that Emma had taken her leave.

Stan grinned. “Emma lies. Within a week she’ll be putty in my hands.”

“I hope so.” Rina meant her words even more after Stan drove her home.

On the way, he’d told her about the death of his wife, how much he and Emma had in common, and how he just wanted companionship in his later years. Emma, with her outspoken attitude and bubbly personality, suited him fine. Rina agreed. Though she hadn’t met Judge Montgomery, only caught sight of the stuffy man from across the room, she didn’t think Stan fell into the other man’s league. No way would Stan side with Judge Montgomery against Emma. Relieved, she hoped Emma would give in and find the happiness she tried to give others.

Twenty minutes after arriving home, Rina stepped out of her own shower, free of the champagne but not free of Colin or the memory of him bringing her to climax. Alone.

Men. What woman could possibly understand them? At this rate, her series would probably never answer the question.

Towel drying her hair, she glanced at Norton. As soon as she met his gaze, he whined and rolled over onto his back. “At least your needs are simple.” She leaned down to scratch his belly when the doorbell rang.

Norton scrambled to his feet and Rina rose, following him to the door. “Coming,” she called.

It was 1:00 a.m., late by most standards but early enough for Frankie to stop by for some chocolate-chip ice cream and a chat after her Saturday-night date. This was the first time Rina could contribute to the dating part of the conversation and she needed her friend's advice. "Am I glad to see you," Rina said as she swung the door open wide.

"Well, at least someone is."

Rina winced. "Bad date?"

"The worst." Frankie stomped inside and made herself at home on Rina's couch, propping her cowboy-booted feet so they hung off the armrest without touching the furniture. "How about you? How was your first date since arriving in this quaint New England town?"

Rina closed her eyes and remembered Colin's touch, his warm mouth, and his heady scent.

"That good, huh? Care to tell me your secret?" Frankie grinned.

With her straight inky-black hair, olive skin, and good heart, Frankie shouldn't need anyone's help to find a man. They should be banging down her door. Only they weren't, which made the opposite sex and their desires that much more of a puzzle.

Rina sighed. "No secret to share."

"So, was this a good date or a bad date?"

"Both. I can't say he used me because he certainly didn't get any satisfaction and I did, but he left me at the party and..."

“Whoa. Back up and start over.” Frankie’s wide-eyed gaze was filled with curiosity.

Rina blushed, realizing what she’d revealed. “Emma spilled champagne on us, and we went upstairs to clean up. Let’s just say Colin and I had a moment and leave it at that. But when I arrived back downstairs, I found out he’d received an emergency telephone call and he’d left immediately for the hospital.”

Frankie frowned. “So, is he or isn’t he a jerk? Tough call.”

Rina laughed. “No kidding. He did arrange a ride home for me,” she said in Colin’s defense.

Frankie shot her a knowing look. “So, how interested are you in this guy?”

“He makes me feel good.” Rina paced the floor in her living room, adrenaline making it impossible for her to relax.

“Which is what you said you wanted in a first-time-out fling.”

“Right. Unfortunately, he also really gets to me in here.” She tapped her chest, over her heart. “His parents died when he was young, and he’s got scars that haven’t healed.”

“So, he’s afraid of being hurt and so are you. Not a bad thing considering you aren’t looking for a serious relationship, right?”

When Rina remained silent, Frankie pinned her with a stare. “Right?” she asked again.

“Right. Right,” Rina said, hoping by verbalizing the words she’d feel them a bit more. “It’s just that he—”

“What?”

She winced. “I feel like I’m being disloyal when I say this, but Colin arouses feelings inside me that Robert never even touched. Physical and emotional.” Rina walked to the window and looked out into the snow-covered night. “And that scares me.”

“Why?” Frankie asked. “Because if a man did it for me like this Colin guy does it for you, then let me tell you, nothing could keep me out of his bed.” She cleared her throat. “I mean life. Nothing could keep me out of his life.”

Rina rolled her eyes, but unfortunately, Frankie’s point was dead on. “You know what scares me so much? The guy is a guaranteed wanderer. He’ll go when this is over.” She turned back to face her friend. That fact, which had originally made Colin the perfect man, now put Rina in a frightening situation.

“That just means you have to keep things shallow.”

“If it were that easy, I wouldn’t be craving chocolate-chip ice cream, now, would I?”

“I thought you’d never offer.” Frankie jumped up and headed for the freezer. “Ice cream is a girl’s best friend.” As she loaded up two bowls, she continued. “There’s no problem that I can see. From what you told me, it’s been two long years since you’ve indulged and you’re due for some male company. Keep things strictly superficial and you’ll be fine. No heartache, no hurt involved.”

Exactly what Rina had been telling herself. Unfortunately, everything about Colin was complicated and involved so much more than surface feelings. Before Rina could reply, the jarring ring of her cell startled her. No one ever called at this hour and Rina immediately thought of her parents in Florida. “One sec...” she said to Frankie, then grabbed for the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey, Rina.”

“Colin.” Relief settled over her that this wasn’t bad news.

“Mmm. Now, *this* is where the night gets interesting,” Frankie said.

Rina kicked her in the shin. “Shh,” she whispered.

“Hi, honey. Listen, I needed to talk to you,” Colin said, his deep voice pulling at her in inexplicable ways.

With his use of the endearment, Rina’s mouth grew dry and her nerves kicked in. She lowered herself onto the couch beside Frankie, her legs suddenly unable to support her.

“Did I wake you?” he asked.

“No. I was just entertaining a friend,” Rina said, a little devil on her shoulder urging her to bait him.

Because though he’d left for a good reason, there were other ways he could have handled things. Especially after how intimate they’d been minutes earlier. She wasn’t angry nor would she hold his ditching her against him. But why not make him wonder?

He cleared his throat. “I see. Well, I just called to make sure you got home safe.”

At his concern, her heart skipped a beat. “How’s Joe?”

“He had a ministroke. It shouldn’t affect him long-term, but it will slow his recuperation and therapy. The doctors are trying to stabilize his medication to prevent it from happening again.” He paused. “Thanks for asking.”

She heard the pain in his voice and softened, knowing how much he loved the older man. “But he’ll be okay?”

“This time. Rina, look. I’m sorry I left you.”

His husky voice brought her arousal to life all over again, along with more wariness this time. “I understand.”

“Good. Then I won’t keep you. I’ll see you at work. ’Night, Rina.”

“Good night, Colin.” She hung up the phone and met Frankie’s curious gaze.

“Still unsure of him? Or is it yourself you don’t trust?” her friend asked too perceptively. “It’s obvious what you want from the guy and it’s equally obvious he’s interested. He cared enough to make sure you got home okay. Better than my date who left me on the sidewalk and will probably never be heard from again.”

Rina rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “I need to take that leap of faith, don’t I?”

“No one can answer that except you.”

Frankie had a good point, and Rina stood up taller. “You’re right. What kind of example do I set for my readers or myself if I overreact and get crazy the first time a guy screws up?”

“I like what I’m hearing.”

Rina nodded. “So do I... I know what I want and I know how to go after it.”

Frankie applauded and Rina bowed for her audience. But she hoped she could sustain the bravado come Monday morning when she faced Colin again.

Chapter Six

I WAS JUST entertaining a friend. A day later, the comment still stung. After leaving Rina at a party, Colin supposed he deserved the barb. He didn't think she was entertaining a man, but his jealousy had been aroused anyway. Which had probably been the point. He cursed taking the bait.

He had an agenda regarding Rina, but it had been pushed to the back burner by real feelings he hadn't anticipated. Jealousy? Damn.

He picked up the phone and called some smaller companies who advertised in the *Times* and was assured they'd continue to place ads. Then he made preliminary calls to add state and more in-depth national information to the wire service the paper already received. As it was, Corinne was printing what she called "need to know" headlines on an inside section of the paper. Colin jotted notes to contact Bloomberg for financial news and the possibility of acquiring national sports from the AP. Separating man from his sports? It was no wonder Corinne had lost much of her audience. From his perspective, everything was ready to go—should he be able to convince Corinne in time.

Of course, Colin's changes would cost money, but he'd have to spend something to rebuild readership. Some of that cost could be recouped in Rina's and Emma's salaries, he thought guiltily.

"Good morning, Colin." Emma strode into the office, too perky and happy for a Monday morning. Especially *this*

Monday morning.

“Morning, Emma. I take it you spent yesterday resting up from your Christmas bash?” He folded his hands behind his head, happy for the distraction.

“Oh, yes. I soaked in a tub, pampered myself, and read a good book. I’m feeling completely refreshed, thank you. How was your weekend?” She put her purse in her bottom desk drawer as if she’d been here all her life and sat down in her seat.

“I spent yesterday with Joe.” And Corinne, but he wasn’t in the mood to even think about that now. He was starting to have conflicting feelings toward Corinne, brought on by her constant attention to Joe and his needs.

“Corinne tells me his prognosis is good. I’m so glad.” Emma clasped her hands to her chest. “No man should have to spend such a long time in a hospital. I think we should throw him a welcome-back party when he’s ready.”

This from the woman whose column was on the line and didn’t know it. Colin groaned, needing a reprieve from guilt, pressure, and his own thoughts.

“Delivery,” a male voice called, pushing through the doors and entering the offices.

Colin turned to see a man, arms loaded with seasonal flowers.

“I’m looking for a Rina Lowell?”

A low growl escaped Colin’s throat at the same time a knot settled in his stomach. Had she had a man in her apartment

after all?

“Oh, how exciting. Right here,” Emma said, pointing to Rina’s desk. Once the flowers were placed on the blotter and the delivery man gone, Emma turned to Colin. “You shouldn’t have.”

“I didn’t,” he said through clenched teeth.

Emma raised an eyebrow. “Oh, dear.”

Before he could suggest peeking at the card and embarrass himself completely, Rina waltzed inside, a smile on her face, a flush on her cheeks, and her hair tousled from the wind. He got a damn hard-on just looking at her.

“Morning, all.” She strode to her desk. “What’s this?”

“Flowers, of course,” Emma said.

Rina’s gaze darted Colin’s way for a brief second before she jerked her stare back to the bouquet. But he didn’t miss the hopeful glint in her eye and was able to relax. He stepped near her desk and leaned closer so only she could hear. “Sorry, babe. They aren’t from me.”

“I didn’t think they were.” She unwrapped the card and read silently, putting the small white envelope in her desk drawer when she was finished.

“So?” Emma asked. “Are you going to share the identity of your secret admirer?”

“They’re from Jake and Brianne. Congratulating me on my series starting.” Rina didn’t meet Emma’s gaze when

answering, a sure sign something was wrong. But Emma didn't pick up on it.

“That's so sweet. Family's wonderful. Speaking of relatives, I need to make a call and then get to work!” Emma swiveled in her chair, leaving Rina to get settled.

She moved the flowers to the side of the desk, dropped her purse into a drawer, and began to unbutton her wool coat. Colin didn't buy for one minute that her brother and his wife had sent those flowers, but she'd hid the identity of the sender more from Emma than him, which made no sense. He wondered about it for a minute, but when she slid her jacket off her shoulders, the world tilted and all rational thought fled.

Because beneath the oversize coat she wore a black blouse, saved from conservatism by a plunging neckline, and a micro-miniskirt that emphasized her slender legs, which were covered only by sheer, nude-colored pantyhose. At least, he hoped they were pantyhose because if he caught a hint of a lace garter, he'd pass out on sight.

He strode over to her desk, grabbing her hand. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

“Coffee break,” he muttered, pulling her through the double doors to a stairwell. It wasn't exactly prime office space, but it afforded the only means of privacy he could think of.

Not even the dank smell could dampen his desire or his need to get inside her, body and soul. Once alone, he backed

her against the wall, propping one arm over her head. “Who really sent those flowers?” he asked, his baser male instincts coming through.

“You care?”

He rubbed his knuckles down her cheek. “I may have one hell of a way of showing it, but I do.”

“Stan Blecher sent the flowers,” she admitted.

“What the hell does the old man think he’s doing?” Colin asked with a surprised shake of his head.

“The obvious. Trying to make Emma jealous by paying attention to me.”

“And you don’t want to help his plan?”

Rina rolled her eyes. Men could be *dense* when it came to matters of the heart. “Of course, I do. But I don’t want to hurt Emma. She’s not just independent by choice but rather by necessity. She’s afraid her son will put her in a home. If she lets herself get close to a friend of his, she fears the same result.”

“She said that?”

Rina shook her head. “Insinuated it. And I don’t want to be the one to push her into something she’s not ready for. Stan admitted he just wants Emma’s companionship, but until she can trust him, she’s not going to give an inch.” Which pretty well summed up any female who’d been hurt or disillusioned by a man, Rina thought.

“So, you’re looking out for her.”

“That’s what friends do,” she murmured.

“That’s what special, caring people do.” His blue eyes bored into hers, causing warmth to blossom in her chest.

After working at her computer all day yesterday and late into the night finishing this week’s column, Rina had had it with sweatpants. She’d had it with being alone and she no longer wanted to make Colin sweat. Not in a bad way, anyway. Saturday night was over, and so was her overreaction to Colin’s defection. Joe had been in the hospital. Case closed.

So, this morning, she’d dressed with Colin in mind, seeking to grab his attention and not let it go. It had been a girlish impulse and she’d accomplished her goal. But, as usual, Colin had more insight than she’d counted on. He’d looked beyond the physical, deeper than the packaging. He’d seen the woman beneath and obviously admired her.

He tangled his hands in her hair, the erotic tugging sensation rippling through her veins. His admiration and perceptiveness took her off guard. She wanted to keep her barriers high but resisting him was impossible. And when he lowered his head for a deep, leisurely kiss, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

His lips were warm and provocative, taking possession and immediately setting her on fire. No big surprise there. Her tongue met his, swirling, seeking, demanding as much as he gave. And then his hands slipped to her thigh, his large palm branding her. “Do you have any idea what that short skirt does to me?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“Looking at those long legs makes me hard.” He deliberately brushed against her thigh, giving her tangible proof.

She sucked in a breath, her body reacting to the knowledge he wanted her. Here, now, in the dark stairwell, Colin Lyons wanted her. His body backed up his claim and hers went into heated overdrive. Dampness slicked her panties and a rush of desire swamped her.

“And wondering what’s holding those things up is driving me insane.” Without awaiting permission, his fingers traveled upward until they came in contact with the elastic-rimmed lace that held the stockings up on her thigh. His fingertips hit bare skin and he let out a sharp, harsh breath. “Damn.”

She shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. “These are more comfortable.”

“For whom?”

She laughed. “For me. Pantyhose cut into my stomach.”

“What happened to the baggy clothes?” A muscle ticked in his jaw and Rina knew her new look was getting to him.

But far from enjoying the knowledge, it made her uneasy. Because she wanted to know for sure that Colin was attracted to Rina Lowell, the woman. And though he showed interest in the many facets of her personality, she couldn’t deny he was enjoying her transformation.

So had Dave from the coffee shop, who’d turned persistent, and Rob, who’d delivered her pizza last night. She could have had a date with a number of men, including the

wealthy Edward Worthington III. But not even in the interest of research could Rina bring herself to go out with anyone other than Colin.

“And what’s beneath the skirt?” Colin asked. “What’s warming you during this cold, winter weather?”

She was tempted to tell him that she didn’t need clothing, not when the heat in his voice could do the trick instead. “Good old-fashioned underwear, Colin, what else?”

An upward sweep of his fingers over her silk-covered sex assured him she was telling the truth. But that same motion set off fireworks inside her brain and triggered mini-explosions, the equivalent of minefields in strategic areas of her body. Her nipples peaked, aching for his touch, and her sex pulsed between her legs. “You don’t play fair,” she whispered.

“Dressed like that, neither do you.” His mouth hovered over hers.

Her lips parted, craving another kiss, but he gave more than she asked for as his finger found the pulse point between her legs. Arousal washed over her, and she jerked her hips forward, seeking to deepen the pressure of his fingertip.

“That works for you, huh?” Resting his cheek against hers, he leaned his body forward, thrusting his hand harder against the tiny pearl of desire begging for release.

“Oh, yes.” Her lips lingered against his skin as she inhaled his masculine scent and her desire peaked higher.

This game they played would drive her to distraction if she wasn’t careful. She squeezed her thighs together, allowing one

last tide of arousal to sweep through her before ducking beneath his arm and gaining space. She needed more time.

He seemed to understand and let her go, studying her in the darkened stairwell as if he could read what she was feeling in her expression. Rina knew exactly why she'd put distance between them, but she wasn't willing to verbalize her thoughts just yet.

While writing her column on attitude, she'd come to a major realization. Looking good meant nothing if a woman didn't feel good about herself. A woman couldn't attract a man let alone keep him happy if she wasn't happy within herself.

Translated into her own life, once she'd quit work and given in to Robert's choices in decor and friends—among other things—spunky Rina Lowell had all but disappeared. She no longer threw on a T-shirt and ripped denim shorts and walked through New York City street fairs nor did she shop the Village for unique but cheap jewelry that would stand out because of its flair. She quit going to the happening clubs where she'd nurse a drink and dance until her feet hurt. Instead, she got old before her time, giving up her fun friends in favor of her husband's staid ones, exchanging nights out on the town for fundraising galas. She'd even altered the way she dressed in order to gain Robert's nod of approval.

She may have looked good in her designer clothes, but she'd slowly lost her inner spark and drive. No wonder he hadn't taken her seriously when she'd expressed interest in writing or doing something outside the confines of their marriage.

Robert thought a credit card would keep her happy, and eventually, she stopped doing anything to convince him otherwise. Because he was giving her a dream life. Too bad it hadn't been *her* dream. She loved him, but she was beginning to doubt they'd have had staying power. The lesson she'd taken away from her latest article, "Strut Your Stuff," was that she now respected herself too much to settle for a man who didn't believe in her, her goals, or her dreams.

Not even for a brief affair. She already knew Colin approved of her work. He'd hinted as much at Emma's party. But before she'd give in to his seductive charm completely, she had to know he accepted everything about her.

"Come dancing with me," she said on impulse. "Friday night."

He leaned against the wall, still holding her gaze. "Dancing?"

"Are you game? I thought I'd check out the Boston nightlife." She needed to recapture the fun she'd been missing, and she wanted Colin to be part of it.

He shrugged. "Why not? Someone has to watch out for you." His lips twitched as he held back a grin.

"I don't need a keeper."

He shook his head, amusement and seriousness warring in his expression. He ran his hand down her neck and dipped his finger into her cleavage, causing her blood to run hotter.

"Something tells me your brother wouldn't agree."

“Low blow.” Accurate, she thought, but low. “Jake’s a reasonable guy.”

Colin’s eyes held a wealth of certainty. “Even when it comes to his baby sister?”

“Even then,” she lied and crossed her fingers behind her back. “So? Do we have a date? Or am I flying solo?” She wasn’t looking forward to nursing a drink and either fending off men or uncomfortably wondering why none approached her. Neither option held any appeal.

Spending time with Colin, however... That prospect appealed to her greatly.

He met her gaze, studying her in an unnerving way. “Why do I feel like you’re testing me?” he asked. “And how do I know if I’ll pass?”

She was testing herself, Rina mused. *Her* reactions, *her* judgment. “You’ll know,” she said, her voice husky with anticipation.

“Then we have a date. Since I know the roads, how about I pick you up? Actually, how about we bring Logan and Cat along?”

“As chaperones?” she teased, liking the idea of spending time with his friends.

He grinned. “For fun.”

“Sounds good to me.”

A loud knock sounded on the other side of the stairwell door. Colin shot her a regret-filled look and stepped toward the

door. Freedom, she thought and sighed.

“Rina Lowell, you get out here now,” Emma’s distinctive voice called to her.

“Some matchmaker,” Colin said wryly.

Rina grabbed for the handle. “I’ll go out ahead. That will give you some time to calm down,” she said with a pointed look at the bulge in his pants.

He shot her an annoyed look. “Very funny,” he muttered, but he didn’t argue when she let herself back into the hall.

“What’s wrong, Emma?”

The older woman waved the white florist card under her nose. “You’re being wooed by the lecher.” Emma perched her hands on her hips and stared, daring Rina to disagree.

“You mean Colin?” she asked too innocently.

“You mean Colin?” Emma parroted. “Very funny. Stan’s sending you flowers. I told you the man was a lecher. Proclaiming his interest in me one minute, showering you with roses the next.”

“They’re wildflowers, not roses.”

“Same difference.”

“Not in price,” Rina said. “And you were snooping.” She snatched the card out of Emma’s hand.

“And your lipstick’s smudged, which means you were fooling around. How many men are you juggling, anyway?” The older woman sniffed, and Rina stifled a laugh.

Placing an arm around Emma's shoulders, Rina led her back inside and to her chair before easing her into her seat. "You, Emma Montgomery, are jealous. *J-E-A-L-O-U-S*. Because Stan's showing interest in someone else after you turned him down."

"Ridiculous."

"Correct," Rina challenged. "And you know good and well Stan's a smart man. He knows you work beside me, knows you can't keep your eyes or ears to yourself. And he knows you'll find out he sent me flowers and work yourself into a frenzy. Which you did." She clucked her tongue at her elderly friend. "Tsk, tsk, Emma. You shouldn't be so predictable. Men need a woman to be fickle and impulsive." Unable to help it, Rina burst out laughing. "Come on, Emma. Just go out with the man."

"What if it's a setup?"

Rina understood what her friend meant. What if her son, the infamous Judge Montgomery, had asked Stan to keep an eye on Emma? And what if she was her usual, capricious, whimsical self and her son used it against her? "I can't imagine a son of yours could be so underhanded." Realizing how many stunts Emma had pulled in the name of matchmaking, Rina shook her head. "Scratch that. But I can't imagine he'd be that cruel. Besides, Logan wouldn't let that happen." She patted Emma's hand. "Stan is a lonely widower. And you're in need of the same companionship."

No matter how old Emma was in years, she was young in heart and spirit. And she deserved to have some happiness in

her later years.

“Give Stan a chance,” Rina said.

“If you do the same,” Emma challenged, a gleam in her warm, blue eyes.

“Excuse me?” Somehow Emma had caught her unprepared.

“You open your mind to Colin, and I’ll do the same for the lecher.”

“His name’s Stan, and you’d better remember that before you call him that horrible name to his face.”

Emma shook her head. “Quit changing the subject.”

“Which is?” Rina asked.

Emma leaned closer, whispering so only Rina could hear. “It’s simple. You trust, I’ll trust.” The older woman shrugged.

Colin chose that moment to reenter the room. Both her body and her heart reacted, proving that when it came to Colin, nothing was simple. Everything was up for grabs. Including, she feared, her heart.



IN ANOTHER ATTEMPT to initiate changes at the *Times*, Colin sat in Logan’s office, located on the waterfront overlooking the ocean. Even in the wintertime, the view took his breath away. The weather had been cold, snow covered the ground, and ice replaced the formerly frothing and churning waves.

“Sorry, I had a phone call that ran long. How are you?” Logan strode into his office and shut the door behind him.

“Surviving.” Colin clasped his friend’s hand and sat back in his chair.

“So, my secretary tells me this is a business visit. What can I do for you?” Instead of sitting behind his desk, Logan joined his friend in one of the guest chairs.

His down-home charm was what the world loved about Logan Montgomery, Colin thought. He shook his head. “You would have made a fine politician, you know.”

“And made myself miserable in the process. Nothing’s worth that, my friend.” Reaching over, Logan grabbed for a picture on his desk and turned it facing them. “Now, *this* is what gets me up in the morning.”

A picture of his wife, Cat, their son, Ace, and infant daughter, Lila, on a beach blanket stared back at Colin.

“You are one lucky son of a bitch.”

Logan inclined his head. “Find the right woman and you will be, too.”

Colin shifted in his seat. He wasn’t in the mood to discuss women, not when he was bound to hurt the one he wanted most. The other day, in the stairwell, he’d felt Rina, her arousal on his hand. He’d wanted to be inside her body and let the intense friction they’d created make them both come. He’d wanted to look into her eyes and see that overwhelming sense of trust and goodness. Thank God she’d ducked out on him first. Two days later and he was still thrown, torn by obligation and a growing sense of caring he hadn’t expected.

“I need a legal opinion,” Colin said, changing the subject.

Logan inclined his head. “Shoot.”

“If I were to challenge Joe’s power of attorney, the one leaving Corinne in charge of the paper—which is about to turn into a sinking ship—as Joe’s adopted son, can I win?”

Logan exhaled loudly and leaned one foot against his desk. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“Any reason why I should?” Colin ran a hand through his hair in aggravation.

“What about Joe’s wishes?” Logan asked.

No one knew Colin or understood his relationship with Joe better than his former college roommate. Without stepping on Colin’s toes, Logan wanted to know if Colin had dealt with the fact that Joe had deliberately and purposefully bypassed his son in favor of his wife. “Until I hear otherwise from Joe, I’m going to assume Corinne got to him in some way.”

“Brainwashed?” Logan asked wryly.

“Used sex to get what she wanted. As far as I’m concerned, it’s the same thing.”

He nodded. “Well, you’ve already nailed your primary legal problem. Unless you can *prove* that Joe’s power of attorney was signed under duress or that he wasn’t aware of his actions at the time of signing, Joe’s wishes remain.”

“So, I don’t have a legal leg to stand on?”

Logan shook his head. “Not unless you want to go head-to-head with Corinne in a nasty, expensive court battle.”

“That neither the paper nor I can afford.” Frustration washed over Colin, along with the first vestiges of anger at Joe, for all purposes *his father*, for betraying him. Anger he hadn’t accepted or dealt with just yet. How could he, when doing so would cut himself off from the only family he had?

As it was, Colin fought the urge to run from the situation and let Corinne cope with the consequences on her own. For the first time, his feelings kept him someplace instead of driving him away. His feelings for Rina.

“I think it’s time you and Joe talked. Is he up to it yet?” Logan asked.

“After that second stroke, they want to keep him stress-free. But he’s doing well and should be up to talking soon.”

“Well, whenever you get the green light from his doctor, I suggest you do just that.” Logan leaned forward in his seat. “As a friend, I’m going to put myself out there on this one.”

“Go on.” Colin waited.

“I understand that Fortune’s is breathing down your neck, and if you don’t get Corinne back on track, the paper will fold. But I’ve known you for years, and my gut tells me there’s something else going on. Something more personal between you and Joe.” Logan raised an eyebrow Colin’s way.

He flinched because Logan had hit a nerve. “I was always grateful I didn’t have a pain-in-the-ass brother.”

Logan laughed. “Then you met me. You’re talking to the expert on parental grief and aggravation. All I’m saying is that I think Joe’s betrayal is bothering you a hell of a lot more than

Corinne's change in format." At Colin's glare, Logan added, "Or at least equally as much. Talk to Joe. Then, if you still want to go ahead with any kind of lawsuit, you know I'm on your side. It's just that it'll get messy and probably destroy your family."

"Thanks," Colin muttered. Knowing his friend meant well, he stowed Logan's advice in the back of his mind. "And you don't have to worry. I'll make sure Emma has a job no matter which direction this mess goes." The least he could do was guarantee Emma a return to her desk job, even if she did have to lose her column.

Logan slapped Colin on the back. "Thank you. You know, if she's at loose ends, the Judge will go back to plotting her relocation to an old-age home."

So, Rina's hunch was right, Colin thought. Another reason weighing against him. His head pounding, Colin rose, ready to go over to the hospital.

"How is Rina?" Logan asked, taking him off guard.

"Who?" Colin asked, but a grin came easily despite the gut-churning circumstances. Dammit, the woman made him smile, regardless of what was going on in his life.

"That answers that question. But it doesn't deal with what'll happen to her job if you have your way."

Unwilling to deal with that yet, Colin focused on a more immediate issue. "Are you and Cat busy Friday night? You could get a sitter for the rugrats and come clubbing with Rina and me."

Logan rubbed his hand over his eyes. “It’s been forever since we’ve gone out like—”

“Single people?” Colin asked. But despite his ribbing, a part of Colin envied what Logan had. A wife he loved, kids, a family.

Colin’s childhood had been shattered when his parents died. And though Joe and Nell had given him everything, a part of him had always felt as though something was missing, something that would fill an empty part of his soul.

He’d traveled far in search of that elusive thing, to no avail. Now, he’d come back home and was faced with a telling question. Was it possible one woman could complete him?

It was a tall order for anyone to fill. As tall as saving Rina’s job and Joe’s paper.

Chapter Seven

IT WAS FRIDAY night in Boston, the weekend before Christmas, and this particular club was hopping. The dance floor was full, the bar packed, yet Logan's wife, Catherine, had managed to snag them a table because she'd arrived early.

"So, when do I get to meet this girlfriend of yours?" Cat asked Colin. Her green eyes shimmered with curiosity. "I was so busy avoiding a business crisis at the family party, I missed meeting her. So? Where is she?"

"You always were persistent, Cat. She'll be here. She had a business meeting first." 'Something suddenly came up,' Rina had told him, so instead of Colin picking her up, she was meeting him here.

"Mmm. She works hard." Cat glanced at her watch as Logan studied his wife, a combination of adoration and amusement in his gaze. "Newspaper business at nine-thirty on a Friday night?"

"I don't know. She didn't say what she had to do." And that drove Colin insane, which he figured had been Rina's point. To build the anticipation between them. That or to get even with him over leaving her last Saturday, though he had to admit she seemed to be over it.

"She didn't say why she'd be late?" Cat raised an eyebrow. "Then let me inform you. She wanted to make an entrance." She nodded her head. "Yep, Rina wants to impress you, so she plans to walk in fashionably late."

Colin waved a hand in the air, dismissing the idea. “You don’t know Rina.” She was up-front and honest about her intentions, something Colin admired.

“And you obviously don’t know women.” Cat glanced over his shoulder, then leaned forward in her seat, warming to the subject. “Didn’t you read Rina’s column? She talked about sex appeal. She said women like to be noticed and she’s right. Especially in the beginning of a relationship when things are uncertain. No woman wants to be easily forgotten, so it’s important to make that impression. What better way than to sashay in a little late, looking amazing?”

“This week she said that attitude is equally important,” Logan added.

“You’ve been reading her column?” Colin asked his friends.

Logan nodded sheepishly, and Colin wasn’t sure if his embarrassment stemmed from the fact that he was aware of Colin’s intentions for the column or because he’d been caught reading a relationship article.

“All my employees have been reading ‘Hot Stuff.’ Rina’s making quite a name for herself in our little town,” Cat said.

Colin couldn’t help feeling proud of Rina and wondered if he could use the column’s popularity in his favor to get the advertiser to extend that January first deadline.

“Anyway,” Cat said. “I think she’s taking her own advice. And you have to admit, it’s a flattering notion for you. A woman wanting to make you sit up and take notice.”

Colin shook his head, disagreeing. “Rina doesn’t have to work to impress me.”

Logan laughed. “Out of curiosity, if she did make an effort, you wouldn’t hold it against her, would you?” He glanced around.

Colin followed his stare and there stood Rina, decked out in a sleeveless red wool dress and matching stiletto heels, doing exactly what Cat had said she would. Making one hell of an impression—on him, and if the other patrons’ stares were any indication, on every male in the room.

He couldn’t wait to see her, and he’d promised himself he’d put the paper out of his mind and just enjoy the weekend. If Rina’s outfit was any indication, she had the same intention. And already his body was reacting to her gorgeous appearance. He wanted her and hoped like hell tonight would be the night.



RINA WANTED TO make an entrance. Corinne’s last-minute meeting had helped her do just that. Even better, Rina was still riding an adrenaline wave from her boss’s news. Reader reaction to the first few issues of “Hot Stuff” had been phenomenal, surpassing Corinne’s expectations. Giddy, Rina was beginning to believe in herself and her ability to make this new career succeed.

She *knew* her positive attitude transferred into the glow in her cheeks, the straightening of her posture, and the excitement rushing through her veins. Okay, so did the anticipation of seeing Colin.

All three people at her table turned her way. Drawing a deep breath, Rina walked over. “Hi, everyone. Sorry I’m late, but I had a meeting with Corinne.” She settled into her seat, aware that Colin’s gaze hadn’t left hers. Or rather, hadn’t left her body, which had been her plan.

The fact that he’d brought his friends along told her he was letting her into his life in a way that surpassed the superficial, something she realized she’d needed in order to take that next step with him. He’d accepted her, and that was enough to allow her to act on the desire that had been growing between them.

Colin rose, as did Logan.

“And they say chivalry is dead,” Rina joked. She settled in more comfortably beside the woman who had to be Catherine. Rina had caught glimpses of her rushing around at the Christmas party, but they hadn’t officially met. “I’m Rina Lowell.”

“Catherine Montgomery.”

The blonde, who Rina would love to hate for her beautiful face and perky disposition, smiled, making her feel welcome.

“I’ve been dying to meet you,” Catherine said. “But I was running around like a crazy person at the party. I’m so glad you invited us tonight. And now, I guess I should shut up and let you talk.” Catherine grinned.

Rina laughed. “Colin’s said wonderful things about you. It seems like he was right.”

Catherine shook her head. “The man’s a charmer. He’d say anything that suited him.”

Beneath the table, Rina felt someone kick their foot out hard.

“Ouch,” Cat muttered. “Sorry. I have a big mouth. I meant that Colin is a charmer of the best kind. I’m really shutting up now.” She deliberately clenched her jaw tight.

Rina laughed again. “Don’t worry. I know who and what Colin is.” Her gaze met his and the fire she saw burning there warmed her inside and out.

They shared an enjoyable round of drinks and appetizers, Rina learning she could judge a lot about a man by his friends. Whereas Robert’s friends were colleagues, stuffy attorneys more full of themselves than she could bear, Logan was the opposite. Warm and fun like his grandmother. In his eyes, Rina saw Emma’s spunk and mischievous nature. She also saw that both he and Catherine cared for Colin, treating him more like family than a friend.

Another half-hour later, the check was paid and Colin had moved closer, his thigh brushing her nearly bare one beneath the table. The short dress had hiked up her legs and his warmth caused a sizzling in her veins. She wanted him more than she’d ever wanted a man. She needed to explore this thing between them and let the passion explode.

“Would you like to dance, Rina?” Logan asked. “My wife made me swear I wouldn’t make her spend any more time on her feet than necessary. She’ll be working parties and running around for the rest of the weekend.”

The background music suddenly became clearer, a throbbing beat made more intense by the pulsing inside her body, the longing she felt for Colin alone.

But since she didn't want to be rude, she agreed to a dance. She and Colin had the night to be together, or so she hoped.

She and Logan moved onto the floor and danced through two songs. Rina enjoyed Logan's sense of humor and wit. Unfortunately, he wasn't Colin, and she wished the last song would end so she could be in Colin's arms. So he could pull her close enough to feel the heat of his body and inhale the heady scent that aroused her and made her wet with wanting him.

Finally, the music ended, and Logan stepped back. "Before we go to the table, I wanted to tell you something."

"What's that?"

"There's something about Colin you may not know. I roomed with the guy in college. He doesn't bring the women he dates around his friends. Even before Julie, he was wary."

"Who's Julie?"

"That's for Colin to tell you." Logan winked. "I'm just trying to let you know that you're special to him."

"Your wife's getting jealous," Colin said, coming up beside them.

Rina glanced back at the table. Catherine had ordered another drink and was talking to the waitress, oblivious to anything happening on the dance floor, making Colin's claim a blatant lie.

Rina swallowed a laugh because there was nothing funny about Colin's possessiveness. The emotions said a lot for his feelings, backing up Logan's claim. "Are you interrupting us for Cat's sake? Or for your own?" Rina asked, finished playing games.

"I think this is my cue to disappear." Chuckling, Logan leaned over and whispered in Rina's ear. "He doesn't bring women back to his place, either." Then he slapped Colin on the back and made his way to the table and his wife, waving goodbye from a distance as he helped Catherine on with her coat.

Alone on the dance floor, Rina looked into Colin's heated gaze and shivered.

"I don't want you to be cold."

"Then warm me," she said, taunting him. Daring him. Begging him, she thought.

But instead of dragging her into the nearest dark room and having his way with her as her fantasy dictated, he pulled her into his arms. His body aligned with hers, and beneath her dress, her nipples puckered as desire licked between her legs and an overall sensual tug of need swamped her.

The dance floor was crowded, but they might as well have been alone as they swayed from side to side. Music beat out a heavy, carnal sound, matching the rhythm quaking inside her.

"Warmer?" he asked at last.

"Mmm," she purred as his lean, hard body took her on the beginning of what she hoped would be a very sensual ride. She

inhaled, savoring the masculine scent of his cologne, letting him seep inside her pores and her skin.

“Rina?”

She tipped her head backward, forcing her heavy eyelids open. “Yes?”

His thumbs brushed over her lips, letting her dampness coat his fingertips. The sensations as he caressed her mouth overwhelmed her and she swallowed a moan.

“Do you want to get even hotter?”

His voice took on a low, husky quality that reverberated over her already-sensitized nerve endings. She couldn't mistake his meaning. She already knew she wanted the night to end in bed.

Meeting his gaze, she nodded but didn't feel anything like the courageous wanton she pretended to be. “I want to burn.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” His hand in hers, he led her off the dance floor, silent understanding about what was to come surrounding them.

By driving into Boston with Corinne, she'd left herself free to return home with Colin. On the long car ride, Rina had a lot of time to reflect on the woman she'd become around Colin. She'd never been so brazen before, not in thought or deed. But no other man had ever allowed her such freedom to be herself. None had ever seen her playful side. She bit her lip and glanced out the car window. The white snow in contrast to the jet-black night made her think of the woman she was... and the woman she'd been. These days, she'd returned to being the

Rina whose ideal Christmases as a child had been spent playing in the snow, then warming up with hot cocoa at the kitchen table.

Colin respected that woman. Colin, a man who'd taken one look at her outrageous red dress and rather than disapprove, he'd drooled and even grown jealous. She studied his handsome profile. Just the sight of him quickened her pulse and a ripple of excitement darted through her.

She clenched and unclenched her fists, all too aware of the fact that with Colin, she felt not just accepted but alive.

One hand on the steering wheel, he met her gaze. Need flared in his eyes and found an answering heat in hers.

She squirmed in her seat, desperate for a distraction. "Mind if I turn on some music?" she asked.

"My place is closer," he said at the same time.

They'd agreed to be together. They hadn't discussed where. *He doesn't bring women back to his place*, Logan had said. The beating of her heart echoed in her ears in the confines of the small car. "Is that an observation or an invitation?" she asked, needing to keep things light. Needing an answer even more.

He laughed. "You don't play games. I respect that about you." He reached over, his hand touching, then covering hers.

Heat seared her already-sensitized skin.

"It's an invitation," he said. "One I don't extend lightly."

He met her gaze once more, hunger and more than she was ready to deal with shimmering in the darkened depths.

She drew a deep breath before answering. “I accept. And it’s not something I do lightly, either.”

His hand squeezed hers, his thumb caressing her skin. He turned off the highway an exit earlier than her own. Two or three short turns later and he drove into a gated town house complex. Lit only by streetlamps and the occasional room occupied by a night owl, they were enveloped in a cocoon of darkness that fit the wanton, decadent way she was feeling.

Staring out the car window, Rina couldn’t get a mental image of the development where Colin lived. She’d have a better idea come morning.

Oh, wow.

She stepped out of the car and glanced up. When had it started to snow? She’d been too preoccupied with her thoughts to notice. Needing the release, she spread her arms out and twirled around, letting the flakes hit her face and the wind whip around her until Colin pulled her into his arms.

“You’re the ultimate snow bunny.” Serious and intense as she’d ever seen him, he dipped his head for a lingering kiss, one hot enough to melt the snow around them. His mouth sizzled against hers. She’d come here for one reason only, and he obviously intended to give her what she wanted.

By the time he took her hand and led her inside, awareness and desire had all but overwhelmed her. But she had no reservations, no doubts. She was ready.



COLIN WATCHED AS Rina shrugged off her jacket, revealing the sexy dress that had tied him up in knots all evening. He reached out for her coat then dropped it onto the couch beside his. “You know, if it wasn’t for the snow on the ground, we’d never have made it inside.”

“And why’s that?” Mischief twinkled in her eyes.

Sexy mischief he couldn’t resist. “As if you don’t know. I want you so badly, the walk from the car to the house was pure torture.”

She threw her shoulders back and strutted toward him. There was no other word for her deliberately provocative movements. She meant to inflame his senses and she accomplished her goal beautifully.

“Then what are we doing wasting time talking?”

“Damned if I know.” She’d tasted delicious and he wanted more. Reaching for her shoulders, he brought her flush against him, sealing his lips against hers and sealing the inevitable outcome at the same time.

A purring sound rose from her throat and reached inside him. His lips traveled to her cheeks, following a moist path down her neck and pausing to nibble on her bare, luscious throat. He inhaled and smelled pure femininity, pure Rina, and a burst of desire shot through him.

Her head tipped backward, affording him better access, and he took advantage, licking and nibbling at her flesh. “I

want to feel you naked,” she murmured. “Skin against skin, I need to know what your body feels like against mine.”

He smiled. This was what he liked best about Rina, the surprises. Demure and quiet on the car ride home, tigress now.

Pulling her closer, he brought her against him. until his hard erection pressed fully into the vee of her legs, he shut his eyes and savored the intense feeling. “You’ll fit perfectly.”

“Then let’s get naked and see,” she said impishly, a blush on her cheeks and a smile on her face.

He didn’t need a second invitation. He reached for the short hem of her dress at the same time she did and together they pulled the garment up and off. She was a vision in red—red bra, red panties, all sinfully decadent. “I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“Care to take me with you?”

“Hell, yes.” He was harder than he’d ever been and he gritted his teeth, unbuttoning his denim shirt. But before he could finish, she grabbed onto the material and ripped the shirt down and off his shoulders.

“Slow has its time and place, Colin. But now’s not it.”

He agreed and reached to unhook her bra. If he thought she was incredible in all that lace, she was even more superb without it. Her breasts were plump and enticing, her nipples peaked and ready as she stepped toward him. She let her fingers travel to the waistband of his pants, and next thing he knew, he was kicking the trousers aside.

She bit her lip in intense concentration, gazing downward at his straining erection begging for relief, near to bursting against his boxer briefs.

When she deliberately let her hand graze over the bulge in his pants, Colin's restraint vanished. Moving quickly, he backed her to the couch, tossed the clothes onto the floor, and came down on top of her on the black leather sofa. Her body was soft, supple, and pliant beneath his; her warm, wet sex cradling him in heat.

His mouth met hers, the kiss ravenous, a release of all the pent-up sexual tension they'd been creating all week. She tasted of wine and Rina and he couldn't get enough. His tongue thrust into her waiting mouth as he mimicked the movement with his hips, jerking forward, getting as close as possible without entering her willing body. That would come.

At the moment, their bodies were in sync as well as their minds. He opened his eyes in time to see her watching him, eyes glazed with desire and a depth of emotion that would have shaken him if he wasn't feeling it himself. For days now they'd danced around each other, feeding the mutual need and teasing one another with erotic touches and silent promises. With foreplay.

His body shook with the need to keep those promises now.

Taking him off guard, she wrapped her legs around his back, and ground her body in an enticing circular motion against his. The wave beckoned slowly, building to a heated crescendo that could have but one resolution.

No way in hell was he coming without being inside her. Neither, he swore to himself, would she.

“Condoms are in the bedroom,” he managed to say, hoping like hell he wasn’t killing the mood.

“They’re also in my purse on the floor next to you.” Despite the intimacy of their position, a flush rose to her cheeks.

She was obviously embarrassed that she’d been so anxious, and the fact that she wasn’t proficient at this made her all the more endearing. He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, wanting her to know she was special.

“Colin?”

“Mmm?”

“I’m on the pill and haven’t been with a man since my husband.” She paused, then shook her head. “What I’m trying to say is... I’m safe.”

He inhaled deep. He’d never made love to a woman without protection, never wanted the responsibility a mistake could cause. He’d contemplated the notion with his wife. Marriage had him thinking of family in the traditional sense, but Julie hadn’t been eager to lose her figure. Another thing they should have discussed before tying the knot. After her departure, he’d applauded her selfishness since it left him with no permanent ties to a woman he considered nothing more than a mistake.

Rina was different. In every way. “I’m safe, too,” he admitted.

“You don’t feel safe,” she said, squeezing her thighs tighter, intensifying the spiraling sensations. She lay her head back and moaned, and the thought of being inside her with no barriers between them, nothing except melding flesh, made him burn hotter. To hell with the consequences, with the problems lying ahead of them.

To hell with everything but this. He pulled the thin string holding her panties until the material tore in two, and tossed the garment on the floor, giving Colin a view of perfection.

“Sweet heaven,” he muttered. He moved aside long enough to pull off his boxer briefs and drop them to the floor, then noticed she’d changed positions. Against the black sofa she lay, legs spread wide, waiting. For him.

He came over her, his hands grasping her thighs at the same time his thumbs caressed and parted her silken, damp flesh. Her breath caught in her throat, her pleasure unmistakable.

“This works for you?” He ran a finger over her slick heat, slipping inside.

“Oh, yes.” Her hips jerked upward in silent acknowledgment, taking him in deeper.

At the simulation of sex, a shudder wracked his body, making him feel as out of control as he’d been when he was a teenager. But no, he thought. This was far worse because no other woman had ever affected him this way.

And Rina hadn’t been with anyone since her husband. The thought both sobered and humbled him. He wanted to give her

perfection. He wanted to give her everything he had.

Nudging himself at her opening, he thrust fast and deep, giving her what *he* needed, what he sensed, she did as well. From her satisfied cry that shook the silent house, he'd been right.

He wanted to savor the moment that had been so long in coming, but they were both too far gone. Her hips gyrated, seeking release, and his body thrust of its own volition, only too happy to comply. Harder, hotter, the slick, synchronized movement between them created not just intense sensation but a swell of emotion he hadn't been prepared to face.

Though he'd known he and Rina wouldn't just have sex, the perfection of the moment completely overwhelmed him. But as she repeated her earlier motion, wrapping her legs around his back and nearly lifting herself off the couch, she brought him so deep into her, he wasn't certain where he left off and she began. And he didn't want to know.

He only wanted to feel, and when she dug her nails into his flesh and let go completely, Colin felt set free.

Chapter Eight

COLIN STRETCHED OUT beside Rina, every inch of his lean, hard, body coming into delicious contact with her skin. His fingers tangled in her hair and he pulled her close. After their encounter on the couch, they'd moved to his bed, where she'd slept more deeply than she'd ever remembered. Being with him had been a mind-altering experience, one she was all too ready to repeat this morning.

But not yet. "Tell me about Julie." Logan had planted the seeds of her curiosity surrounding Colin's past and Rina wanted to explore them. To know more about this enigmatic man who made her come apart so easily.

He groaned. "Hell of a way to start the day," he muttered.

Okay, so it wasn't the best question first thing the morning after, but she'd spent the night in his arms. He'd spent it inside her body. She figured that allowed her some leeway.

"She's my ex-wife." He rolled over and propped up on one arm.

The sheet pulled low on his chest and the urge to press her breasts against him and drop this whole conversation was strong. Unfortunately, her curiosity was stronger. "And?"

He met her gaze. "She's in the past."

"A painful past?" She probed deeper.

He shrugged. "It only hurts if you care. I'm over it."

"I should hope so, considering where we are."

He exhaled hard, and she knew he was going through that frustrating process of withdrawal.

“So, why do I have the feeling that knowing Julie’s in the past isn’t enough?” he asked.

“Because I’m a woman and I like to push.”

“Even if I’d rather do something more than talk?” A wry, sexy smile tipped his lips.

Good, she thought. He wasn’t angry, just attempting to maintain his dignity with stoic silence. She rewarded his patience with her questions with a long, lingering kiss. One that quickly threatened to explode in another session considering they were both still naked. But she wasn’t ready to give up on emotional intimacy for more sex, as much as her body craved him.

She broke the kiss, licking at her damp lips. A disheveled Colin was as devastating to her senses as a well-put-together one. And if the man was going to have this kind of effect on her, she needed to understand all about him.

“Did you love her?” Rina asked.



COLIN ROLLED BACK and lay a hand over his eyes, resigning himself to talking before any other desires were satisfied. Truth be told, he wanted to confide in Rina, which surprised him since he wasn’t a sharing kind of guy.

“Not the way I should have. Then again, the feeling was mutual.” Sensing Rina’s gaze on him, he stared up at the ceiling, wanting a clear head when he answered her. “I was a

news anchor on a local station in Boston when Julie and I met. We had some things in common and I thought she was a refreshing change from the women who wanted the more dominating personality they saw on TV.”

“You, dominating?” Rina laughed.

“After last night are you seriously doubting me?” He pushed her onto her back, straddling her hips.

She sucked in a shallow breath. “Definitely not.”

“So, do you want to hear about my disastrous marriage, or would you rather repeat some of those erotic positions we tried last night?” He asked, his erection poised at her moist, ready flesh.

She sighed, obviously torn, her wide brown eyes filled with curiosity and desire. He didn’t blame her for either. He wanted equal insight into her past and planned to get it after he satisfied his need for her this morning. He doubted he’d ever have his fill of her completely, something he’d have to deal with soon.

“I want you to talk. I want to know all about you. Then I want to have sex.”

“Okay,” he said, resigned. “Julie and I got married. I was working at the network, restless with the job and life, but that wasn’t anything new or different for me.” He’d always been restless, ready to move on. So why wasn’t he compelled to bolt now, when things in his personal life were at their most complicated? He knew the reason lay in his arms, waiting for more answers. “I think Julie sensed my restlessness. Not that

it's an excuse for cheating, but I think she wasn't any happier than I was."

"She cheated on you?" Rina asked.

Realizing he hadn't been clear, Colin laughed. Amazing that she hadn't jumped to the conclusion that *he'd* been the one to stray, which said volumes about her faith in him. Unwarranted faith under the present circumstances, but it pleased him anyway. "Yeah, she did. Obviously, she wasn't getting what she needed out of the relationship."

"Or she didn't know the meaning of truth, honesty, and fidelity," Rina said in disgust.

Ouch, he thought, taking the direct hit. "I think Julie just wanted me to be satisfied at home and, sensing I wasn't, she went looking elsewhere."

"I never realized we had anything so fundamental in common. My husband wanted me to be more satisfied at home than I was."

"He didn't cheat on you, did he?" Colin wouldn't want Rina to suffer the humiliation.

She shook her head. "I think what he wanted was almost worse. He wanted to change me."

"Foolish man."

Her eyes shimmered with happiness. "That's what I like about you, Colin. You accept me for who I am and respect what I want to do in life." She shook her head. "For as long as we last, I'll know you're not a man who has some wrong

vision of who I am or some alternative idea of what I should be doing. You want me.”

Yes, he did. For as long as she’d have him and, he feared, beyond. Colin nudged her legs aside with his, and while she watched, he entered slowly. “I want *you*.” He thrust deep and she took all of him, arching her hips while her body contracted around him, milking him with her tight, wet heat.

She shuddered and sucked in a breath. “I want a man to know me and accept me.”

He withdrew, feeling her swollen and wet surrounding him. “I want to know all of you. Every last thing about you.”

She bent her knees, forcing him to thrust deeper in order to maintain body contact. “I want to know you the same way.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” he asked and proceeded to know her. Accept her. And she did the same, taking him, accepting every last bit he had to offer.



RINA TURNED ON the shower in Colin’s bathroom. She inhaled the scent of shaving cream and aftershave. Colin’s aftershave. Just the delicious smell was enough to arouse her sensitive body all over again.

As much as she’d like to head back into the bedroom to repeat the experience, she knew she had to shower and let Colin drive her home. She’d called Frankie and left word for her to walk Norton, but she couldn’t be certain her friend had gotten the message. And Norton, the pampered pooch, wasn’t

used to being alone overnight any more than Rina was used to spending her nights in a man's bed.

Any more than she was used to bonding with a man emotionally, and for that reason, her escape home came at the perfect time. Ironically, this time she needed space and time to think.

And an hour later, Colin drove her home. He pulled up to the Cape house and she noticed an unfamiliar black car parked in the driveway. "Maybe Frankie's got company."

"Frankie, *your* company?" he asked wryly, reminding her of last Saturday night's phone call.

Rina grinned. "Frankie, my female friend who lives downstairs." She'd told him about Frankie over a quick breakfast of cold cereal in his kitchen, where she'd admitted to baiting him last weekend.

"Wouldn't be unusual for people to have family over during the holidays. By the way, that reminds me of something I've been meaning to bring up. And would have if you weren't so sexy and distracting. Christmas Eve is tomorrow night." He turned off the ignition at the same time he turned on the charm, treating her to the endearing grin she'd come to know so well. "Did you have any plans?"

Jake and Brianne were coming up from New York tomorrow when her sister-in-law got off from work, and she wanted Colin to meet them. She refused to think about what that meant. Neither did she want Colin to be alone while Joe lay in a hospital bed.

But she wanted to hear his thoughts before she sprang her suggestion on him. “What did you have in mind?”

He twirled her hair around his finger. “I noticed there’s no Christmas tree in your apartment.”

Now that he mentioned it, she’d noticed the same about his condo. “I didn’t want to put one up alone.” Jake would probably kill her when he arrived and discovered she’d neglected their favorite family tradition, but she hadn’t wanted to go tree shopping solo.

“Tsk, tsk,” he said jokingly. “Don’t you think Norton deserves a festive holiday?”

“Norton!” She had to get inside and let him out. Reaching for the handle, she jumped out of the car and ran up the back stairs.

Once outside her apartment, she paused. A pair of women’s slippers sat by the welcome mat in the hall. A pair of wet women’s slippers with gold embroidery that could only belong to one person. Rina crinkled her nose, recognizing that Norton had done his business yet again, this time on Emma’s shoes. Though what Emma would be doing here, she hadn’t any idea.

“Oh, no. Emma? Emma, is that you?”

Colin’s footsteps sounded behind her as he followed her inside. “Emma’s here?”

Rina pointed to the damp slippers. “No self-respecting prowler would wear these or leave them as evidence. Frankie must have let her in.” She ran a hand through her still-damp

hair. Colin, guy that he was, didn't have a blow-dryer. "I wonder what she wants."

He groaned. "Does it matter? We get to be interrogated by the matchmaker the morning after. That's fun I wouldn't mind missing."

"Chicken." She grinned, grabbed his hand, and pulled him inside, surprised when Norton didn't come bounding toward her. "Emma?" she called once more.

"I'm in the kitchen."

Rina stepped into the room and found Emma, the sleeves of her silk blouse rolled up to her elbows as she rinsed what looked like a pair of pantyhose in the sink.

Norton had obviously ruined them as well as her shoes. Rina winced. "Hi, Emma."

"Hello, dear. Your friend Francesca let me in. Lovely girl. Bad date last night and I'm coming up with a list of possible men to help her out." Emma shut off the faucet and wrung out the damp hose.

"I see you met Norton?" Rina asked carefully.

"Oh, yes." Emma smiled.

"And you aren't angry?"

She shook her head. "What can you expect when the poor thing's been left alone *all night*? You should be happy I don't report you to the ASPCA." Her wink made a mockery of her words.

Rina rolled her eyes. Norton was perfectly capable of holding himself for the time she'd been gone. He had an extraordinary bladder. "What happened?"

"He got so excited when I rang your bell. It was about the same time Francesca had come upstairs to walk him, and while she was looking for the leash, he... uh... well, suffice it to say he didn't quite make it this time." She lifted her shoulder in the delicate shrug Rina had come to know well. "Anyway, Frankie took him for a walk, and she said she'd keep him downstairs for a while. Just in case he had any ideas about repeating himself."

Rina shook her head. "I'll pay for your shoes and pantyhose." Knowing Emma's expensive taste, replacing them would probably set her back a fair penny. But somebody had to pay Norton's debts.

"Never mind that." Emma lay her stockings over one of Rina's kitchen chairs as if she lived there and walked into the living room, expecting them to follow.

Of course, they did.

"You two have some explaining to do," she said as she turned around and seated herself in the club chair in the corner, holding court in Rina's house.

Colin walked by and knelt down beside Emma. As he passed, Rina inhaled his masculine scent and her body heated up all over again. The timing was all wrong, of course. As much as Rina enjoyed Emma's company, the older woman seemed to have taken up residence, hadn't told Rina what she wanted, and didn't seem inclined to leave anytime soon.

After lifting Emma's hand in his, Colin placed a kiss on her hand. "You know I adore you."

Was it Rina's imagination or did Emma actually blush?

"Of course, you do, you charmer, you. It still doesn't mean you don't have some explaining to do, keeping Rina out all night."

"How do you know we didn't just go for breakfast?" Rina asked.

"Because you're dressed like a hot number in wrinkled clothing, which leads me to believe you've been out all night. You can't pull the wool over my eyes. I'm too old and I've been around. Now, young man, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Colin laughed. "Only that I adore you."

Rina walked closer to the chair. "Not that you aren't welcome anytime, but what are you doing here now?"

"That's a good question." Colin rose to his feet and thrust his hands into his back pockets, waiting for an answer.

"Honestly?"

Rina threw her hands in the air in pure frustration. "Of course!" she said on an exasperated breath.

"I came to snoop."

That took Rina off guard. "What?" Last time Emma nosed around, she'd found Stan's card. This time, Rina had nothing to hide.

“I came to have tea, make small talk, excuse myself to go to the ladies’ room, and see what evidence you’d left around. Then I realized that you’re my dear friend and such behavior is inexcusable. *Not* that you’ve been looking out for my feelings, but I certainly look out for yours.”

Rina’s head was swimming. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Turning to Colin, she asked, “What is she talking about?”

He merely shrugged, one eyebrow raised as he, too, waited for an explanation.

“Did you know she’s two-timing you, Colin?”

“What!” Rina and Colin both asked at the same time.

Emma nodded. “She’s giving me competition for my dear Stan.”

Rina blinked. “You said the man’s a lecher. Now he’s your dear Stan? Come on, Emma. What gives?”

“First he sends you flowers.” She sniffed, pulling a handkerchief out of the cuff of her sleeve. “Then he asks you out.”

“He did no such thing,” Rina said, outraged.

Colin coughed, lifting his hand to cover his obvious laughter. The traitor. Rina would deal with him later, but first, there was the matter of an outlandish eighty-year-old storyteller to deal with. “Prove it, Emma.”

“Stan showed me a copy of the letter he penned asking you out. Flowery language and written in his own hand.”

Rina rubbed her temples. “He’s playing you. He never sent any letter. But he wants you jealous and you are. You’re interested in the man. Just admit it and go out with him, for heaven’s sake.” She shot an imploring glance at Colin.

“Emma?” Colin prodded.

Old, wise eyes met Rina’s. “I’m afraid.”

“Logan won’t allow the Judge to put you in an old-age home, Emma,” Colin assured her.

He spoke the words Rina had tried to convince Emma of already. But hearing him say it, Rina believed. She trusted Colin’s instincts. His judgment. And that meant her feelings for this man went deeper than she’d ever imagined.

She shivered, forcing herself to focus on Emma. “Isn’t that the same thing I told you the other day?”

The older woman nodded.

“Life is short,” Rina said, speaking from experience. “Please trust me on this and live every day to its fullest. If Stan wants to be your companion, then get to know him. Trust your own instincts.”

“I know you’re right. I just wish it was easy.”

Rina didn’t miss the irony in Emma’s life. She had no problem trusting her instincts when giving advice to others, but when it came to herself, she doubted her judgment. For the first time, Emma looked fragile, a word Rina had never associated with her before. She wanted to strangle the *judge* herself, but she’d settle for comforting her friend.

As if reading her mind, Colin walked over and pulled Emma into a silent hug. Over Emma's shoulder, he met Rina's gaze. Sizzling heat and understanding passed between them.

Emma rose and cleared her throat. "Well, I plan to give Stan a piece of my mind for deceiving me," she said, back to her old feisty self.

Rina smiled. "I bet you will."

"And I'll be keeping an eye on you, young lady. No more two-timing this wonderful man." With a chuckle, she embraced Rina. "You are a good girl, Rina. I wish I had a daughter like you. And a son like you, Colin."

"You just take care of yourself. More importantly, be good to yourself, okay?" Rina said.

"Am I ever anything but good?" A naughty twinkle settled in Emma's blue eyes. At least she'd brushed off her bout of insecurity. "Now, I believe my driver's waiting in the car."

Rina raised an eyebrow. "I didn't recognize the car. Come to think of it, I didn't see anyone sitting in it, either."

"I borrowed the judge's favorite sedan. Heaven forbid he thinks he has the upper hand." She sniffed. "As for my driver, he probably went to take a leak... er, do his business." She shot Rina a wink and laughed.

Rina chuckled, helping Emma on with her coat and providing her with a pair of flat shoes to wear out to the car. "We'll settle Norton's mess later, okay?"

"Nonsense. It's over and done with. Just give him a kiss for me. I love that boy." And then she was gone.

Exhausted, Rina leaned against the wall and glanced at Colin. Somehow, she found the energy to laugh. “Alone at last.”

He grinned. “We certainly are. So, can we get back to discussing Christmas Eve?” Because Colin didn’t want to put off asking her to spend the holiday with him one more minute.

She bit down on her lower lip. “I think I’d asked you what you had in mind.”

“You, me, a small tree we buy today and decorate, and then sex by the fire all weekend long.” His body burned at the thought, and from the inferno in her gaze, she obviously felt the same way.

“It all sounds so great,” she said in a husky voice that aroused every male instinct he possessed. “We can do all that for the rest of today and tonight. As for tomorrow, we could have that fire if you don’t mind sharing with family.”

“Family?”

“Mine. With all the excitement over my series, then my desire to seduce you—”

“You wanted to seduce me?” he asked, obviously joking, obviously pleased as his lips hovered over hers.

His scent, his heat all worked to get her all stirred up again. “Stop and let me finish. I was so distracted, I forgot that Brianne and Jake are coming tomorrow.”

Disappointment hit him hard. He’d counted on Rina’s brother being out of state, on his and Rina’s similar lack of family to push them together for the holiday. So much for the

intimate night he'd planned. "I wouldn't want to intrude on a family holiday."

A wounded look crossed her face. "Who said you'd be intruding? I just invited you. I would have asked you to stay anyway had I remembered they were coming. You just kept me too distracted to think clearly." She stepped toward him, a come-hither look in her eyes, a sizzling, sexy smile on her lips. "It wouldn't be a holiday for me without you."

She trailed her fingertips up his chest, letting them linger on the collar of his sweater. She knew how to get to him in word and deed. Heat pervaded his body, and a throbbing erection took up residence in his jeans. And when she stepped closer, letting her chest brush against him, the swell of her breasts gave him every indication her invitation was sincere. Family or no family, he supposed he could deal with it.

For Rina, he could probably cope with anything.

"How about you go down, get Norton, do whatever you need to around here, and then we go tree shopping?"

"Does that mean you'll be here when Jake and Brianne arrive?"

"As long as you keep Norton away from my shoes, I'll do anything you ask."

"Anything?" she asked with a grin.

"You're naughty, Rina."

"And you love it."

He nodded. He sure as hell did. And the notion caused his chest to constrict.

“Give me half an hour to get Norton and change and then I’m all yours,” Rina said. After brushing a kiss over his lips, one that was brief but electric, she bolted for Frankie’s.

Cheeks flushed and glowing, she lit up something inside him. Colin never wanted to lose the feeling, but he warned himself not to get too used to it. Life was all about change. His parents’ deaths, Joe and Nell taking him in, his brief marriage, followed by Nell’s death, Colin’s divorce, and then Joe’s marriage to Corinne. Nothing ever stayed the same.

Fate always threatened to take away what he loved most. But in this case, Colin himself had the means to tear him and Rina apart. But he hoped to build a solid foundation before then, something that could withstand the repercussions when they came.

Chapter Nine

AROUND FOUR THAT afternoon, Colin lugged a pathetic-looking tree up Rina's stairs. "This thing looks like it's seen better days."

Rina unlocked the door and held it open so he could drag their tree inside. "We're lucky they had any left the day before Christmas Eve. Personally, I don't care what it looks like. It's ours and that's all that counts."

Norton barked when they entered, and he danced around, jumping on Colin with his front paws. "Go walk him before I become his next victim, will you?"

Rina laughed. "I expect that tree set up and ready to be decorated when I return."

"Slave driver." He winked and waved her away.

A few hours later, he stepped back to admire their handiwork. The small tree twinkled with all the spark, spunk, and spirit that Rina had brought into his life. Red, green, and gold ornaments decorated the branches, along with silver tinsel and a shiny star on top. The result was commercial in color but warm and comforting in the aura it exuded. A fire crackled in the small fireplace where Norton lay basking in the heat before deciding to snooze on the couch instead.

A feeling of accomplishment filled Colin, along with the strange sensation of belonging. Here. With Rina and her dog in this small Cape apartment. "Amazing," he said, unsure if he was referring to the tree or the feelings *she* inspired.

“I know. Even with remnants left in the stores, this tree looks just perfect.” Her soft, grateful gaze met his and yearning flared to life between them.

He’d held off touching her all day, knowing the tree would never get put up or decorated if he even so much as stroked or kissed her soft skin. But the work was finished, and now the fun could begin. “We can’t have sex by the fire on Christmas Eve, but there’s no reason why we can’t do it tonight.”

She let out a husky purr of agreement and came into his arms. “But I thought we’d make New Year’s resolutions first.”

He blinked, surprised. “I’m not big on those.” Mostly because they entailed promises, something he’d never been great at keeping. To distract her, he slipped his hands beneath her heavy wool sweater so his hands spanned her waist, traveling upward and coming to rest on the outside of her breasts. The full mounds filled his palms, warm, feminine flesh awaiting his touch.

“Force yourself. For me, okay? It’s an old family tradition, and I thought you and I could do it together this year.”

Even if they wouldn’t be together next year to reassess and reevaluate? Colin wondered silently. “You go first,” he said instead.

“Okay.” She scrunched her nose and she got lost, deep in thought. “I will continue to be true to myself.”

“In what way?” he asked, intrigued.

“You know how some people undergo psychotherapy? Well, I don’t have to. My column’s been one huge lesson in

self-awareness. And it's taught me a bigger lesson about you." She wrapped her hands around him, trapping his hands against her bare skin. "So, I'll continue to write my column and only let people and things that are good for me into my life."

"That's a tall order."

"I can handle it." She grinned and brushed a kiss over his lips. "Your turn."

He swallowed hard. "I'll be true to..." He wanted to say *you* but bit his tongue, knowing that kind of promise was impossible to keep. And any commitment he made to Rina, he intended to follow through upon.

"Come on, Colin. Don't take the easy way and just repeat what I said. Make a New Year's resolution," she urged.

"I resolve to take care of things in my life the most responsible way I can." Vague, but he hoped she wouldn't question him.

Because it was a holiday weekend, no one had returned his business calls, but he intended to start by having another talk with the accountants and seeing exactly what shape the paper was in now. His last figures had been from too far back. Then he needed to talk to Joe. Together, maybe they could come up with a plan that wouldn't hurt the people they both cared for, he thought, looking into Rina's wide-eyed gaze. But in the meantime, he couldn't deny that he'd been progressing with his plan, and he silently cursed Corinne for letting things slide so far that Colin had to put the pieces back together.

"See? That wasn't so difficult, was it?" she asked.

He forced a grin. “Of course not.”

“And now we can pick up where we left off.” Without warning, she reached down and pulled her sweater over her head until she stood before him in a pink lace bra, her pale skin lit by the flickering firelight.

He leaned forward, intending to kiss her, but she stopped him by pushing down on his shoulders, bringing him to his knees. She followed, eyeing him expectantly. The time for kissing had passed and he dipped his head. Starting at her navel, his tongue traced a pattern on her flat stomach and silken skin. He unhooked her bra and tossed it aside so he could encircle first one nipple with his mouth, then the next, tugging on the distended tip until her hips tilted forward and a strangled moan reverberated from her throat.

“Get undressed.” Rina’s demand sounded hoarse to her own ears.

She didn’t care. She’d never felt such driving, overpowering need to be a part of another human being. To be one with Colin. Her hands shook as she reached for the button on his jeans, impatience overtaking her.

“Relax. We have all night.”

Someone ought to tell that to her overheated body. He covered her hand, moving it away so he could take care of things himself. Quicker, she figured, than if she’d fumbled around.

Instead, she worked on her own clothes, meeting him naked on the floor. He pulled her on top of his warm, strong

body, allowing her to feel his erection hot and ready against her stomach. She reached between them and a drop of his moisture touched her hand. A wash of desire and sensation swept through her, a heavy dampness filling the space between her legs.

Unable to wait, she straddled him, holding his hard length in one hand and him between her thighs. His gaze never left hers, hot and intense as she lowered herself, taking him in, inch by inch, feeling him swell and harden inside her. And just when she thought she couldn't take any more, she released the muscles in her legs and he filled her completely.

He reached out, grabbing her hands in his, intertwining their fingers. They couldn't be in a more intimate position. She sat up on his thighs, his penis embedded deep inside her, her entire upper body exposed for his view. When she glanced down, their joining was an erotic vision of two people becoming one. At the sight, her muscles contracted around him and his hips jerked upward, pressing on just the right place to increase the friction and orgasm-inducing sensation.

“Ride me, honey,” Colin spoke through gritted teeth.

He shook from the effort of holding back, and Rina gave him what he asked for. Rising up, she felt every hard ridge ease out of her body before she came back down hard, bringing herself closer to the brink. He picked up on her rhythm. Bucking in and out, up and down, she lost herself in hot, sweaty, desire.

Without warning, the physical sensations swamping her mixed with raw emotion and Rina swallowed over a sob, one

that came loud and ripped from inside her. God, she was close. He slipped his fingers between them, gliding over her clit, rolling his fingertips while they moved, bringing on an intense, explosive orgasm that seemed to go on and on and on.



AT RINA'S INSISTENCE, she and Colin spent Sunday morning with the rest of the crowds doing last-minute holiday shopping. They separated in the mall long enough for him to buy her a present before meeting up again later. Now, gifts under the tree, they were relaxing at her place when the doorbell rang.

She dropped the pad and paper. "They're here." She sprang from the chair where she'd been taking notes for her column and ran for the door.

Their solitude had officially ended, and Colin groaned. After making love in front of the fire, they'd showered, gone out for a quick burger, picked up a change of clothes for him, and returned to her place for the night. And what a night it had been. The woman had energy, stamina, and a completely giving nature, going so far as to insist Norton be allowed to join them when it came time for sleep. She didn't want the pooch to face another night alone.

Now the damn dog was his best friend. While Colin lay on the couch watching football, Norton sprawled on top of him, his face on Colin's stomach, his black tongue hanging out.

"What kind of dog doesn't jump when the doorbell rings?" he asked aloud.

“The dumbest kind,” a male voice said from behind him.

Colin tried to rise but Norton wasn't budging.

“That's okay. If he's attached to you, he'll stay the hell away from me. I'm Jake. Rina's brother.” The other man extended his hand and Colin shook it.

“Colin Lyons.”

“Good to meet you. Rina's told me all about you.”

That shocked him. He'd never thought about whether Rina discussed him with her family. If he had, he wouldn't have believed he was important enough for her to mention. It looked as though he'd have been wrong.

Jake studied Colin as if taking his measure. “Good game?” he asked, settling in on the couch, comfortable and at home.

Colin glanced at the television. “Not bad. How was your trip?”

Jake laughed. “Long, with too many pit stops.”

In person, Colin could see the resemblance between the dark-haired cop and his sister.

A pretty auburn-haired woman came up around Jake, joining them, reminding Colin their private time had come to an end, at least for the weekend. But time with her family meant that he would be learning more about her, as he discovered over the next few hours. Her sister-in-law liked to talk, filling him in on Rina's life back in New York and how proud she and Jake were of her new job and column. She'd even mentioned how the glow in Rina's cheeks was more

pronounced now with her new life underway, prompting an elbow in her arm from Rina.

Overall, Colin was overwhelmed by Rina's brother and sister-in-law. Her family's presence reminded him he hadn't visited Joe in the last day or so, and guilt compounded any fun he might have had. "Listen, since you have company, I'm going to head on over to the hospital to see Joe."

"His... father," Rina said by way of explanation.

"Hospital at Christmas? I'm sorry," Brianne said.

"Thanks."

Brianne smiled. "Do you plan to come back? I was hoping we'd have more time getting to know you this weekend."

"Colin?" Rina turned her gaze his way.

Knowing he couldn't deny her a thing even if it involved more family time, he nodded. "How about I go for a quick visit and come back after? That'll give you all some time alone." While he visited Joe in a hospital bed and Corinne in Dior's finest. He groaned, wishing not for the first time since Joe's remarriage that Nell was still alive and he had the family he'd grown up with instead of some awkward situation where Colin felt like a third wheel.

"Can you make it back by dinner?" Rina asked.

"You should try," Jake said. "Otherwise, you're leaving me alone with these two women and one wuss of a dog." He grinned, making his joke obvious before Rina could smack him.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“That would be great. I really want the three of us to celebrate. Jake, did you read my columns?” Rina asked, shamelessly seeking praise.

Something Jake obviously realized because he laughed and pulled her into a brotherly embrace. “You know I’m proud of you, Ri.”

So was Colin. Pride and admiration filled him, feelings at odds with promises already made. During halftime, he’d checked his cell to discover he’d missed a call from Ron Gold. The lender had wanted to know what progress Colin had made with Corinne, and he’d asked how soon the paper would begin its turnaround. Damn.

It was time he cornered Corinne again.

“I’ll walk Colin out and be back in a few minutes.” Rina followed him, stepping outside and shutting the door behind them. “I know you need to see Joe, but I hope you don’t feel like we’re pushing you out.”

He cradled her cheek in his palm. “Of course not. It’s just that being around your family reminded me I need to be more attentive to mine.”

“You’ll come back?” she asked.

She stepped closer, her body heat obvious despite the cold, attracting him, beckoning to him, offering him warmth that went beyond skin deep. “I’ll come back,” he promised.

Differences aside, he meant to keep his word.



COLIN PACED THE hallway. He couldn't bring himself to go back into Joe's room and watch Corinne fawn over his father, waving her perfumed wrist around and issuing orders to Colin to get more water and help her take care of Joe. He didn't need Corinne telling him what to do for the man he'd known most of his life.

He paused in the doorway of Joe's room, realizing the couple was having a hushed conversation. Joe was weak and hadn't done more than open his eyes. As a result of the stroke, he had slurred speech and Colin hadn't pressed him. But there he was with Corinne, her head bent, and soft whispers passing between them.

As he'd come to believe by watching Corinne over the last week, there was more to this relationship than he'd originally believed. Hell, there'd have to be more to Joe and Corinne's marriage than sex or convenience or even money for Joe to give her power of attorney and control of the paper instead of giving that control to *his son*.

Logan had been right all along. The adoption papers called Colin Joe's son, but more and more, Colin was coming to feel shut out. Belonging nowhere and to no one. A tight knot constricted his chest, making breathing difficult. He wished he could blame the antiseptic hospital smells, but something else was at work and Colin didn't like it worth a damn.

He also didn't like the waiting. Unfortunately, the time of year and the circumstances with Joe left him without a choice. There'd be no talking to Corinne now.

Colin slipped back into the hall, nearly colliding with a nurse and her lunch cart on the way out. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Making his way to the elevators, he only wanted to get the hell out of here.

Away from the family he didn’t really have, the place he didn’t belong. He needed to be with Rina. She made him feel accepted, whole in a way he’d never been. But the last thing he wanted to deal with was another family situation where he was the outsider.

He’d promised her he’d come back, but he wasn’t ready now. In fact, he was one step away from jumping on a plane and saying to hell with them all. His love for Joe wouldn’t allow it, of course, not until things with the paper were settled.

But the stronger pull came not from his father figure, but from Rina, or more accurately, the feelings she inspired in him. Feelings that were growing beyond anything he’d anticipated or knew how to deal with.



SINCE BRIANNE AND Jake insisted they wanted to spend the night in a hotel and not put her out, Rina had the evening to herself. Of course, she wouldn’t be alone if Colin had shown up as he’d promised. But she was coming to realize Colin didn’t keep promises. He didn’t know how, she thought sadly.

In her heart, she knew he hadn’t meant to hurt her, not when he’d left her at Emma’s party and not tonight. Ironically, writing about what men wanted was helping her sort out her relationship with Colin. Once she’d gotten past sex appeal,

attraction, and attitude, she had to ask herself what kept people together. And what immediately came to mind was understanding, something Colin needed.

Anger would only drive him away. Rina suspected losing his parents had left him unable to deal with his feelings, and so, when things got out of control, he withdrew. As he had when his parents died, and as he had when his marriage went bad. Even Rina had seen him run more than once. Being around her family hadn't been easy for him. She'd seen his clenched jaw and occasional restless pacing. Until he faced his past and his feelings, understanding was the only thing she could offer him now.

Unable to help herself or Colin, she decided to share her insight with her readers and sat down in front of the computer. With the upcoming new year, Rina hoped that more relationships would be strengthened than lost. That was the point of her column, after all. Too bad she, personally, couldn't count on that optimistic outcome.

By the time she typed the last sentence and glanced up, over two hours had passed. She saved her document, then emailed to Corinne. Cathartic as well as productive, this week's column, entitled "Of One Mind: Getting Inside Your Man's Head," was ready.

She'd gone way beyond the first article that detailed superficial things like hair and makeup. Once a woman landed a man, those frills still counted but the heart and soul had something at stake, too.

She stood and stretched her cramped muscles, feeling proud of a job well done. Except for Colin's absence, life was very good right now and would be even better once she soaked in a nice, warm, strawberry-scented bath. She pulled her hair on top of her head, changed into a robe, ran the water, and was just about to climb into the tub when the doorbell rang. Norton jumped up from the bathroom floor and ran for the front door.

Rina followed, assuming Frankie had come by to tell her about the date she'd accepted with a coworker. One thing Rina could say for her friend, she didn't have a problem getting an initial date. Apparently, Rina's bath would have to wait.

Commiserating about men couldn't. But when she opened the door, instead of Frankie, she found a surprise visitor leaning against the door frame. "Colin!"

"Hi," he said, then wedged his foot in the doorway.

Obviously, he assumed she'd slam the door in his face. He couldn't be more wrong.

She inhaled his masculine scent and memories of having him inside her body ricocheted through her. "Come on in." She figured that was a start.

After shutting the door behind him, she turned to meet his gaze.

"Don't hate me, Rina. I couldn't handle that." He laid a hand on her shoulder and his fingertips brushed the sensitive skin on her neck.

She shivered, his touch more sensual than apologetic. "I didn't expect to see you again tonight. Or any other time this

weekend, to be honest.”

Because her family would still be around, Rina had counted Colin out. The fact that he was here now gave her a ridiculous amount of hope for a woman who’d just admitted to herself that she accepted this man for the wanderer he was.

Exhaustion strained his expression, and her heart went out to him. He ran a hand through his hair. “When I left the hospital, at first I needed to be alone. To get away from everyone and everything.”

His fingers tangled in the stray strands of her hair, causing her pulse to hammer wildly and her mouth to grow dry.

He led her inside and together they sat on the couch. Rina curled her legs beneath her.

“I wasn’t ready to deal with another family situation.”

He’d confirmed her hunch. One part of her liked knowing she understood him so well, another part was disappointed that he’d fallen back into old patterns.

“Especially another one where I was an outsider.” He held out his hand and waited.

He obviously wanted her understanding. She’d already promised herself she’d provide it, and now she knew why. *She loved him*. Flaws and all, *she loved* this man who found himself unable to handle emotion or commitment.

Seconds passed, in which the roar in her ears and the silent echo of the words were the only sounds she heard. *She loved him*. Because of Colin, she’d come to understand her past and her marriage, and she knew not only what she wanted, but

what she deserved out of life. Colin would never demand self-sacrifice.

He'd never ask her to give up the career she loved or the life she'd created. He might leave in the end, but he'd given her something precious to keep in her heart. He'd given her his understanding. In return, because she loved and accepted him, she'd reciprocate by letting him go.

She placed her palm inside his. The sizzling sexual tension sprang to life once more. Only this time she knew more than desire crackled between them. Because the heart she thought she'd protected belonged to him.

Chapter Ten

“WHAT HAPPENED AT the hospital?” Rina asked.

Colin shrugged. He leaned back into the cushioned sofa and glanced up at the ceiling, his pain obvious. “Watching Corinne at Joe’s bedside made me... uncomfortable.”

“Why?” She needed details if she was going to help him through this. That he’d come to her now showed how much faith he placed in them. She didn’t want to let him down.

“All this time, I’ve been blaming her for working her wiles on Joe and destroying the family we used to have.”

“And now?” Rina asked, leading but wanting him to confide on his own.

“I accepted something I probably knew all along but wasn’t ready to face.”

Rina squeezed his hand tighter. “Which is?”

“Corinne’s not the outsider, I am.”

She had a family she’d never feel left out of. Colin didn’t, and his words hit Rina hard, helping her to understand him even more. Still, maybe his vision was distorted, coming from the perspective of the little boy who’d lost his parents and then felt as if he’d had no one.

“I know that’s your perception and I’ve never met Joe, but my heart tells me he wouldn’t agree. The man took you into his home. He adopted you. That says something about his feelings for you. Did you talk to him today?”

“I didn’t want to be in a place I didn’t belong, so I took off.”

“So, what brought you back here now?”

He rolled his head to the side, meeting her gaze. “You’re the only one I trust enough to let in.” He pointed to his chest. “Here.” He tapped the area over his heart.

A lump rose to her throat as he reached out and touched her cheek.

“Am I forgiven?”

“There never was anything to forgive.”

He released a long breath, and she felt as if she’d given him a gift.

Still, she sensed he wasn’t finished, that he had more to reveal. “What else did you realize today?” she asked.

“Are you a mind reader?” he asked, laughing.

“No, but I guess I am coming to know you.”

Gratitude flickered in his gaze. “Joe raised me as his son. From plain old discipline to learning journalism at his knee, he didn’t treat me any differently than if he’d had a kid of his own.”

“That says so much about his character. He’s obviously a good man.”

“I know. That’s what makes this so hard to reconcile. When Joe got sick, who did he give power of attorney? Who did he trust with his biggest, most beloved asset? With the

asset he taught *me* to love and respect? Not his *son*, but his wife of two years.”

She heard the betrayal in Colin’s voice. She felt his pain in her heart. Her words wouldn’t offer any explanation or ease his hurt, but she instinctively knew exactly what he needed. Something she could provide.

Turning toward him, she held out her arms, waiting as he came forward, his lips sealing hard and fast against hers.

Rina’s lips devoured Colin’s with abandon, not holding back. His blood heated and blazed, desire threatening to rampage out of control.

“Let’s take this into the bedroom,” he suggested, breaking the kiss.

He had no doubt she’d agree. Her body spoke for her, telling him she wanted him as much as he wanted her. But more importantly, she’d listened and understood, offering the comfort he needed without him having to ask.

“Sounds like a good plan,” she said, her brown eyes glittering bright with desire.

Rising from the couch, he picked her up and swept her into his arms. “You should know I didn’t come back here expecting this.”

She laughed and shook her head before running a finger down his cheek. “Liar.”

Caught, he merely grinned. “Okay, let’s say I needed you and leave it at that.”

“That’s more like the silver-tongued devil you usually are.”

He laughed. Her acceptance filled an emptiness inside him. He could have said that gnawing hole had begun with Joe’s illness, but the empty pit had been eating away at him for a long time. Since his parents’ deaths.

And that emptiness had led to the need to fill the void. He’d fallen back on travel, and the old desire was beckoning again. But he hadn’t been able to outrun the void in the past and he knew it wouldn’t accomplish anything now. He was fighting it this time, but it was difficult.

The woman in his arms made it easier. He made his way to the bedroom with her nuzzling at his neck, her breath warm against his skin. Without warning, she began to tug at his earlobe with her teeth. The sensation was hot and erotic, shooting desire straight to his cock. She’d not only chased away the pain but *she’d* filled the emptiness.

The realization struck him hard, but before he could deal with what that meant, he’d reached the bed and more urgent needs called to him.

He lowered her to the comforter and came down on top of her in the nick of time, spreading her thighs and settling his hard, aching erection between her legs. Though he was fully dressed, he realized she wasn’t.

Her robe parted easily, and instead of thin silk, he discovered bare flesh, heat, and her needy sex waiting for his touch and his taste. He curled his fingers around the down comforter surrounding them and prayed for restraint.

“Don’t you think you’re overdressed?” she asked.

To hell with it. Restraint was overrated. He rose and began stripping out of his clothes, mindless of where they fell but not unaware of Rina. She watched him undress. Her bright gaze followed his movements, the need dilating her eyes an arousing sight. As was her pose. She lay on the bed, robe parted, exposing a hint of white skin and cleavage above the belted knot.

He eased himself beside her, fully naked and completely aroused. Flesh against flesh, he thought he’d died and gone to heaven except for the hard ache he’d yet to satisfy.

“I have a surprise.” Her light laughter only served to inflame his need even more.

“I like surprises.”

“Then close your eyes.”

He lay back and complied, his body charged, his mind barely able to focus. In the darkness, he heard her open a drawer and rummage through it. “No peeking,” she warned him.

He covered his eyes with one arm for good measure.

“Ready?” she asked in a husky voice.

“That’s a loaded question, Rina.” And then he nearly flew off the bed as he felt the first silken touch of... “What is that?”

“What’s it feel like?”

“A soft tingling,” he said through gritted teeth as a featherlight sensation teased his skin and worked its way up

his thighs. “A feather?”

“Wrong.”

The fluttering torment continued as she caressed his lower abdomen, flirting with him, circling close to where his erection pulsed thick and ready.

“Guess again.”

The sensation came once more, this time teasing the head of his cock, causing his hips to jerk upward. He nearly came then. Unable and unwilling to play anymore, he opened his eyes.

Rina straddled his thighs, a long ponytail in her hand, a warm, inviting smile on her flushed face. “I remember how much you liked the long hair, so I thought I’d satisfy that ultimate male fantasy.”

“What male fantasy?”

“Wrapping long hair around your body. Don’t tell me it’s not something you’ve dreamed about.” She studied him through too-innocent eyes for a woman so bewitching.

“If I admit to the obvious, do you think we can do something about this?” He glanced at his unrestrained erection.

“I think that can be arranged.” With a wicked grin, she tossed the hair extension aside and covered his thighs with splayed hands, inching upward until her fingertips touched his coarse hair.

He let out a groan. This woman would be the death of him.

“But first, I need you to tell me what you want.” She swallowed hard and hesitated, the uncertainty more endearing than her earlier boldness had been.

He’d once asked her to tell him the same thing, and he was grateful she’d cared enough to ask. “I want you to take me in your mouth.” He needed her to give to him that way. Needed to know she was as far gone as he. “Grip me in your hand, take me in your mouth, and make me come.”

He held his breath and waited as she stretched out beside him, her legs near his head, her mouth hovering above his sex. “A first,” he thought he heard her say, and then he heard nothing because she’d done as he’d asked.

Heat enveloped him, cushioning him in liquid warmth. At the first lap of her tongue, he nearly came off the bed. And then she bathed him with long sweeps of her tongue, alternating with erotic grazing of teeth against his cock.

“Sweet heaven,” he muttered with an uncontrollable groan. He was lost in the most incredible whirlpool of sensation but not so far gone he couldn’t think of her, and when he opened his eyes, her bare skin beckoned to him.

It took some maneuvering and some concentration on his part not to come first, but he managed to part her robe and find the vee of her legs. He grasped her thighs and placed his mouth on her feminine heat, finding her wet and wanting.

“Colin?”

The shock in her voice sounded at the same time the swirling arousing sensations rocking his body tapered off.

Damn. “Relax, sweetheart. I want you with me when I come.”

The things Rina did to him, body, heart, and soul defied description. He inhaled her scent and his body trembled as he began working her again with his tongue.

A whimper escaped, bubbling up from the back of her throat, and her hips began a subtle gyration, begging for more. Holding on to her thighs, he met her silent demand as she did the same for him, slickening his hard shaft with her mouth and gliding her hands up and down, mimicking the thrust of his body pumping into her tight heat.

Within seconds, a shaking, shuddering climax hit him, harder than any he could remember, sending him into a breath-stealing moment of release and complete surrender. From the cry that escaped her lips, he knew he’d taken her along for the ride. And that notion pleased him far more than his own physical release.



LATER, AFTER A shower that involved more than washing up, they shared popcorn in bed music from her phone played in the background. A dim light set the room aglow, Rina snuggled beside him, and Colin felt a contentment that had always eluded him.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said.

“I know. I can hear those old gears grinding.”

She laughed. “I’m serious. You were talking earlier about how hurt you were that Joe didn’t leave the running of the paper to you in case of an emergency.”

The topic sobered him, reminding him of how and why he'd ended up back on Rina's doorstep tonight. Watching Corinne sit by Joe's bedside, her gaze wet, his hand in hers, he'd felt like an outsider in a family he thought had been his. He wasn't a child and he understood how juvenile his thoughts seemed, so he'd tried to focus on the reasons behind his feelings.

It came back to the bond he'd always shared with Joe. The bond the older man had broken. The newspaper. "What about it?" he asked Rina.

"Well, I take it that Joe hasn't been up to a business conversation for awhile now, so you don't know why he did what he did."

"That about sums it up."

"Until you can talk with him, you won't feel much better. But you can try talking to Corinne and not fighting with her," she suggested. "I did notice you aren't exactly your charming self when she's around."

Despite the serious subject, he laughed. "That's true." He picked up a piece of popcorn. "Open," he said. Rina opened her mouth, and he popped a piece inside. "But I have tried, and she's set on doing things her way. And I went there today, intending to hash things out, but..." He shook his head. "It wasn't the time."

She chewed and swallowed. "Well, you're the one with experience," she said, taking his side without knowing what his side was or what it would mean for her future. "As soon as Joe's better, I'm sure he'll hear you out."

“The doctor’s indicated a return to work wasn’t coming anytime soon,” he said.

“But he’ll be able to take back the reins or at least oversee more. At the very least, you’ll be able to talk to him again.” She leaned over and placed a salty kiss on his lips. “You’ll feel better once you get things off your chest. Be true to yourself, Colin. I already told you, my marriage taught me that’s the one thing that counts in life.”

“You told me a little. I want to know more.”

She eyed him steadily. “I realize now that though I did love Robert...” She trailed off.

And he hated the jealousy gnawing at his gut. Hating the thought of Rina with any other man.

“Although I loved him, it was a steady, dependable kind of love.” She drew a calming breath. “Not anything like...” She shook her head, interrupting herself. “Never mind.”

Colin’s stomach clenched, but he refused to push her. Probably because he was afraid she’d compare her safe marriage to their more-combustible, less-reliable, short-term affair. And he wasn’t in any position to reassure her.



RINA DECIDED TO throw a last-minute party on Christmas Day. Instead of having Colin uncomfortable and surrounded only by her family, she wanted to bring his friends and relatives to him.

Luckily, Logan and Catherine agreed to move their holiday celebration to Rina’s, and Catherine even offered to bring the

food, for which Rina was eternally grateful. Catherine then talked her sister, Kayla, and her husband, Kane, into joining them. Frankie had also agreed since her family was out of state and she hadn't made any plans. And Emma had jumped with glee, accepting any excuse to spend Christmas with Logan and away from her son. She'd even asked if she could bring Stan.

Progress came in many forms, Rina thought wryly as her company all mingled in the family room. Rina's only concern was whether Norton would behave. She glanced down at the offending male, who stared up at her with soulful eyes.

He didn't like having his home invaded by so many people who ignored him or refused to pass him food. "You will be good, won't you, boy?"

"If you insist on wearing that dress, I can't promise a thing."

Rina turned. Colin stood in the doorway, staring at her hungrily from across the expanse of the small kitchen. "For a minute there, I thought Norton was answering me."

He laughed, stepping toward her. "You look incredible."

Heat flooded her cheeks, but she was glad he'd noticed. "You're not so bad yourself."

"Now, there's a compliment," he said wryly. "Are you really worried about Norton? I can walk him if you are."

She shrugged. "I'm just being cautious. He's not too happy with so many people in his space. Except for you. He adores you. And so do I." She brushed a kiss on his clean-shaven

cheek, inhaling his seductive, purely masculine scent. Delicious, she thought.

She couldn't get enough of him. No matter how dangerous the thought, she had no choice but to accept what he gave and put the notion of him moving on out of her mind. It would happen soon enough, especially if things with Joe didn't go well.

Forcing herself to think about the party and the guests instead of making love with Colin wasn't easy. "You can walk him in about an hour. Right now, he's just sulking."

Colin cocked his head to the side, taking in the morose dog. "How can you tell?"

"Because he's not jumping and begging for attention. He wants these people to come to him. He went through a period like this after his stint as a hero dog. He saved Brianne from a drug dealer who wanted revenge on my brother. He got so spoiled afterward it took a while until he started acting like a normal canine again."

Colin raised an eyebrow in surprise. "I didn't think he had a vicious bone in his wrinkled body."

She laughed. "He doesn't. He didn't even have to bare his teeth. All he had to do was pee on the guy's leg. The bad guy lost his focus, giving Jake a chance to step in."

Colin grinned. "Way to use your bodily functions, man."

Norton thumped his tail in reply.

"Hey, I thought I was the hero who rescued Brianne." Jake entered the kitchen.

“Only after Norton provided the opportunity, and don’t you forget it. You owe him.”

“I paid in advance by watching him that entire summer,” he muttered.

“I’m sure it wasn’t that much of a hardship.” She folded her arms over her chest. “And I didn’t realize you were standing there.”

He folded his arms over his chest, too, a gesture very much like Rina’s, Colin thought.

“I’m just observing,” Jake said, his gaze on Colin.

Observing him, Colin realized. Rina hadn’t said anything, but it was obvious his decision not to return yesterday had impacted not just Rina but her brother. Jake’s attitude had been decidedly chillier than yesterday. Colin respected that.

“So, what can I get you guys? Colin?” she asked first, obviously attempting to change the subject.

“Do you have any bottled water? Emma’s getting tipsy and Logan wants to dilute her wine.”

Rina furrowed her eyebrows. “Emma doesn’t drink. She’s up to something, so you’d better keep an eye on her. Better yet, keep an eye on poor Stan. The man has his hands full.” She turned to her brother. “And you? Isn’t your wife waiting inside?”

“As a matter of fact, she wants to know if you have any celery.”

Rina crinkled her nose. “Cat’s hot appetizers are so good. Why would Brianne want celery?”

Jake rolled his eyes skyward. “As if I have a clue what women think.”

“Hmm. That might be a good subject for my next series of articles. How to get inside a woman’s head.” She grinned. “I like that.”

“Works for me,” Jake muttered.

Colin swallowed hard and remained silent.

“Brianne also wants peanut butter,” Jake said. “And some raisins if you have them. Oh, and she’d like a large glass of milk.”

Colin grimaced. “That’s what I call disgusting.”

“It’s what I’d call a craving,” Rina said, her eyes opening wide.

“What?” Jake walked over to Rina, obviously picking up on her choice of words. “What are you talking about?”

“Brianne’s got odd cravings. Could there be any special reason for them?” Rina wiggled her eyebrows knowingly while Jake, the macho cop, suddenly looked green.

“To hell with the celery,” he said and bolted for the other room to talk to his wife.

Rina laughed. “Mission accomplished. Jake’s out of here and we can squeeze in a minute alone.”

“You went to all this trouble, arranged this party, all for me. Do you know how lucky I am to have you?” He wrapped

his arms around her waist and pulled her to him. She smelled like Rina, an arousing floral scent that seeped into his bones. He smelled it in his sleep.

“Mmm. As long as you know how lucky you are, that’s all that counts.” She linked her hands around his neck and pulled him into a hot, tongue-tangling kiss.

But before things could get any deeper, a ringing cell phone interrupted them. With a groan, Colin reached for his phone while Rina stepped back, resigned.

“Hello?”

“Merry Christmas, Colin.” He recognized Corinne’s voice.

His heart clenched in fear. “Same to you. Is Joe okay?” he asked, knowing she wouldn’t call without good reason.

“Actually, he’s doing well today. Holiday spirits and all that. He’d like to see you.”

Fear turned to anticipation. “I’d planned on coming to the hospital after dinner.”

“Could you make it before then? Actually, can you make it now? Joe’s strength is up and it’s a good time for the two of you to talk.”

“Go,” Rina whispered, obviously having overheard. “I understand.”

He didn’t want to leave, if only because he didn’t want to walk out on her again. But he needed to see Joe and he couldn’t let the opportunity slip by. “Tell him I’ll be there,” he said to Corinne.

“Thanks.”

Colin hung up and slipped the phone into his pocket, shooting Rina a regret-filled look. “I wish—”

“Shh.” She put a finger to his lips. “It’s Christmas. You should be with Joe. I’d go with you, but I have a houseful of people.”

He placed his hand beneath her chin, tilting her face up toward him. “You thought about going with me. That means a lot.”

He bent to kiss her and, as usual, the kiss flared out of control. She teased him with her tongue, tracing the seam of his lips and darting inside before she pulled away.

“Just wanted to give you a taste. Come back tonight and I’ll give you even more.” A wicked gleam flickered in her gaze, making him laugh. He’d already grown hard with wanting her.

Getting through the day, his desire unrelieved, would be hell. Dealing with Joe and the subject of family, the paper, and Corinne would be even worse.

“Hey, you two, quit necking and get inside for a toast,” Emma said, banging on the wall by the kitchen, making her presence known. “It’s rude to make out when you have company waiting. I, on the other hand, do not have company. So, would you mind pointing out the least trafficked area so I can get my dear Stan alone?”

Colin rolled his eyes.

Rina laughed. “Probably the bathroom since this is a small place. Sorry, Emma, but today won’t be the most romantic day you’ll ever spend.”

She wagged her wrinkled finger at Rina. “That’s where you’re wrong. It’s the person you are with, not your surroundings that matters. Now, get inside. Your brother wants to make a toast.”

And then he’d head over to the hospital, Colin thought, uncertain of whether to dread or look forward to the meeting. As they stepped inside, Jake tapped a knife against a glass and the talking dwindled. “I’d just like to say a few words. First, I don’t know most of you, but thanks for taking care of my sister since she’s moved here.”

Colin squeezed Rina’s hand tight.

“Second, I want to toast her determination to make a new life and her success in going after what she’s always wanted. My sister is now a columnist and happier than I’ve ever seen her. Here’s to health and happiness, Ri.”

Rina blushed, an adorable shade of pink. But with every one of Jake’s words, Colin’s gut twisted tighter. Because he knew he was heading over to the hospital to finally discuss the paper’s financial situation and future with Joe. A future that might not include Rina.

She wanted to continue her column and live life on her own terms the way her ex-husband had never allowed her to do. Could Colin destroy her dreams just so he could achieve his own goals? January 1 was around the corner, and even if Colin managed an extension, it would only delay the

inevitable. Unless he came up with another solution or performed magic. Neither seemed likely.

“And lastly,” Jake said, bringing Colin back to the other man’s toast, “I want to let all of you in on the fact that my beautiful wife and I are officially expecting a baby, something I just discovered myself. So, cheers, everyone, and Merry Christmas.” He raised his glass and everyone toasted, clicking glasses and murmuring good wishes.

Colin glanced at Rina’s wide smile. “You don’t seem surprised by this news. You weren’t fishing when you sent your brother out of the room earlier?”

She shrugged, looking like the proverbial cat who ate the canary. “I had a *very* strong hunch. I’m just glad to be right. I’m going to be an aunt!” Her voice rose in excitement as she glanced back at her brother and Brianne.

“You like kids, huh?” Now, where the hell had *that* come from?

“Is this a trick question?” She met his gaze, a wry smile on her lips. “I say no, you think I’m a witch? I say yes, you run for cover before I can con you into having one? It *is* every single man’s worst fear realized, right?”

He brushed his knuckles over her cheek. “Until he meets the right woman.” And then, before things could get too serious, he said, “I have to get going.”

She nodded. “I know talking to Joe won’t be easy, but you need to do what I said. You need to be true to yourself.”

His heart constricted at her serious words and earnest gaze. She cared so much and gave even more. But she had no idea just what her advice would cost her.

Chapter Eleven

RINA LOVED THE holidays. The music, the festive cheer, the people surrounding her. She just wished she'd been able to help Colin more, but maybe meeting with Joe would do the trick.

Emma tapped her foot impatiently against the floor and Rina realized she was being chastised. She also knew what for. "What would you like me to do?" she asked, meeting the older woman's annoyed gaze. "I can't just take off after Colin."

Much as she'd like to. She didn't want him to be alone when dealing with Joe in case the older man's explanation provided more hurt than solution.

"Why can't you leave? It's not like someone here can't hold down the fort while you're gone." Emma shot her a pointed glare.

"You of all people understand etiquette. I can't walk out on my own party. It's rude."

"I beg to differ. Catherine's a caterer and she'd be happy to keep the hors d'oeuvres hot until you get back. Wouldn't you?" Emma grasped Catherine's sleeve as she walked by.

"Wouldn't I what?" the pretty blonde asked.

"Hold down the food, I mean fort, while Rina goes to the hospital to be by Colin's side."

"Of course." Cat waved a hand in dismissal. "You go on and don't worry about a thing here."

“But...”

“And while Catherine handles the food, Francesca doesn’t mind serving as hostess, do you, dear?” The older woman had to hustle, but she managed to poke Frankie in the back as she passed. “I’d play hostess myself but I’m being paged,” Emma said.

To Rina’s shock, Emma turned and blew a kiss Stan’s way.

“I’ll be right there,” she called to the man who sat in the corner, patting the arm of the chair as if he wanted Emma to join him.

Frankie chuckled. “I can handle things here,” she assured Emma and Rina.

Rina glanced around. She had to admit, she could probably sneak off for an hour and they’d survive.

But Colin was facing an emotional minefield. Would he welcome her presence? Or would showing up give him a reason to push her away?



HALF AN HOUR later, Rina walked into the hospital, and after meeting up with Corinne on Joe’s floor, was directed to his room. She strode into the doorway and paused. Colin sat in the chair beside the bed, his back to the door and his head bent close to the man he called his father.

The intensity in the room was fierce and a lump rose to her throat. Her pulse began to pound and her heart raced, anticipation and anxiety feuding inside her. She didn’t know what Colin was facing. But as much as she wanted to go to

him, to hold his hand, she remained in the shadows, knowing he deserved his time alone.

Knowing, too, she'd be here when it was through.

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CORINNE HAD LEFT Colin alone with Joe, destroying any lingering notions Colin might have had about her exerting undue influence on Joe. Not that he had many left anyway. After a solid week of watching her at Joe's bedside, he was convinced of her sincerity, not that it was an easy thing to admit.

"Did you ever have a dream?" Joe asked.

"Of course, I've dreamed." Colin forced a laugh as the older man stared without speaking, an old tactic he'd used on Colin as a teenager. One that to this day never failed to elicit a response. "I've dreamed of running the paper."

"Bullshit" Joe spoke loud, clear, and less slurred than before. The effort obviously cost him because he leaned back against the white pillow. "You don't know your dreams, and until you stop running, you never will."

A punch in the stomach would have been more gentle, but then, gentle had never been Joe's style. Directness had, which was why Corinne's power of attorney had taken Colin off guard. Joe hadn't prepared him up front.

Seconds passed in which Joe just met Colin's gaze and stared, while Colin tried to formulate a response when he had none. Because, as usual, the older man was right.

Joe gestured to the water pitcher. Grateful for a minute to think, Colin poured the cold liquid into a disposable cup, waiting for Joe to take a few sips before taking the cup back and placing it on the tray.

“If I’d have asked you to run the paper when I got sick, months before I had the stroke, I’d have been forcing you to come home for who knows how long. And you needed to find your way without my influence.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve always considered you a son. Even when you couldn’t return the sentiment.”

Colin swallowed hard. “I returned it. I just couldn’t show it. I thought I’d be betraying my parents.”

Hard as Joe and Nell tried, Colin realized now they’d never completely filled the parental role, probably because he’d been old enough to maintain love and loyalty. And fear. Fear if he gave himself over to Joe and Nell’s love, he’d lose his parents for good. Never mind that he’d already lost them.

Joe’s laugh sounded more like a rasping wheeze, scaring Colin. “I knew that. Hell, Nell knew it, too. We never held it against you, though. That sense of loyalty was what made you such a damn fine man, one I’m proud to call my son.”

Colin shook his head. “I never deserved you.”

“You damn well did. You still do. You think I don’t know you’re here now, fighting to save what’s mine? Only a son would do that for his father.”

Colin closed his eyes but he couldn’t shut out the truth. Joe knew him better than he knew himself. The older man

understood things about Colin he himself had just come to recognize and accept. The running, the emotional barriers, all a result of his parents' deaths, had distanced him from his life and the people in it. But no longer.

It had taken Joe's stroke to bring him home, Joe's seeming betrayal to shock him into looking deeper, but it had been Rina who'd taught him the biggest lesson of all in understanding, acceptance—and love.

He shook as the word ran through his mind and settled there. He loved Rina. Something he'd deal with when he left the hospital.

And he loved the older man lying in the bed before him. "I'm lucky to have you. Always have been," Colin told Joe. "But why didn't you just tell me about giving Corinne power of attorney?"

Joe's brown eyes clouded over. "When I got sick, no way did I want to call you home, so when the doctors insisted I cut back, I put Corinne in charge."

"She knows nothing about running a paper, Joe."

"But I love and trust her, just like I do you. Just like I did Nell before her." He gestured for the water and Colin passed the cup again, waiting while Joe finished soothing his dry throat.

Hearing how Joe felt about his wife made Colin's mission to enlighten his father about the paper's problems more difficult. Colin ran a hand over his eyes and groaned.

He didn't know how to approach the issue and since he still didn't have a direct answer to his question, he focused on that first. "Then why didn't you *tell* me you put Corinne in charge?" he asked again.

"Because it wasn't something I felt I could do long distance. I knew you'd come home for Christmas, even if it was a short visit. I planned to tell you then. But fate intervened, and I had the damn stroke first." Joe's voice returned to a low whisper he had to strain to hear, but there was no mistaking the regret in his voice.

The vise holding Colin's heart hostage eased with the realization that everything Joe did had been in Colin's best interest. At the expense of his beloved paper.

Be true to yourself, Rina had said. The time had come. For father and son to work out a solution together. He rose from his seat and began pacing the floor, his gaze never leaving Joe's bed. "The *Times* has limited space, and Corinne's been sacrificing hard news for softer pieces." He no longer considered Rina's dreams fluff. Not since seeing how important they were to her and the reaction of people he admired, like Logan and Cat. "We're not putting out true news on the front or home page. Corinne's hired a woman named Rina Lowell to write about relationships, while Emma's doing a matchmaking column for the elderly. Our numbers and advertising have suffered," he said, forcing the words out.

He hated to hurt Joe, and he realized he hated to hurt Corinne, the woman he now understood Joe loved. But the older man didn't blink at the information.

Colin narrowed his gaze. “You knew this was coming, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “I wasn’t feeling well even before the stroke, and she didn’t want to tell me she was having problems. But she finally told me she’d made some mistakes.”

An understatement if Colin ever heard one.

“But,” Joe continued. “She was determined to fix things and make me proud.”

“You don’t sound angry.”

He shrugged. “When you face death, you realize there are more important things in life than selling newspapers.”

Colin scrubbed a hand over his burning eyes. “Well, I’m about to complicate things.” He explained how they’d lost advertising dollars and were poised to lose more. And then he topped off his story with the fact that he’d borrowed money to keep the paper afloat. “And like me, Ron thought you’d want nothing more than to have things return to the status quo. I promised him I’d get rid of the fluff in favor of hard news, and according to Fortune, I have until January first to provide proof I can do that or they’re pulling out.”

“And how exactly did you plan to save the paper from my terrible clutches, Colin?” Corinne walked into the room at the worst possible moment.

“By getting your promise to return things to the way they were.” He didn’t turn to face her, but he had to admit the truth. “And by getting rid of your new columnists.” That had always been the plan, replace the new people’s work with news worth

printing. Only now, discussing his plans aloud, he realized how shortsighted he'd been.

“You wanted to fire Rina and Emma?” Corinne asked, outraged.

He winced, knowing he no longer advocated that scenario, but nodded because that had been his intention. But he now realized that, like Joe said, some things *were* more important. His family, Corinne included, was one of them. Rina another.

It was time to face Corinne and explain his change of heart. He turned, but behind Corinne, he saw Rina in the doorway and his stomach plummeted.

Eyes wide and full of hurt, she met his gaze. His gut clenched hard. Damn. “Rina.”

She turned, pivoting and walking away. He stepped toward the door, then paused, looking back at the man in the bed.

“Don't you think you should go after her?” Corinne asked.

Colin was torn, but with Joe so ill, he had to take opportunity when he could and mend fences here first. “I'll talk to her as soon as we finish.” Facing Corinne wasn't easy. “My perspective has changed even if the promise I made hasn't. And I'd like to explain.”

Corinne nodded. “Seems fair.”

“Then both of you sit,” Joe said. “It's time we started acting like a family.”

Although his heart was with Rina, Colin did as Joe asked. They talked like a family for the first time. When it was over,

Colin knew they had a chance of saving the paper. Corinne agreed not to touch the remainder of the lender's money on anything without Colin's approval. With Joe supporting her columns, she was more agreeable to putting the news on the front and home pages.

In return, Colin was willing to invest the rest of the lender's money in creating a supplement section that would carry her beloved columns as well as the syndicated ones Colin had already lined up to return.

All that remained was working the magic he'd thought of earlier. He had to prove to the conservative Fortune's Inc. that Rina, Emma, and Corinne's other ideas would increase sales if they weren't the sole focus of the paper. Ironically, he'd use Corinne's argument that people's priorities had changed, and they could sell newspapers by combining news and softer pieces. If a simple phone call wouldn't do it, Colin would resort to statistical proof, something that would cost money and take time. He hoped he could at least get a deadline extension out of Fortune's.

By the time he left the hospital, Colin felt more centered about his family situation, but he still had to settle things with Rina. After not returning yesterday, Colin wasn't about to repeat the same mistake and compound her anger over what she'd overheard.

Instead, he showed up in time to suffer through a frosty Christmas dinner. And he wasn't referring to the weather outside. Rina barely spoke to him and he couldn't say he blamed her. He also couldn't find time to talk to her alone, and

since Jake and Brianne planned to stay late, he had no choice but to wait until work in the morning. And he wasn't surprised when Rina didn't walk him to the door to say good night.

He let himself out, disappointment in his gut and her Christmas gift still in his pocket.



MONDAY MORNING, RINA called in sick. She wasn't ill. She was merely informed and armed with knowledge. She intended to protect herself and her future. She had no choice since she was about to lose the job she loved. True, eavesdroppers didn't always hear correctly, but Corinne had been by her side, peppering Colin with questions, and his words had left no doubt. He intended to *get rid of Corinne's columnists*. Herself and Emma.

Which meant that from the day he'd turned that incredible charm her way, he'd *known* he had an agenda. Her series of articles and research had taught her to understand and not jump to irrational conclusions. She could understand Colin's desperate need to save the paper from financial ruin, something else she'd been in the dark about. And when they'd first met and he didn't know her, she couldn't blame him for having an agenda that would negatively impact her.

But she couldn't understand the lingering deception. That was the hardest thing to grasp, Rina thought, and an even more difficult thing to forgive.

How could he have listened to her hopes and dreams, all the while knowing he intended to crush them, and never reveal a thing? How could he have made love to her and not tell her

something so fundamentally important? And worst of all, how could he hear her revelations about her marriage, discover she'd come through one relationship where she'd lost sight of herself and her dreams, and not reveal his plans to take away hers?

Well, she thought, silence could go both ways. She'd gone out of her way to be understanding of his past, his need for emotional distance, and the fact that his desire to travel would take him away one day. But his behavior toward her was a direct slap, and Rina didn't feel the need to roll over and take it lying down.

Ironically, Colin himself had provided her with her new plan, and she had taken today off to update her résumé and e-mail her job queries to magazine editors in New York. Now, all she needed to do was wait for replies. As much as she loved it here in Ashford, Colin was right. The opportunities were in New York.

She was going home.

"Hello?" Frankie's voice was followed by a belated knock on the door as she let herself in. "Did you survive Christmas?" she asked. "I saw your car downstairs and figured you called in sick in favor of sleeping in."

"So, you thought you'd wake me up instead?" Rina asked wryly.

"Ha-ha." Frankie sat down on the living room couch, eyeing Rina's laptop. "Are you working from home?" she asked, concerned.

“No. I’m looking for new employment.” She shut down the computer and turned toward Frankie. “In fact, you’ll probably have a new neighbor soon.” At the notion, Rina’s stomach twisted with pain and regret.

She didn’t want to leave her home here or the friends she’d made. But now that she’d found herself and her calling, she couldn’t give up writing and there weren’t any other opportunities in the town of Ashford.

“Whoa.” Frankie shook her head. “New neighbor? Not a chance. That’s like asking me to find a new best friend. Besides, you love it here. So back up and ’splain, Lucy.”

Rina rolled her eyes. “You’ve been watching *I Love Lucy* reruns again, haven’t you?”

Frankie shrugged. “What can I say? It’s better than sleeping. Now, quit avoiding the issue and take things from the beginning. Why do you need a new job?”

Rina bunched her hands into fists and explained the paper’s financial situation and Colin’s means of fixing the problem. “So, you see, the columnists are out, hard news is in. So, I am trying to find a job in Manhattan, where the major national women’s magazines are located. My résumé isn’t extensive, but this series of five articles is nearly finished and it’s the best I’ve got.”

She could fill her résumé with the articles she’d written for her “Hot Stuff” column. She still hoped the paper would run the end of the *Simply Sexy* series, but if not, she’d survive. At least she had an attractive package to show prospective employers.

“Earth to Rina.” Frankie waved her hand in front of Rina’s eyes. “I asked if you were really just running away from your problems with Colin.”

Rina scowled. “I’m made of stronger stuff than that. I’m not running, I’m being smart. There’s nothing left for me here, so I’m moving on.” But the tight squeeze around her heart made her realize she was lying. There was plenty she wanted here, but she had no way of making those kinds of dreams come true.

“What about Colin?” Frankie asked.

Rina glanced down at her feet before meeting Frankie’s gaze. “What about him?”

This time it was Frankie’s turn to scowl. “Don’t play dumb. It doesn’t become you.”

Rina let out a groan of frustration and stomped her foot for good measure. She felt a stab of pain in her heel. “Damn.”

Frankie put a hand on Rina’s shoulder, and at the comforting touch, Rina’s eyes filled with tears. The first ones she’d let herself shed. “The man didn’t think twice about lying to me, so what’s left for me to hang onto now?”

As she spoke, she wanted to believe that the goodness she sensed in Colin wasn’t false, that he had regrets despite his agenda. But she didn’t know nor could it make any difference. They’d had an affair, by definition a short-term arrangement. She’d always assumed he’d leave, and now, she was going back to New York.

“You can hang onto me, Emma, the friends you made down at the paper, to start with. And I bet Colin would be there, too, if you’d let him.”

That was the problem, Rina thought. To listen to him, to hear his side, to let him be there for her—assuming he even wanted to—would leave her vulnerable. No matter how much she loved him, and there was no denying she still did, she didn’t think she could open herself up to that kind of hurt again.

She’d lost her husband and now she’d lost Colin. But she’d just now found herself. She couldn’t put that on the line. Especially since his departure was imminent if not guaranteed.



COLIN SAT AT his desk, tapping a pencil against the old blotter. He’d never known a woman could make herself so busy she didn’t have time for one conversation. Monday, Rina had called in sick. Tuesday, she’d come in, worked on her column, wearing earbuds, no less. When he’d approached her at lunchtime, she’d said she had a meeting and ran out, probably knowing full well he’d be at the hospital all afternoon. Tuesday evening, she hadn’t answered her phone, texts or her doorbell, and by Wednesday morning, he was annoyed.

He’d pick her up and carry her over his shoulder and into the back hall if he had to. Today, he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Someone tapping on his shoulder startled him. “What?” he snapped, annoyed, and he whipped around to see Rina.

“A minute of your time, if it isn’t too much to ask.” She stood before him, one hand on her hip, acting as distant as his latest assignment in South America.

Now she wanted to talk? “What can I do for you?” he asked, trying to keep things professional in front of the staff despite his earlier thoughts of acting like an irrational caveman.

But outer calm belied his internal struggle. He wanted to take her into his arms and not just apologize but swear he’d make things right. How, he wasn’t certain yet. But he damn well would. Even if she never forgave him, he still had to prove he wasn’t another man who’d trampled on her needs and desires.

“I spoke to Corinne about this, but she said you’re handling personnel now, so I should come to you.” Her voice was cold, but her eyes betrayed both pain and what he hoped was a lingering caring beneath the cool veneer.

He wasn’t certain where this conversation was headed, but at the word *personnel*, a distinct tingling he’d always referred to as gut instinct set off warning signals in his brain. “About what?” he asked.

“Referrals. I’ve taken your advice and submitted résumés to some major magazines in New York. Some smaller ones as well.” She shook her head in a breezy attempt at looking casual.

She failed, he thought. He saw the wounded woman beneath. But he was nowhere near as confident as he had been when this mess had started, and he wondered if he was only

imagining the depth of her hurt. Because if she hurt, it meant she still cared.

She drew a deep breath. “So, if anyone calls, I’d appreciate you giving me a good reference despite all that’s gone on between us personally.”

At the thought of losing her, fear shot through him. “The hell I will,” he said, rising from his seat so he could tower over her.

“Look, Colin, you may not like what I write, but you can’t deny I’ve done a good job. And you can’t possibly deny me a decent reference.” She clenched and unclenched her fists at her sides.

“Yes, I can.” As he’d done once before, he grabbed her hand, ignored the stares, and pulled her out to the hall and into the darkened stairwell.

“You’re being unreasonable,” she said, backing up against the wall.

He knew better than to press for an advantage or to attempt to get close to her the way he’d done last time. But damn, he wanted to. She wore an oversize white sweater and a pair of jeans that enhanced her curves, making him itch to pull her closer and push their differences aside. If only it was that easy.

“You don’t think packing up and sending out résumés is being a bit unreasonable yourself?”

“Did you or did you not plan to get rid of Corinne’s columnists?” She bit down on her glossed lips.

He liked the slight insecurity he sensed because it backed up his hunch, that she wasn't as hardened to him as she wanted him to believe. "That *was* my plan."

"So why would you think me preparing for my future is unreasonable?"

"Because between Corinne, Joe, and myself, are going to bring the paper back to life by returning to news, but I still hope to save both columns in the process." He had an afternoon appointment with the accountants and Fortune's together.

The number crunchers didn't like being hassled during the week between Christmas and New Year's, but they'd agreed to meet with him anyway.

She shrugged. "There are no guarantees. So, can I have your word that you'll give me a good recommendation?"

Not the reaction he'd have hoped for, and grabbing a minute to think, he drew a long breath. The dank smell in the hallway assaulted him, waking him up to the bleak reality confronting him. "Rina, I'm truly sorry. You're the last person on earth I'd ever want to hurt. And I'll do everything I can to save your job."

He reached out to graze her cheek, but she turned her head, avoiding his touch. His gut clenched hard.

"You don't get it, do you?" She stared at him wide-eyed. "I'm not hurt or angry because you planned to cut my job. Hard as it is for me to believe, I can understand your need to save the paper, even if it was at my expense." She trembled,

wrapping her arms around herself tight. “What I can’t understand is how you could lie to me.” She pointed to her chest. “After you slept with me, got to know my hopes and dreams, my fears and mistakes, after all that, how could you keep something so important from me?” Her eyes welled up with tears.

Knowing he’d caused them, he wanted to give himself a swift kick. “There was no good way to tell you. I admit, I tried to broach the subject and gauge your reaction a few times.”

“At Emma’s Christmas party.”

He nodded. “We got interrupted by Emma’s champagne spill. And by the time I thought I could level with you again, I knew what the column meant to you and why. I realized how devastating the news would be.” He wanted to touch her. Instead, he shoved his hands into his back pockets. “If you understand why I did it, can’t you forgive me for not telling you?”

She shook her head, and the long ponytail that had grazed his body so lovingly the other night fell over her shoulder.

“I can forgive you, but I can’t go back to what we had.” Her voice cracked on her words. “First, you’ll leave anyway, and a break is better off clean. Secondly, when I opened up to you, I trusted my instincts, and you proved me wrong.”

She let out a laugh that didn’t sound funny and his stomach lurched.

“I accept your apology, Colin. But I’m going home to New York.” From the look in her eyes, she wasn’t joking nor would

she be changing her mind. She ducked beneath his arm and headed for the door.

“Rina,” he called out.

She turned. For a brief moment, her heart was in her eyes and everything he felt for her, the love, desire, and caring, was obviously reciprocated. Then she schooled her features into a blank mask. One he didn’t buy into because he’d seen the feelings beneath.

“What is it?” she asked.

“If I save your job, will you stay? I know you love it here.”

She didn’t answer.

“Corinne and I will take that as a yes,” he said. And then he tossed out his final words. The ones that would be the most difficult for him to live by. “If you do stay, I’ll be right beside you. Because my days of running are over.” With or without her, Colin knew the time had come to put down roots, accept his family, and live again.

“No, you won’t. You’ll get bored or feel closed in by some difficult situation. You’ll take off like you always do.” But she didn’t meet his gaze, giving him the hope that she didn’t really believe her words.

He had a hunch that deep down she trusted him more than she was letting on. He met her gaze and smiled. “The only way to find out is to stick around yourself.”

“Just give me a good recommendation, Colin. Please.” Then she walked out the door.

He shook his head and leaned back against the cool wall. What a mess he'd created. Why had he thought he could get involved with Rina and easily walk away?

Because he always had before. Ever since he'd lost both his mother and father, he'd kept his distance from everyone and everything, hoping that he'd never again experience that cavernous feeling of loss. Faced with Rina's withdrawal and threatened departure, he was experiencing it again. And he didn't like it worth a damn. Because this was a loss he didn't think he'd bounce back from. One no amount of running would help.

So he'd better start fighting for what he wanted.

Chapter Twelve

FLOWERS ARRIVED AT Rina's home. A thick, red, luxurious, and obviously expensive bouquet of roses. The card had only two words: *Please stay.*

Next, she checked her e-mail and discovered a card. *Lovers' quarrels are meant to be forgotten,* it said.

And then there was the small box she'd found in her desk drawer. An empty velvet jewelry box. *The best gifts are meant to be given in person. Forgive me.*

The gifts were lovely, all sentimental, all intended to wrap around her heart. But the last one, the empty jewelry box that could only hold a ring, was almost her undoing. Until she reminded herself that none of the presents, the ring box included, could possibly be from Colin. The man had a direct style, and this anonymous note-sending wasn't an approach he'd choose. She couldn't help suspecting somebody else was trying to get her and Colin back together.

The phone rang, distracting her. She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hi, Rina? It's Cat."

"Cat!" Rina said, glad to hear from the other woman. She loved her outgoing personality and wanted to get to know her better. Then she remembered she wasn't staying in town. A lump rose to her throat.

"I hope you survived the holiday," Cat said. "I know that after a party at my place, I want to crawl into bed and stay

there for days. It's amazing how I can cater at other people's homes without any problems, but bring the festivities to my house, and I'm a wreck."

Rina laughed. "I know what you mean. But it was so special having everyone share the holiday with me."

"Even if you did look like you'd lost your best friend?"

Rina blinked. "Emma always said you were perceptive."

"And nosy." A tinkling laughter followed Cat's pronouncement. "Is everything better with you and Colin?"

Rina twirled the phone cord around her finger and leaned back into her comfortable couch. "It's settled," she said. But was it? an inner voice asked.

"Forgive me for prying, but it didn't seem that way to me. Colin came for dinner last night and he was miserable."

Rina's heart pounded in her chest. She didn't want him unhappy, yet she couldn't help the lift in her heart that came with knowing he hadn't gotten over her quickly. Because she was nowhere near over him. "It's not something I caused, Cat."

"Well, I didn't cause my problems with Logan before we got married, but it was up to me to decide I could live with who and what he was." Cat cleared her throat. "Actually, I had to decide I could accept who and what *I* was," she admitted. "But that was me. We're talking about you."

Rina sighed. "Somehow, I'm sensing there's not much difference." Colin accepted her for who and what *she* was. Despite the lies, in her heart, Rina understood that.

She understood that there'd been no honest, graceful way for him to tap her on the shoulder and say, "Hey, Rina, you should know, the paper's in deep financial trouble and the only way out is for me to cut the column you love so much."

Yes, she wished he'd told her. But she understood why he hadn't. She hadn't written advice for women without learning a few things herself. And in the days since discovering the truth, she'd put herself in Colin's position and knew the words couldn't possibly come easily for him. Especially after he'd learned how important her work and newly asserted independence were to her, both missing in her past marriage.

Like Robert, Colin wanted to give her what she desired. Unlike Robert, Colin listened to her needs, accepted them, and didn't want to be the man to destroy her dreams. She sighed.

"Hello?" Catherine called into the phone. "You're breathing but not speaking. What's going on?"

Rina smiled and glanced at the flowers and notes strewn on the table. She didn't want to put Catherine in the middle of her messed-up love life. "Does Colin strike you as a guy who'd send flowers and anonymous notes?"

Cat laughed. "No. Are you receiving them?"

"Yes." Rina paused in thought.

"Emma," they said at the same time.

"That's my guess," Cat said. "You can't imagine the lengths she went to in order to get Logan and I back together. She actually sent me fairy dust!"

Rina rolled her eyes. “That sounds like Emma, all right. Which just goes to show you, even her own social life doesn’t keep her busy enough to keep her from meddling.”

“Nothing could,” Cat said. “Listen, before I forget, the reason I called is that I left my favorite serving dish at your house the other night.”

“It’s all cleaned for you.” Rina drew a deep breath. “How about we meet for lunch sometime next week and I’ll return it then?”

Because in her heart, she realized that Ashford was home and she couldn’t bear to leave it or the friends she’d begun to make here, regardless of whether Colin decided to stay or go.

“Sounds good.”

After agreeing on an exact day and time, Rina hung up the phone and stared around her small apartment. If she closed her eyes, she could see Colin everywhere. He’d made such a big impact in the weekend he’d spent here.

And she missed him now. But how much worse would the ache be if she let things get even more serious and then he took off? She’d lost Robert in an unexpected, devastating tragedy, and she’d promised herself from the beginning that she wouldn’t get emotionally involved with Colin because he’d never said he was staying. She didn’t want her heart broken again. But control was an illusion and she’d fallen in love despite it all. With a man who would probably leave at the first opportunity, whether he knew it yet or not. His history spoke louder than his words.

She rubbed her aching temples. She didn't know what, if anything, Colin wanted out of their relationship. There was no denying he understood and accepted Rina for who and what she was. The question was did she accept him?



COLIN HAD SPENT a long week gathering information. From the accountants, he'd learned that things were on a slow upswing. From old and loyal advertisers who'd slowly begun to pull out or take less space, he'd discovered that they liked the new offerings but not in place of hard news. The old format, or some semblance thereof, would entice them to advertise more in the hopes of reaching more people again. Especially if Colin promised to stay in town and run things along with Corinne.

And the head guys at Fortune's had latched on to the financial upswing, too. Because of their loyalty to Joe, they'd agreed to ride out the problems for a while longer. The conservative advertiser could live with the risqué quality of the columns, as long as it wasn't shoved in people's faces over breakfast.

From the bank, Colin found out that he qualified for a line of credit, one that would enable him to pay back the lender and leave the fate of the paper solely within Colin's hands. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it sooner. The line of credit was the only means to convince Rina he had faith in her column, her vision, and in her. It was the only thing he could think of to secure their future. If she bailed on him after that, he couldn't say he hadn't tried.

When his doorbell rang late New Year's Eve, he was surprised since he had no plans and wasn't expecting company. He zipped his jeans, skipping the button. Whoever wanted to talk to him would just have to deal.

He pulled open the door, shocked when he came face-to-face with Rina. He hadn't expected to see her until after the new year and had resigned himself to leaving her alone since that's what she seemed to want. At least until he had his proof compiled and groveling speech ready.

"This is a surprise." He stepped back to let her inside, hoping he wouldn't do something to scare her off before he had a chance to find out what she wanted.

"I had to talk to you, and it wasn't something I could do at work." She bit down on her lower lip. "Can I take off my coat and stay awhile?"

She could stay forever, but he doubted she was ready to hear that. "Sure thing." He helped her off with her jacket and hung it on the rack in the entryway, then gestured for her to head up the stairs.

Following behind, he couldn't keep his eyes off her jean-clad behind, swaying as she walked, and he was hard in an instant. He needed to make her his once more. Not just in a primal male way but in a completely permanent one.

She stood by the couch and turned toward him, a file folder clutched against her chest.

"What do you have there?" he asked.

“Something that I think will simplify your life.” She reached inside the manila folder and pulled out a single sheet of white paper. “I know that our relationship complicated your goals, and with Joe sick, you need to do what’s right for the *Times*, not for me. So, here.”

His stomach in knots, he accepted the paper and skimmed the contents of the letter, his gut cramping more with each word. “You’re resigning?”

She nodded, her eyes sad and huge. “You don’t need to tiptoe around my feelings anymore or worry about what I’ll think of you.” She let out a laugh. “Not that I’m saying you worry at all about what I think of you, but I was hoping this would make any decisions easier on you.”

“Are you finished?” he asked when she’d stopped rambling.

“Yes.”

He held up the paper and ripped it in half. “Don’t want it, don’t need it. But I do want to know what the hell would possess you to quit a job you obviously love so much.”

“All good things must come to an end. And you said yourself, the paper’s in financial trouble and getting rid of the newer columnists is the solution.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I also remember saying I hoped to save both your job and Emma’s.”

“Hope isn’t definite. And you need to concentrate on what’s best for the paper, not what’s best for me.”

“But you believe I want to save your job?”

One side of her mouth lifted. He'd take the first half-smile in over a week as a positive sign.

"Yeah, I do," she said at last.

"And if I said I had saved your column, that you still had a job, would you stay?"

"Is that a hypothetical question? Because I don't think I can play games anymore."

For the first time, he noticed the stress in her taut expression and the darker circles under her eyes. Well, at least she wasn't getting any more sleep than he was. Reaching out, he grasped her hand. "I'm not looking to play games, either. It's an honest question."

She glanced down at their intertwined hands, his darker skin, her softer, whiter flesh. "I'm staying whether or not there's a place for me at the *Times*," she admitted. "Ashford is home now."

He released a harsh breath. Now *that*, he hadn't expected to hear. "Rina?"

She glanced up to meet his gaze.

"I'm glad."

She blinked, moisture filling her eyes. "You are? Why? Will you stay long enough for it to matter?"

"I told you the other day, I'm not going anywhere. My family is here, my new job is here, and most importantly, you're here."

"Your family's always been here."

He laughed. "Leave it to you to point out the obvious. Yes, my family's always been here, but my heart hasn't been."

She searched his expression, obviously looking deeper inside him. "And now it is?"

He paused, wondering how to explain something he'd only just come to terms with himself. "I needed to face my past in order to have a future. Or at least a stable one, anyway. I've done that now." He squeezed her hand tighter. "Thanks to you. From the day I met you, I recognized you were special. That you had the ability to change me."

Rina's heart felt full. She didn't know whether to laugh because she seemed on the verge of getting everything she wanted or cry because she was so afraid he was saying the words he wanted to believe but wasn't ready to act on. She was still afraid she'd lose him to his emotional fear.

Then again, there was the real possibility it was still her fear she was dealing with, not his. Knowing she had one chance left with Colin, she listened with an open mind, and she hoped with an open heart. "Change you how?" she asked.

"For the better, of course." He winked, then sobered quickly, looking at her with those intense blue eyes she adored. "I never let Joe and Nell inside." He tapped his chest. "I couldn't because I feared it would mean being disloyal to my parents and losing them forever. Of course, they were already gone, but I didn't want to face that. So, I ran. First into a marriage that was doomed from the start because we were so different, and then abroad. But now I've come home and faced

the fact that I almost lost Joe. So, I'm through running. I've got too much going for me here."

Rina tipped her head to one side. "Am I included in all that?"

"As long as you've stopped running, too." He gestured to the torn resignation pages that had dropped to the floor. "That was my doing. But you're the one who has to have the courage to stick around. I know you said you're staying, but..."

"Are you calling me a coward?" Rina tried to play things light but the situation was too serious. Too much was at stake, and her joking words fell flat.

Placing an arm around her shoulder, he lowered her to the couch, then met her gaze. "I can't promise you I won't up and die on you, sweetheart," he said, nailing her biggest fear.

Her heart began a rapid, pounding beat and her pulse rate skyrocketed. For the first time since knowing Colin, sexual desire wasn't the cause. Pure adrenaline was. That old fight-or-flight mechanism.

The time had come for her to make a stand. As Colin had done, she had to face her past and reach out for what she wanted or regret it for the rest of her life. She'd come here intending to bare her feelings, but now, fear lodged in her throat.

But she was letting it go. To move forward, not away. "I can't promise you I won't panic every once in a while," she warned him.

“I can handle a little panic,” he said wryly. “In fact, I’ve gotten used to going out on a limb. I’ve talked Corinne into taking a second mortgage on their place. And I’ve co-signed for a loan as well. I’ve held off the advertisers with a promise of better returns next quarter, and I paid off the guy who lent us money to keep the paper afloat. The only people controlling the *Times* now are me and Corinne. We’re running things together.” He laughed. “Who’d have thought?”

She blinked, stunned at his news. For one thing, he was working with Corinne, though she shouldn’t be surprised. He’d do anything for Joe. Then there was his second bit of news. “You put Joe’s place—and your finances—on the line for the paper?”

He shook his head vehemently, shocking her. “I did it for you.”

“What?” She wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly.

“I could have continued to use Ron’s money and pay off the loan as the we steadily get back on our feet. He was willing. But I don’t want you to ever doubt that I have faith in you or your abilities.”

Her heart soared higher than it had minutes earlier, strengthening the resolve she’d had all along to risk her heart on this man.

“Colin, I’m sorry. Because I feared another loss, I blamed you for not telling me about the loan, the paper, everything. But that was my problem to resolve, not yours. You never had to prove anything to me.” But he cared enough to try, and she

loved him even more for it. “And now you’ve risked so much for me... I don’t know what to say.”

“I do.” He treated her to the endearing, sexy grin she’d missed in the last week.

She leaned closer, waiting.

He stroked her cheek gently. An erotic, tingling sensation shot straight to her belly and a delicious, curling warmth settled inside her.

“You can say you love me, too,” he said.

She sucked in a deep breath, then exhaled as everything she’d dreamed of fell squarely into her lap. “You love me?”

“That’s what I said.”

“In a backhanded way.”

“Okay, so call it guy-speak. In female terms, that would be those infamous three words. *I love you.*”

He grinned, but she didn’t miss the apprehension in his voice, and she put him out of his misery. “I love you, too.”

He met her lips with his in a kiss much needed and long overdue. His tongue swept over her mouth and she opened wide, allowing him inside... and into her heart.

Too soon, he broke the kiss and reached over, pulling open a drawer in the table at the end of the couch. “I left your Christmas party with this still in my jacket. I didn’t think I’d get the chance to give it to you.” He opened his hand and revealed a bangle bracelet with tiny diamonds embedded in gold.

She sucked in a startled breath. “It’s beautiful,” she murmured as he snapped it on her wrist.

“I stared at it for many lonely nights, imagining what it would look like on your wrist.” He tilted his head and met her gaze. “Merry Christmas, Rina.”

“Merry Christmas, Colin.” Her eyes misted as she glanced at his beautiful gift.

“What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t have anything nearly as special for you.”

She wrinkled her nose and Colin leaned forward to kiss the tiny lines she’d created. “What’d you get me?”

“Stationery and an engraved pen. It reminded me of the heart of the paper you love so much.”

She shrugged, looking so sorry, so lost, and so *his*, Colin didn’t care if she’d given him a lump of coal. “Look at it this way. I can use it to write you love notes—every morning for the rest of our lives.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is that a proposal?”

“You’re damn right it is.” Once again, he reached over and into that drawer, bringing out the second part of her gift, the one he’d bought just yesterday after co-signing the papers for the loan. “Didn’t you think that empty jewelry box was a message of some sort?” he asked.

Because he’d left the velvet ring box in her desk, wanting her to find it, wanting her to realize he had it in him to stick around forever.

“*You* gave me the box?” she asked, obviously surprised.

“Of course, I did. Why? Is there another man you think would leave you a private note and personal gift?”

“How about the flowers?” Rina asked.

A jealous tingling ran up his spine. He shook his head. “No flowers.”

“Anonymous e-mail?”

“No,” he said through clenched teeth.

She smoothed a hand over his cheek. “Relax. Your only competition is an eighty-year-old woman looking to get us back together.” She laughed and he was able to calm down.

“Emma didn’t,” he said with a groan.

“She did.”

“Stan’s got to take her in hand,” he muttered.

“I’d like to see him try. In fact, I’d like to see any man try to tame an independent woman.”

“Is that a challenge?” he asked.

A wicked gleam flickered in her gaze. “Are you up to it?”

“Sweetheart, I thought you’d never ask. Step one in taming you.” He opened his hand to reveal a diamond ring, then slipped it on her trembling finger. “You now belong to me.”

She took in the sign of his love, one thought out and saved for the right moment, and brought it to her chest. A tremor shook her and she shuddered, happiness filling her. “You’re so special, Colin. I love you.”

He smiled. “I love you, too. Which brings me to step two. You were speechless, then resorted to exalting me. I’d call that tamed. Now, do you need me to bring out the big guns, or do you think I’m up to the challenge?”

Rina loved joking with him, talking with him, sharing, and just being with him. Was he up to the challenge? She moved her hand to the front of his jeans, maneuvering until she cradled his hard length in her palm. “Hmm. I think I need to explore a bit more.”

Colin grinned, then lay back on the couch and let her do just that. She unzipped his jeans and pulled them and his boxer briefs down to his ankles, trapping him at her mercy. And with her tongue, she proceeded to show *him* who was in ncharge.

And later, she was more than happy to play the subservient one while he pleased her. Then they made love, a coming together of equals, Rina thought. A place she didn’t mind being for the rest of her life.



Thanks for reading! Check out The Kingston Family next!

[CLICK HERE TO READ](#): starting with JUST ONE NIGHT.

Turn the page for a sneak peek!



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JUST ONE NIGHT EXCERPT

LINC KINGSTON'S FATHER was a pompous jerk, a philandering womanizer, an asshole of the first order, and he was dead, leaving behind four legitimate children and one illegitimate daughter. That they knew of.

Linc spread the canceled checks he'd found weeks ago across his desk. As he'd discovered yesterday from the private investigator he'd hired, the trail had led to a sister he knew nothing about, and the information had sent him reeling. Who knew what other surprises awaited in the wake of Kenneth Kingston's death of a heart attack a month earlier?

Picking up a glass of Macallan 18, not his first or even his second, he finished the contents. Without hesitation, he poured himself another with the bottle he'd taken from the bar in the corner of the office that had once been his father's.

"Slow down or you'll end up sleeping here tonight," his brother Xander said. Feet kicked out in front of him, he leaned back in his chair.

"I have a car waiting to take me home. I can get as drunk as I want." Linc lifted the tumbler to his lips.

Xander groaned. "Look, I get it. I'm not happy about the news either, but it's not like we thought Dad was a stellar human being. Are you really shocked he knocked up his secretary nineteen years ago and left a daughter to show for it?"

"No." Linc took another sip. "But I am horrified by the fact that at some point he looked up the kid's mother, found out the child was in foster care, and left her there." Linc's

private investigator had tracked down Tiffany Michaels and gotten the story. Linc's stomach churned at how his sister had been treated by both of her parents.

Xander glanced up at the ceiling, adjusting his black-framed eyeglasses he wore after a long day staring at a computer screen. "I changed my mind. I could use a drink myself."

With a shake of his head, Xander rose, walked to the bar, grabbed a tumbler, and brought it back to the desk. He picked up the bottle, poured himself a drink, and settled into his chair before indulging in a hefty gulp.

"What do Dash and Chloe say?" Xander asked of their siblings.

Of course Xander wouldn't know how they'd taken the news. While Linc was dealing with their late father's estate, the business he'd been helping to run for years, and the paperwork after their father's death, Xander had been closed up in his home office writing. He was a marine turned thriller writer after his return stateside whose books had been made into blockbuster movies, and he often got lost in his own world. Linc had called him here tonight to fill him in about their sister.

He glanced at the surprise checks he'd found. Everything relating to the family real estate business banking was online. That Kenneth had obviously opened an account to hide these payments spoke volumes about what their father was capable of when it came to his penchant for deception.

“I dragged his ass out of the studio to talk to him. Did it on the phone because, as you know, he’s holed up and working with the band. He listened, said it figured Dad would leave us with this kind of surprise, and went back to work.”

Dash was the lead singer of The Original Kings, a rock band he’d been a part of since he was in high school. After years of playing bars and smaller gigs, they’d been discovered, and their success was massive and worldwide. When home in New York, Dash had a house near Xander’s in the Hamptons fully equipped with a studio and enough room for his bandmates to crash.

Linc rubbed the back of his stiff neck with his fingers.

Xander nodded. “Dash is focused when he’s working.”

“Sound familiar?” Linc asked wryly. “Anyway, he texted me later and said he wanted to meet her, so he’s fine. Mellow and typical Dash.”

“And Chloe?” Xander drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair.

“She’s upset. Devastated she had a sister she never knew about and one who obviously grew up in way different circumstances than us.” It turned Linc’s stomach. He didn’t have details of this sibling’s upbringing, but he knew it wouldn’t be pretty. “Aurora,” he said.

“What?” Xander asked.

“Our sister’s name is Aurora. I think we should start getting used to it.”

A knock sounded on his door, and his personal assistant and best friend, Jordan Greene, walked inside, her dark hair pulled back in a sleek ponytail, her black slacks and silk blouse as immaculate as they'd been this morning. After her upbringing, Jordan prided herself on being able to afford quality clothing and looking her best. No more hand-me-downs from her sister.

"I'm leaving for the night. Anything I can get you before I go?" she asked, as she did every night he stayed later than her. They both worked long hours.

Xander turned to face her. "Hey, Jordan. You weren't at your desk when I came in. I almost thought you gave up on dealing with my brother." He jerked a finger back at Linc and laughed.

"Shut up, asshole." Linc scowled at his sibling.

Jordan chuckled. "We all know I'm the only one who will put up with him. I can't subject my fellow females to his bossy personality at work."

"I am not that bad," Linc muttered.

"Yes, you are," they both said at the same time, and their joint laughter echoed around the room.

Linc shook his head as they made fun of him. It wasn't unusual for Jordan to gang up on him with one of his siblings, and maybe he deserved it. He wasn't always easy.

Jordan's mother, Tamara, had been the Kingston's housekeeper throughout their childhood. As a result, Jordan knew all of his siblings well but mostly Linc as they'd bonded

early on. They'd become not just best friends but a united duo. Despite their different backgrounds, they'd clicked. After school she'd come to their house to do her homework while waiting for her mother to finish working, and Linc used to join her.

Getting her to become his assistant after he'd graduated business school had been the smartest thing he'd ever done. His schedule was always up-to-date, she knew what he wanted almost before he asked, and their friendship had only deepened.

He met her blue-eyed stare. "I'm good. You can take off for the night."

"Awesome. I'm going to pick up sushi for dinner on my way home. See you in the morning!" she said, bright and cheery as always. "Night, Xander."

"Good night, Jordan." Xander gave her a wave before turning back to face Linc, a curious expression on his face as the door clicked shut behind her.

"What?" Linc all but barked the question at his brother, who still stared at him as if he had something to say.

"Have you really not fucked her yet?" Xander asked.

"You asshole. Don't talk about Jordan like that."

Xander's grin told Linc he'd nailed him, prodding him on purpose to get a reaction, and Linc had given the bastard what he wanted.

"Come on, seriously. Why haven't you two gotten together?" Xander finished his drink and put the glass down

on the old mahogany desk.

“Want more?” Linc lifted the bottle of scotch.

Xander shook his head. “No, but I do want an answer.”

Knowing he needed more alcohol for this, Linc poured himself another drink. He was getting wasted far deeper and faster than he preferred, liking to keep his wits about him. But after hearing about his new sister and processing how she’d been raised when a family with money would have welcomed her, he needed to numb his feelings.

“Linc!” Xander kicked the desk with his foot. “Where did you go?”

He blinked and looked into his empty glass. “Sorry. What did you want to know?” The alcohol was getting to him.

“I asked why you and Jordan haven’t hooked up.”

“Because she’s my best friend, and I couldn’t live without her if things didn’t work out.” Even if she had a body his fingers itched to touch, lips he was dying to kiss, and sky-blue eyes that could see into his soul, he had to keep his hands ... and mouth to himself. Over the years, the restraint had cost him, but he’d managed not to step over that line.

He’d grown up well aware of his father’s indiscretions, mostly with the women who worked for him, and Linc had gone out of his way not to be anything like the man. If he was more serious, asked more of others, then so be it. As long as he wasn’t leaving work to meet up with a mistress or sleeping with one of his assistants or secretaries, Linc could look himself in the mirror each day.

Xander tipped his head to one side. “Makes sense, I guess.”

Xander knew all about heartbreak after being duped by a young, hot Hollywood actress he’d fallen in love with while in LA during the filming of his first book made into a movie. He wouldn’t argue with Linc’s explanation about why he kept things platonic with Jordan. Not when it meant avoiding both heartbreak and the potential ending of an important friendship.

“You ever wonder if she would want more?” Xander asked.

Linc shook his head, knowing he couldn’t let himself go there. It would only make it harder if he knew she desired him, too. But he had no intention of giving his brother ammunition. He hadn’t told Xander he wanted Jordan and he wasn’t about to.

For the next hour, Linc drank, Xander watched, and they talked about Xander’s next book, in the pre-filming and heavy discussion stages. Xander didn’t bring up their half-sister or their father again, and Linc was grateful. He wasn’t sure why the news had hit him as hard as it had.

Xander obviously had his head on straight about it, but then again, his brother worked his issues out on the page. Linc brooded.

“What do you say we call it a night?” Without waiting for an answer, Xander stood and grabbed the liquor bottle from the desk before Linc could pour more. Which was just as well. He was feeling the effects of how much he’d already had to drink.

Linc picked up his phone to text Max, his driver. “You want a ride back to your place?” he asked his brother.

Xander had a house on Long Island where he retreated when he was deep in work. And for when he came into the city, he had an apartment on the Upper East Side in the same building Linc lived in.

His brother shook his head. “I drove in and I’m going to head back to my house tonight. I want to get to work first thing in the morning. Want me to drop *you* off?”

“It’s out of your way and my driver’s waiting. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Linc shut the light, they both grabbed their jackets, and they walked out of the office, taking the elevator downstairs and heading to the city street, where they parted ways. As usual, Manhattan was busy at eight p.m., cars, taxis, and buses clogging the street and honking when another vehicle didn’t move fast enough.

Linc’s driver was coming around the corner. In no time, Linc was sitting in the back of a town car, fiddling with his phone, his mind on everything he’d learned today. God, he hated his father. Hated the times he’d hear his mother crying while he was growing up, knowing she’d stayed married to her husband for the sake of her children. Linc grimaced. His parents had taught him it wasn’t worth having children. What if a relationship went sour? Would his kids have to hear ugly arguing or deal with the pain of divorce? His stomach churned, and he knew it was the combination of the liquor and the memories assaulting him.

He leaned his head against the back seat and closed his eyes, surprised when his phone rang. Lifting the cell from his lap, he glanced at the screen and groaned. Angelica, his ex-girlfriend and one-time friend with benefits, was calling. Though he rarely saw her anymore, he occasionally ran into her at the country club where both of their families belonged.

“Hello?” he asked, planning to keep the conversation short.

“Linc, honey, it’s been so long. How are you?” She purred in an obvious attempt to interest him. It didn’t work.

How was he? Drunk, pissed, confused, and the last thing he needed or wanted was a woman whose only goal was to marry into his family. When he was younger, he’d had no problem indulging her because they’d both needed the same thing. To be seen with the right person on their arms. These days he was older, wiser, and more discriminating. And not about pedigree or women who faked everything about themselves.

He wanted someone real. Someone like Jordan. Shit, he was drunk.

“Linc?” Angelica asked, her voice causing his eyes to open wider and forcing him to concentrate.

“I’m here. It’s been a long day.”

“Oh, poor baby. Why don’t you come over and I’ll pour us some wine. We can work out your frustrations.”

He knew her offer came with strings, something he’d discovered when they’d tried the friends-with-benefits route.

She'd always wanted and demanded more than he was willing to give. Financially and emotionally. There was a reason he'd been celibate for the last year. His hand didn't demand anything in return.

"Sorry. I'm home for the night," he said, glancing out the window. The car was nearing Jordan's apartment, which he always passed on his way home.

"I could come to you," Angelica offered, the desperation in her tone obvious.

His entire body tensed at the sound. "Sorry, I'm beat. I need to go. Bye."

He disconnected the call, and before he could think through what he was doing, he leaned forward in his seat. "Max, I had a change of plans," he said and rattled off Jordan's address.

With his mind spinning as much as his head, there was only one person he wanted to be with tonight. The only one who'd understand his pain.

He leaned against the cushioned backrest and waited for the car to come to a stop in front of Jordan's building.

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JORDAN CAME HOME and changed into a pair of gray joggers and a tie-dye swing tank-top, an outfit she'd be comfortable wearing to relax and watch television, and also to sleep in once she removed the bottoms. She released her hair from the low ponytail she'd had it in, the last thing she needed to free herself from the constraints of working for Linc's Fortune 500

privately held company, where appearances were important. She was grateful to him for giving her a job where she earned more than she'd ever dreamed when growing up, and she refused to let him down.

She poured herself a small glass of wine and dug into the sushi she'd picked up, nearly inhaling the food because she was starving. Then she cleaned up and settled onto the couch in her living room, pulling a blanket over her and snuggling in.

Man, she'd had a long day.

Since Kenneth Kingston had passed away unexpectedly a few weeks ago, she and Linc had had their hands full catching up on his father's deals and properties. Although no one in the family liked to talk about it, Kenneth Kingston had been suffering from the early stages of dementia when he died. He'd refused to step down from his position as chairman of the company or become a figurehead in the organization he'd founded. All Linc had been able to do was make sure that Wallace Franklin, their chief financial officer and Kenneth's closest friend, was on top of Kenneth's investments.

Now, while Jordan focused on Linc's listings and outstanding contracts, he handled both the business and his father's estate. When necessary, Jordan coordinating with the elder Mr. Kingston's secretary, Suzanne, who Linc had decided to keep on in a different position. He hadn't wanted to fire the woman who'd been with the company for years. Linc thought he was a hard-ass, and they all liked to tease him about his demands, but deep down he had a good heart.

And right now he was hurting.

With a sigh, Jordan picked up the television remote and was about to turn it on when her cell rang. A glance showed her it was her doorman, and she tapped accept, surprised he'd call so late. "Hi, Jerry."

"Miss Greene, Mr. Kingston is here. Should I send him up?"

"Yes, please," she said, rising from her seat, concerned. She disconnected the call.

Why would Linc be here now? When she'd said good night at the office, he'd been drinking with and talking to Xander, filling him in about the sister they hadn't known about. He'd already told Jordan everything about his discovery, and she understood how upsetting he'd found the news.

To show up here now wasn't in character. He was self-contained and kept his emotions to himself, even when he was upset. But she'd never seen him quite as worked up as he'd been about his new sister, Aurora, and her past, growing up in foster homes while he and his siblings had wealth and comfort.

After folding the blanket she'd pulled over herself, she laid it onto the couch before heading to the door, reaching it just as Linc knocked.

She opened it to find him standing, one arm on the doorframe, a sexy vision with his white dress shirt unbuttoned and tie hanging loose around his neck. His silky black hair was mussed from running his fingers through the strands, and a day's worth of scruff graced his gorgeous face.

But his eyes drew her attention most. Devastation looked back at her from his blue gaze with a darker ring around the outer edges.

“Hey,” he said, and she caught the whiff of whiskey on his breath.

“Come on in.” She stepped back and he entered, brushing past her and leaving her with a hint of his cologne in his wake.

After closing the door, she followed him into her living room. “I’d offer you a drink, but it smells like you’ve had enough.”

Without replying, he threw his body onto the couch she’d been sitting on, choosing her favorite side and he knew it.

“Talk to me,” she said, joining him on the cushion next to his and crossing her legs in front of her.

“I’m pissed at my father.” He leaned back and groaned.

“I know.” She’d spent enough time in their large house growing up.

Enough to know Kenneth Kingston hadn’t been a man to be emulated. A man of power? Yes. A kind, caring parent to the children with his wife? Not so much. But a worse husband and definitely a horrible human to the daughter he’d abandoned. Now Linc was left to pick up the pieces.

“Does your mother know about your half-sister?”

He shook his head. “And who do you think has to tell her?”

Linc was close to his mother, as were all his siblings. Despite how long she'd known Melissa Kingston, who liked to be called Melly, Jordan couldn't read her. She'd seen Melly be stern and she'd seen her kind. She'd never treated Jordan badly and had allowed her to come to the house and do homework while her mom finished her day of work. And unlike Mr. Kingston, she never gave Linc a hard time about their friendship, for which Jordan was grateful. One thing was certain. The woman hadn't deserved for her husband to cheat on her.

"You'll handle it," she said, putting a hand on Linc's shoulder.

He pulled her closer until she leaned against him, her head in the crook of his arm. His body was warm, he smelled good, and she did her best to ignore the tingle of awareness inside her. Linc liked to hang out, to snuggle and watch a movie or just talk. Their friendship consisted of everything she'd want with someone she loved deeply except sex and the intimacy that came with it.

So as she sat with his arm around her, comforting him in silence, she ignored the scent of his cologne, masculine and sexy. She tried not to focus on the hard muscled body she leaned against, but it wasn't easy.

She couldn't lie and say she'd never wanted a relationship with Linc, but those days were over. When she was younger, she'd had a crush on him, but her mother had caught on quickly and warned her about their different status in life and how ultimately Jordan didn't fit into his world.

Those words had crushed her young heart, but since her mother cleaned their home, they ultimately made sense, and Jordan had forced herself to focus on being Linc's friend. Eventually, he'd gone to college, the cost fully covered by his family. She had student loans. She'd gotten a job in human resources for a company she'd liked while he'd attended business school.

But maybe she'd read too many romance novels, because her first year out of college, she'd met a hot guy at a bar. Collin had been attentive, taken her number, and called her the next day. They'd begun dating, and she'd quickly learned he'd come from a wealthy family who made their money in hedge funds.

The relationship turned serious fast, but she never met his family, and she'd begun to feel like he was hiding her from his parents. After all, he'd already met hers. And like with Linc, Jordan's mother was wary thanks to Collin's family's wealth, but since she didn't work for them, she hadn't harped on the issue.

Then Jordan had missed her period and a test proved she was pregnant. And Collin Auerbach had panicked and handed her money to get rid of the problem. Much like Linc's father had apparently done to one of his mistresses, as she now knew.

Jordan had thrown him out, ripped up the check, and the man she'd thought she'd marry got engaged to an oil heiress six months later.

As for Jordan, a month into the pregnancy, she'd experienced terrible cramps and heavy bleeding and lost the

baby. The pain of remembering always hurt. And who had been there for her? Linc. He'd helped her with her grief and was there as she'd picked up the pieces of her broken heart.

After Linc had graduated business school, he began working at Kingston Enterprises, and he'd all but begged her to become his personal assistant. Something his father hadn't been happy about because she was the help's daughter.

This time she understood she'd never be good enough for anyone with wealth. Fine. She didn't want the upscale, hoity-toity kind of life anyway. She just desired a normal existence with a job she enjoyed, a man she loved, and eventually a family of her own.

She'd taken the job at Kingston Enterprises, refusing to give up a great opportunity because Linc's father was an asshole. Besides, the older man's office had been a long hall away from Linc's. Once she'd been hired, she'd rarely seen him. And she and Linc had fallen into a special work dynamic. She'd be a fool to think about him as anything other than her boss and friend.

A friend she treasured and didn't want to lose by adding sex to their relationship. No more wealthy men for her. Plus she saw the kind of women Linc dated, the type of families they came from, the approval his mother gave those women, all proof her own her mother's words still held true. Jordan wasn't in his league and didn't belong there.

"I need a plan," he said, speaking up out of the blue.

She'd actually thought he'd fallen asleep.

“Do I go meet my sister? Or do I let it go because knowing the truth about her father might be too painful for her?” His words sounded slurred, and he was obviously in no position to talk tonight.

“I think we should discuss this in the morning. You need a clear head to make those kinds of decisions.” She pushed herself off him and rose to her feet.

“Stay with me,” he said, and when she glanced at him, his lips were set in a little-boy pout.

This was the Linc not many people saw. The vulnerable man beneath the businessman he presented to the world. “You need sleep. Do you have a car waiting?” she asked because he used a driver to get around the city.

“I sent him home.” He stretched his feet out on her couch, and she realized he was settling in for the night.

“Kick off your shoes,” she said. No way could he sleep on the couch in his work clothes.

He did as she instructed, and his black dress shoes fell to the floor.

“Now take off your tie and shirt so you’re comfortable.”

“Bossy,” he muttered and began to undo the buttons. He worked his way down, revealing his muscled chest and defined abs from time with a professional trainer. He shrugged out of the shirt, struggling with the buttons on the cuffs, but he managed to release them.

Swallowing hard, she took the shirt and tie from him and put them aside, planning to hang them up so they didn’t

wrinkle even more. He'd need them to wear home in the morning.

Despite herself, she couldn't help but stare at his naked chest. It had been years since they were kids swimming together in his family's pool, and the man in front of her now was a far cry from the boy he'd been.

How could she look at him and not drool? "Do you want to wash up before you settle in for the night?" she asked in a husky voice.

She reached out a hand to help him to his feet, and without warning, he pulled her forward. She tumbled, twisting herself so she landed on top of his hard body.

"Linc, what are you doing?" She lifted herself up, intending to climb off him when a firm arm around her back locked her in place.

"I need you," he said, his voice full of longing.

His words took her off guard. Heart pounding, she looked up, and his gaze, hazy with alcohol but no less compelling, met hers. Everything inside her twisted with need. Need for this man and everything he was.

"Kiss me, Jordan."

A moan escaped her throat because she wanted desperately to press her lips to his. She stilled, her heart debating with her mind.

Just as she decided to make light of the moment, to treat it as a joke, he cupped the back of her head, and with a little pressure from his hand, her mouth met his. Sparks flew

through her body, the warmth and feel of him utter perfection. She sighed, wanting to get closer, and in response, his tongue pushed past her lips and curled around hers.

Unable to stop herself, she slid her hands into his hair and deepened the kiss. His breath tasted malty from alcohol, but nothing mattered except the feel of him devouring her mouth. His other hand slipped beneath the back of her shirt, his large, warm palm covering her skin. Her nipples grew tight, and she rubbed herself against him, enjoying their closeness.

The sound of her phone ringing penetrated her consciousness, popping the desire-filled bubble she'd been in, and brought her out of her fantasy moment. Reality came crashing in, and the reality was, Linc would never cross this line sober. She shouldn't have crossed it at all.

Ignoring the call, she pushed herself up, breaking their connection. With a groan, he met her gaze. "I'm not sorry," he said.

But he would be in the morning. If he even remembered the kiss. She shook her head, knowing she would never forget.

She stepped to the other end of the sofa, picked up the blanket, and as she draped it over him, a light snore escaped his parted lips.

She gently tucked the knitted covering around him, and because he was sleeping, she leaned down and pressed her lips to his forehead, closing her eyes and savoring his warmth and masculine scent.

Then, with one last glance at the man on her couch, she picked up his clothes and headed to her room alone.

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NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestseller, Carly Phillips is the queen of Alpha Heroes, at least according to The Harlequin Junkie Reviewer. Carly married her college sweetheart and lives in Purchase, NY along with her crazy dogs who are featured on her Facebook and Instagram pages. The author of over 75 romance novels, she has raised two incredible daughters and is now an empty nester. Carly's book, *The Bachelor*, was chosen by Kelly Ripa as her first romance club pick. Carly loves social media and interacting with her readers. Want to keep up with Carly? Sign up for her newsletter and receive TWO FREE books at www.carlyphillips.com.