



HALLIDAY FAMILY  
BOOK 2

# *Felix*

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# Felix

By Elizabeth Lennox

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# Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Jenna](#)

## Chapter 1

She was late!

Felix pretended to sip his scotch, but in reality, he glared impatiently at the door, willing it to open.

Was she okay? Was she lying hurt somewhere? Had she been accosted on the sidewalk?

Felix Halliday glanced at his watch for the fifth time in as many minutes. He'd give her two more minutes, then he was going out to find her!

Ninety seconds later, the woman in question stepped into the pub-style bar and Felix felt himself relax. She was here. She was fine!

And yet, the gorgeous woman hesitated in the doorway and his protective instincts flared hot again. He was just about to stand up and go over to her when she looked directly at him. He froze, feeling his muscles tighten into stone.

What the hell was she doing? They had a routine! She would enter the bar, order a glass of wine, and carry it to the small table in the back corner. She would then pull a book out of her tote bag and read as she sipped her wine. As soon as the pub started to become crowded with other patrons, she would leave.

She never, *ever*, paused to look him in the eye!

Plus, she was obviously nervous tonight! Granted, she was always a bit nervous when she came in. Until she was settled at her usual table, the pretty woman seemed a little tense. So, what was bothering her today?

He watched her carefully, wondering what he could do to help. To soothe her anxiety. He certainly didn't want to scare her further. His interest had never been so captured by a woman and he knew that he'd have to tread carefully.

Then she did something so outrageous, he was stunned.

The woman sat down at his table!

Felix stared at her, not sure what to say. They'd been playing their game for the past several weeks. What had changed today?

He glanced out the window, wondering if she'd been followed. If someone was bothering her, he would...!

"I'm Giselle," she announced.

Felix's body tightened at the delicate, feminine quality of her voice. Brown eyes. Beautiful, brown eyes, Felix corrected. He'd never gotten close enough to catch her eye color before. Brown. He loved them! They were soft and...worried.

"Felix," he replied, adding a nod for some reason. For emphasis of his name?

She smiled, lowering her eyes to the book she clutched in both hands.

Felix glanced at Tom, the bartender, and nodded. Tom immediately took out the bottle of white wine from the fridge underneath the bar and a wine glass.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently, wanting to understand her nervousness. He didn't like that look on her. For the past several weeks, he'd watched her walk with confidence and a pretty smile to her features. She always had a different book, which also fascinated him.

Her soft, brown eyes flashed nervously back up at him. "Yes!" she gasped, looking around, then letting her eyes rest on him again. "Why do you ask?"

Tom set the glass of wine on the table by her elbow and she flinched away, then forcibly relaxed when she saw it was just her wine.

"Thank you, Tom," she whispered, glancing up at the bartender. Normally, she had a saucy smile for the man before she accepted the wine and headed to her back corner table. What the hell was going on today?

The bartender retreated behind the bar and Felix leaned forward. "What's wrong?" he demanded in the gentlest tone he could manage. "Is someone bothering you? You can tell me. I will handle it for you."

Giselle's eyes brightened with hope and he tensed even further, but for a different reason. This time, he didn't fully understand why he felt like

he was on high alert, but he frowned at her from across the table. She was so tiny, he thought, his eyes flickering over her figure. Round and soft, he thought, in all of the right places. She was beautiful, with her dark hair and her starry brown eyes. She had a tiny, rosebud mouth and a cute little nose that turned up slightly at the tip. She was adorable. No, beautiful. He knew from his sisters not to describe women as “adorable”. They didn’t like it for some reason.

And yet, the adjective fit Giselle perfectly. She was soft, lovely, and absolutely adorable.

Not his type, he reminded himself. He preferred tall, leggy blonds.

“No one is bothering me,” she replied, adding a sigh.

His head tilted quizzically. “Then why are you nervous?”

She snorted and Felix swallowed a chuckle at the sound. “Because I’m sitting across a small table from you.”

He blinked. “*I* make you nervous?” he demanded in surprise, then wondered how he could fix that.

“Of course you make me nervous,” she said, then took a long sip of her wine. “I would have finished my wine before approaching you, but usually, the bar is too full by then.”

His eyebrows furrowed as he tried to follow her logic. “And you don’t like being around people?”

She snorted again. So adorable! “I don’t like being humiliated.”

That was a confusing comment and he frowned thoughtfully, toying with his glass of scotch. “Why would other people humiliate you?”

Her shoulders drooped slightly. Immediately, Felix felt the need to pull her onto his lap to reassure her...but, about what? He didn’t understand. But he wanted to! For some reason, he truly wanted to understand this particular woman.

She fidgeted with her wine glass as those dark eyes peered up at him through her long, black lashes. “You are quite terrifying, Mr. Halliday.”

“Felix. My name is Felix.”

She smiled and he saw a small dimple on her right cheek. Damn, that dimple was cute!

“Thank you, Felix.”

He shifted slightly, suddenly uncomfortable on the hard, wooden bench. “So, what’s the problem?”

“Me.” She took another small sip of her wine and set the book down on the table. As she carefully set the wine glass back down, she looked up at him. “I’m the problem.”

Giselle couldn’t believe how breathtakingly handsome Felix Halliday was up close. It was like sitting with a mountain, with his enormous shoulders and his towering height. She’d read online that he was six feet, two inches tall. That was exactly one foot taller than her. And she definitely didn’t have any muscles, enormous or otherwise. She had boobs. Rather large, cumbersome boobs. That was her dubious claim to fame.

“Why the hell do you think that you’re a problem?”

She smiled at his outrage, laying both of her hands on the book she’d brought with her tonight. It was more of a prop than anything else. She used it to hide behind so that she could watch him without being noticed. He was beyond gorgeous. Those crystal blue eyes glowed against his tanned skin, seeming to pierce a person’s soul. The chiseled, square jawline along with the thin nose and those firm, seemingly uncompromising lips...and his dreamy shoulders. Yeah, Giselle knew that she was a shoulders woman. She loved men with really broad, muscular shoulders.

“Giselle?”

Startled, she pulled her eyes away from those delicious shoulders and reminded herself that this man was way out of her league.

“Right,” she whispered and reminded herself of why she was here. Shifting on the wooden chair, she laid her hands flat on the table, prepared to lay out her soul. “Okay, so here’s the deal. I need to learn how to be a good girlfriend. And I’m willing to teach you how to be a good boyfriend, if you agree to help me.”

The surprise in his blue eyes made her stomach go all fluttery again.

His gaze sharpened for a brief moment. And in that moment, she was warmed by the admiration in his eyes. “Why don’t you think you’re a good girlfriend?”

Giselle laughed and looked down at the book as she sighed. “I *know* that I’m not a good girlfriend. That’s why I need your help. I think we can help each other.”

Those firm lips tightened, then he said, “And you think that I can teach you?”

She smiled and looked down at her book. She flipped through the pages and pulled out a piece of paper, placing it carefully on top of the book. “I *know* you can help me.” She tapped a finger on the list. “You date some of the most sophisticated women in the world.” She pulled her hand back, hiding her hands under the table to keep him from seeing the tremble in her fingers. “I want to be sophisticated and interesting.”

He barely glanced at the article before turning back to her. For some silly reason, Giselle found that she liked the way his dark eyebrow lifted as he asked, “And in exchange, you’re going to teach me to be a good boyfriend?”

She smiled charmingly. “You’ve gone through several woman this year, Mr. Hall...Felix,” she corrected quickly, almost laughing at the stern look that appeared in his eyes when she started to use his last name. “Obviously, we’re both doing something wrong.” She leaned forward, eager now. “Maybe if we share our knowledge and expertise with each other, then we can stop the patterns of our past and create a better future.”

He grinned playfully, but Giselle ignored his amusement. Shifting in her chair, she glared at him. “I’m being serious.”

He took a thoughtful sip of his scotch and asked, “What would you think would be a better future?”

“I want children. I want to get married.”

“In that order?” he asked and Giselle could tell he was teasing her.

She blushed and tucked a dark lock of her hair behind her ear, trying



valiantly to hide her nervousness. When she looked up at him, she pulled her shoulders back and gave him a stiff nod. “If that’s what it takes, then yes. I want children more than I want a husband.” She was working on being honest and standing up for what she wanted in life. So speaking her truth made her feel...powerful! “Yes. The priority for my life is children. If I have a husband to help me with that, then all the better. But I will *not* be in a relationship with a mooch. Or someone who doesn’t respect me.” She lifted her chin, meeting his eyes firmly. “I will not be used again.”

As soon as she said that last word, she knew she’d messed up. Sure enough, his eyes narrowed and Giselle’s gaze returned to his shoulders. Goodness, he was so obviously a warrior! She knew he’d been a Navy SEAL. But she’d never seen a man who could morph so quickly from hot-guy to warrior-guy.

“Who hurt you, Giselle?” he demanded, his voice now low and grumbly. She squirmed, trying to hide how turned on she was at this he-man display. As a modern woman, she shouldn’t become excited when a man displayed such behavior. But there was something so basic, so shockingly hot about a man who was ready to defend her.

“He’s in the past, Felix,” she assured him gently, watching as he leaned back against the leather cushion of the bench. The anger was still there, but the fury was merely banked.

“Who was he?”

She shook her head. “I’ve moved on.” She tapped her book. “I have a list of things that I have decided I need to change about myself in order to become a better girlfriend.”

There was another long pause and Giselle suspected that he was debating whether to insist on information about the man who had hurt her. Thankfully, he let it go. For now.

“Let me see it,” he demanded.

“No,” she replied tartly. “It’s *my* list.”

He flashed a grin at her defiance and Giselle felt a warm, melting sensation inside of herself.

“How am I supposed to help you with the list if I don’t know what’s on it?” he countered.

Giselle considered his point for a long moment, unaware of her pursed lips and the impact her expression of concentration had on him.

When her chocolate eyes returned to him, she beamed like she’d just solved world hunger. “I’ll tell you what the items are, one at a time. Once you’ve helped me with one, then I’ll tell you the next.”

Immediately, he shook his head. “You came to me because you think I’m an expert, correct?”

She bit her lip, then shook her head. “No, I came to you because I don’t think you’ll let me get away with anything. You seem like the kind who won’t let me back slide into my previous habits.”

He tilted his head slightly, acknowledging her statement. “Fair enough. You’re correct in that assumption.” She relaxed, but her relief was short lived. “However, you might think certain items on your list are more important. As a man, I can prioritize the action items from a male viewpoint. So, I need to see the whole list before we start.”

Giselle hadn’t thought of that, and had to agree that his comment made sense. “Yes, you’re right.” She considered his argument for another moment, then nodded slowly. “You’re absolutely right.” She flipped through the pages of her book again and another list fell out. “Darn it,” she muttered, then reached out to pick it up. But Felix was faster.

She eyed his long fingers as he read, conjuring up the images from her dream the previous night. Goodness, his fingers were extremely nice. Too nice for a man who worked with his hands. Did he have calluses? She shivered, wondering what it would be like to feel those hard, unforgiving hands on her skin, to know what it was like to...!

Giselle’s mind blanked when she realized he was watching her. Were her cheeks as red as they felt? She certainly hoped not! And please please please, don’t let him be the kind who could discern her thoughts simply by looking at her expression!

Forcing her thoughts to more...innocent images, she looked back at Felix with what she hoped was a placid expression.

Felix watched her for another long moment, his eyes assessing. But when she merely smiled calmly back at him, he gave up and looked over the list. One of those dark, enticing eyebrows lifted in question. “You made a list of the things you need to clean?”

She blinked at him with confusion. “Of course. Don’t you?” She snatched the list out of his hand, glaring at the words.

He chuckled and Giselle had to admit that she enjoyed the sound. “No. I don’t clean. I have a housekeeper who keeps my place nice and tidy.”

She rolled her eyes as she stuffed the list back into her book. “Well, some of us don’t have that luxury. So a list keeps me on track.”

She shuffled through the pages to find the correct list and pulled it out, stared at it and...! “Just a moment,” she whispered, hoping that her face didn’t look as heated as it felt. She put the list on the edge of the table, tearing the last item off and handing him the rest of it.

Felix couldn’t believe how fascinating he found her. Giselle. What a beautiful name. It fit her. She wasn’t classically beautiful, but he could see the beauty in all of her cuteness.

She handed him the next list, but he stared at the book, wondering what the last item was that she’d torn off. Obviously, she didn’t want him to know, which only made him more curious.

He had to respect her privacy though, so he looked down at the list in his hand.

As soon as he read the first item, he shook his head adamantly. “No!” he snapped. He shot a glare across the table at her. “You absolutely do *not* need to lose ten or twenty pounds, Giselle!”

She blushed and spun her glass of wine between her fingers, looking down at the scratches in the wood of the pub table. “Of course I do. Men don’t like chubby women. They want someone who is fit and svelte. Someone they would be proud to have by their side at corporate functions.” She looked away and he suspected that she felt she’d admitted too much to him.

Furious, he leaned forward again, wanting to spank her adorable bottom for even thinking such incorrect thoughts. “Who the hell told you that you need to lose twenty pounds?”

She fidgeted on the chair again, hiding her hands under the table. “It doesn’t matter who said it,” she asserted firmly. “It’s true. I’m short, Felix. Short women with too much weight just look frumpy.”

“No,” he snapped again and stood up, stalking over to the bar. He grabbed a pen from the register and brought it back to the table. Grabbing the list, he slashed a line through item one.

She huffed again and couldn’t stop another wiggle on her chair. “I’m still going to do it,” she vowed. “Just because you cross it off of the list, doesn’t mean that it’s wrong.”

He ignored her, still looking at the list. “Become more adventurous?” he read aloud, then looked at her. “What does that mean?”

She shrugged slightly and looked out the window. “I’ve read articles about you, Felix,” she began, then turned and looked right at him. “You jump out of airplanes, go rock climbing, hike up mountain trails, dangle from which ever building you’re currently building.” She shivered. “I’ve seen pictures of you and it looks terrifying.” She leaned forward conspiratorially. “You’re an adrenaline junky, aren’t you?”

He smiled, unable to stop himself because she just looked too cute. “Yeah, I guess I am. I love dangling, as you put it.”

Those dark eyes were wide with fascination as she asked, “Why?”

He valiantly tried to keep his gaze away from the dark shadow revealed by her neckline. It was more pronounced as she leaned forward. Unfortunately, not even the intensity of her brown gaze could keep him from looking.

Hell, he was a guy! And a breast man, at that. He loved breasts. Small ones, large ones, medium. And nipples. Damn, he absolutely adored nipples! All colors, all shapes. Large, small, pink, tan, rose colored...every part of a woman’s breast was just...amazing. He loved holding them, touching them, licking and biting the nipples to see how a woman reacted.

What would Giselle do when he touched her breasts? Did she like a lover to kiss them? Did she like to feel the slight pain of a nip? How hard did she like her breasts to be sucked?

“Felix?” she called out. “Are you okay?”

Felix dragged his thoughts back to the present, looking into her eyes. “I’m fine,” he replied, ignoring the fact that his voice was rougher now. That happened every time he thought about breasts, he thought with a mental chuckle.

Clearing his throat, he kept his eyes firmly on the list in front of him. He tried to remember what they’d been discussing. Right! Adrenaline.

“I enjoy the thrill of it,” he finally answered. “I guess that means I could be classified as an adrenaline junky.”

“When did you first realize that you liked the thrills?”

He thought about that. “I don’t know,” he replied. “I guess I discovered the love of excitement while I was in the Navy.”

“You were a Navy SEAL, correct?”

He was startled that she knew that, and then realized where her knowledge of his past must have come from. His family’s hotel business was more of an empire than just a business and articles about their success were all over the internet now. His youngest sister, Ava, was brilliant at marketing and publicity.

“Yes. That was years ago though.”

She smiled and Felix wondered what she would look like when she actually laughed.

“What was it like?”

He grinned, unable to stop himself. “It was amazing.”

Her head tilted and his gaze moved to her neck. He loved necks too. Correction, he thought that *her* neck was very interesting. He couldn’t say that he’d ever noticed anyone else’s neck.

“Why did you leave the Navy if you enjoyed it so much? I thought it was incredibly difficult to become a SEAL.”

“It is,” he confirmed. “I broke my leg in several places during one mission.” He didn’t mention the country where it had happened, since all of his missions as a Navy SEAL were classified.

She did that cute, blinking thing again and he wondered if she’d do that when she was turned on. “And they kicked you out of the Navy because of that?”

It took him a moment to recall what they were discussing. Finally, he shook his head. “No, they didn’t kick me out. I could have done a desk job for the SEAL teams. But that wasn’t what I wanted.” He leaned forward, the list still in his hand. “At the time, I realized that my family needed my help. So I left the Navy and came back to help them.”

She grinned as if she were somehow proud of him for that decision. He’d never thought about it before right now, before her admiration. But seeing the awe in her eyes made him feel like a freaking hero! Damn, Giselle was amazingly expressive!

“And now, you are an architect who builds the newest Halliday Hotels.”

Once again, he shook his head. “No, I have a degree in business and math that I earned while in the Navy. I’m not an architect, but I work with a team of them. And yes, I am in charge of managing the actual building after my older brother, Pierce, finds the site. Or, if he finds a chain of hotels that we could bring under our corporate umbrella, then me and my team go in to fix them and bring them up to the Halliday Hotels standards.”

“And your sister decorates the hotels once you’re done?”

He chuckled. “My youngest sister, Ava, does all of the designs. She has a genius eye for creating a unique atmosphere.”

Giselle smiled and even sighed slightly. “I love seeing the various designs she’s created. None of the spaces are identical, are they?”

Felix shook his head. “Years ago, my parents owned a small, roadside hotel. It was an absolute dump back then. But after my father left, Ava figured out how to decorate each of the rooms so that they were unique.” He shook his head at the memory. “She’d find the oddest items at yard sales and thrift shops and used them to decorate the rooms. Jenna, the

third oldest in our family, ran the business side of things. Still does. But once Ava and Jenna didn't have the interference of my father drinking away all the profits, the hotel really started to make money."

"But you were in the Navy then, right? I remember reading about the success of the Halliday Hotels in the news a while ago. That business magazine interviewed your sisters."

"Yeah. I was in the Navy," he replied, rubbing the back of his neck uncomfortably. "I would come back on leave from the Navy, dragging several of my friends. Together, we'd build extra cabins." He chuckled, thinking about the great times they'd had. "Those cabins got a bit wild. Several of them were up in the trees, accessible only by rope bridges and odd ladders. One of them had a maze that the guests needed to work their way through in order to reach the treehouse cabin."

"And people liked that?"

He chuckled, nodding at the memories. "They loved it! Even now, those cabins are booked up months in advance. Those cabins are really what put us on the map." He shook his head. "The cabins and Ava's decorating style. She convinced us that every cabin needed to be unique and interesting. So now, whenever I start working on a building, she'll come with me at the beginning to get a feel for the city. Then she designs the hotel décor so that it has the same vibe as the city."

"That's wonderful," she sighed. "I've been to the one here in Seattle for drinks. But that's as far as I've ventured."

"I'll take you out to some of the others the next time I go."

Giselle pulled back, shaking her head. "Oh, that's not necessary."

Felix wondered about her dismissal, but figured he'd understand once he got to know her better. Then he'd convince her to come with him to visit the other hotels, so she could experience more of Ava's creativity.

For the moment, Felix waved the list at Giselle. "You want to be more adventurous. That means traveling to new cities and exploring different cultures around the world. So, visiting the other hotels would be a perfect first step."

Good point, Giselle thought, but didn't reply.

He perused the list again, his eyebrows furrowing when he read the next line. "Why the hell do you want to become more of a night person?"

"Because I'm an early bird," she explained, shaking her head with resignation. "I love getting up early in the morning and seeing the sun rise." She sighed, her eyes becoming dreamy as she thought back. "I love being awake when the world is waking with me. It's best when I can get up before the sun rises, make a cup of tea and watch..." She abruptly stopped, peeking self-consciously at Felix through her eyelashes. "Well, never mind that," she said, wiggling her fingers towards the list as if encouraging him to read the next item.

Felix ignored her wiggling fingers and asked, "You like mornings. Why would you change that about yourself?"

Her mouth twisted in a grimace and she shrugged. "Because the rest of the world seems to be night people. Everyone else I know goes out to dinner at restaurants, they dance and party at night clubs. They attend the opera and the theater. They do *things*," she said, emphasizing the last word. "I get sleepy by eight o'clock because I get up so early in the morning."

"I'm a morning person too," he offered. "I hate nightclubs."

She wasn't convinced. "I've seen plenty of pictures of you at clubs. Hard to believe that you don't enjoy them."

"I hate them," he confirmed. "The music is too loud, the spaces are always crowded. It's hard to get a drink because there are so many people and it's just annoying and a little overwhelming."

She grinned and he felt as if she'd just given him a gift. "Well, that's...um...nice."

He looked down at the list again. "Why do you think you need to stop reading so much?" That one really irritated him. He'd bought every single book she'd brought into the pub and read it cover to cover. Some of the titles he'd loved and others, he'd hated. But Giselle...he loved her name and loved that he finally had a name for her...she'd encouraged him to read books he never would have considered. She'd broadened his horizons significantly.



“Oh, that’s an easy one. I added that to my list because I know I read too much,” she replied confidently.

“According to whom?” he demanded, horrified.

She didn’t reply, but he knew. He could see the answer in her eyes. “How long were you dating him?” he asked, referring to the ass who had created all of these insecurities in her.

“Seven years,” she replied as her shoulders drooped for a brief moment before she pulled herself together again. “But,” her chin lifted, “I’ve accepted that my past only makes me stronger. I was with him for too long.”

“Were you engaged?” Felix waited for her answer, surprised at how important it was.

She tilted her head, that sexy, rosebud mouth pursing as she considered his question. “I guess it is appropriate to say that we were engaged to be engaged.”

He wasn’t aware of how dangerous his look became at that statement. “What does that mean? Either a man proposes, or he doesn’t.”

“The woman could propose,” she pointed out.

He grinned. “Yeah, but where’s the fun in that?”

She laughed and he felt oddly victorious. The sound of her laughter was...hot! Beautiful! She was truly a delight.

“Good point. There is a certain romance in a man getting down on one knee and offering a pretty ring to a woman.”

“Exactly,” he nodded, although he couldn’t see himself getting down on his knee. That had always reeked of begging and Felix didn’t beg. Ever!

“So, why did he think you read too much?”

Giselle shrugged and her sigh was resigned. “He wanted to go out and do things.”

“What kinds of things.”

She sighed. “I don’t know. But he would rail at me because I’d be curled up on the couch, reading, and he’d complain that he wanted to go out and do something. But when I asked him what he wanted to do, he never had

any ideas.” She took another sip of her wine. “I guess if I wasn’t reading, I might have come up with something exciting to do. Which is why I shouldn’t read as much as I do.”

“If that ass wanted to do something, if he’d offered you a specific plan, would you have turned him down because you wanted to finish a book?”

“Of course not,” she answered quickly.

“Exactly,” he said, nodding for emphasis as if that one word proved his point.

She blinked, obviously not sure what he meant. “What is ‘exactly’?” she asked carefully.

“The men you dated expected you to entertain them. They expected you to come up with the plans for their excitement. They were waiting on you to find something for them to do. They relied on you to do the heavy lifting so they could enjoy themselves.” He shrugged. “If I want to do something, I’m going to make the plan, offer the idea and, if she wants to do it, then we’ll go together.”

“And if your girlfriend doesn’t want to do it?”

He considered her question carefully. “I guess I’d go do it on my own.”

She pursed her lips thoughtfully and his body tightened in response. When she nodded, her lips relaxing, so did he. Felix wondered what sort of spell she’d cast over him.

“I think that’s an excellent idea.” She bit her lip, then leaned forward and asked, “If your girlfriend wanted to do something and you weren’t interested in that activity, would you get angry if she did it on her own?”

He pulled back, confusion marring his blue eyes now. “Why on earth would I get angry? If she wants to do something, why would I try to stop her?”

There was a long moment of silence and he saw the relief wash over her. “Someone did that to you, didn’t he? He got mad when you went out by yourself to pursue your own interests?”

Instead of answering his question, Giselle pointed to the list. “Skip number five.”

He looked down, then chuckled. “What does that mean?” He blinked, then looked at her again. “Where...chickens?”

She waved her hand towards the list. “Skip that one. The next two are probably more within your area of expertise.”

He stared at her for a long moment before returning to the list. “Fix things around your house is number six?” He looked at her, waiting for confirmation. When she nodded, he read the next item. “Why are you afraid of power tools?”

She grimaced, her shoulders slumping slightly. “Those are actually the most ambitious items on my list,” she told him. His gaze encouraged her to continue. “My ex would mock me if I tried to fix anything around my apartment.” Her mouth twisted into a grimace at the memories.

“How?”

One shoulder lifted and dropped, as if the answer wasn't important. “If I picked up the drill, he would groan and shake his head, saying things like, ‘What are you going to do with that?’ like he was terrified by the thought of me using a power tool.” Her eyes flared with anger. “I couldn't even go to a hardware store without him telling me that I can't possibly know what I was doing!”

“I think you can do anything you put your mind to.”

She blinked, then stared at him like she'd never seen anything like him before. She took a long, deep breath, then forced herself to smile. “Well, you don't know me very well yet, but I thank you for the vote of confidence. However, I'm going to learn to fix things.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

Her chin went up another notch and her smile became genuine. “I bought a new house.” She wrinkled her nose slightly and corrected herself. “Actually, I bought an old house that is new to me. I'm going to fix it up.” Her eyes sparkled and she leaned forward as she continued, “I changed the faucets in the downstairs bathroom! They look fabulous now! And it wasn't

easy. I had to figure out several plumbing issues, like the fact that the pipes to the new faucet didn't fit the older pipes."

He grinned in response. "But you figured it out, huh?"

She beamed and clapped her hands together. "It took me a month, during which I couldn't use that bathroom sink, but yes. I fixed it all by myself!"

"Good for you!"

She continued to grin. "Next, I'm hoping to change out the ugly ceiling fixtures. They are the old boob light kind."

He had just taken a sip of his scotch, but at her words, he choked and his eyes immediately dropped to her breasts in spite of himself. The glance was only a brief look, before his self-discipline kicked in. "What are boob lights?" he asked, fascinated despite his admonition to stop thinking about her breasts.

She waved a hand in the air, indicating the lights above them. "You know, the ones that have a half globe with that decorative bolt on the bottom. The globe is the boob and the connecting bolt is the...ummm..." her face turned bright red and she clasped her hands together in her lap. "Well, you get the idea."

Felix's grin widened as he nodded. "I do now."

She groaned good-naturedly and rolled her eyes. "Anyway, that's my next project. I've been watching videos on how to change ceiling fixtures for the past couple weeks. I'm pretty sure I can do it. I've even ordered the light fixtures. I just need to get the courage to change them."

"I could help you."

She groaned, shooting him a wary glance. "Are you the kind who 'shows' a woman how to do it by grabbing the tool out of my hands and doing it yourself?" she asked. "Because that's not going to work for me. I want to learn how to do it all by myself."

He shrugged dismissively. "I can either change them for you or show you how," he offered, thinking it would be fun to teach her how to do just about anything. Besides, if she were doing it, he could stand back and

admire her. It could be a win-win situation.

He returned to the list and frowned. “Isn’t this next one the same as number six?”

“Don’t be afraid to use power tools?” she filled in, then shook her head. “Completely different.”

He was stumped by that response. “What are you going to use the power tools for if not to fix things around your house?”

She laughed, taking another, longer, sip of her wine. “I understand your confusion. And yes, you’re absolutely correct that I will use power tools to fix things around my house. However, that’s not all power tools can be used for. I’m thinking about craft purposes. And making things.” She winked playfully at him. Then her face suddenly dimmed. “You do know how to use power tools, right?”

“Yes,” he replied, thinking of the crane he’d gotten to operate yesterday. “A few.” He knew how to use all of them, actually. He loved power tools.

“Well, I am terrified of losing a finger, or worse, to a power tool. And yet, a lot of the projects I hope to tackle require power tools. So, I need to learn to use them. Not just because of the projects, but also because I want to overcome my fears.”

“That’s a good plan,” he told her, admiration in his voice.

Giselle blushed again, but he had already moved on to the next item on her list. “This one doesn’t make any sense,” he said. “Why would you want to stop being so clean?”

She laced her fingers together, then hid them under the table. “My ex often complained that I was a neat freak.”

Felix shook his head in disgust. “Don’t lower your standards for anyone,” he said as he reached for the pen to slash through that line item. But Giselle snatched the list out of his hands.

“Leave it alone. I *am* a neat freak,” she insisted, pressing her lips together. “It’s something I want to work on because I don’t want my future husband to feel uncomfortable living with me.”

“Your ex told you he felt uncomfortable?”

“Yes. He said that I was always cleaning and never just relaxed.”

“But you would relax when you were reading?”

She shrugged. “That was different.”

“How so?”

“It just is,” she insisted. She handed the list back, but grabbed the pen so he couldn’t do any more damage to her list.

He read the next item and she looked around, praying that he didn’t...!

He did. Felix barely finished reading the next line item when he threw back his head and roared with laughter. “Plaid?” he asked between bouts of laughter. “You are going to ‘accept’ plaid as a decorating option?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “Yes. My house is currently very...uh...” she sighed, pausing to consider how to explain. “Well, it’s very feminine. I like pinks and whites. The living room is decorated with flowers and sage green throw pillows. The kitchen is all white and when I renovate it, I’d planned to have white cabinets and maybe pink dishes.” She shook her head. “I really love pink.” Giselle whispered the last part, as if it were an admission of guilt.

“What’s wrong with pink?”

She shrugged, trying to appear indifferent. “Men don’t like pink. Pink is, apparently, emasculating.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t know that.”

Giselle made a face. “Apparently, it’s a thing. So, I need to figure out how to...*accept*...plaid as a decorating choice. I don’t like it, but maybe I can figure out how to live with it.”

Felix put the list down and folded his arms on the table. “Giselle, this list is all about changing yourself. Why don’t you work on finding someone who accepts you as you are?”

Giselle blinked rapidly and shook her head. “No, I don’t think that will get me what I want. I want a family. I want lots of children and...,” she

paused, not wanting to get into too much detail. She'd already messed up on the chicken issue, so she hadn't allowed herself to go to the animal shelter to find a dog or cat, even though she desperately wanted one of each. Or three of both, she thought wistfully, then pushed the idea of pets away. "I'm not giving up on my dream simply because there are a few personality quirks that I need to work on. In a relationship, both people need to compromise." She tapped her finger on the list. "These are the things that I'm willing to compromise." She glanced down at the list. "The list probably seems like a suppression of my personality. But that's not the case. I'm going to learn new things and expand my horizons. And I want to do it before my next birthday in a couple of months."

Felix stared at her for a long moment. Giselle remained still, taking in his gaze.

Suddenly, he nodded. "Yes. I'll help you."

She had no idea what her smile did to him. Even Felix was stunned and confused. Giselle was a beautiful woman, but she was so completely different from anyone else he'd ever known. So why did he feel as if he wanted to pull her over to him and make love to her right here? He was turned on simply because of her beautiful smile?

He had to remind himself that she needed his help. She definitely didn't need another man that made her feel like less than she was. Not that he would do that, he thought to himself. He considered Giselle to be absolutely incredible. Completely beautiful and amazing. Even more fascinating than he'd thought during all of the weeks that he'd come to this bar just to watch her read.

She started to gather up her lists, book and her purse, acting as if she were about to leave. But she looked over at him eagerly as she said, "Wonderful! Then, I'll see you next week, when you bring your list." She stood up, looking at him with anticipation.

His list? What list? Had she said something about a list?

"I'm sorry?" he asked, standing next to her. Damn, she was short! In the past, he'd dated tall women, thinking that it was easier to kiss a woman

when he didn't have to crouch down. But Felix had to admit that the thought of pulling Giselle close and feeling her petite-ness all snuggled up against him had appeal.

Wouldn't it be nice to have someone with curves and softness pressing against him instead of the skinny, bony women he'd been with before? What would it feel like to have Giselle press her glorious curves against his chest? To have his hands cup her ass and feel those curves under his fingertips.

Help, he reminded himself. She needed his help!

He blinked back to the present, only to realize that she was saying something to him. "Your list. Remember? You said that you wanted to learn to be a better boyfriend."

He had? He didn't remember that, but what did he have to lose? "I'll create a list. But we should meet sooner. And it should be more often than just once a week."

"We should?" she asked, looking up at him with those amazing brown eyes. Long, dark lashes fluttered, making him think of a butterfly.

"Yes," he replied, clearing his throat. He glanced up and saw the bartender's smothered grin. He'd deal with Tom later, Felix thought. Looking back at Giselle, he nodded emphatically. "If you want to be ready by your birthday, then we should definitely meet more often." He put a hand to the small of her back, leading her towards the doorway so that Tom couldn't overhear the rest of their conversation. He glanced over his shoulder, shooting the man a fulminating glare. Tom wasn't intimidated in the least and smirked unrepentantly at Felix.

Which was fair, he thought. Tom probably thought that Felix had been coming to the bar just to see Giselle. Then he thought about that statement and...okay, Tom would be correct; Felix had rearranged his daily schedule and travel arrangements so he could be here on Thursday evenings.

"Okay," she replied, then stepped out into the early evening sunshine "When would you like to meet again? You're right. We should meet sooner, so that I can review your list of action items."

"Tomorrow night." Felix would make up a list as fast as possible if it



meant that he would see Giselle the following evening. Maybe take her out to dinner? Yes, dinner was an excellent idea!

She pursed that cute mouth of hers and his mind shifted gears. So it took him a moment to process her words when she asked, “Is that enough time for you to come up with ten items?”

He looked down at her with one eyebrow raised. “You only had nine items on your list.”

She shifted uncomfortably, hitching the straps of her tote bag higher onto her shoulder before she said, “Well, there *were* ten items. But the last item is a bit too personal. I’ll work on that one myself.”

Too personal? Now he desperately wanted to know what that last item was. What action item was so personal that she wouldn’t tell him about it? It had to be sexual. But for the moment, he would leave it alone. He’d find out eventually.

“Meet me at Malone’s. We’ll discuss my list over dinner. Would six o’clock be too early for you?”

She considered his question briefly, giving him time to consider all of the sexual possibilities for item number ten. But then she nodded, offering him a tentative smile. “Yes. That’s fine.”

“Great. I’ll see you tomorrow at six, then,” he said and every cell in his body wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her until she was dazed. It took him several moments to remember that they weren’t dating. Hell, her suggestion, that he teach her how to be a better girlfriend was the exact opposite of dating.

Damn!

“Thank you!” Giselle gushed, beaming up at him, those chocolate eyes sparkling with happiness. “I’m truly grateful that you are willing to help me with this.” And then she turned and hurried down the street towards another building where he suspected she worked.

Felix watched her until she disappeared into the parking garage, his body aching for her. Only then did he head back to his office. Looking around, he bit back a snarl at a female pedestrian who dared to smile at him.

He was *taken*, he wanted to snap at the stranger. Yep, Felix Halliday, the hard-core, tough and rakish former Navy SEAL, was entirely smitten!

As he returned to his office, he couldn't stop thinking about what had just occurred. Giselle. He wasn't aware of the slight smile on his face, which caused more wistful sighs from passing ladies. But none of them stopped him. The women passing by him were strangers, but every one of them recognized the smile for what it was.

"What are you doing back here?" Jenna, his sister asked. She was the third sibling in the Halliday clan and the President of Halliday Hotels. Jenna was in charge of the daily activities for the hotels and she managed every detail with absolute precision and amazing grace under pressure. Jenna never had a hair out of place and always looked like she'd just stepped off of a runway. If only she'd spruce up the colors in her wardrobe, Felix thought...then made a mental note to banish such thoughts. Giselle thought she needed to change herself in order to find a husband. Some ass had convinced her that she needed to change all of the basic aspects of her personality. When in reality, she was lovely, just the way she was.

So was Jenna, he reminded himself. She was beautiful in a quiet, interesting sort of way. Ava, the youngest sibling, was the creative personality. His youngest sister was newly married and was rarely in the office before or after hours. Ava preferred to spend her time with her new husband, Grant Hanover. Felix highly suspected that those two were actively, and earnestly, attempting to start the next generation of the Halliday clan.

He laughed softly at Jenna. "I'm not the one who started before six o'clock this morning." He glanced at his watch. "It's just after six o'clock now, which means that you've worked at least a twelve hour day." She looked tired too, but Felix refrained from mentioning it. Instead, he asked, "Are you sleeping okay?"

Jenna laughed softly as she rubbed her forehead and smoothed her hair. She kept the dark locks in a tight twist on the back of her neck, which probably increased the pressure on her neck and scalp throughout the day. He doubted that the style could be comfortable.

"Yeah, I'm okay." He suspected that his sister was lying, but he

didn't know how to call her out. They were close, but in a formal sort of way. He'd like to change that, but wasn't sure how. Felix knew that he'd abandoned his sisters at a point when they desperately could have used his help. His only defense was that he hadn't known their father had walked out on Jenna and Ava. As soon as he'd realized what the bastard had done, Felix had sent as much money back to them as he could spare from his Navy salary.

He searched Jenna's features now, wondering how he could ease her burden. "Why don't you come into my office and talk to me?" he offered.

She was just as startled as he was by his suggestion. They never just...hung out together.

For a moment, he saw the indecision on her face and was certain that she'd turn him down. Jenna didn't like to admit to weakness. He understood that. Years ago, she'd had to keep everything together to protect Ava. But maybe it was time to share a bit of the burden.

So he was surprised when she nodded slowly. "Um...okay," Jenna replied. "Let me just go put these files down first."

Felix plucked them out of her arms and walked into his office. "Later. You look like you could use a drink." Each of them had a large office that Ava had painstakingly decorated according to their perceived personalities. Felix felt Ava had nailed his preference. She'd left the floor to ceiling windows unobstructed and added furniture with modern, clean lines. His desk was chrome and glass and a leather sofa with matching chairs stood off to the side.

"Scotch?" he asked, picking up a bottle of thirty year old scotch from the bar.

"Why not?" she asked, sitting down in the nearest chair.

He poured two glasses of scotch, even though he wasn't really in the mood for another drink after having had one in the pub less than twenty minutes ago. He was a bit surprised to notice that he only wanted to drink scotch when Giselle was around. It sort of seemed like "their" drink. Or his drink when they were together.

Ridiculous, he told himself and took a sip of the scotch, then put it

down on the table beside the sofa. “So, what’s going on in your life?”

Jenna licked her lips, savoring the scotch. She looked so prim and uptight. Maybe the scotch would ease the tension that always seemed to be weighing her down.

She leaned back against the leather cushions, crossing her legs and letting one of her shoes dangle off her toe. It was startling to see Jenna look so...casual! Normally, she was rushing from one meeting or another, always tense and ready to tackle the next problem.

“Well, profits are up. The cleaning crews are anxious about the new equipment we’ve brought in, but...”

Felix lifted a hand, stopping her. “What’s up with *you*, Jenna. Not the business.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “We never talk about anything personal. It’s always business with the four of us.” He looked into her eyes, the same shade of sky blue as his own. “How are *you*?”

She laughed and the sound faltered self-consciously. She stared down into the amber depths of her drink, as if looking for answers there. For a long moment, she didn’t say anything. Then she looked up at him and opened her mouth. She started to say something, paused, then shook her head and tried again. “I’m fine. Just...tired, I guess. It’s been a long day.”

She started to lift the glass and he knew that she was going to down the rest of the scotch and leave. Felix thought about Giselle’s comments about how she wanted a big family. No, she hadn’t said a big family, she said she wanted lots of kids.

What did he want? Why did the image of a huge family with lots of kids feel incomplete?

Because he wanted his children to have aunts and uncles. He wanted to have birthday parties with his nieces and nephews.

Because he wanted to get to know his sisters and brother.

Yes, that was what had been bothering him. It wasn’t that he wanted lots of kids, but that he wanted a big “family”. He wanted to genuinely *know* his brother and sisters. He wanted to be a part of their lives and not just the

brother who builds the hotels.

To slow her down, he blurted out, “I need some advice on how to be a better boyfriend.”

That halted the glass midway to her mouth. She froze for a long moment, then the glass slowly lowered to rest on her knee. “You...want to become a better...boyfriend?” she repeated, her words halting – as if she couldn’t quite comprehend their meaning.

“Yeah.” He sighed with an embarrassed laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m friends with a woman who wants to become a better girlfriend. She asked me to help her with some of the things she thinks she needs to change in order to become this...paragon of...whatever.” Irritation washed over him at the memory of all the ways Giselle wanted to change herself. “But she will only accept my help if she can help me in return. So I need to come up with a way to be a better boyfriend.”

Jenna let out a sound that might have been a giggle. Quickly, she lifted her hand, covering her mouth. “Oh my...I beg your pardon!”

“Hey Felix, do you have the report on–” Pierce, their oldest brother stuck his head into Felix’s office and glanced at the two of them. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Felix stood up to go to the bar.

“Felix needs to become a better boyfriend,” Jenna announced, a grin still on her lovely, delicate features.

Felix poured another glass of scotch and handed it to Pierce. “Any advice?”

Pierce looked down at the liquid, then at Jenna and Felix, both of whom were waiting for his reply. “Maybe stop hanging off buildings?” he offered.

Felix cringed. “Yeah, that one occurred to me as well.” Felix sat back down on the couch and was gratified when Pierce entered into the office and leaned against the desk.

“What’s this about?” Pierce asked, taking a casual sip of the scotch.

“What’s going on?” a new female voice asked.

Everyone turned to find Ava standing in the doorway. She looked hurt to find all three of her siblings in Felix's office and she hadn't been invited.

Jenna immediately waved her into the room, but Ava remained in the doorway, valiantly trying, and failing, to hide her wounded expression.

Felix immediately understood the expression and wanted to erase it as fast as possible. "I dragged Jenna in here because she's exhausted," Felix explained quickly as Pierce poured Ava a glass of scotch. "And I figured she'd know how to make me into a better man."

"And then I came in," Pierce added, offering Ava the scotch, "because I'm amused by the subject matter. I'm sure that you, as a female, and the only married person in our family, might be able to offer Felix some pointers."

As he'd hoped, their comments eased the hurt in her eyes. It quickly morphed into an expression of curiosity. "About becoming a better man?" Ava asked, perching on the edge of the nearest chair. Her stance indicated that she wasn't fully on board with offering advice. She didn't trust what was going on here, so Felix was even more determined to pull her into the conversation.

"Yeah. A friend of mine," he hoped none of his siblings noticed the small hesitation at his use of the term 'friend', "had some sort of jerk for a boyfriend during a previous relationship. The guy really did a number on her self-confidence." He paused, shaking his head with disgust. "She is absolutely gorgeous, adorable and interesting. She's well read, has a great job," at least, he assumed she had a good job. He suddenly realized that he had no idea what Giselle did for a living. But he ignored the fact that he didn't know and continued. "She's really cute, in a beautiful sort of way." He was looking down at his scotch so he didn't catch the knowing glances between his siblings. He sighed and looked up. "She asked me to help her work on some parts of herself so that she could become a better girlfriend. But the only way she'll let me help her is if I'll allow her to help me in return. So I have to come up with a list of ten things that I want to change about myself in order to become a better boyfriend."

Ava smiled ruefully. "If you become a better boyfriend, Felix, then

the female population is going to be heartbroken when some woman snatches you up and marries you!”

Jenna rolled her eyes, adding a snort to emphasize her disbelief. “Not so. They’ll just turn their focus on Pierce. He’s been somewhat of a playboy for the past several years now.”

Ava nodded. “What happened with that Ms. Pennsylvania that you were dating last month?”

“No,” he growled. When they all stared at him with surprise, he grudgingly admitted, “That was two months ago. I was dating Emma last month.” He lifted his glass amidst the groans. “And it’s over with her now, anyway.” He glanced down at his drink. “Never really got started, actually.”

“Why not?”

He sighed before he explained, “Because she’s a nitwit,” Pierce admitted, shaking his head. “For such a brilliant actress, she couldn’t carry a decent conversation, even if she had a bucket.”

“I guess she just seems smarter when someone else gives her the lines,” Jenna offered, and everyone laughed.

Ava tilted her head slightly. “I think we’ve veered off course.” She lifted her glass towards their other brother. “Felix needs help coming up with ten actionable changes.” She glanced at Jenna. “We have one.”

Jenna chuckled, nodding. Then she tilted her head as if considering the problem. “You’re already very polite, so that’s not an issue.”

“And I guess some women would consider you hunky,” Ava added, letting her eyes move up and down over him. “For a brother, at least.” Then she cringed, causing Pierce and Jenna to snicker.

“Fine,” Felix grumbled. “But so far, the three of you have only come up with one thing I should change about myself in order to be a better boyfriend.”

“Focus on one woman,” Pierce blurted out, causing Jenna and Ava to turn towards him with matching stunned expressions. A split second later, both women burst out laughing. “Oh, that’s irony!” Jenna gasped, reaching out with her free hand to touch Ava’s arm. The two women laughed for

several moments until they got themselves back under control.

“You mock,” Pierce murmured, his voice soft with a playful threat underlying the words, “but it’s true, isn’t it? Women don’t like cheaters?”

Both Jenna and Ava nodded their agreement, sipping their scotch. Ava slid into the chair, one leg draped over the arm as she contemplated. “Maybe you could...?” but the idea didn’t completely form and she shook her head.

Jenna looked over at Felix. “I think...?” She stumbled with an idea but, as Felix looked on hopefully, the idea died.

The two women grimaced, then looked at each other. “He’s already kind of perfect,” Ava whispered.

In unison, the women pretended to gag at the thought of their brother being the perfect boyfriend.

“They are comediennes aren’t they?” Pierce grumbled.

“They think so,” Felix replied, rolling his eyes. The effort was wasted since his lips curled in amusement. “Okay, so I’m perfect. But I still need to come up with ten things I want to change about myself in order to become a better boyfriend.”

“What do women want from a man?” Pierce asked, taking another sip of the scotch. “I know what they say they want, but what do women truly want?”

Ava tilted her head to the side. “What is it that you think women say that they want?”

“Money,” Pierce snapped.

“Money,” Felix said at the same time.

Pierce and Felix looked at each other, then lifted their glasses in a mock salute, then took a long sip before turning back to their sisters.

“Laughter,” Ava announced.

Jenna nodded her agreement. “Exactly. Women love a guy who is funny.”

Felix thought about that for a brief moment, then nodded. “Okay, so



I need to learn several good jokes,” Felix said, making a mental note of that idea. “What else?”

“Pay attention to the little details,” Ava advised.

“Can you give an example?” Pierce demanded in his usual abrupt manner.

Ava grinned. “A perfect example is when Grant noticed that I got my hair cut last week.” She looked pointedly at Pierce and Felix, her dark eyebrows lifted.

Jenna snorted at the blank expressions on both brothers. “She cut three inches off of her hair!”

The guys stared at Jenna with a blank expression, then turned, their eyes narrowing as they looked at Ava. She merely rolled her eyes. “Forget it. Let’s move on.”

Both men sighed with relief. “The woman should always come first,” Ava announced.

Pierce and Felix chuckled, then looked at each other and nodded, lifting their glasses in salute. “Got that one covered,” Felix told his sisters.

Ava sighed and shook her head. “Not in bed!”

“Oh, definitely in bed!” Jenna argued, then blushed as she cleared her throat. “But I don’t think that’s what Ava meant.”

“No,” Ava laughed. “I’m talking about things outside of the bedroom. Too many men are selfish jerks. A guy might have a bad day at work and comes home bitching about his day. Meanwhile, the woman might have had to skip meals, had a co-worker yell at her, messed up on a major issue, and had a bad hair day.”

Jenna nodded. “A woman in a relationship will push all of that aside when she sees that her man is upset about something.” She pointed a finger towards Felix. “A woman will bury all of her own problems in order to make a fabulous dinner for her man, cook all of his favorite foods...”

“Stop at the grocery store to get his favorite beer,” Ava added.

“Maybe even grab that box of brownies and cook up some dessert

just to make him feel better.”

“And then...” Ava paused, her nose squinching up as she wiggled her fingers in the air, “do what he wants in the bedroom. All to make *him* feel better.”

Jenna stood up and started pacing, waving the now-empty glass as she moved. “And then he falls asleep and the woman slips out of bed to curl up at the end of the couch, trying to work through her problems on her own, so that she doesn’t wake him up!”

Ava pointed her finger at her sister. “And he snores! The woman wakes up and goes into the other room, then the boyfriend complains that she’s not in bed with him the following morning. He snaps at her because he doesn’t like waking up alone.”

Jenna nodded emphatically. “And yet, she’s expected to simply lay in the bed, listening to the bastard snore just so *HE* doesn’t have to wake up alone!”

“Aaah! I hate that!” Ava growled, pacing right along with Jenna.

They both paused and, simultaneously glared at their older brothers. Felix and Pierce were staring at their sisters with their mouths hanging open.

Pierce broke the silence. “Don’t snore,” he advised Felix.

Felix burst out laughing, but he nodded. “Consider it on the list!”

Ava and Jenna laughed right along with their brother, then high fived each other. A moment later, they both sighed and clinked empty glasses. “Okay, I’d better call Grant and have him pick me up,” Ava said as she put her empty glass on the bar counter. “Felix, I will come up with other things that make a good boyfriend. I’ll send you the list later tonight.”

Jenna followed her out. “I was going to look over that report,” she muttered, but her voice faded as she walked down the hallway with her sister.

Pierce and Felix remained in the office, being very still until their sisters were out of earshot. “I think there are things that we missed as big brothers,” Felix finally said.

Pierce nodded his agreement. “If I ever find out who hurt them so badly, I’m going to kick their asses.” He put his glass down on the

countertop and glanced at his watch.

Felix did the same. “You’ll have to stand in line.” He put the half empty bottle of scotch away. “I’ll get a cab home.”

“I’ll join you,” Pierce agreed.

With that, they left the office, flicking off the lights as they made their way down the long, silent hallway.

## Chapter 2

Giselle hummed as she walked up to her front door. It was wonderful to have her own house instead of renting. Not that she minded renting. There were definite benefits to renting a place. But owning one's home...it was... different. For instance, Giselle absolutely hated mowing the grass. By the time next spring rolled around, she was going to have enough money saved to purchase a riding lawn mower. She figured it would be more fun to mow the grass when she was riding along under an umbrella rather than pushing the damn mower.

She hadn't realized what she was getting into when she'd bought a house with over an acre of land, but Giselle knew that she wouldn't change her decision for anything.

"Hi there ladies!" she called out to the chickens, who were eagerly waiting for their evening meal. "I'll be with you as soon as I drop off my bag."

The chickens obviously didn't understand since they followed her progress until they crowded up the end of their chicken run, but she pushed her way into the house anyway.

She dumped her purse on the counter, then flipped through the mail she'd grabbed from the mailbox on her way up the driveway.

Quickly, she raced up the stairs and changed into a pair of shorts and tee-shirt, then went outside to check on her chickens. "Okay, I'm here!" she called out, grabbing the bucket she used to fill their feeders with grain. "Did you have a nice day? Did you behave?"

She counted all of her chickens, just to make sure they were all safe. Before she'd fixed anything in the house, she'd ordered a large chicken coop to protect her "babies" from hawks and foxes. It had devastated her the one time a fox had managed to make off with one.

Tonight, she fed the chickens, ensured that they had enough water to get them through the night, collected several eggs, then exited the coop and made sure that the lock was attached. She didn't understand the need for a

lock on a chicken coop, but it was there, so she used it. Perhaps there were some extra smart foxes that could open a coop?

Giselle chuckled at the idea.

When she went back inside, her cell phone rang. “Hello?” she answered.

“Oh, Giselle, I’m so glad that I caught you,” Sandra Emmerson, her previous landlady said.

“Hi Sandra!” Giselle replied, pulling open the fridge to see what options she had for dinner. Nothing. But that wasn’t a problem. She went back outside to her garden. It was locked as well, but not because of foxes. This was protected from neighbors and rabbits, both of whom would blithely steal her produce.

“I had a lovely delivery today. A massive bouquet of flowers was delivered here for you.”

Giselle straightened up, a tomato in her free hand. “Someone sent me flowers?” No one had ever sent her flowers before.

“Yes! They are gorgeous! And huge! Someone doesn’t know that you’ve moved, but I accepted the delivery. When can you stop by to get them?”

Giselle looked at her watch. “Um...how much longer are you going to be at your office?”

“Oh, I’m heading out now.” There were some keys jingling in the background.

“What about tomorrow?” Giselle asked, trying to sift through her schedule tomorrow. Maybe she could get over to her old apartment complex during her lunch break.

“That would be wonderful. And I’ll be able to enjoy these flowers until then!” Sandra exclaimed cheerfully. They exchanged pleasantries, then hung up while Giselle considered other options for her meal.

She bent down to snip some rosemary and sage from her herbs. It really was lovely to have a “grocery store” in her backyard. Growing a garden was the second best thing she’d done after moving into this place.

With all of the sunshine in the backyard, it was relatively simple to grow veggies. It had been harder to build the raised flowerbeds, but she'd figured it out and was pretty proud of herself.

Once in her kitchen, she pulled out the bread she'd baked yesterday and popped a slice into the toaster oven. Then she scrambled the egg, added in some of the red peppers she'd harvested yesterday, as well as the sage and a bit of rosemary for flavor. Then she walked into her family room and settled down with her dinner and the book she'd been reading.

But as soon as she sat down, thoughts of Felix popped into her head. And her list. That dratted list! She was supposed to stop reading so much. And yet, here she was, only a few hours later, reading a book. A good book, but still. If she was going to do this properly, she needed to start now.

So instead of reading, she finished off her meal and decided to work on...? She had several projects going at the moment. Tonight, she'd work on sanding down the floors on the top level. It was hot up there, but at least she would be getting the rooms ready for occupancy.

With that in mind, she washed her dishes and got to work.

The following morning, she left early, heading over to her old apartment complex. As soon as she stepped into Sandra's office, her heart sank. "Are those for me?" she asked, staring at the enormous bouquet.

The older woman smiled and nodded. "Yes, aren't they lovely?"

Sunflowers. She was allergic to sunflowers! These were the smaller variety, but the mixed bouquet still included five of the pretty, happy sunflowers.

Giselle shifted uncomfortably, gripping the strap of her tote bag. "I hate to ask this Sandra, but is there any way you could keep the flowers?"

Sandra looked startled. "Why wouldn't you want such a lovely gift?" she asked, her fingers reaching out to touch the delicate blooms.

With a dismissive shrug, Giselle explained, "I'm allergic to the sunflowers." And if there were sunflowers in the bouquet, then the delivery must be from Kevin. Giselle knew sunflowers were Kevin's favorite flower,

as well as his favorite snack. He'd never concerned himself with the fact that she was allergic to the pollen as well as the casing the seeds came in. The allergy wasn't life threatening, but the itching, burning sensation in her throat and lungs whenever she came into contact with the sunflower seeds or the crumbs wasn't fun.

“Oh, goodness! Well, of course I can keep them here. Would you like to take the rest of the flowers with you? I can pull out the sunflowers so that you can keep the daisies and...I don't know the names of the other flowers, but they're pretty.”

She shook her head, even backing up a step. “No. The pollen from the sunflowers is probably already on the other flowers.”

Sandra looked concerned. “That's such a shame!”

Giselle smiled and lifted her hand. “Thank you so much for calling me, Sandra. Enjoy the flowers!”

“I will!” she called back and Giselle rushed out to her car. She grabbed a sanitizing wipe from the package that she kept in her purse, wiping her hands and the outside of her jacket, just in case any pollen had gotten on her. She didn't relish the idea of spending the day with a scratchy throat.

Kevin was such a jerk! He knew she was allergic to sunflowers! Giselle had told him often enough, plus he'd seen the effects the seeds had on her. She was so glad that he'd broken up with her. His rejection had devastated her at first. But she'd moved on and now she was well on her way to finding the happiness that she deserved!

## Chapter 3

Giselle stood outside of Malone's restaurant, nervous and wondering if she should have just called Felix to tell him she couldn't make it tonight. She knew she was playing with fire. Felix was definitely out of her league, and yet, she couldn't stop thinking about him. She'd dreamt about him last night and wow, were those dreams steamy! Unrealistic, but hot!

Today, she'd been distracted all day, her thoughts repeatedly returning to those dreams.

She glanced at her watch. Giselle had arrived five minutes early. He still had a few minutes before he would be late. Was Felix one of those men who always showed up late?

No, he wouldn't do that! And yet, what did she really know about him, other than what she'd read about him on the internet? Everyone knew information found on the internet isn't always accurate.

Just as she turned around, Felix stepped out of a fancy car, tossed his keys to the valet and said, "Keep it under a hundred," to the young kid who's eyes just about popped out of his head as he stared at the sleek sports car.

"Do you drive that every day?" she asked, peering around him as she watched the valet carefully, reverently, step into the expensive vehicle.

"Only on the days when I want to impress someone," he told her, then slipped his hand to the small of her back to lead her into the restaurant. "My assistant made reservations. I hope you're hungry."

"Yes, I'm..." she watched as the car revved, then sped away towards the parking lot. "Are you sure that the kid is just going to park your car?"

"Yeah," Felix said with a chuckle as he pulled the door open. "Billy is a good kid. His mother will tear into him if he hurts my car."

She paused and shot him a startled glance. "You *know* him?"

"Of course. His mother works at the downtown hotel. She's in charge of the cleaning crew. Her name is Marci and, the kid who just parked my car, is Billy, William, actually. He's working three jobs right now in order to save money for college." Felix leaned in to whisper, "He doesn't



know it yet, but Halliday Hotels set up a scholarship fund in his name.”

“Oh!” she gasped, then stepped forward as the hostess smiled at them.

“Mr. Halliday,” the tall, gorgeous woman with shimmering, golden hair beamed up at him. “We’ve been expecting you. Have you had a good day?” she asked as she pulled two menus out of the hostess stand.

“Excellent, thank you, Melanie.”

“This way,” the blond nemesis said and did an elegant turn on her four inch, spiked heel and sauntered away.

Giselle hated the woman immediately. She looked exactly like the type who generally graced Felix’s arm. There wasn’t an extra ounce of fat anywhere on her reed-thin body. Melanie led them to one of the best tables in the restaurant and smiled as she handed each of them a menu. “Enjoy your meal, Mr. Halliday.” The woman barely glanced at Giselle, who fumed as she draped the linen napkin over her lap.

“Stop grinding your teeth, Giselle,” Felix teased. “She’s not my type.”

Giselle rolled her eyes at him. “According to your past dating life, she’s exactly your type.”

“Okay, she’s not my type *anymore*,” he asserted firmly. The sommelier arrived at their table and bowed slightly. “Good evening, Mr. Halliday. Can I get you some wine? We have an excellent chardonnay.” The man continued with a description of the wine, complete with “earthy tones” and “fruit-forward notes”. There was something about a “primary aroma” and a “secondary aroma”. Giselle managed not to snort. Why couldn’t the man just say that the wine smelled good? Why all the pretension?

Okay, so perhaps some wines were a bit more complex. But while Giselle loved to experiment with herbs and vegetables while cooking or baking, she wasn’t much of a wine connoisseur. She generally chose wine because of the label or because it had a funny title.

“That sounds great, George. Thank you.”

The sommelier walked away, looking pleased.

Felix lifted his menu and surveyed the options. “I hope you understood what he was talking about,” he grumbled. “Wine mystifies me.”

Giselle gaped at him, then burst out laughing. She was laughing so hard, she had to cover her mouth.

“What’s the joke?” Felix asked, utterly befuddled.

She shook her head and got her amusement under control. “I had no idea what he was saying either! I like wine, but I have no clue what he meant about undertones and secondary aromas!” She slumped slightly as she admitted, “I like wine, but a good beer is pretty nice as well.”

Felix stared at her with wide, confused eyes. Then he laughed as well. When the sommelier returned with the bottle for Felix’s inspection, he said, “George, I’m so sorry but we’ve changed our minds. We’ll have two Alagash Whites,” he said, referring to a craft beer brewed in Portland, Maine.

“Oh, that’s one of my favorites!” Giselle sighed as soon as the devastated sommelier walked away. “But I wouldn’t have rejected the wine. You’ve hurt his feelings.”

Felix chuckled. “George will get over it. As soon as Jenna or Pierce come here for dinner, they will soothe his wounded feelings. They love wine, for some reason.”

She tilted her head slightly. “I would have thought you and your family eat only at the hotel’s restaurant.”

“Why?” he asked, genuinely confused.

She glanced around at the exclusive restaurant. “Why would you support the competition?”

He laughed and shook his head. “The restaurant at the hotel is excellent and draws in customers every day. The chef is amazing and rotates the menu to entice people to return often.” He smiled slightly, and continued, “However, outside of the hotel rooms, the main profit-generating business is the ballrooms and conference center. Those areas are booked pretty solid and the kitchens are busy preparing the meals and snacks for the guests attending

the meetings or weddings.”

“Huh!” Giselle replied, nodding her head. “I didn’t know that. I always thought that the restaurant was a big money maker for hotels.”

“Oh, it’s profitable. Jenna doesn’t allow any aspect of the hotel to be unprofitable. But the restaurants aren’t in the lead when it comes to bringing in revenue.”

“Isn’t Pierce the chief executive officer?”

“He is,” Felix confirmed.

“So, why is Jenna in charge of the profits?”

“Pierce manages the expansion and the financial aspect of the business. Jenna is the president of the corporation and, as such, she’s in charge of the day to day activities.”

“And Ava is in charge of decorating?”

“And marketing,” he added. “She’s absolutely brilliant at marketing, getting the hotels’ images into the various travel magazines and tourists blogs.”

“Who takes the photographs for those magazines? They are amazing!”

He smiled slightly. “That’s all Ava. She loves photography.”

Giselle sighed and took a long sip of her beer. “That’s...interesting.”

Felix’s eyes sharpened. “What just happened?”

She shook her head and brightened her smile. “Oh, nothing. Just a pang of jealousy about your youngest sister.” She shook off the jealousy and smiled. “What are you going to order?” she asked, lifting the menu to hide her face. Just for a moment, she told herself.

“I recommend the Tuscan chicken.”

The waiter arrived at that moment and Giselle laid her menu down. With a firm nod, she said, “That sounds wonderful.”

Felix looked at the waiter and said, “We’ll both have the Tuscan Chicken.”

The waiter bowed, took the menus and walked quickly away, giving them privacy again.

Giselle cringed as soon as they were alone. “Somehow, it seems wrong for both of us to order the same thing at a restaurant.”

Felix laughed. “The thing about a restaurant is that everyone gets what they want. It’s part of the magic of dining out. And if two people want the same thing,” he looked her in the eye meaningfully, “what’s the issue with having it?”

Giselle swallowed, wondering if they were talking about chicken now. Were they? Surely Felix wasn’t talking about...sex! They were just friends, right?

Reaching out, she lifted her glass of ice water and took a long sip, staring at him as he lifted a dark eyebrow. When she put the glass down, she decided that a change of subject would be a good idea.

“How did your sister learn to take such fabulous pictures?”

Felix’s firm mouth curved into a slight, knowing smile.

“I don’t know. I think she just...went out into the world and started taking pictures.”

Giselle tilted her head slightly. “How do you not know? You aren’t close with your siblings?”

He grimaced, the light in his eyes shifting to an unrecognizable emotion. “Not anymore. We used to be close.”

“What happened?”

“Well, our mother died. Then my brother went off to Harvard on a full scholarship.” He chuckled. “Not sure how that happened. He’s just... he’s great with numbers, but even better, Pierce has a gift for making money.” He lifted his glass of beer in a mock toast. “Which I appreciate!” he explained.

Giselle smiled at him. “There are articles about you that say that you have an amazing eye for detail and a brilliant mind for architecture.”

“They exaggerate,” he scoffed. “That’s all part of my sister’s

marketing efforts.”

Giselle stared at him, evaluating what she knew of him so far. “I don’t think so, Felix,” she replied softly. “The buildings you design are... almost haunting in some ways. And just like your sister and her decorating, the actual buildings suit the city in which they are located.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

She chuckled. “Which only means that you design instinctively, which is even more incredible.” She shifted in her chair, her enthusiasm for the subject rising. “The hotel that you’re building in Houston, on the surface, looks like all of the other buildings around it. Just modern steel and glass. But I read that if one comes towards the building from different angles, it almost seems to change shapes. It goes from a simple square to almost a triangle.” She shook her head in amazement. “And the building you reconstructed in Manhattan? It harkens back to the eighteen hundreds, to the Golden Age of the Rockefellers and Carnegies. The article I read about that site talked about the innovative building materials that were less expensive and stronger than traditional building methods. The heating and cooling in that building are only a fraction of the cost of the surrounding buildings.”

“Have you been there?” he asked.

She looked down at her water, shaking her head. “No, I haven’t gotten out to the East Coast yet. One day, I will make my way across the country to all of the various states.” For the next twenty minutes, they talked about traveling and what they liked or disliked about the various places they’d visited.

When their meals arrived, the chicken was just as delicious as he’d promised. But Felix brought up a subject that she’d hoped to avoid until he knew her a bit better.

“So...about line item number five on your list.” He sliced into the tender chicken. “I need more information.”

“About the chickens?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m intrigued.”

Giselle cringed, wiping her mouth with her napkin. With a sigh, she

explained the sad story. “Well, when I first bought my house, I got a bunch of baby chicks, hoping to raise them so that I could have healthier chicken meals. I read about all of the antibiotics that are put into the chicken feed for the chicken that are sold at the grocery stores.” She wrapped her fingers around her beer glass. “So I was just...I...!” She tried to explain, but stumbled and her explanation tapered to silence.

Felix watched her for a long moment, then he chuckled. “You named them, didn’t you?”

“Yes!” she sighed with defeat. “They are all my friends now and I go out every morning and night and we talk to each other. I know that they don’t have big enough brains for friendship, but they are very sweet creatures who seem proud of the eggs they lay every day.”

“That’s not the end of the story, is it?” he asked, chuckling as he leaned back in his chair.

“No.” She groaned, closing her eyes for a brief moment. “I didn’t know one of the chicks was a male.” She whispered that last part, as if confessing to a major sin.

Felix ran her words through in his mind once more, trying to make sense of what she was saying. When he finally understood, he threw back his head, laughing, both at the pained expression as well as the idea of a rooster growing up in a hen house. Lucky guy, Felix thought.

When he got his amusement back under control, he asked, “So what happened next?”

“Next?” she quipped, her gaze turning angry. “Every morning, I’d come out to the chicken coop to find a bunch of eggs. They were my breakfast and, most of the time, my dinner as well. I was baking cakes for the neighbors and the office. I was offering eggs to my co-workers and... then all of a sudden, one morning I went out to the coop and found a bunch of brand new chicks skittering about!”

He laughed again. “You didn’t know that the rooster would eventually...uh...do what roosters do?”

“Well, I do now!” she replied with heat. “It just seemed as if one of the chicks was more assertive than the others. But I just thought that, when I

ordered chicks, they would all be female!”

“Apparently, that’s not the case,” he teased.

“Well, duh!” she hissed and stabbed a bite of the Tuscan chicken.

“What did you do with the roosters after that?”

She looked down again. “The big guys are in a separate pen.”

He chuckled. “You couldn’t kill them for meat, could you?”

She squinched up her nose before answering. “No. They aren’t very nice, but that’s probably because roosters are territorial.” She looked up at him. “I am a failure as a chicken parent. I know this. But I genuinely thought I was going to raise the chickens for meat. Unfortunately, raising chickens from baby chicks, I just...I couldn’t kill them! So now I have so many eggs, I don’t know what to do with all of them. And I have roosters that compete with each other to wake me up every morning.” She shrugged and smiled. “However, I have finally stopped having more baby chicks, which is a good thing. I learned pretty fast how to tell which chicks were male and female once they had a few feathers on their wings.”

“Good. I’m glad but...what do you do with the roosters?” he asked. “Are you just going to keep them separate for their whole life?”

“Yes. I also heard what the roosters do to the hens if they are in the same coop and that,” she pointed her fork at him, “is *not* going to happen in my chicken coop!”

He laughed, then asked, “What’s wrong with the roosters having a bit of fun, as long as the hens enjoy the rooster’s attention?”

“That’s just it,” she said as she stabbed another piece of chicken. “The roosters don’t ask the hens for permission! They don’t woo the hens!” She waved her fork expressively. “The roosters just...go at it with the hens! Like...all the time! Someone told me that roosters will mate upwards of about thirty times a day! They just jump on the hen and go at it! There’s no consent! There’s no romance! It’s just...” She lowered her voice when she finished with, “It’s rape!”

Felix couldn’t hold back his laughter. He threw back his head, laughing with delight at her defense of the hens. When he had his

amusement back under control, he said, “I think that nature has different views on reproductive rights than humans do.”

“I know,” she replied, trying to calm down. “Don’t even get me started about the methods for propagating a giant squash,” she muttered. “That’s not right either.”

Felix was about to take the last bite of his chicken when she muttered that comment. He thought about ignoring it, but he couldn’t. Not after the hen issue.

“What’s the problem with squash?”

She squirmed in her chair for a moment and Felix knew that she was going to change the subject. But then she blew out a breath.

“Well, in a normal way, there’s no problem.” She lifted her glass of beer. “The bees and bugs, sometimes the wind, does all the work of fertilizing the squash flower. But I watched this video where someone wanted a ‘perfect’ giant squash.” She glanced around, making sure that the other diners couldn’t hear what she was about to say. When she saw that the other guests were absorbed in their own conversations, she turned back to Felix. “Apparently, there are male and female flowers. One needs to wrap the female flower in cotton and then tie the ends of the male flower closed. Then in the morning, the person unties and unwraps, then...” she blushed now and couldn’t look Felix in the eyes, “well, then you just...” she wiggled her fingers. “Rub the male flower against the female flower. And then she’s pregnant.”

He smothered several chuckles during that explanation. “And you object to...?”

Giselle squirmed uncomfortably in her chair, unable to hold his gaze. “It’s a sort of forced birth, eugenics situation. I know that I’m being ridiculous, but I don’t like the idea of forcing a ‘perfect’ something or other. It’s just...it reeks of striving for one person’s perception of perfection.”

“In a plant.”

She sighed and shrugged. “Yes. I know. It’s silly. But it bothers me.”



“So you don’t do that to your plants?”

“Absolutely not!” she stated firmly. “I take care of my plants and I have a bunch of bug traps, which I then feed to my chickens. They absolutely love the Japanese beetles. And the worms! Goodness, they fight over the slugs I’m able to pull from the squash and tomato plants.”

“Do you have a large garden?”

She smiled, nodding eagerly. “Yes. This is my first year in a place where there’s enough room to grow vegetables and flowers. So, it’s an adventure to figure everything out.” She laughed. “I make mistakes a lot, but that only makes the successes even more wonderful.”

“That’s truly amazing, Giselle,” he said sincerely.

She couldn’t stop the blush at his admiration either. She looked down at her plate, stunned to see that she’d eaten the entire meal. “This was delicious,” she said and looked up at him. “Oh! I’m so sorry! We’ve been talking about me throughout dinner. Tonight was supposed to be about you and we were going to review your list.”

He shook his head. “I enjoyed our conversation, Giselle.”

“Yes, but we’re in this as a team,” she reminded him.

He lifted his hand, waving slightly. “I might be a lost cause.”

She gazed at him with startled eyes. “Nonsense! You’re incredibly handsome and you have an exciting job. Plus, you’re a wonderful conversationalist and you have a lot going for you.”

He laughed. “For some reason, that feels like being damned with faint praise.”

“Oh, you know that you’re one of the hottest men in Seattle.”

“Not my brother?” he teased.

“Pierce Halliday is very,” she cleared her throat delicately, “handsome, but,” she looked up at him, shy all of a sudden. “Well, there’s something special about you.” She blushed again. “I’m sure that other women have told you that.”

“Not in the same way, Giselle. For some reason, your words mean

more to me than any other woman's praise."

She was saved from needing to form a reply to his comment by the waiter approaching. "Would you like to see the dessert menu?" he asked.

Giselle was already shaking her head. "I can't eat another bite," she admitted when he turned to her.

"We'll just have the check, thank you."

The waiter pulled the leather-bound check from his jacket, laying it on the table between them.

"I'll handle it," she said, reaching for the bill.

Felix chuckled and pulled it away from her. "Not a chance, Giselle." He tucked some cash into the bill and stood up. "Ready for our next adventure?"

"I thought we were just going to discuss your list over dinner?"

"Nope," he said, taking her hand and looping it onto his elbow. "Before I give you my list, I'm going to show you something."

"What's that?"

"You'll see," he replied mysteriously.

As he led her over to his car, she protested. "But my car is here."

"I'll bring you back. I promise."

Giselle eyed his elegant sports car with trepidation. "I might scratch the leather seat," she argued.

"Don't worry, Giselle. Just get in and enjoy the ride," he urged, moving closer and putting his hands on her waist.

They both froze, startled by the sudden intensity. Felix gazed down into her eyes and noticed the heat there that mirrored his own. In a flash, he suddenly realized exactly why he'd arranged his entire schedule so that he could be at the pub when she walked in every Thursday. The idea had been there all this time, but he hadn't realized how powerful the need was!

He wanted her! It was the most intense, most amazing sensation. It wasn't like anything he'd ever experienced before. In the past, he'd been

intrigued by women and he'd felt desire for them. That desire had been a low hum in the back of his mind. It never lingered when the ladies hadn't been around.

But with Giselle, he was beyond fascinated. His need to know her, to touch and understand her went well beyond something as mild as intrigue. It was an aching, clawing hunger. He excused himself from not understanding what was going on because it was such a new sensation.

But now that he understood it...! He looked over at her, eyeing her soft, dark hair and her delectable curves. She was beautiful and he wanted to pursue this attraction.

Unlike Giselle, who blushed sweetly, then ducked into the vehicle so that she could hide from him.

Felix closed the car door and started to walk around to the driver's side. But he paused, contemplating his reaction. How had he been so obtuse? How could he have been so completely oblivious to how he felt about her?

He stared at the vehicle, wishing he could tell her how he felt.

But Giselle was just coming out of a bad relationship. No wonder she was so hesitant to venture into a new one. Especially with a man like him!

Okay, so she didn't know what an ass he truly was. But he could change. Felix thought about the list in his pocket and vowed to change. He would update the list so that it was more personal, something that would call to her specifically. He wanted the list to be perfect *for her*! He didn't want to change in order to become the ideal husband and lover to some generic woman that he may or may not meet someday. As far as he was concerned, Giselle was it. She was the woman he'd been waiting for!

He didn't deserve her. Not after all he'd done in the past. But he could become a better man. He could find out exactly what she wanted in a man and he would become that man! Wasn't that what this whole exercise was about?

Giselle watched through the side mirror, praying that she hadn't made a complete fool of herself. Her reaction to Felix's touch had been unexpected and off the charts! The two spots on her hips where his hands had been still tingled. She could still feel the heat from his hands, from his body, even!

She would have to be extra careful to ensure that she didn't reveal her true feelings.

She breathed a sigh of relief when he came around to the driver's seat. "We don't have to do this, Felix," she told him, reaching for the door handle.

"I need your help, Giselle," he pointed out, laying a hand on her forearm, stopping her from leaving him. "We're a team, remember?"

Giselle hadn't said anything about becoming a team, she thought, ignoring the tingling in her breasts caused by his fingers on her bare skin. This was even more intense than his hands on her hips moments ago. She liked it. Too much!

Her reaction was dangerous. It could do real damage to their budding friendship. And yet, she couldn't quite manage to get out of the car. Her fingers were still on the door handle and Giselle knew that he wouldn't stop her. It was only the look in his eyes, the promise of...something...that kept her in the passenger seat.

"Okay," she replied softly.

"Thank you."

There was another tense moment when she looked into his eyes, trapped by the heat she saw in those blue depths. Was she imagining the need? The hope? Surely, she was.

"The traffic has most likely died down," she blurted out. "So wherever you're taking me, we shouldn't run into the commuter traffic at this time of the night."

He smiled and nodded, thankfully, pulling his hand away. A moment later, he reached for the button to start the powerful engine. It roared to life

and he grinned at her. “Would my car be a negative checkmark for some women?”

She blinked, not sure what he meant. “Why would someone’s vehicle be a bad thing?”

He shifted into reverse and put his hand behind her seat as he twisted around to look behind him as he backed up. Why wasn’t he using the backup camera? The video on the dashboard clearly showed him what was behind the vehicle. When he turned around like this, it made her feel as if he were wrapping his arms around her. Which was absolutely silly. He was merely backing up!

Felix backed the car up slowly, enjoying the sensation of almost having his arms wrapped around Giselle. He couldn’t believe he’d been so blind. But now that he understood, he was going to take whatever opportunities he could manufacture to touch her. Even now, he wasn’t touching her in any way, but the sensation of almost having his arms wrapped around her like this, with his hand on the back of her seat, made him feel better. Closer to her somehow.

In the confines of his car, he could smell her. Thankfully, Giselle didn’t drench herself in musky, overwhelming fragrance. He remembered a woman he’d dated, about five years ago maybe, who thought it was sexy for her to smell like a perfume factory. He’d only taken her out twice because he simply couldn’t stand the overwhelming cloud of scent that followed her everywhere.

“Where are we going?”

Felix shifted, speeding up to merge into traffic as he entered the highway. “We’re going to a building in progress.”

“Why?” she asked, and he could hear the nervousness in her voice.

“Because I want you to experience something. If you don’t like this experience, then I’ll never take you there again.” He glanced over at her, then turned his attention back to the road. “But I have a feeling about you.”

“A feeling?”

He laughed softly, but didn't look at her. "Yes. I have a feeling. You're just going to have to wait and see. I don't want to tell you where we're going because I'm fairly certain that you'll object."

"If I'm going to object, then why are we going?"

"Because I think you will like it." He took a right, heading off the highway.

"Fair enough. Are you going to tell me what it is?"

"Nope," he replied quickly. "It's a surprise."

Five minutes later, he pulled into the rough parking lot of a building under construction. At the moment, there were only steel beams that comprised the skeleton of the building. There weren't any walls, only wire "handrails" that would protect the construction workers from falling to the ground.

"What are we doing here?" she asked as she stood beside his car, staring up at the building with rising trepidation.

"Come with me," he urged, gently taking her hand and pulling her towards a rough elevator. It wasn't like any elevator that she'd used before. This was more of a wire cage and, after Felix pulled a lever, the cage whisked them up to the top floor.

"I'm not doing this!" Giselle told him, hesitating, but still peeking over his shoulder at the open expanse. There weren't any walls on this floor. It was just sky and lights twinkling in the distance.

As soon as the cage stopped on the top floor, without conscious thought, Giselle stepped out, gazing out at the blackness of the night sky. The building was set so close to the water, there was nothingness. Just a void that expanded out into the inky horizon until the stars shimmered way off in the distance.

"Are you scared?" Felix asked softly, still holding her hands, but only the tips of her fingertips now.

Giselle stared out at the night, almost unaware of Felix as he guided her slowly along the rough floor. She felt her heart pounding against her ribs, the danger of the situation making her whole body tingle with awareness.

Suddenly, Giselle felt alive! More alive than she'd ever felt before! She looked around, daring herself to walk further into the openness.

"Yes," she answered, but stepped forward again. Closer and closer, she walked towards the edge of the building. Oh, she wasn't going to get too close to the edge, but being up here, she could feel the wind blowing through her hair, toying with her skirt and...and she felt as if every cell in her body was thrumming with vitality!

"You like it, don't you?" he asked, his husky voice teasing her ear.

Giselle nodded, as she felt the warmth of his arms encircle her waist from behind. "I love it too," he whispered in her ear. "Can you feel it? The sense of balancing on the edge of life? On the edge of everything?"

"Yes!" she whispered back, leaning against him. The hardness of his chest only enhanced everything she was feeling. Giselle had never felt like this before. It was almost as if she were only now starting to realize how amazing the world could be. "How often do you come up here?" she asked.

"As often as I can," he said, his cheek resting against her ear. "It's an amazing feeling, isn't it?"

"Yes," she admitted, enjoying the way her blood seemed to almost fizz in her veins.

Then he did something unexpected. He took her hands and turned her around. She stared up into his eyes, unable to see the color in the darkness that enveloped them. But she could see him lean down and, a moment later, his lips were against hers. Giselle couldn't believe that Felix Halliday was actually kissing her!

She leaned into him, her hands sliding up his arms, and then her fingers dove into his hair. She pulled his head down lower, deepening the kiss. The thrill was unlike anything she'd ever felt. Being up here, kissing Felix, was heady and exhilarating. It was danger wrapped in a cocoon of sensuality and stars! She wanted this moment to last forever!

Felix tightened his arms around Giselle, too turned on to revel in the realization that she enjoyed the sensation of being so high up in the sky. It

was only the adrenaline rush. But for him, the sensations of being up high, of being out on the edge of the world, becoming a part of the night was more than a chemical reaction. There was a special element to their kiss now. The kiss was...earth-shattering! The combination of kissing Giselle as well as being up here with her, sharing the experience of being this high, this close to danger, was an intoxicating combination. Giselle was finally in his arms and she fit perfectly! Her soft, incredible curves were shockingly sexy! He wanted to touch her everywhere. Hell, he wanted to lower her down on to the floor and make love to her right here under the endless stars!

He wouldn't, of course. At this point in the construction process, the floors were mere plywood, the sliver-prone boards covered with dust and probably nails and screws, possibly even bolts. This definitely wasn't the place where he wanted to make love to Giselle for the first time.

Pulling back, he noticed that she was breathing heavily, which turned him on even more.

"You really like it up here, don't you?" he asked, needing to hear her say the words.

"Yes. I love it."

Was she talking about their kiss? Or being up in the sky? He didn't care. Either was good enough for him. He wanted to love her. He wanted to physically show her how much she'd come to mean to him.

But this was Giselle. He had to slow down. She was nervous about him and this was their first real date. She probably didn't even think of it as a date, he thought. So he pulled back, but he couldn't resist nibbling at her neck, her earlobe. He wanted to run his hands over her soft curves, to memorize them so that he could dream about them tonight.

Slow down, he reminded himself. Slow down and let her catch up. He had to take this step by step or he might scare her away.

When they finally separated, he sighed in protest. And she whimpered, which was good enough for him.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" he asked, his hands still resting on her hips. She was so damn soft!



“I don’t know,” she responded. “Probably reading.” She pulled away and wrapped her arms around her waist. “Or *not* reading. Working on all those promises I made to myself.”

He took her hands, unwrapping them from her waist to that he could see her more clearly. “Will you let me pick you up tomorrow?”

“To do what?” she asked, a small, slightly terrified smile showing that she was interested, but still wary. Wise woman!

“I have a wood working studio in my shed,” he explained, lacing his fingers through hers. “I thought that maybe you’d let me show you how to use some power tools.”

Even in the darkness, he could still see how her eyes lit up with hope. “You’d do that? You’d show me how to use tools?”

He grinned at her eagerness. She was so damn cute! “Absolutely. I’d enjoy showing you how to work with power tools.” He kissed her again, just a brush of his lips against hers. “It’s an easy way to cross one of your action items off of your list.”

She laughed and even bounced on her toes. “That sounds great.” Then she sobered. “But don’t you have plans for tomorrow?”

“Nope.” He tucked her hand onto his elbow, leading her back to the elevator. “I’m completely at your service. We’ll work on a project together and you can get a good feel for the various tools.”

“That would be really amazing.”

“I’d enjoy it as well.”

## Chapter 4

“What is this?” Giselle whispered, putting her sensible sedan into park. She gazed, awestruck, up at the enormous home. It was very modern looking. In fact, it was similar to something out of “The Jetsons”! There were three levels, not including the garage she was currently parked in front of. Each level had a long porch with clear-glass railings. And there were so many windows!

“Giselle?” Felix’s deep voice called out.

Jerking around, she watched as Felix came down an exterior set of stone steps that was lined with thriving plants. The whole stairway up from the driveway had to have been designed by landscape artists. There was no way an average person could have come up with such a work of art. It was just...beautiful!

But perhaps some of the beauty was Felix and those impossibly wide shoulders. Especially since she was having trouble pulling her eyes away from him. Goodness, she’d *kissed* that man last night!

The door to her car opened and then he knelt down beside her. The man was so big, even at a crouch, he was still at eye level with her. There was something so appealing about a man this tall, muscular, and confident!

“Hi,” she whispered, remembering last night and his kiss. Remembering how she’d basically thrown herself into his arms. And also remembering the salacious dreams she’d had featuring him last night.

“Hello,” he replied, his lips curving into a smile that reached his gorgeous, blue eyes.

He wore a pair of well-worn jeans today and a tee shirt that he must have gotten back during his Navy days. The shoulders barely fit, the sleeves around his biceps were stretched tight. Giselle wondered what he would do if she reached out and touched him.

“Are you ready?”

Ready? To touch him? “For what?” she asked.

“To learn about power tools, of course,” he said, then took her hand

and helped her out of the car. She grabbed her purse and wished she'd worn something other than ugly jeans. She hated jeans. She had big hips and a small waist, so the waistline of her jeans never fit properly. Her jeans always slid down too low and she had to tug them back up. The tee shirt she'd chosen today was probably as old as his, but it didn't look as good on her as his did on him. On her, the straight lines of the tee shirt combined with her large breasts made her look dumpy. She wasn't dumpy, she was just...soft and curvy.

"I don't know if I'm ready," she admitted. "Power tools are pretty scary."

"True," he replied, taking her hand and leading her up the stairs. "But they are fun to use," he countered.

"How many power tools do you have?" she asked, looking around, even more impressed with the landscaping. There wasn't a lot of grass. Instead, the yard was filled with various types of trees and bushes, interspersed with mounds of flowers and various evergreen shrubs.

"Lots. I will admit I have a bit of an addiction to power tools. Any and everything that has to do with woodworking or power interests me." He led her down a side pathway. This path led around the house to the back where...another sci-fi inspired building awaited them.

With a press of a button, the garage-door style door lifted, then tucked away in the ceiling to reveal a wood shop. There were stacks of wood on the shelves along one wall of the long building. And along the middle, there were power tools galore! He'd said he liked tools, but he hadn't admitted that he owned every power tool ever invented!

"Wow!" she whispered, looking around, trying to take it all in. "What's that over there?" she asked, pointing to shelves that contained several pieces that looked like art work.

He waved a dismissive hand, pulling her focus towards the other side of the wood shop. "Oh, that's nothing. Come over here. We're going to make a picture frame," he announced.

"Why are we going to make a picture frame?" she asked, still looking around in awe.

“Because it requires angles, measuring, and the use of a router to finish. Plus,” he added smugly, “we can finish it in one day.”

Giselle’s heart sank. She would have liked to take on a more complicated project so that she had a good reason to come back and be with him more often. But he was right. A one day project was a good starting place.

“Do you have any pictures you’d like to frame?” he asked, leading her to the wall of wood in various sizes, textures, and colors. Some of the wood was rough and other pieces smooth. There were dark woods, some honey colored pieces, as well as other pieces that seemed nearly white.

Giselle considered for a moment, then inspiration struck. “I took a picture of a sunset a week ago,” she told him. “I wouldn’t mind getting it printed out and framed.”

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “A sunset? Will you show me?”

Giselle pulled out her phone and, self-consciously, flipped through her pictures until she found the photo in question. It was one she was particularly proud of because of the excellent gradation of the colors. It was difficult to properly capture a sunset, but she’d adjusted the settings on her phone and...well, this one showed off the light blues, purples, and yellows all the way to fuchsia as the sun lowered behind the clouds.

“That’s amazing,” he murmured, staring at the picture in quiet wonder. He was leaning over her shoulder and she could feel him, the heat and the power of his body as well as smell the incredible scent of his aftershave.

She felt him nod his head. “I think framing that would be an excellent idea.” He took her phone and pressed some buttons.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m sending the picture to myself,” he told her, concentrating on the tiny keys. He then handed it back to her. “And I also sent it to my favorite printing company. I ordered a large canvas print.” He walked over to a chalk board and wrote down the dimensions. “Here’s how big it will be.”

For the next two hours, he showed her how to build a frame, how to

measure the inside versus the outside angles, mitering the back of the frame so the glass would hold, and adding a backing for the canvas.

When she slammed in the final nail with the brad nailer, she eyed the piece expectantly. “Is it done?” she asked.

“It’s done!” he agreed, lifting it up to show her. “You’ve just built your first picture frame!”

She laughed delightedly, bouncing on her toes before realizing she was still holding the nail gun and carefully set it down on the work table. Then she turned back to Felix. “I did it!” she gasped, covering her mouth with her fingertips. “I really did it!”

He nodded. “Yep,” he said, moving closer. “You really did it.”

“Thank you!” she gushed, trying to contain her exuberance.

The look he gave her in that moment shocked her and she had to look away. It was either look away, or kiss the man. Since she doubted Felix wanted a replay of last night, she stepped back and looked towards the open doorway, thinking it must be time for her to head home.

But as soon as she turned her head, that other wall caught her eye again. Now that she was inside the workshop, the pieces were more visible. “What *are* those?” pointing towards that wall. “Did you make them?”

Giselle moved closer, gazing in awe of the wooden sculptures that lined the shelves. There were racing horses, manes and tails flying as if they were dancing in the wind, and an octopus that looked to be sprinting through the water. Somehow, the octopus even had a jet of ink following her. Another sculpture was a field of flowers, each flower and blade of grass perfectly etched out of the wood. The blades and stems tilted to the side, as if the wind was blowing across the field.

Giselle moved slowly down the row of shelves. All three shelves were crowded with wooden sculptures, and each was more fascinating than the last.

She turned to find Felix leaning against the shelves, his arms folded over his chest. “Felix, did you make these?” she asked again.

He shrugged one shoulder dismissively. “It’s just a hobby,” he

admitted.

Giselle stared at him for another long moment, then turned to continue perusing the statues. There were animals, trees and buildings, all done in wood, all carved with a loving hand.

Stunned, she turned and walked over to him. “This isn’t just a hobby, Felix,” she said, staring into his blue eyes that were now shuttered for some odd reason. “These are truly remarkable.”

He didn’t move, but muttered, “Just a hobby, Giselle. You can have one if you’d like.”

She’d leaned closer to examine each piece, but at his comment, Giselle’s head swiveled up to look into his eyes. “I couldn’t just *take* one! These are works of art, Felix!”

“They’re just something I do in the evenings to calm my brain.”

She turned and frowned thoughtfully up at him. “Is your job stressful?”

He shrugged. “It’s not my job that is stressful. It’s...well, family and other issues are on my mind a lot.” Felix couldn’t believe that he’d just said that out loud. Next, he’d be admitting what a terrible excuse for a brother he was. “Here,” he reached around her and took down one of his favorites. “I made this one right after Ava’s wedding.” He gazed at it for a moment, then nodded before handing it to her. “It’s yours.”

Felix watched as she examined it. The piece was more abstract than most of his others, the wood twisting around in an unexpected fashion. But if she looked closely, there was a human face in the twisted wood. There was a touch of anguish in the features, but he hoped that the emotions were hidden well enough that she wouldn’t....

“You were hurting when you made this one,” she observed, her finger sliding over the “eyes”, then the “mouth” as it pulled wide in pain. “What were you thinking about when you made it?”

He gave her a wry half smile. “I was ready to fight someone,” he admitted. He took her hand and led her out of the workroom. “Let’s have dinner, shall we?”

Hugging the piece to her chest, she ignored the rumbling hunger that suddenly sounded in her stomach. “You don’t have to feed me, Felix,” she said, following along behind him, although she glanced over her shoulder to get one more glimpse of those beautiful sculptures before the door closed behind them.

With resignation, she allowed him to lead her into the house and... came to a halt.

The house was...magnificent! She’d known that Felix was wealthy, but this house and the views...! This was beyond the kind of wealth she understood! The entire first floor was one big, open room that was absolutely enormous! There was a kitchen at one end with a long island covered in white marble that fronted a wall of cabinets. It all looked very sleek and modern, and the appliances were probably more complicated than a nuclear reactor. There was also a large sitting room and a massive table with about a dozen chairs around it. Her entire house *and* yard could fit into this room!

But that wasn’t even the most amazing part of the house. It was the views! The whole back wall of the house was a wall of windows that looked out onto Puget Sound. It was...stunning! Magnificent! Wait, she’d already used that word. But it was appropriate. This place was...!

“Wow!” she whispered.

“Do you like it?” he asked, walking into the kitchen. He opened a refrigerator and grabbed two beers. He opened them with a bottle opener, and brought them over to where she was standing, offering one to her and taking a long sip of his own. “I designed it myself.”

“I love it!” she whispered, walking around to survey the view from different angles. She finally pulled her gaze away and looked at the furniture. The curved wood was...extraordinary and she grinned up at him, incredibly impressed. “You designed the table too, didn’t you?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

She chuckled. “I just saw your ‘hobby’ Felix. The tables and chairs in here are wooden. It makes sense that you designed them.” She looked up at him, a thought struck her at that moment. “Did you make the chairs as well?”

He took another sip of his beer. “Just the table,” he admitted. “What would you like for dinner? I could make pizza.”

“We could order pizza,” she countered.

He looked at her, one eyebrow lifted as if to say, “Are you kidding me?”. Then he reached into the fridge again, but lower this time, and she discovered that there was a freezer at the bottom. He grabbed something and plopped it onto the marble countertop. “Pizza dough.” He pointed towards what she assumed was a pantry. “There are ingredients for the toppings in there. Not fresh from the garden, like you have at your place, but hopefully the homemade pizza dough will make up for the lack of fresh vegetables.”

Giselle laughed, but nodded. “That sounds like an excellent exchange.” She peered at the white blob. “Where did you get homemade pizza dough?”

“I made it,” he replied, with a tinge of pride to his voice. “And that is a sexist question,” he continued, pointing to her but adding a playful wink. “If I were a woman, you would have just assumed that I’d made the pizza dough. But because I’m male, you automatically assumed that I didn’t make it, that I’d gotten it somewhere else.”

Giselle considered that for a long moment, and then nodded slowly. “You’re absolutely correct. That was sexist of me and I appreciate you pointing it out. I’ll do better in the future.”

She pulled out a stool to sit down on the other side of the large island, sipping her beer as she watched him work the pizza dough. “How often do you make pizza?”

“I love pizza. I make pizza whenever I can. Sometimes, I’ll even make a breakfast pizza.”

“Breakfast? How odd. What do you put on a breakfast pizza? What kind of sauce?”

He shook his head. “My breakfast version doesn’t include sauce. I just add scrambled eggs and sausage with sauteed vegetables. Usually whatever I have in the fridge at the moment.”

“How often do you have that?”



As she watched, something came over his face and she was fascinated.

“Not as often as I like,” he admitted, focusing more intently on the pizza crust.

“What just happened, Felix?” she asked, leaning forward, trying to see into his eyes.

“I don’t know what you mean.” He pressed out the pizza dough, expertly manipulating it into a circle.

She reached out and touched his hand, stopping him. He looked up at her, those blue eyes...tormented. “Why don’t you have pizza as often as you’d like?” she asked softly, concerned now.

Giselle felt her heart pounding against her ribs as the moment continued in tense silence. She could see the debate in his eyes, in the way his shoulder muscles tightened. It was almost as if he was at war with himself.

She also recognized the exact moment he lost the battle. “It’s nothing,” he replied and refocused on the crust.

“I think it’s something,” she argued gently. “I think it’s something very important. But you don’t know me well enough to tell me, and that’s okay.” She pulled her hand back and wrapped her fingers around the beer bottle, feeling...rejected. Which was ridiculous. Everyone had secrets. She certainly had enough of her own! “You’re a good man, Felix. I’m sure that, whatever holds you back from celebrating life with a pizza, it’s not as bad as you think.”

Her words must have broken through a dam inside of him because he muttered an expletive under his breath and turned to her. His eyes were heated, but they didn’t scare her.

Felix couldn’t take it anymore. If it were any other woman, he would have brushed off those comments and continued in his usual manner. Felix considered himself to be a relatively laid back person. But with Giselle, she brought out needs in him that he didn’t fully understand.

And one of those needs was for her to *know* him. To know the real man and not the fake image she'd read about online.

“I’m *not* a good man, Giselle. If we’re going to move forward with this relationship, then you have to know that. You have to understand that I’m a horrible, pathetic...coward!”

## Chapter 5

Giselle stared at Felix in shock, then jumped up off of the stool, rushing around to the other side. She hadn't considered what she was going to do. But when she wrapped her arms around his waist, she knew that this was right.

"You are *not* a coward!" she whispered vehemently. "You're a proud, brave man! Not many men could do what you did to serve our country. I've heard what the SEAL training is like and it's not for cowards!"

He tried to push her away, but not because he didn't want her touch. Giselle's head was resting against his chest so she heard the pounding of his heart. Briefly, he leaned into her hug. She felt his need and wouldn't let him punish himself by pushing away her compassion.

"I'm a coward, Giselle," he told her firmly, but at least he stopped trying to push her away. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly. Felix even lowered his head so that his cheek rested on the top of her head. "I'm a pathetic coward."

She pulled away just enough to look into those blue eyes. "You're not!"

"I am, Giselle. And you need to understand that." With that, he took in a deep breath and released her, stepping back so that he couldn't pull her right back into his arms. He fisted his hands on his hips and stared out the window.

"Tell me," she urged, waiting patiently.

It took him a few more minutes, but eventually he admitted, "I ran away."

"From home?"

"Yes," he sighed, then turned to look at her again. "My mother had died years earlier. Pierce studying away at Harvard." He closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "I took off and joined the Navy."

"I know. That's...admirable."

He opened his eyes, staring at her with grim determination. “No. It wasn’t admirable, Giselle. It was cowardly. I wanted to get the hell away from home. I hated my father. He was drunk all the time by that point. Any money we made was immediately used to buy booze. Jenna and Ava were getting food from the free school lunches and somehow, they were doing extremely well in school. I should have stayed and helped out. But I left. I joined the Navy and had a great time. I didn’t even know that my father had abandoned my sisters until I came home the first time I was granted leave. I’d been sending money to them every month. I’d send it directly to Jenna and Ava so that they’d be able to buy food. Between the money I could scrape together, as well as the extra money Jenna and Ava generated through guests at the hotel, we were able to pay the property taxes on the land so that the county wouldn’t take it over or place a lien on the land or the buildings. But I ran. I escaped.”

Giselle shook her head. “No, Felix. You did what you needed to do for your family.”

He snorted. “If I’d been a better man, I would have stayed home and taken care of them. I would have pushed my father out of the business and helped my sisters full time. Instead, I was off doing fun stuff around the world, training, jumping out of planes, and repelling down cliffs...I loved it, Giselle. I had a great time while my sisters struggled to find food!”

Giselle stepped closer, but didn’t reach for him. She suspected that he needed the space to come to terms with what she was about to say. “What percentage of your monthly income from the Navy did you send home?”

He shrugged, his hands fisted on his lean hips. “Almost all of it. The girls used it to refurbish the buildings and rooms. Ava used some of it for marketing.”

She stepped even closer. “You mentioned that you brought your Navy buddies back home with you to build the crazy cabins. Was that a lie?”

He shook his head but his features remained grim. “Nah. But again, we had such a good time building those insane structures. It was a lark. Four or five of us would have a bit of fun in the lake, then spend the next few days building the cabins over a long weekend. After building, we’d head back down to the dock and swim, drink beer, and party at night.”

“Who paid for the materials for those cabins?”

“I did. The girls didn’t have anything to spare.”

She moved closer. “So your translation of the past is that you abandoned your family and now consider yourself to be a coward.” She tilted her head to the side. “Let’s view this from your sisters’ perspective. You went off to do a job in which you excelled, while sending back nearly all of your income from that job so your sisters had food to eat and a place to live. In other words, you ensured that both of your sisters had their basic needs covered.” She lifted her hand to stop his next argument, then continued. “You came back to help expand the business with your expertise. You call the cabins insane, and yet, those are the cabins that got your family’s business noticed. Those buildings were so well constructed that they are *still* making money for your family years later.” She paused again, inching closer. “You think you abandoned your family. But I’m guessing that your family probably thinks that you saved them from starvation. Have you spoken to them about this?”

“I can’t,” he replied. “I’m just...!” He ran a hand through his hair. “Every day, I tell myself to do something to make up for the past. For my abandonment.”

She laid a hand on his chest, her fingers splaying wider as she felt his heart pounding. “You call yourself a coward. But when I hear your story, I think you are a hero!”

Felix froze, her words almost too painful to take in. A moment later, he pulled her roughly into his arms. “Damn woman!” he groaned, then covered her mouth with his, kissing her with a need that she reciprocated. Giselle wrapped her arms around his neck, thrilled. She’d dreamed about this, but even her dreams couldn’t compare to this. It was so much more than her dreams could ever be. And just like last night, she lost herself in the kiss, in the way he touched her almost worshipfully.

When she felt the hardening of his body, Giselle felt a surge of power, of lust so intense, it caused her knees to buckle. But Felix’s arms were there, catching her. She felt a moment’s confusion and dizziness, then opened her eyes in time to realize that he was carrying her up the stairs.

To his bedroom? Giselle was afraid to hope. Making love with Felix? Oh, how she'd dreamed about doing this! For months, she'd gone to that stupid bar only to sit in the corner and fantasize about him.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he kicked the door closed behind them. "I've thought about making love to you ever since the moment I saw you walking down the street, Giselle. But I don't want to rush you. If you don't want this, then just say the word, and I'll wait until you're ready."

"You've dreamed about this? With *me*?" she asked as she regained her footing. He lowered her feet to the floor, but didn't release her. His big, heavy hands rested on her hips as he gazed down at her. She stepped closer, that hardness pressing against her belly, thrilling her!

"Hell yes!" he groaned, running his hands up and down her waist. He didn't go high enough to touch her breasts, but that only excited her further. It was as if he were keeping his touch from where she really needed it until she gave him the green light.

Her smile spreading across her features was that green light! "I've dreamed about you too," she admitted.

"About me in general?" he asked, needing clarification. "Or this?" His hand moved higher, cupping her breast through the thin material of her tee shirt.

"This!" she hissed, closing her eyes as the wash of pleasure almost overwhelmed her. When his thumb rubbed against the hardened peak, she clutched at his arms to steady herself.

"I think this needs to go," he urged.

His thumb left her nipple and she whimpered in protest. But she lifted her arms as he pulled the tee shirt up over her head. Giselle was relieved that she'd pulled on pretty underwear this morning. She hadn't anticipated this. Not in her wildest moments had she thought that Felix would want her like this. But she'd chosen something pretty this morning to give herself a little confidence.

"Damn, this is beautiful," he rasped out, his hands cupping her breasts without the frumpy tee shirt getting in the way.

She shivered, trying to smile. “I wasn’t anticipating this,” she told him. “But sometimes, a pretty piece of underwear gives a woman confidence.”

He kissed her then, his mouth moving over hers as he tried to silently tell her something. When he lifted his mouth, she whimpered. “You are gorgeous, Giselle!”

She smiled, feeling powerfully beautiful as he stared down at her. For some reason, when Felix touched her, it felt different. Giselle felt his touch all the way down to her soul!

She lifted her hands, pressing his to her breasts. “I like it when you do this,” she murmured.

“I’m glad.” He looked down at her lace covered breasts. “What about this? Do you like this as well?”

She might have moaned. Giselle wasn’t sure about anything anymore. “Don’t stop!”

“Not a chance!” And he lowered his mouth to suckle the tip of her breast. “I need you naked, Giselle.” As soon as he’d said it, Giselle felt herself falling backwards onto his bed. It was a large, comfortable bed, but she didn’t feel very comfortable in it. Not with Felix watching her as if he were about to devour her. And especially not when he took her breast into his mouth again! She hissed, arching her back while her fingers dove into his hair. Her body throbbed with the need.

Felix felt her trembling and wanted to roar with the lust surging through him. But this was Giselle and he wanted to make this perfect. Perfect for her!

However, his control had never been tested to this extent. His mouth covered her breast while his other hand teased her other nipple, the peaks so deliciously perfect that he thought he could do this all day. He laughed when she pulled his mouth away, but he merely moved lower, his fingers burning a trail along her stomach. She was so damn soft! Everywhere he touched, she was soft and smooth.

Felix could smell her arousal as he moved lower. And lower! He chuckled softly when he realized that her legs were tightly closed. “You’re going to have to relax, Giselle,” he warned her, his fingers teasing the soft skin along her knees.

“I’m fine!” she whispered harshly, tugging at his shoulders

“I’m not leaving here until I taste you, love.”

She groaned, then shifted so she was nearly sitting up. “Felix, I know that men only do...that...because they think they have to,” she angled her head towards her hips, “but they don’t really enjoy doing it.”

He stared at her for a long moment, then threw his head back, laughing with delight. He knew that he was making her self-conscious, but her comment was just...hilarious. “Giselle, I not only love doing...that,” he said, teasing her with his words. “But I’m not going to do anything else until you let me have my way!”

She whimpered, shaking her head. “No, I really don’t need...that.”

He grinned, moving forward until she was laying on her back again. “I’m going to relent this once, but only because I think you’re self-conscious about...that.”

“Stop,” she said, then chuckled at his teasing tone. “You’re horrible.”

His amusement faded as his hands moved along her skin. “I don’t want anything that we do together to make you uncomfortable, Giselle, but I would love to give you pleasure. And I suspect that the taste of you is going to be a serious turn-on.”

“I’m not...very...um...”

“Who told you that?” he asked, his fingers moving lower, teasing her legs apart. “Are you not excited when I touch you?”

“I love it when you touch me,” she whispered, her hips shifting as his fingers urged her legs slowly apart.

Felix spread her legs wider, his fingers teasing those soft, glistening folds. He wanted to move lower so that he could taste her. But he didn’t want to push her too fast. Right now, he focused on touching her. He



watched as her eyes fluttered closed as his fingers teased her, drenching his fingers in her moisture before he slid that moisture along her most sensitive nub. She jerked in his arms, so he moved away. The hitch in her breathing warned him that she wanted him to move back, so he gave her what she wanted. His thumb flicked against that nub, then his fingers dove into her heat, repeating that movement over and over again. He watched her, noting the places on her body that gave her more pleasure. He returned to tease her nipple and she just about levitated off the bed. Her reactions to his fingers and mouth was a bit like a flower blooming for the first time. Every touch, every flick of his fingers or his tongue was like a surprise and she gasped, moaned, and wiggled against him until...!

Giselle cried out as her body shook with her first climax. It was so beautiful to see her skin flushed with pleasure, that Felix almost couldn't take it. She was so freaking amazing! So beautiful and lovely and incredibly passionate.

Quickly, he grabbed protection, rolling it down his shaft as he shifted so that she was cradling his erection now. Her legs automatically lifted, giving him more room, but it was her soft, sweet smile that made him groan. "Giselle," he rasped, pressing slowly into her with his final bit of control.

He tried to be slow. He tried to be careful and gentle. But she lifted those sweet hips to him, angling her body to take him deeper into her white-hot heat. Everything inside of him hummed with pleasure as he thrust into her. Felix couldn't be gentle. Not with her body tightening around him like that.

Pressing into Giselle was the equivalent of being connected to an electric current. Everything was sharper, better, more amazing!

When he knew that she was close and his control was slipping, he shifted slightly, using his thumb to rub that nub and...and her inner muscles tightened around him like a vice and that was all he could do. His control shattered and he closed his eyes as they both exploded together.

When it was all over, he pulled her into his arms, trying to give her the gentleness that he'd wanted to give her before. Felix smiled as he felt her soft, fervent kisses moments before she fell asleep in his arms.

## Chapter 6

“Chickens!” Giselle gasped, jackknifing up in the bed and looking around.

Felix jerked awake, startled. One moment, he was having a very nice dream about making love to Giselle again, cupping her beautiful breasts while he thrust into her heat ...and the next moment, he was jerked away from that enticing dream with the horror of...?

“Did you just yell ‘chickens’?” he asked, rubbing the scruff of his beard.

She turned around and looked down at him, her brown eyes wide with worry. That worry woke him up faster than anything else. “What’s wrong?”

“My chickens!” She climbed out of bed. “They have an automatic feeder, but they need me!”

Giselle frantically searched for a shirt, or anything, to cover up her nakedness. As soon as Felix realized what she was doing, he chuckled, stood up, and simply lifted her into his arms. He was naked as well and didn’t give a damn. Giselle was going to have to get used to being naked because, with a body like hers, he would love watching her walk around naked.

“It’s still dark outside. I thought chickens were diurnal.”

“They are,” Giselle replied, quickly wrapping one arm around his shoulders as he carried her to the bathroom. He lowered her feet to the floor and flipped on the shower. “But they need me. I need to collect their eggs and talk to them. I need to make sure they are okay.”

He understood. “We’ll get there,” he promised. “Let’s shower and I’ll grab some ingredients. Then we’ll head over to your place and you can teach me how to take care of the chickens, okay?”

He saw the anxiety ease from her pretty features. She took a brief moment to look out the window to confirm for herself that it was still dark outside. As soon as that fact sunk into her sleep-starved brain, she relaxed. “You’re right. It’s still dark and my ladies will probably be asleep.”

She turned around, about to reach for a towel but he grabbed her

hands and guided her into the extra-large shower. It was big enough to fit both of them as well as probably a half dozen other people.

“Why is your shower so huge?” she asked, stepping under one of the sprays of water. “And why do you have several shower heads?”

He kissed her bare shoulder. “I designed an extra-large shower because I don’t like feeling cramped. I’m a big guy,” he pointed out as he handed her the bar of soap. “I like to have enough elbow room.”

She turned, smiling up at him as she placed a kiss on his chest. “I have the opposite problem. With my height, some spaces feel too large.”

He smiled, taking the soap and using it on her back. “I like your size.”

She laughed and spun around, but he wouldn’t let her have the soap. He simply started washing the front of her body.

“I need to lose some weight,” she sighed, moving his hand higher when his fingers lingered on the soft curve of her stomach.

“I love your curves, Giselle. I don’t think you need to lose any weight.” His lips nuzzled her neck while his fingers explored those curves. Thoroughly! He pulled her against his erection, showing her how much he enjoyed her body. She shivered and he smiled, then nipped her earlobe. “In fact, I think I should explore everything more carefully. Just so that you are fully aware of how much I love every inch of you.”

With that, he pressed her back against the wall. She looked so adorably confused, which caused his body to tighten even more. She’d never had shower sex, he realized. Oh, this was going to be good!

As his hands slid over the wet globes of her breasts, he knelt down. Abandoning her breasts, he lifted one of her legs and pulled it over his shoulder, opening her up so that he could taste her. She was delicious! And so damn responsive! Her fingers dove into his hair, tugging as he licked and sucked at her folds. He was aware of the time pressure. He knew that she wanted to take care of her chickens, so he focused his efforts, zeroing in on that sensitive nub. It took less time than he would have wished to drive her mad with need. He would have loved to explore her more thoroughly, but he pushed her over the edge into a screaming climax, holding her up as her legs

gave out.

Damn, he loved doing that to her! He would love to try doing it again, to see if he could bring her to another orgasm right away.

Well, maybe in a moment. He should give her a few minutes to recover from that last one. She was still trembling as he cradled her close. However, her nipples were right there! So close and so tempting.

“That was...unexpected,” Giselle whispered, shifting so that she could kiss him lingeringly. Damn, he loved her!

That was so stunning of a thought that he pulled back, gazing down at her as the realization struck him. Love?

As she smiled up at him, that sleepy, satisfied expression on her beautiful face, he realized that, yes, this was love. It was absolute, all-consuming love. Now his actions over the past several weeks made sense!

“Your turn,” she whispered.

If Felix hadn't been overwhelmed by his revelation, he might have been more prepared. But he was still thinking about the fact that he was in love. He'd never been in love before. He'd barely even admired the women he'd bedded in the past. They'd been a sexual release, he suddenly understood in a burst of clarity. He'd never had any true feelings for...dear heaven what was she doing?

He glanced down and just about climaxed on the spot as her mouth closed over his shaft. The white-hot heat of her mouth on his erection was shocking and his hands slapped against the marble walls of the shower area, trying to keep himself upright. Holy hell, she was good at this!

Her mouth moved over his shaft, up and down and...damn! Her tongue kept flicking against the underside of the tip, which was the most sensitive place. He wanted...no! Just a bit longer, he vowed! This was so good! He didn't want her to stop. He opened his eyes and gazed down at her. She wasn't on her knees. She'd just bent over so that her cute ass wiggled in the air and he wanted to reach out and touch it. But he couldn't take his hands away from the wall or he'd collapse.

Then she did it. She sucked against his shaft and...it was all over!

He couldn't even give her any warning so that she could pull away. He was just...his climax exploded over him and he groaned, gasping for air as she continued to move her mouth up and down over him!

When it was all over, she stood up and beamed at him. Felix stared down at her, his body still thrumming with the pleasure she'd given him. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. She leaned into him, pressing all of her glorious curves against him and making him want to do it all over again.

But there were chickens to handle. Chickens! He almost laughed out loud at the realization that chickens, of all things, were interfering with his love life!

He smiled down at her. "Let's finish showering and go take care of your chickens," he suggested, his voice rough with leftover lust.

"Good plan," she whispered back.

Twenty minute later, Giselle pulled into her driveway with Felix right behind her. He parked on the street so that her car wouldn't be trapped in front of his and they both stepped out.

"Are you sure that you want to meet my ladies?" she asked, looking up at him with a curious expression. "They're sweet to me because I raised them, but I doubt anyone else would understand their value to me."

He lowered his head to kiss her softly. "The hens are important to you, so I want to understand." He pulled back and Giselle tried to hide her disappointment. It seemed that even a small kiss from this man could set her body to singing with hope for another round in bed with him.

Embarrassed by such overwhelming need, she pulled back, turning away from him so that he wouldn't notice her blush. "The hens are back this way," she explained, pointing towards the backyard. The main yard didn't have a fence, so the hens were enclosed in a large coop that gave them some shade and some sunshine with lots of places in which to roost as well as lay their eggs.

But as soon as she rounded the corner, she discovered her ladies were outside of the coop! The hens were pecking at the grass, looking for bugs to

eat .

“What’s going on?” she gasped, hurrying over to the hens. They lifted their heads at the sound of her voice and rushed over to her, surrounding her and clucking with excitement. “Oh, ladies! How did you all get out of there? I’m so sorry!”

Giselle rushed over to the coop door , the hens following after her. As soon as she lifted the latch and slid the lock to the side, the hens rushed in, then started gobbling up the corn and other grains that had spilled out from the automatic feeder.

“Why did they get out?” she wondered out loud, stroking the backs of the two closest birds.

“This lock seems pretty complicated,” Felix replied as he examined it carefully. He looked up at her, but neither of them understood how the gate got open.

“It’s fine,” she replied, dismissing the mystery. “The ladies are all fine, so no harm done.” She looked off to the right. “My neighbor probably came over to check on me, realized I wasn’t here and let my ladies out.”

“How far away is your nearest neighbor?”

She shrugged, standing up and wiping her hands against her jeans. “Melissa and Jordan’s farmhouse is about a mile that way.” She pointed towards the line of corn growing behind a split-pine fence. “That’s where their property starts. They’ve been very good neighbors so far.”

“Would they notice if you weren’t here at night?”

Giselle nibbled her lower lip, looking thoughtfully off into the distance. “They never have before,” she admitted. “They’ll sometimes drop off a pie, if Melissa was in a baking mood and had extra.” She sighed and turned away, glancing at her chickens, who were busy pecking at the corn coming out of the feeder. “But no, she’s never come over just to check on me. And if she was going to bring something to me, she would have texted me first to make sure I was here.”

Felix pulled her into his arms. “Why don’t we go inside? You change into something more comfortable and I’ll make breakfast. I know

that you're hungry, since you made us skip dinner last night."

"Huh?" Giselle gasped. "Me? *I'm* the one that interrupted the dinner preparation last night?" she demanded, hands on her hips as she glared playfully up at him.

He laughed and moved closer to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Absolutely. I blame it all on you."

She punched his shoulder playfully, but then lifted up on her toes to kiss him.

He kissed her back, then pulled her in closer to deepen the kiss. Giselle laughed and pulled out of his arms, ducking around him to run towards the backdoor of her house. "Not a chance, mister!" she called out over her shoulder. "You're not going to fool me into another round, then blame me for another missed meal!"

She heard Felix's amused growl, but didn't turn around. So, she yelped when he swooped behind her and scooped her up off her feet, then tossed her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry as he entered the house. "You're denying your part in last night's escapades, eh? Well, I'll just have to prove you wrong!"

Giselle giggled, clutching at the back of his shirt as she bounced along on his shoulder. "I need food, mister!" she exclaimed, then laughed when he swatted her bottom. Goodness, it was nice to be with a man who enjoyed her body!

Kevin glowered at the man who was manhandling his Giselle. What the hell was his woman doing? And when the hell had she bought this crappy little house? It was a stupid house, but he supposed he could work with it. He'd just discovered that the inside was like a bottle of pepto-bismol had exploded. There was so much damn pink, it was nauseating. Without him to balance Giselle's rather questionable choices, she'd gone a bit nuts on the décor. Everything was either pink or white. It was the stupidest décor he'd ever seen. She had no concept of resale value or making a space inviting. It was like she decorated the tiny house just for herself and didn't plan on having company.

But the guy who'd just walked into the house would most likely run screaming for his life, and his shriveled balls, after just a few minutes in that pink crap! The walls in the dining room were pink with giant flowers in the corners. What the hell was she thinking? Who wants to eat in a pink dining room?!

Taking deep breaths, he calmed himself down. Kevin understood that he had a temper. Actually, it wasn't so much a temper as it was a passion. Yes, he had a passion for life and the world. He had ideas on how to fix things so that the world, a person's home or their work life, flowed more smoothly. He just needed to build up his audience, then people would listen to him. There were plenty of podcasters who spouted ridiculous stuff and somehow made millions. Kevin was going to be one of them. Of course, his podcasts wouldn't be ridiculous. He made sense. He looked at life with a practical eye. Everything had a place. When everything was in the right place, life ran smoothly.

He glared at the tiny house. There couldn't be more than two bedrooms in there, he thought in disgust. If Giselle had talked to him before purchasing the house, he would have told her to look for a three bedroom house, minimum. Four would have been better. Three bedrooms meant that there would be a room for the parents, then a room for the boys and another for the girls. With just two bedrooms, a couple could only have one kid.

Giselle wanted a lot of kids, he knew. They'd talked about kids before he'd started dating Lisa, so he knew Giselle wanted a large family. However, Kevin had discovered Lisa and chose her, thinking she'd be a better homemaker. And he'd been right, if Giselle's decorating style was any indication!

Just thinking of kids brought Lisa to mind. She was a good wife and an even better mother. Or she would be once his baby was a little older. Lisa wasn't good with infants, he thought. His new wife always seemed to be in tears lately, but she was just tired. All new mothers were tired. Lisa simply needed time to figure this new motherhood thing out.

Returning his attention to Giselle, he stared at the small house. Why wasn't that dude running out of there? It had been twenty minutes already.

Maybe that guy was gay. Yes, that had to be it. Giselle had been



devastated when he'd dumped her last year. She wouldn't have taken up with another lover already. It only made sense that this other man was gay. Finally, the pieces of the mystery fell into place.

He probably shouldn't have opened up that chicken coop this morning. But he'd been curious about the eggs. Kevin hadn't expected the damn things to peck at his ankles. Little bastards! Or bitches, he thought with a chuckle. The roosters were in another coop, separated from the females.

Kevin started his truck and pulled out onto the street. He'd found the perfect hiding place for when he needed to keep an eye on Giselle's house. The copse of trees at the curve in the road gave him a perfect angle to watch both the front and back of her house.

Glancing at his watch, he groaned when he realized that he was more than two hours late. Lisa had asked him to be home in time to go to her parents' house for Sunday brunch with her and the baby. Eh, he'd just tell her he'd had an emergency at work. No use getting her dander up by explaining that he'd been watching over his ex-girlfriend's house. Lisa was wound a bit tight and wouldn't understand.

## Chapter 7

Felix whistled cheerfully as he sauntered into the office the following morning. He felt better than he had in ages. And it was all because of Giselle. They'd spent the rest of Sunday at her house. He absolutely loved the pink interior. It was such a freaking turn on to be entirely surrounded by Giselle. Everywhere he looked, there was another feminine touch, a feather or a pillow, a pink stripe going down a door, or maybe it was just the scent of lavender that kept his body on such high alert.

Whatever the reason, they'd made love in just about every room in her house yesterday. The only times they'd stopped was to cook together, eat it, then maybe shower before one of them looked at the other and the whole thing started all over again. It was a heady thing to be wanted as much as Giselle wanted him.

Of course, it helped that her last boyfriend had been such an impressively selfish lover. She hadn't known that she could climax five times in a row. She hadn't known that she could be so drenched in pleasure that she could melt into a puddle of satisfaction. He'd taught her that.

"You're smiling."

Felix stopped in the middle of the hallway, wondering why Jenna used that stern tone.

"I am," he replied with a nod. "Is that a bad thing?"

She shook her head, the ever-present stack of files pressed against her chest. "No, not at all. But it's...weird. You don't normally smile."

He laughed and continued walking, putting his arm around her shoulders. She stiffened for just a moment, then fell into step beside him.

"Sorry, I'll try to be grumpy again. Will that make you feel better?"

He walked into the kitchen and poured two cups of coffee. "Do you take cream or sugar?" he asked, stunned that he didn't know how his sister took her coffee. "And why don't I know that already?"

"Because...you've never gotten me coffee before? And sugar, no cream, thanks." she offered as an explanation.

He handed her a ceramic cup with the Halliday logo on the outside. “Why is that?”

Jenna accepted the cup, cradling it in one hand while she kept the files close to her body like a shield. “Why is what?”

He took a sip of his black coffee, then asked, “Why don’t we ever have coffee together? Why are we all so wrapped up in our own roles here that we never just...get to know one another?”

Jenna grinned and the expression transformed her features from merely pretty, to stunning. Felix was shocked all over again to realize just how beautiful Jenna was. She was just so serious all the time!

“Because you used to throw mud at me when we’d all go to the lake together.”

He shrugged. “You used to work some magic trick on my shoelaces so that it would take me a good hour to get them unknotted. We were kids. We all did stupid stuff to get each other’s attention.”

“Is that what it was?” she teased, then sighed. “I guess you’re right. I always wanted to hang out with you and Pierce. But I was your little sister and neither of you wanted anything to do with me.”

“Eh, we didn’t mind you,” he said, then winked at her before he added, “It was Ava we were trying to avoid.”

“Hey!” Ava snapped, poking her head into the doorway. “I heard that!”

Jenna and Felix laughed, and Felix turned to pour her a cup of coffee. “I was just asking Jenna why we don’t hang out together more often.”

Ava shrugged breezily. “Because you’re a big bully and Pierce is evil.” She took the cup of coffee, grinning at both of them.

Felix and Jenna laughed again, then Felix became serious. “I realized something this weekend,” he began, staring down into his coffee cup. “I’m so sorry that I ran off to the Navy right when you two needed me the most.”

Jenna and Ava stared at him so he continued. Turning away from

their stunned expressions, he looked out the window, sighing heavily as he stared down at the coffee in his cup. “I abandoned both of you. And I’m so sorry!” He told both of them, rubbing the back of his neck. “If I’d known that Dad was going to abandon you, I would have...?”

Jenna moved to his side, placing a comforting hand on his arm. “You did what was right for you,” she emphasized. “And we desperately needed the money you sent to us.” Tears formed in her eyes. “We needed the money so badly and you sent us so much! And we used it very carefully.”

Ava stepped forward and Felix noticed tears in her eyes as well. “She’s right. We were very careful with it! We didn’t let Dad know anything about the money, Felix. It was like...” Ava swallowed hard. “It saved us!” she whispered with heartfelt sincerity. “It literally saved us from starving!”

Ava lifted up onto her toes and kissed his jaw. “You didn’t abandon us, Felix. Dad did that. You were our savior.” A moment later, Ava rushed out of the kitchen, barely managing to keep the coffee in her cup as she rounded the corner.

Jenna pulled back, wiping her tears as well. She smoothed a hand over her dark locks to ensure there wasn’t a strand out of place. “She’s right, Felix,” Jenna whispered, her voice full of emotion. “You didn’t abandon us. When you and your friends came back, I couldn’t figure out how to tell you guys to stop building those wild cabins. But they were incredible! The way you and your friends built them is amazing and those are what put Halliday Hotels on the map. Without those cabins, we wouldn’t be here today.” She took a deep breath and continued. “I know that you hate working for the company now. But we’re okay. Your efforts are brilliant, and I don’t want you to ever think otherwise. I know that I sort of roped the family into this business. I’ve felt guilty ever since.”

Felix stared down at her for a moment, not sure he’d heard her correctly. “What the hell are you talking about, Jenna? I love my job. I am doing every boy’s fantasy. I get to build stuff and work with big trucks!”

For a stunned moment, she merely stared up at him. “You...love your job?” she gasped. “You...you don’t resent me for forcing you to work

here?”

“Force me?” he asked, then laughed. “Jenna, you seriously have no idea how much I love my job, do you?”

She shook her head slowly. “None. You always look so grim, so... angry.”

He hugged her tightly for a moment. “I think I was just trying to hold up my end of the business. You are so amazing at keeping everything going. And Pierce...he’s able to make deals in the darndest places. And it seems as if whatever he touches turns to gold.” He sighed and shook his head. “Then there’s Ava. She’s shockingly good at decorating and her marketing team is out of this world.”

Felix frowned thoughtfully down at Jenna. There was a sadness on her face now that he didn’t understand. “Do you like your job?” he asked.

Jenna looked startled for a moment, then she pasted on a bright smile. It was completely fake, but Felix didn’t know how to get past her barriers. “Of course I like my job,” she said. “Everything is fine.”

He glared down at her. “You’re lying. Why?”

She laughed and pulled out of his arms. “I don’t know why you think so, but I’d better get back to work. I’ll talk to you later!” she called out, then hurried away.

Felix was still staring at the empty doorway when Pierce walked in. He was wearing his signature charcoal suit, white dress shirt, and a tie. The only difference in his clothing each day was the color of his silk tie. Every day, he wore the exact same suit.

Oh, it probably wasn’t the “exact” same suit. Most likely, Pierce had gone to a tailor and had his measurements taken. After that, he’d only need to order more suits in the same color and fabric.

“What’s wrong?” Pierce demanded.

Felix pulled his attention away from the doorway to frown at Pierce. “Something is wrong with Jenna.”

Pierce finished pouring himself a cup of coffee and turned, staring at Felix as if he were speaking a foreign language. “Jenna? She’s fine.”

“No,” Felix asserted firmly. “Something is not right. I don’t know what, but she’s...I think she’s miserable.”

Pierce glanced at the doorway, then shook his head. “She’s just working too hard. I’ll talk to her.”

Felix contemplated Pierce for a moment. “Are you good?”

Pierce’s coffee cup froze halfway to his mouth. After a moment, he lowered the cup and nodded. “I’m fine,” he replied back. “Are you?” His eyes narrowed. For some reason, his big brother’s gaze was much more potent than anything Felix could do.

“I’m good,” Felix said, nodding for emphasis. “I’m getting married soon.”

Well...that was out of the blue, Felix thought. He swallowed his laughter at Pierce’s shocked expression. Most likely, it mirrored his own.

“Married?”

He heard the question and thought about walking the comment back. But then he thought about Giselle. Her smile, the softness of her body, and the way she lit up a room just by entering it. He nodded, confirming his comment. “Yep. I’m going to propose to a woman that I’ve known for several weeks.” Okay, that was a bit of a stretch. He couldn’t say that he’d “known” Giselle for weeks. Some might even say that he’d stalked her for several weeks. He’d actually only *known* her for a weekend. Correction, four days.

But in his heart, he knew Giselle was the one he’d been waiting for. She was everything. She was funny, smart, and...so beautiful!

“Well, congratulations!” Pierce said in a confused tone, then nodded as if he understood.

Felix laughed and punched his brother playfully on the arm. “Yeah, I’ll let you know when she says yes.” Then he walked out of the kitchen, still whistling and worrying about Jenna. She definitely wasn’t happy. Nor was Pierce. Ava was stupidly happy. She had married Grant Hanover several months ago and his baby sister danced around the office with a dreamy smile all the time lately. If Ava weren’t so happy, Felix knew he’d have to hurt

Grant. Because there was only one way to put that kind of smile on a woman's face.

Giselle had smiled like that when he'd left her this morning.

Felix's whistling grew louder as he entered his office to start the day. He had Giselle in his bed. Now he just had to make her fall in love with him. That might be the biggest challenge yet, considering the stupid ass who had messed with her head.

## Chapter 8

Giselle turned the power off on her laptop and stuffed the pile of papers into her tote bag.

“Leaving early again?” Jessica, her obnoxious co-worker, asked as she also packed up, minus bringing work home with her.

“Early?” Giselle asked, trying to hide her dislike. Jessica was one of those employees who didn’t accomplish much during the day, but she was a favorite of the management team. Jessica regularly chatted up the boss in the kitchen, and the two were often seen out on the company terrace together, having lunch.

“Not early,” Giselle corrected with as polite a tone as possible. “I’m leaving on time.” She paused and looked pointedly at Jessica. “Is that a problem?”

“Not at all,” Jessica replied. “I just thought you might want to do a bit extra since Jamie just put in his resignation.” She preened slightly, pushing her tight skirt down over her slim hips. “You might want to start by impressing your new boss.”

Giselle gritted her teeth as the implication of what Jessica meant hit her. “You applied for the management position?” she asked, stunned and horrified.

Jessica shrugged one slender shoulder. “Absolutely! I’m definitely a favorite with upper management around here, wouldn’t you say?”

Giselle stared at the horrible woman for a long moment, then hitched her tote bag higher on her shoulder. “I have to go,” she muttered, walking out with her head held high.

She needed to speak with Felix, she thought. As soon as she saw him, everything would be better. Yes, she’d gone and fallen in love with the man. Yes, she knew she was a fool. But for as long as this lasted, she was going to enjoy being with him. He would inevitably move on to someone else. He always did. But for now, he was hers to love and enjoy.

Twenty minutes later, Giselle stepped through the backdoor of her



house. She'd greeted the hens, but wanted to change into something more practical than her work clothes before going out to feed them. She'd also harvest some vegetables for dinner. Giselle wasn't sure what Felix wanted to eat, but she knew he was on his way. He'd texted ten minutes ago, letting her know that he was leaving the office.

Kevin waited in his spot, the minutes ticking by. He'd left work early today just so that he could be close to Giselle. He was going to have to speak to Giselle about the man who kept coming around and spending the night. Kevin knew that they weren't having sex. Giselle just wasn't a sexual person. It had taken a lot of coaxing and, sometimes, even force, to get Giselle to have sex with him.

She was a damn good cook though! For all her faults, Giselle knew exactly how to mix flavors to present him with some of the best food he'd ever had.

Lisa didn't cook. Well, she used to. But at the moment, she pretended to be overwhelmed with the baby all the time. He worked hard all day long, so was it really so awful for him to expect dinner on the table when he came home? Besides, the baby needed to learn discipline. She woke up several times a night. No matter how many times Kevin ordered Lisa to ignore the baby's cries, she still got up to feed her.

He was starting to regret allowing Lisa to become pregnant.

Kevin perked up when Giselle came back out, that stupid basket swinging in her hand. Why not just bring a bowl or something? She looked like a freaking farmer with that silly basket!

But he couldn't seem to look away as Giselle bent over to choose vegetables. Not that he wanted to look away, he thought with an evil grin.

Felix drove slowly down the street, wondering why he felt...off, somehow. He remembered this sensation from his days with the SEAL team. Never ignore that feeling, he thought. It wasn't just his "gut" telling him that something was wrong. Sometimes, his eyes and brain saw something that didn't fully register at the time. It took a bit more data, like

adding puzzle pieces, for him to put together what his senses were trying to warn him about.

Letting his eyes skim over the area, he didn't see anything out of the ordinary. But it was there. Something was off.

Getting out of his car, he pushed his sunglasses higher and went around to the trunk of his car. He didn't really need anything out of his trunk. He just wanted another moment to look around.

Still, nothing was wrong. Nothing was obviously out of place. The summer's heat was starting to ease, the humidity dropping steadily as September drew closer. There were still a few days in August to get through, but soon, autumn would paint the trees in bright, vibrant hues.

So, what was niggling at him?

Expecting Giselle to be in her garden again, where she loved finding treasures, Felix walked around to the backyard, not bothering with her front door. His fingers toyed with the two objects in his pocket. Was she ready for either? He was, he thought. But no, not tonight. Giselle wasn't ready for that level of commitment. She needed time. Time to trust him and time to get over the ass who had hurt her so badly.

He'd wait. Another week, perhaps.

Another week in paradise. He could handle that. Besides, he spent his evenings and nights here at her place, and he hoped she'd spend the weekend with him at his place. They'd have to figure out the chicken issue though. He didn't want the feathered ladies to feel abandoned.

Felix chuckled as he spotted Giselle in the middle of her garden. Who would have thought that he'd be worried about the feelings of a chicken? Oh, how the world turns. He couldn't wait to tell his SEAL buddies about his concerns for freaking chickens, of all things. Hopefully during their next weekend together, Felix could introduce Giselle to the guys and their wives, and they could all get a huge laugh out of how much his life had changed.

For the better, he thought. Definitely for the better.

"What's for dinner tonight?" he called out, fascinated by the idea of

wandering out into one's backyard to decide what to eat that night. Eating something one had grown was an amazing thing. Everything tasted better than anything one could buy at the store.

Giselle looked up at him over her shoulder, showing him her tear stained features. His heart plummeted. Rushing over to her, he pulled her into his arms. "What's wrong?" Felix demanded. "Are you hurt?"

He glanced over at the chickens. They were happily pecking at whatever was in the feeder. The roosters looked perfectly happy too. He surveyed the house. Everything seemed okay; no graffiti or broken windows.

"They're gone!" she whispered, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

"Who is gone?" he asked, pulling her in closer and rubbing her back comfortingly. Was someone watching them? Had she seen someone watching her earlier? He scanned the area for dangers, still aware of an unsettled feeling deep in his gut.

"My vegetables," she whispered, wiping at her cheeks and leaving smears of dirt behind. "Everything is gone!"

Gone? What did she mean?

He looked around and found that she was right. Everything had been harvested. Yesterday, they'd laughed together about the bumper crop of zucchini that was nearly ready. There were none on the plants now. Not even a flower indicating that a zucchini was developing. The tomatoes were gone, every ripe and even semi-ripe fruit ripped from the vines. Same with the squash and cucumbers. The carrots might be fine, but they were underground so, whoever had done this probably hadn't recognized them.

"Why?"

"I don't know," he told her softly, looking around for clues.

"It wasn't an animal," she declared, getting angry now. "An animal couldn't have done this."

He nodded. "You're right. If an animal had come through, they would have left a hint of their presence. And the plants would be fully

trashed, not just harvested.” His jaw tightened. “This was vandalism, love.”

“But who would do this?” she asked. “And why?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go inside.”

Felix took her hand, gently leading her towards her house. She hesitated only for a moment before she followed him inside.

“I’ll be right back,” he told her, then went back outside. Bending down, he looked at the ground. He noticed several footprints. There were the smaller prints that were obviously Giselle’s and his larger prints. But as he looked around at the edges of the garden, he also found a third set of prints that were bigger than Giselle’s and smaller than his own.

“What the hell?” he muttered, bending down and taking pictures of the prints with his cell phone. He used his own foot as a measurement and comparison. Then he started noticing other clues. Some of the branches on the tomato plants were broken. Not bitten off, like what an animal would do, but snapped, as if someone had brushed by the plant too quickly. Someone who didn’t know anything about gardening did this, he thought. Giselle had taught him how to move through the garden carefully and gently, so as not to damage the plants.

There were also plants that had been stomped on by the middle-sized footprint. Felix took pictures of everything as quickly as possible. He wanted to get back to Giselle because she needed him. She was inside, fuming and probably pacing.

He stood up and his eyes landed on the chicken coop gate lock. What had she said a few days ago? That the lock was racoon proof. The chickens getting out of their coop had been the start of all of this, he thought. Someone had been here a few days ago.

Felix walked back into the house.

“Someone has been in my house,” she whispered, wide eyed as she looked around, as if looking for hidden cameras.

Felix froze. “What else did you find?”

Giselle wanted to throw herself into his arms. He believed her! He

hadn't questioned her sanity or told her to "calm down" or to be more rational. He simply accepted her word and went into warrior mode. "I love you!" she blurted out, then gasped, shocked when those words escaped her. She even slapped a hand over her mouth, staring up at him with huge, terrified eyes.

He growled and came over to wrap her up in his arms. "I love you, too!" he growled, then lifted her into his arms, kissing the breath out of her. When she squeaked, he pulled back, pressing his forehead to hers. "I love you too, Giselle. Don't even try to take the words back. They are special and I feel the same way."

"But it's too soon!" she protested, even as her grip tightened around his neck.

He held her more securely. "I know. It's a bit overwhelming, isn't it?"

She nodded, unable to speak as emotions almost choked her.

He saw the wariness in her eyes and reacted to it. "I get it, Giselle. You're still hurting. And I can be patient while you heal. Just please, don't take your words back." He sighed impatiently, cupping her head with his hands. "No, take them back if you don't mean them." He looked her in the eye. "I don't want to pressure you into anything."

"I'm not still hurting, Felix," she assured him, tightening her grip on his waist so that she could convey the depth of her feelings to him through her fingertips. "I don't think I ever had a relationship like this before. The men I've dated in the past, they were...well, boys. But none of them made me feel whole. I finally found happiness here with my house and garden, my hens and...well, just figuring out my life and what I prefer one day at a time. Then you came into my life and...I'm truly happy, Felix."

"I don't want to take that away from you, Giselle," he vowed.

She smiled and lifted onto her toes to kiss him. "I love you," she said firmly. "I needed the past year to recover because I was deeply wounded from my last relationship." She looked around then. "But this house, fixing up the broken parts felt like fixing the parts of me that were broken inside. And decorating this house allowed me to become the person I was always

meant to be.”

“I don’t mind living here,” he told her. “As long as you don’t mind me ravishing you every time I come through the doors.”

Her smile widened. “You really don’t mind all of the pink and feminine stuff?”

Felix laughed, pulling her more tightly against his body as proof of his reaction to her house. “Are you kidding me? This place is such a turn-on for me! It’s like I’m inside your brain.” He looked around, smiling at the pink walls and flowers everywhere. “It’s *you*, Giselle. And you turn me on. If we move in here, I’ll be walking around with a permanent erection.” He lowered his head and nuzzled her neck. “And you’ll just have to deal with the consequences, I’m afraid.”

Giselle laughed, then gasped when he nibbled at her neck. A moment later, she yelped when he scooped her up and carried her towards the stairway. But something niggled at the back of her mind. Suddenly, she gripped his head and pulled away. “Stop!”

Instantly, Felix froze, looking down at her with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Someone was in my house,” she whispered. Then she looked around. “What if they are still here?”

Felix immediately went on high alert. He set her down, scanning her family room for threats. “Go get a knife from the kitchen, then stand with your back against a wall, away from the windows.”

Giselle slipped silently into the kitchen and grabbed the biggest knife she had, then turned and looked around. Because this was an old house that hadn’t been built with central air conditioning, there were lots of windows. Windows had been the only way to get air flow through the house during the hot summer days before central cooling systems were invented. But she hurried to the family room and stood with her back against the fireplace. It wasn’t perfect since there were windows to her left and the front door to her right, but it was a solid place to stand for the moment.

Felix nodded his approval and flipped something around in his hand. A knife? Where in the world had that come from? She’d undressed the man

and knew that he didn't carry a knife on his ankle. He must have brought it in from his car.

For some reason, the sight of the knife in his hands calmed her. She knew with absolute certainty that Felix knew how to use it with lethal precision.

Felix was standing still, but she could see how tight his muscles were, every part of him on high alert. Was this what he'd been like in the Navy? Giselle didn't ask questions, allowing him to focus on searching the house. He checked closets and behind furniture, then went upstairs. From her place in front of the fireplace, she heard the creaking of the floorboards as he walked from her bedroom to the guest room.

Moments later, he came down the stairs and she relaxed as she took in the expression on his handsome features. "No one here?" she asked, then relaxed even more at his nod.

"Tell me why you thought someone had been in here."

She nodded and took his hand, leading him back into the kitchen. She took a moment to return the knife to the knife block, then turned to open her fridge. "You know how I prepare my meals for the week, right?"

"Yes. It's smart. Makes life easier."

"Exactly," she confirmed, then pointed to the top shelf. "Two of my salads are missing." She closed the fridge and turned towards the recycling bin. "And you know I don't drink soda."

"Yes," he replied. They both peered into her recycling bin. It held several soda cans amid the yogurt cartons and old mail she'd recycled. "That's not good, Giselle," he growled, bending down to examine the soda cans. He glanced up at her. "Can you get me a plastic bag?"

Giselle looked around, then grabbed a roll of wax paper. "Will this work?"

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "No plastic, right?" he offered, then chuckled and took the wax paper. "This will do." Carefully tearing off a piece, he picked up both cans and twisted the wax paper around them – candy style.

“What are you going to do with those cans?” she asked, inching closer.

Felix wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her snugly against his side. “I’m going to ask our security team to try to get some prints off of the cans. Hopefully, the prints belong to someone in AFIS.”

“What’s AFIS?” she asked. “It sounds familiar....”

He hugged her tighter for a moment before releasing her. “That’s the Automatic Fingerprint Identification System run by Interpol,” Felix explained, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “The security team has contacts that can get fingerprints analyzed.”

“Oh, wow...you have some good contacts,” she said with a grin. “I’m a bit jealous.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure that you also have great contacts.”

She shook her head. “Nope. Except for work colleagues and my neighbors out here, I’ve been somewhat of a recluse for the past year. I’m not a particularly social person.”

“I’m not either,” he admitted. “I have my Navy friends, and we get together once or twice a year. But other than my work colleagues, I don’t have many acquaintances either.” He kissed her briefly. “We’ll form a group of friends together.”

She loved the sound of that. “Okay, so what’s next?”

“Next, you go quickly pack a bag because you’re spending the night at my place. I have a security system at my house and around my yard. You’ll be safer there. We’ll also stop by the police and let them know what’s going on. They won’t be able to do much, other than drive by your house more often, but at least they’ll be alerted that there is a problem.”

“That sounds like a wonderful plan.” Her features dimmed somewhat. “I was going to make stuffed squash flowers for dinner tonight.”

“Squash flowers? Why would you stuff them?”

She smiled, eager now. “Well, at the end of the season, the squash plant is still producing flowers and, potentially more squash. But by this point in the season, most people are sick of squash, myself included. I have



some spaghetti squash that..." she stopped her explanation and gazed out the window. Sadness washed over her as she remembered the vandalism of her garden. "Well, I used to have spaghetti squash that was almost ready to harvest." She sighed and rubbed her forehead. "I'll go pack a bag." She paused to smile weakly up at him. "Thank you for letting me stay with you tonight. I really will feel better if I'm not here."

"I wouldn't let you stay here alone, Giselle," he told her with feeling. "Go," he urged, touching her arm lightly. "Pack for a few days. I'll get someone to come out and take care of the feathered fowl."

"Oh, that's not necessary. I watch Melissa's chickens and goats when they go on vacation. She'll be happy to take care of my ladies and gents while I'm at your place."

After that, she rushed up the stairs and threw several outfits into a bag. She grabbed two suits that she could wear to work, hoping that the police or the Halliday security personnel would figure this out before too long.

Felix watched her hurry up the stairs, his body aching to hold her, to protect her. She was in danger and every instinct inside of him warned him that something bad was happening here. He'd hire a private detective to look into it. He doubted the police had the personnel hours to dedicate to something like this. No one had been hurt and there were only vague clues that someone had been in her garden and in her house. Since only vegetables had been stolen, he wasn't sure they would consider this crime a high priority.

It was definitely a high priority for him though and he was going to do whatever it took to protect her.

Thinking of that, he called a guy named Dash Phillips. The man used to be an outstanding private detective, and now he ran a company that offered just about any security service one could imagine. He knew that Phillips had a whole division of bodyguard services. Maybe he would ask Phillips to send someone out here to protect Giselle when Felix couldn't be with her.

A smile formed as he listened to the ringing. He planned on being around Giselle a lot!

The call was answered and he spoke to the operator. Fifteen minutes later, Giselle came down the stairs, lugging a large suitcase. Felix hurried over and took it out of her hands. "I've got this." He set it near the backdoor. "Why don't you go out and do your thing with the chickens. Fill up the automatic feeder and water. I have a few more calls to make."

"Thanks," she said, and offered him a bright smile. She was so relaxed now. She trusted him!

Giselle trusted him to keep her safe!

He paused before dialing the next number, letting that knowledge sink in. Giselle trusted him. Completely. She knew he would keep her safe.

He stepped outside to survey the surrounding area again, more to be with Giselle than because he sensed imminent danger. He enjoyed being around her, watching her with her hens or in the garden. Hell, he absolutely loved seeing her moving through her pink, feminine house.

But the heady sensation hitting him now was because she trusted him. Felix hadn't realized how much he needed that, craved it, even. Trust. He had needed someone to trust him.

For so long, the guilt over his abandonment of his sisters had gnawed at his soul, eaten away at him. This...this was exactly what he needed. Trust. Giselle looked at him and he was a whole man again. He was powerful. Hell, he was freaking Thor, because she believed in him.

What would have happened if he hadn't joined the Navy all those years ago? What could he have done if he'd stayed behind?

He'd been too young to get a decent job. He'd worked his ass off to get his degree while still in the Navy, studying nights and weekends when he wasn't on a mission or coming back to the lake to build more cabins.

Would his family even be here? Would they have survived their father's abandonment if he hadn't joined the Navy and earned enough money to keep Jenna and Ava off the streets?

With sudden realization, he shook his head. There was no way he

could have earned as much money if he'd stayed and found a job in town. Where the hell would he have even found a job? There weren't any jobs to be had back then. Their family hotel had been nothing more than a roadside stop, a cheap hotel that had looked more like a pay-by-the-hour hotel. A no-tell-motel, as some people crudely labeled it. Back then, their hotel hadn't even been popular enough for the hourly visit clientele.

So maybe joining the Navy hadn't been such a bad thing? The Navy and the SEAL training had taught him how to survive. The training had given him the skills he needed now.

His eyes moved over the horizon. Something was out there. He could feel it. But his eyes didn't detect any movement.

"Everything okay?" Giselle asked, moving to stand beside him.

He looked down at her sharply. "The ladies okay?" he asked.

"Yes. I've loaded enough food for the next four days."

"Good," he said with a sharp nod. "Would you mind getting in my car instead of driving your own?"

"Of course," she replied at once. Once again, his chest swelled with hope and...hell, there was relief too. She trusted him.

How long had he gone without that sensation? Maybe that was why he'd pushed himself so hard with his SEAL team. He'd earned their trust. They knew that, in a pinch, he was there for them, no matter what.

Because he hadn't been there for Jenna and Ava.

"What's going on in your mind?" she asked when he stepped into the driver's seat and started the engine.

"Let me get you out of here first," he said to her, pushing his sunglasses higher up on his nose. The sun was setting, so the sunglasses weren't exactly necessary. But he didn't want anyone to see him scanning the horizon while they drove off.

Thankfully, the drive out was done without issue. Felix didn't see anything out of the ordinary, but his senses remained on high alert.

Kevin watched as the expensive sports car drove away. He'd seen the way Giselle had looked at the man. She was crushing hard on the guy!

He shook his head and considered his options while munching on a handful of grape tomatoes. The tomatoes were amazing. Giselle might have pathetic taste in decorating, which he would help her to change, but wow, the woman could grow stuff!

He'd take all of the freshly picked produce home to Lisa. She could cook it up and make something for dinner tonight. Besides, she needed the nutrients since she was nursing their daughter. Glancing at the time, he decided to head on home. It was actually too late for dinner tonight, but Lisa was great at making breakfasts too.

Kevin paused thoughtfully, gazing speculatively at the chicken coop. Eggs? He hadn't bothered with the eggs up until now. Chickens were nasty creatures. He didn't want to take the eggs from the coops or roosts or wherever the chickens tended to put their fresh eggs. He preferred getting his eggs from the grocery store, where they'd been cleaned and processed.

He sent a text message to Lisa. "Hey, got lots of fresh veggies from a friend who had too much. Can you run to the grocery store to get some eggs? Hoping for an omelet for tomorrow's breakfast."

Tossing the phone back onto the passenger seat, he tossed the remaining grape tomatoes out the window, then started his car and drove off, anticipating a delicious omelet and maybe even hashbrowns. Lisa knew how to make awesome hashbrowns that were crispy on the outside and soft on the inside. He just hoped she wasn't wearing the hangdog expression when he got home. He was sick of her pouting. The woman should exercise more, or just drink a damn cup of coffee! He was tired too, having worked all day at the office, handling the clients his accounting firm required him to handle.

Once Giselle agreed to be his mistress, maybe he'd bring her into the firm. That's how he'd met her before. She was an excellent accountant. She'd given him a few tips when he'd first started with their firm. Too bad he'd gotten that promotion instead of her. That promotion had given him a huge raise and had brought him to the attention of his current employer. He chuckled, thinking that Giselle would be an excellent addition to his team. He could give her several of his current clients and take the credit for her

excellent accounting skills. Giselle was fast, efficient, and her clients loved her.

Yes, that was an excellent plan! Turning right, he headed for the highway and back to the suburbs where Lisa awaited him.

## Chapter 9

“Where are you taking me?” Giselle asked, excited but wary about his current mood. He’d been brooding since they’d left her house.

“Someone stole your crop and invaded your sanctuary, Giselle.”

“I’m aware of that,” she replied, sighing and sinking into the soft leather of the passenger seat. “Plus, I got some really horrible news at work.”

“What’s going on there?”

Her lips pressed together for a moment and she brushed non-existent dirt from her shorts. “The woman who has the cubicle behind mine, she’s a flirt and pathetically lazy. I’m not a fan of hers. But she’s good friends with our manager.” Giselle leaned her head back against the seat. “Our boss just resigned and this woman applied for the role.”

“So this woman that you don’t like could become your boss?”

“Yes. Most likely.” Mentally, Giselle groaned, looking out the passenger side window as she contemplated a life under Jessica as her boss.

He nodded but didn’t say anything for a long moment. “Why don’t you apply for the job?”

Giselle’s head swung around. She blinked and turned to stare at him. “Me?”

He glanced at her, but then brought his focus back to the traffic as he maneuvered onto a side street. “Yeah. Why don’t you apply for the position?”

“Why would I?”

He lifted a dark eyebrow after parking in front of a small restaurant. “Why wouldn’t you?” he asked, turning the question around. “Are you incompetent?”

She huffed a little, indignant at his question. “I’m a great accountant! My clients love me!”

He nodded and Giselle relaxed again. “Okay, do the other accountants hate you?”

She realized where he was going and thought about it for a moment. “I don’t think so. I seem to get along with everyone but this one woman.”

“Ah, so this other woman, she considers you to be competition, huh?”

Giselle considered for a moment, turning the idea around in her mind. “Yes, I suppose that’s the case. But I don’t feel as if she’s my competition.”

“If you’re better at your job, then it doesn’t matter if you think of her as competition or not. It’s her perception of you as a threat that you need to focus on.”

She nodded her agreement. “You’re right.”

“So, are you going to throw your name into the competition for manager?”

Giselle considered the possibility. “The guy I dated a year ago, the one that really messed me up, would ask me for help with his clients. Somehow, I ended up doing all the work for him, as well as my own. But when a promotion became available, he got the job, *because* of the work I did for him.”

“That’s unethical,” Felix snapped.

Giselle smiled faintly, relaxing even more as she watched his fingers tighten on the steering wheel. “I agree,” she asserted firmly. “So yes, I’m definitely going to submit my name for the manager’s role.”

“Good!” he said softly, then leaned in to kiss her. He pulled back before the kiss could get out of control. “Don’t tease me, woman,” he growled and pushed his door open. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Giselle beamed, warmed not only by his words, but also the obvious confidence he had in her.

Why hadn’t she considered going after the manager’s role? Was it just because she was afraid of competing? Giselle’s pride pricked her at that possibility. She was strong and competent! Plus, Jessica wasn’t a good accountant. There had been several errors that had cost her clients money.

So, why wouldn’t she try for the role?

Because she didn't believe that the company she worked for was ethical. They'd promoted Kevin, who had stolen credit for her work. And he hadn't been particularly good at his job either. Thankfully, he was long gone now.

Until this moment, Giselle hadn't realized how badly his promotion had shaken her confidence. Or was her confidence at work more complicated? Was her personal and work confidence more intertwined than she'd realized?

That was definitely something to consider.

Felix opened the back door of his sedan to put a large bag of something that smelled delicious on the backseat. Then he got into the driver's seat and looked mischievously at her.

"What's that?" she asked, knowing that it was food, but what kind of food?

"That," he emphasized as he started the engine and backed out of the parking space, "is our dinner. I'm taking you to our special place so that we can dine al fresco."

She beamed at him. After such a horrible day, she was feeling pretty good now. Felix had said that he loved her, he'd been there for her after the theft of her produce, and now, he was taking her somewhere special. She felt like a princess!

Ten minutes later, he pulled off the street at the construction site where he'd taken her after their first dinner together. "This is where we are eating dinner," he announced, before stepping out of the vehicle. He grabbed the bag of food, then came around to her side of the car. "Will you carry this?" he asked, handing her the food. "Don't peek!"

Giselle jerked her nose out of the bag and laughed. "Fine! It's a surprise!"

"Exactly," he said, then pulled a blanket out of the trunk. "This will save us from sitting on the construction dust."

They made their way up to the top floor and, this time, it wasn't nearly as scary. It was thrilling, in fact.



“Let’s eat over there,” he pointed to the wide open area on the top floor. He spread the blanket out while Giselle looked around. He was right, it was exciting to be up here on top of the world. No walls, just the breeze running gentle fingers through her hair. The sun was setting over the water, the light filtering through the humid air and painting the sky in dramatic colors.

“Ready?” he asked, taking the bag and her hand, guiding her to the middle of the blanket.

The evening meal was one of the nicest she’d ever had. The food was good, but by the end of it, she couldn’t remember what she’d eaten. She was too busy laughing at the stories Felix told her about the pranks he and his fellow SEALs had played on each other when they went too long between missions.

“So, I guess the trick is to always keep you mentally challenged, huh?” she offered.

He pulled out a container with baklava, then handed her a fork. “Exactly. And I know many great ways to keep me mentally stimulated,” he teased, leaning forward to give her the first bite off his fork.

“Oh, that’s so good!” she sighed, letting the sweet nuttiness of the baklava hit her senses.

He took a bite, smiling at her. Their lips were only a few inches apart and Giselle couldn’t resist. She leaned in to kiss him, letting her lips linger. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?”

Her smile widened. “For very excellent girlfriend lessons.” And with that, she kissed him again, pressing against his shoulders until he was lying on his back. Straddling his hips, she looked around but they were too high up for anyone to see them. So Giselle pulled her shirt off, tossing it onto the blanket. “And for showing me how wonderful sex can be.” She wiggled her hips, pressing her groin against his increasingly large erection.

“Giselle!” he groaned, grabbing her hips.

Giselle took his hands, placing them on her lace covered breasts.

“Touch me, Felix,” she urged, leaning forward to kiss his neck, teasing the scruffy skin just as he did for her. She loved the moans he made and wanted more.

Sliding down lower, she kissed her way down his chest, making a line to his nipples. She teased him just as he’d teased her and got a similar if slightly different reaction. He didn’t take it like she did. Instead, Felix growled, then rolled her over and took control.

“Now, wait a minute,” she teased, even as her legs lifted, wrapping around his waist.

“I can’t go slow, Giselle. Not up here!” he pulled the strap of her bra down as his mouth covered hers. She fumbled with the zipper on his slacks.

Gasping, Felix pulled back and pulled a condom out of his pocket. “I have learned to always be prepared when I’m around you. I thought we’d be back at your place where all the pink drives me wild. I love seeing you surrounded by all that femininity. I feel like some sort of warrior or invader.” He shook his head back as if trying to clear the haze of lust. “Pull your other bra strap down,” he ordered as he rolled the condom down over his shaft. “Now!”

Giselle smiled seductively, and ever so slowly, pulled the bra down to expose her other breast.

“Damn it, Giselle, you’re so unbelievably sexy.” He lowered his head, taking the tip into his mouth and sucking. Hard! Giselle screamed, her fingers diving into his hair as she lifted her hips towards him.

“I need you, Felix!” she gasped, kicking her leggings off, pushing her panties along with them. “I need...!” she couldn’t finish that statement because he thrust into her. She arched her back, closing her eyes as he filled her, then he froze.

“Look at me, Giselle,” he ordered, his hands cupping her head as he tried to be gentle.

She looked up at him, her eyes hazy with need and lust. “I love you,” she whispered to him, rolling her hips to encourage him to start moving.

Felix groaned. “I was going to say that!” And then he started thrusting. There was no softness now. It was hard, demanding thrusts! He was pushing her to the edge of a climax faster than ever before and Giselle couldn’t slow down even if she wanted to. When he shifted, his body rubbing against that nub, she screamed as her first climax washed over her and she could only hang on, meeting every thrust as he found his own pleasure.

Afterwards, she stared up at the stars, smiling as her fingers sifted through his hair. He hadn’t moved and she loved this. Small aftershocks of pleasure rippled through her body and she shivered.

That must have woken him from his contemplation of her neck, because he lifted his head, resting his weight on his elbows. “I love you, Giselle.”

She smiled, rubbing her inner thigh against his hip. “I love you too. I didn’t think I’d ever find love again. I didn’t want to. And then...you followed me into the bar and...I was lost.”

“You transfixed me as I walked down the sidewalk behind you,” he admitted, kissing her tenderly.

## Chapter 10

Giselle beamed as she stepped into her house. Three days. She'd been at Felix's house for three days and three nights. She loved him so much, and he loved her!

She glanced over at the mantle, where she'd placed the sculpture he'd given her. It had a place of pride there. She'd rearranged the other pieces so that the "Tortured Soul" could be in the center. Giselle often wondered what was going on underneath Felix's constantly changing expressions. One moment, he appeared intense and focused. Then he'd catch her watching him and he hid behind a smile or a teasing look. She couldn't forget the "warrior" expression he'd worn when he'd thought she was in danger.

The doorbell ringing dragged her back to the present and she looked around to make sure that there wasn't anything out of place. The room was a touch dusty from lack of use, but otherwise, everything was neat and tidy.

Walking to the front door, she pulled it open, startled to find two women standing on the doorstep.

"Can I help you?"

The women seemed vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place them immediately. They were stunningly beautiful with sharp blue eyes and dark hair. They looked like...Felix!

"Sorry to drop in unannounced like this," the shorter woman explained, smiling and hitching an expensive leather tote bag higher onto her shoulder. "I'm Ava Halliday. And this is Jenna Halliday. We're Felix's sisters."

Giselle's eyes moved from the bohemian beauty to the coldly magnificent woman beside her.

"Hello," Jenna greeted Giselle, extending her hand in a friendly way. "It's a pleasure to meet the person who finally brought a smile to Felix's face."

Giselle shook the woman's hand. To say that Jenna Halliday was

beautiful was an understatement. There was an elegance and grace to her that made her delicate features even more stunning. And Ava Halliday...she was like a technicolor sunset. The woman's laughing blue eyes were the opposite of Jenna's wary gaze, but the color in both women's eyes was the exact same shade as Felix's.

Automatically, Giselle stepped back to allow the women to enter, smoothing a hand self-consciously down over her dress as she did so, praying that she didn't look as frumpy as she felt.

"Oh wow!" Ava sighed as she took in the pink and white striped foyer. It was a tiny space, but even the ceiling had pink stripes with a green fern on a pedestal for a pop of color. "This is amazing! Did you paint this yourself?"

"Yes," Giselle admitted, looking at the stripes critically, praying that the famous interior designer didn't notice all of the errors in the lines or the places she'd fudged a bit. She glanced down and wished she had a broom to sweep away the small, dried leaves shed by the fern.

"I love it!" Ava announced, beaming at Giselle. "Would you mind if I stole your idea? This is amazing! I'd love to create a space with this kind of romantic feel to it."

"Steal away," Giselle said with an embarrassed laugh. She was sure that Ava Halliday, creative genius, was merely being polite. "Can I offer you some lemonade? Or iced tea?" She gestured for both of them to follow her into the main living area.

"If you have some lemonade already made, that would be lovely," Ava replied.

Giselle gestured to the small stools pushed under the island. It was a small island, but Giselle had painted it white and the stools were black with pink cushions on top. "Have a seat," she offered, then opened the refrigerator. But she reached in to get the pitcher of lemonade she'd made several days ago only to find it empty.

"Who made this?" Ava demanded.

Giselle looked up from the empty pitcher to find Ava examining the wood sculpture on her mantle. Felix's sculpture.

“Your brother gave it to me,” she admitted, putting the pitcher down and walking over to the mantle. “I didn’t steal it, promise. He gave it to me.” She glanced worriedly at Jenna who was examining the piece as well. “He has dozens. I’m sure you know this. He’s very talented.”

Two sets of piercing blue eyes turned to stare at her and Giselle almost took a step back.

“Felix made this?” Ava demanded.

“How?” Jenna asked, stepping closer.

Neither woman touched the sculpture. They merely leaned in closer as if it were a museum piece.

“He has a whole wood working shop behind his house,” Giselle explained, wondering if she was revealing secrets that Felix didn’t want his family to know about.

“It’s extraordinary,” Ava whispered and Jenna nodded. Ava looked at Giselle. “I’m going to murder him for keeping this kind of talent hidden from us.” Then she grinned playfully. “And then I’m going to convince him to let me include some of his work in my next art exhibit.”

Giselle doubted that Felix would like his pieces on display. He had them all stacked on a shelf in his workshop, as if he were ashamed of his work. But that was an issue for another day.

“I’m so sorry but...apparently, I’m out of lemonade.” The fact was more troubling than she wanted to admit with Felix’s sisters here. Someone had been in her house again! Someone had invaded her privacy and she was sick of it!

“That’s fine,” Jenna replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. “We really just wanted to see you. Felix has been quite secretive about you and we wanted to...” She paused and a beautifully awkward smile formed on her perfect lips. “Well, we wanted to meet you.”

Ava chuckled and Giselle turned toward the husky sound. “We came to find out your intentions towards our brother.” She moved closer, her gaze hardening. “Felix is a good man. And I think he might have strong feelings for you.” She paused lightly. “Are you going to hurt him?”

Giselle didn't know what to say. She should offer these women a softly spoken promise to be careful. She should tell them to leave, not sure if Felix wanted his sisters to know his business. Or maybe she should tell them that their brother was a good, fine man. Instead, the words that burst from her lips was, "I love him."

When their faces relaxed, some of the tension in Giselle's shoulders eased. More softly, she added, "I love him with all my heart." She clenched her hands together tightly. "I don't know where our relationship is heading, but I won't hurt him. I promise you that."

Jenna and Ava nodded and smiled. "That's all we need to know," Jenna said softly. She reached out to touch Giselle's arm lightly. "I hope to see you again, very soon."

Giselle was so confused. They were leaving?

Yep! The lovely pair left with smiles and cheerful waves. Why had they come here? Was it truly just to make sure she wasn't going to hurt their brother? Didn't they know how tough and strong Felix was?

Sighing, she stared down at the lemonade pitcher. The empty pitcher!

A shiver rolled down her spine as she put the empty pitcher down on the countertop and turned to head upstairs. She didn't feel safe here anymore. Especially since someone felt confident enough to keep entering her house and eating her food. This was insane! She was going to change the locks and maybe install a security system!

Felix paced back and forth in his office. "Do you see her? Is she okay?"

"She's fine, sir," William, the bodyguard that the Phillips Agency had sent over. "I have a visual on her right now. She's coming down the stairs."

"Good. Let me know when she gets into her car."

"I'll text you as soon as she's on her way."

Felix ended the call and dialed Giselle's number again. The call

went straight to voice mail. Again! Why wasn't she answering her phone? She'd texted him that she was going to run to her house for more clothes. If he'd gotten the message sooner, he would have gone with her. Now all he could do was hope that the bodyguard was good enough to stop the crazy person who was stalking Giselle.

He stared out the windows of his house, sending up silent prayers to the universe that she would return to him safely. He didn't understand who was messing with her, or why, but he had an awful feeling right now.

It wasn't until her little sedan pulled into his driveway that he breathed a sigh of relief. And even then, he was halfway down the stairs before the oxygen hit his lungs. He was beside her car even before she shut off the engine and he pulled her out of the driver's side, ignored her startled gasp of "What's wrong?" and kissed her. He needed to reassure himself that she was safe. He needed to touch every part of her so that his brain could understand that she was unharmed.

When her arms wrapped around his neck and her incredible softness pressed against him, he slowed down. He was already hard and aching for her, but he still needed to look at her. Pulling away, he peered down into her eyes, gently brushing the stray locks of hair away from her face. "Did anyone bother you?"

"No. I was fine." She pressed a kiss to his neck and his hands automatically tightened around her waist. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Don't go back to your house alone until we've figured out who is doing this to you."

"I won't," she vowed, unaware of how her lips pressed together.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously and he could tell there was something she hadn't told him. "What is it?"

She laid her head against his chest and he wanted to shake her. But the wonderful feeling of holding her like this was too nice. He'd shake her later, he promised himself.

"Someone was in my house again. They drank my lemonade."

"The lavender lemonade that you promised to bring back here?"



“Yes. It was all gone.”

His hands tightened and he lowered his head, burying his face against her neck. Slowly, he breathed in her scent, holding her close and reminded himself several times that she was right here, in his arms, and she was safe. “What else did you notice?”

“Other than the bodyguard that has been following me everywhere for the past three days?” she teased.

He wasn’t going to apologize for hiring the guy. But he should have told her. “I’m sorry I didn’t warn you about that. I kept meaning to tell you about the bodyguard, but then you’d walk into a room and I’d be distracted.”

Giselle smiled and leaned in for another kiss. “I think that’s the best excuse I’ve ever heard.”

He laughed and shifted so that she could walk beside him. “Where are your other clothes?”

“In the trunk. I’ll get them.”

“You go inside, Giselle.” He looked warily around as he moved to the back of her car and popped the trunk. He took the bag then glowered at her when he saw that she remained standing where he’d left her. “Woman!” he groaned, then slung his arm over her shoulders, leading her into the house.

“I know you’re trying to shield me from someone trying to take a shot at me,” she commented with a warning glance. “But really, I haven’t upset anyone to the point that they would want to shoot me. Besides, I don’t want you hurt if someone *is* trying to get to me.”

He didn’t slow down, nor did he deny her charge. He was trying to protect her. He refused to let anything happen to his Giselle.

Felix closed the door behind them and locked it, then led her through to the kitchen. “Sit and I’ll make you something to eat.”

“I think I’d like to make some bread. Would that bother you?”

He’d already turned to bring her suitcase up to his bedroom. “Bread?” He grinned and plopped her suitcase down on the floor by the sofa. “I love baking bread.”

She laughed and held up her hands, warding him off. “No!” she ordered, pointing towards the stool on the other side of the island. “You are not going to make the bread. You sit and *I* will bake the bread. You can pour us a drink. That’s your only job.”

He stopped, his eyes assessing her. “Why won’t you let me help you?”

“Because kneading bread is a stress reliever for me. And I...!” she yelped when he swooped over to her and scooped her into his arms. “What are you doing?”

He hurried up the stairs. “You’re stressed. I’m going to give you a much better stress reliever than kneading bread.”

Giselle considered for a long moment, then nodded. “Excellent point!”

She laughed, her arms looping around his neck. He kissed her as he carried her up the stairs and Giselle would swear that he had magic hands because somehow, they were already naked and he never stopped kissing her.

Then she was on her back with his hands spreading her wide. “Ah, love,” he groaned, staring down at her pink folds. “You’re the most tempting sight!”

She wiggled slightly, almost afraid of the intensity in his eyes. When he looked at her like that, he didn’t let her climax quickly.

An hour later, she was proven right. She was screaming his name, gasping for breath as he teased her in so many different ways. Every time, he’d take her right to the edge, then pull back, not letting her climax.

“No more!” she screamed finally and shoved against his shoulders until he was on his back and she could straddle his hips. “No more!”

She grabbed the condom and tore it open, then teased him as she rolled the protection down over his shaft. When she gazed down at him, she found him watching her fingers. With an unconsciously sensuous smile, she rolled her hips, placing her hands on his chest. Then she slowly, painfully slowly, lowered herself down onto him.

“Now, you’re mine!” she whispered into his mouth as she kissed him. When she started moving, he groaned, his head thrown back and arching his back when she didn’t move fast enough for his preference.

“Giselle!” he hissed, his hands gripping her hips in an effort to speed up her movements. “Faster, love.”

“Slower,” she argued, shifting against his shaft. Leaning forward even more, she eased against him again and again, coming closer! Giselle knew that she was nearly there and...!

“No!” she yelled, her body feeling as if it might just explode when he rolled them over so that he was on top again.

“You’re mine, Giselle,” he said, sweat beading on his forehead. Then he started moving. He wasn’t slow now. He was fast and furious, pumping into her with hard, demanding thrusts. “Say it,” he ordered.

“I’m yours!” she gasped. “I’m all yours!” She gripped his shoulders, clinging to him as her body spiraled into a climax that was so intense, she wondered later if she passed out. She knew that he was experiencing his own pleasure because she heard him groan, then he collapsed down next to her, pulling her tight against his side.

“I love you,” she whispered, kissing his chest.

He rolled over, his fingers stroking her stomach. “I love you too. I need...” he paused, his jaw clenching.

Giselle reached up, her body still tingling, still throbbing, but something was bothering him so she pushed it all aside. “What is it?”

“Marry me,” he urged.

At the stunned look in his eyes, Giselle bit her lip. Her first instinct was to shriek, “Yes!” But there as something in his blue eyes that stopped her.

He groaned, his head dropping to her shoulder. “I’m sorry. I did this all wrong.”

“Wrong?”

He lifted his head and looked down at her. “I know you had a really

bad relationship with the previous guy. I promised myself that I would wait until you knew that you could trust me. I was trying to wait, Giselle. I promise I tried to hold off and wait for you to understand that I'm not going to hurt you. But..."

He stopped speaking when she covered his mouth with her hand. "Yes." She stared at him, her heart pounding against her ribs. Had she misunderstood? He stared at her, confusion in his amazing blue eyes.

"Yes?" He shook his head, every muscle in his body tense. "Yes, you trust me?"

She blinked, then shook her head. "Yes, I trust you, Felix. I know that you won't hurt me. And yes. Did you mean it? About the other thing?"

"About marrying me?"

Giselle bit her lip, worried now. "Yeah. That. Were you serious?"

"Hell yes," he whispered, lowering his head, his lips hovering over hers. "I definitely want to marry you. I've wanted to marry you since the moment you sat down across from me with your prissy glass of wine that you hate."

Giselle laughed because she really didn't like wine. "Eh, I was only trying to impress you with my elegant taste."

He chuckled, his hands moving to cup her bottom as he shifted so that she was draped over him. "You have very generous feminine parts of you that I'm far more impressed with."

Giselle laughed and laid her chin on his chest. "Did you mean it?"

"Yes," he replied, squeezing her butt. "I meant it. I want to marry you. But only if you trust me."

She smiled, running a finger lovingly along his jawline. "I love you, Felix. I trust you and I love you and, yes, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to have kids with you and laugh with you and make love at the top of the world, but only with you." She kissed him tenderly.

"Damn, woman," he breathed when she lifted her lips. "You really know how to respond to a guy."

She laughed, and then turned serious. “I really do love you. And I would be honored to marry you, Felix.”

With that question resolved, he rolled over and made love to her all over again. Slower this time. And more thoroughly. And in the end, they were both shaking as they held each other, trying to catch their breath.

“Where have you been?”

Kevin heard the screeching and swallowed a groan. “I’ve been out,” he snapped. He looked at his wife, wondering what had gone wrong. “You look like hell.” He walked past her, heading to the kitchen for a beer.

“*I* look like hell?” she snapped, following him. “I’ve been up since two o’clock this morning. You woke up at seven and then decided to go out to do...whatever you do. Then you have the audacity to tell me that I look like hell? I’ve gotten three hours of sleep a night *at best*, for the past two months because you don’t think you have to help with our infant daughter.” She threw her hands in the air. “Then you dare to tell me that I look bad?”

With the fridge open, he turned and sneered at her. “You’re starting to sound like a fishwife too.”

Lisa’s jaw dropped and he would have snickered, but he was too irritated. Who the hell had been at Giselle’s house this time? It was a new guy. Kevin had to admit that neither of the men who had come and gone into her house were gay. That meant that Giselle had taken up with someone else. Someone not him.

Yeah, he’d dumped her and married Lisa. But he would have respected her a whole lot more if she’d taken a more decent amount of time to get over him. Instead, she’d turned into a slut! Two guys at one time? And where the hell was she going? He’d tried to follow her, but some ass on the highway had forced him off course and he’d missed the exit she’d taken. He still didn’t know where she went and that just infuriated him!

Now, he needed a plan.

“Are you even listening to me?”

Kevin turned and glared at her. “You didn’t get any beer!” he

snapped, then flung the door to the refrigerator closed. “You know that I need beer when I get home.”

Lisa’s mouth fell open again and he almost told her that she’d gone from fishwife to fish. But he bit his tongue because she was screeching again.

“If you want something, haul your lazy butt to the store and get it yourself! I am not your maid, you sniveling, lazy sod!”

“Lazy? How the hell can you call me lazy? I’m the only one that works every day. You sit around here sleeping and taking care of the baby!”

Her eyes bugged out. “You have absolutely no concept of how hard it is to take care of a baby because you’re never here!”

He slapped his chest, furious with her words. “I go to work! I am the one paying for this house and the food!”

Lisa gasped. “Is that what you really think? Have you deluded yourself into truly believing *you* paid for this house? That you bring in enough money to pay for the food and everything else around here? The furniture? The cars?”

“Well you’re not doing anything!” he yelled back, glaring at her, daring her to say it.

She dared!

“My father paid for this house! He *gave* us the house as a wedding present! And I paid for the cars!” It was Lisa’s turn to smack her chest and she glared at him. “You don’t pay for anything around here.” She’d stopped screaming suddenly, her tone almost conversational by the end. That wasn’t a good thing, he knew. Kevin knew that it was best to keep a woman emotional. They were easier to control that way.

In truth, he had no idea who owned anything. Around Lisa, stuff just appeared. It was one of the reasons he’d married her. Still, he couldn’t just sit back and let her think he was a putz. “I pay for everything, Lisa. You know that.”

She blinked and pulled back, folding her arms over her stomach. For a long moment, she simply stared at him. She was too calm.

As he watched her, Lisa's head tilted slightly to the side. She huffed a moment, then said, "You're serious. You honestly believe that you paid for the house and cars, the clothes and food, and everything we have?"

He didn't give a damn who had paid for anything around her, he thought. Still, he couldn't relinquish control. "No one else did it! It's all because of me."

She lifted a blond eyebrow, but the scruffy tee shirt and baggy shorts she wore diminished the image of her disdain. "This house? How do you think you paid for it? You didn't have any money when we married."

Kevin considered his options quickly, then came up with the perfect answer. "Your father only pretended to buy the house for us because he was embarrassed."

Her formerly pretty mouth fell open again. Why were her lips so chapped? He knew she had lipstick! Why the hell wasn't she wearing it today?

"Embarrassed about what?"

He huffed impatiently. "Your father was embarrassed because I was the one bringing in the clients, Lisa. You know this! I was the one who brought in the new clients and made them happy. I'm the one that advanced his accounting firm to the point where they are useless without me. The clients love me and your father's business would go bankrupt if I left his firm and you know it."

Lisa leaned back against the kitchen countertop, tilting her head slightly. "Is that so?"

"Yeah!" he sneered back at her. "Your father thinks he's so great at accounting. But he'd be lost without me."

"Fine," she snapped, straightening up. "I agree with you. My father really should learn his lesson. I'll tell him that you think he's an ungrateful bastard and that you're leaving the firm to start your own business."

Huh? What kind of insanity was she spewing now? "I never said that," he argued, panic starting to rise in his chest. What the hell was Lisa doing? They had it good together! And her father needed him!

She shook her head, lifting her hand. “No, what you said was that my father would be lost without you and that you’re a better accountant. So prove it. Go out and start your own accounting firm. Let my father sink or swim.” With that, she turned on her bare foot and walked out of the kitchen. Over her shoulder she added, “Oh, and I’m hiring a nanny. It’s about time I got some actual help around here.” She paused in the doorway and turned to look at him. “And I want a divorce.” She wiggled her fingers at him, then disappeared.

“Divorce?” he echoed weakly. What the hell was she talking about? Lisa adored him! Kevin had convinced her to marry him only two weeks after they’d met!

And why the hell would he leave her father’s accounting firm? He loved working there! He had plans to bring Giselle into the firm so that she could help boost his image with Lisa’s father! The old man had given him too many clients and he knew it. Lisa’s father was trying to embarrass him because Kevin was the better accountant. Bringing Giselle on board meant he could task her with his clients, then wow Lisa’s dad.

He had a plan! No way was he letting Lisa mess with it!

A moment later, he stomped down the hallway to his office. The space had a huge desk and leather chair, as well as built in bookcases. Lisa had decorated the room so that it looked impressive, but all he really did in here was watch porn.

Today, he wasn’t in the mood even for porn. For some reason, he felt panic gnawing at his gut. It was a foreign sensation to him. He was *always* in control. He knew how to manipulate emotions so that people did what he wanted. So, why was Lisa not following the rules?

Damn her!

And what the hell was going on with Giselle?

Kevin needed to regain control of his world. He’d worry about Lisa later. She was the easy one. Working through the problem, he knew that he needed to get Giselle back, get her hired into his firm and on his team so that he could really shine. Kevin supposed that he had been slacking off a bit lately, but only because he’d had to spend so much time watching Giselle and



her investigating her house.

Plus, she made some damn good lemonade. Oh, and where was all the produce that he'd brought back several days ago? Had Lisa eaten all it all? The bitch didn't know how good she had it. How many husbands brought back boxes filled with fresh produce for their wife who was nursing their newborn baby?

He was a freaking awesome husband and Lisa would figure that out eventually and come running back to him. Maybe he'd take her back. If she apologized for all of the lies she'd spouted.

The front door closing didn't bother him. But when he peered out of his office window, he saw Lisa tossing a couple of bags into the trunk of her minivan. Why was she carrying the diaper bag and bags?

"Oh hell no!" he shouted and sprung up from his chair, sprinting to the front door.

But he was too late. Lisa was already halfway down the street by the time he made it outside. Grumbling, he forced a smile for the annoying neighbors as he walked back into the house. Bitch! Now she was really going to have to apologize.

As soon as he closed the front door, he realized the boon that Lisa had just given him. His wife's departure meant that he could focus more fully on getting Giselle back into his life and his work. This was actually pretty great, he thought, rubbing his hands as he went to find his keys.

## Chapter 11

Giselle practically danced her way to her office building. Every few moments, she'd glance down at the diamond on her finger, enjoying the way that the early morning sunshine made the diamond sparkle. The rock was much bigger than she would have chosen, but Felix had merely laughed at the tiny diamond ring she'd pointed to yesterday when they'd gone engagement ring shopping. She'd objected to the three carat diamond and he'd objected to the half-carat. They'd settled on a two carat, emerald cut diamond in a simple, platinum setting.

It wasn't the diamond ring that made her smile. It was the message behind it. Giselle pictured the intense satisfaction in Felix's blue eyes yesterday when he'd slid the ring onto her finger. It had been the most magical moment of her life.

He'd taken her back to his place afterward and made love to her over and over again throughout the night. It had felt as if he was trying to brand her in some way with his body and his lovemaking. What he didn't know was that she was already branded. By his love! She was seared from the heat of his feelings from the inside out and she couldn't believe how much she loved him.

"Giselle!" an oddly familiar voice called out.

Startled, Giselle stopped and looked around. This early in the morning, there weren't many people on the sidewalk. She knew a bodyguard was close by, but she wasn't sure where he was.

Unfortunately, she saw Kevin running towards her in a new charcoal suit. She studied him, wondering why she'd cared so much about him. Giselle no longer called her past feelings for Kevin "love". She now knew that Kevin had merely been a habit. They'd been together for so long that when he'd broken things off with her and married someone else so soon after their breakup, her pride had been wounded, not her heart.

"Hello Kevin," she greeted him when he came to a stop in front of her, breathing heavily. Kevin hadn't ever been one to exercise, so any sort of physical exertion took his breath away. "How are you?" she asked, smiling

weakly up at him.

“Doing great!” he replied, smiling that ooey smile. Ick! Had she really liked that smile once? No. Even back then, she’d hated that smile. She’d merely suppressed her dislike of it. Now that she was free of him, Giselle could admit that his smile had always seemed fake. In fact, everything about Kevin seemed fake.

“That’s good.” She checked the time on her phone, anxious to get to her desk. She had an interview today for the manager’s position. Her boss had been thrilled when she’d submitted her resume for the role. “Did you need to speak with me?” she asked, needing to prompt him to speed up this unexpected meeting.

“Let me buy you a cup of coffee. I have an exciting proposition to discuss with you.”

Giselle considered him for a moment, then shook her head. “I don’t have time right now, Kevin. I have an early meeting I need to prepare for. How about later?”

Kevin’s eyes hardened briefly, but something caught his eye and, instantly, his anger morphed into that fake smile. “Sure! Lunch would be great. But you’re buying,” he added with a chuckle.

Giselle smiled back at him, but hers wasn’t genuine either. He laughed again, but she knew he was serious about her paying for their meal. Kevin was cheap. And for some reason, he was always broke. The man never paid for anything, so why didn’t he ever have any money?

“Fine. How about if we meet at the diner over there?” she offered.

Kevin glanced at the diner, then shook his head. “I can’t make it back here later. Can you meet me at my place?”

Giselle thought about that. She didn’t have time to drive the thirty minutes to his new office either, but she wanted to get to her desk. She needed to review her notes, go over her accomplishments for the past year. And she wanted a few minutes to calm down. But if she said no, Kevin would just argue with her until she agreed. So she nodded her head. “Fine. I’ll see you at noon?” she offered, already mentally drafting a message letting him know that something had come up and they’d have to postpone their

lunch. She didn't really care what he had to say anyway. Even if he wasn't married, there was no chance that she'd get back together with Kevin. And there was zero chance that she'd work at the same company. Kevin had taught her that he was the kind who stole credit for other people's work.

He was a slug, she thought resentfully.

"One o'clock would be better."

She'd just turned to head into her office building when he said that. She paused with her hand on the door, then nodded. Giselle recognized the time change for what it was – a power move. He needed to prove that he was more important.

"One o'clock, then," she agreed and yanked the door open, hurrying inside as quickly as possible.

As soon as she got to her desk, she sent him an email letting him know that something had come up and she couldn't meet him at one o'clock after all. Then she focused on preparing for the interview.

Two hours later, Giselle was busy working through a problem for one of her clients. She looked up at a noise, surprised to find so many of her co-workers already at the office. When she noticed the time, she was surprised to find that it was so late.

"Are you ready, Giselle?" her boss asked, stopping by Giselle's cubicle.

"Ready for what?" Jessica demanded, dumping her faux-leather purse onto her chair as she tugged off her jacket. She wore a skin tight skirt and filmy, silk blouse today. The blouse was a touch too transparent in Giselle's opinion, but it wasn't her job to police her co-workers' clothing choices. Yet!

Abe smiled firmly at Jessica. "We have a meeting in five minutes. Nothing to do with your clients, Jessica."

Giselle smiled at Abe and ignored Jessica's huff of irritation. Was Abe a bit more abrupt with Jessica than normal?

Something to contemplate later, she told herself, then gathered up her papers and headed for the conference room where three of the managers were

doing the interviews today.

“Good morning, Giselle,” Ingrid, the manager for one of the other teams, greeted Giselle eagerly. Abe smiled encouragingly at her as he took a seat and then there was one other woman. Giselle knew that her name was Monica, but they didn’t interact at work.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you finally,” Monica said, shaking her hand as well. “I’ve heard really great things about you.”

“Oh!” that was surprising. It took her a moment, but she finally smiled her appreciation. “Well, thank you!”

“Have a seat, Giselle,” Abe suggested, waving his hand at the chair on one side of the conference table. The other three were settled on the opposite side.

“Okay, so tell us a bit about yourself,” Monica started off. “Tell us something that we don’t know.”

Giselle had prepared for this. She took a deep breath, then launched into her accomplishments over the past year. Each person asked a few questions, but nothing that stumped her. Even their accounting questions designed to test her knowledge were easy

At the end of an hour, they all stood up and Giselle felt good about her efforts. Even if she didn’t get this job, at least these three managers viewed her as someone promising and who wanted to move up in the company.

“Thank you so much for your time,” Giselle said, shaking each person’s hand before she headed back to her desk.

Jessica had already left for lunch by the time Giselle reached her desk. That was a relief because she didn’t want to deal with the nosy questions.

Giselle sat down to sort through the emails from her clients that had come in while she’d been away from her desk. By the end of the day, she was exhausted, but she also felt a sensation of success. She’d resolved several issues for her clients today and they’d sent her grateful messages.

She turned off her computer and locked up her files. Giselle was just

about to head out, eager to see Felix and tell him about the interview, when Abe came to her desk. “Can I speak to you for a moment?”

Giselle didn’t like the tone of his voice. He looked too serious as well. Swallowing hard, she nodded, and followed Abe to his office. The other two people who had interviewed her this morning were also in Abe’s office, plus their manager, Tony. All of them looked very serious.

“Giselle, I know that you are incredible at your job,” Abe began, “however…” and he paused, looking down for a moment.

Giselle’s heart began to pound. Was she about to be fired? Was this the end of her career? What was happening? What had she done wrong?

“However, we are delighted to offer you the position as manager of the team,” Monica finished for him.

Giselle stared for a moment. Then everyone’s features lightened into cheerful grins and she sucked in a breath. “Seriously?” she gasped, too stunned to move for a long moment.

Abe laughed and nodded emphatically. “Will you accept the promotion?”

Giselle’s breath came out in a whoosh. “I got it? I got the job?” she asked, still uncertain.

“Yes!” Abe replied, chuckling at her disbelief. Monica pulled out a bottle of champagne and Ingrid waved champagne glasses in the air.

“I got the job!” Giselle gasped, bouncing on her toes with excitement. As soon as she realized what she was doing and how unprofessional she must seem, she tempered her reaction, then laughed, covering her mouth with her fingers as a rush of excitement hit her.

“Yes you did!” Abe said, handing her a glass of champagne. “It’s up to you, but I hope that your first decision is to fire Jessica.”

The others laughed in heartfelt agreement, lifting their glasses in the air and clinking them gently. “She’s a mess!” Monica replied.

The three managers pointed out various problems with Jessica’s work and Giselle wondered why they hadn’t fired her long before now.

Abe answered that question before she could voice the concern. “She kept convincing us to give her just one more chance. She has a way of wheedling behind my defenses, so maybe you can be stronger than me and get rid of her. There is plenty of documentation to justify firing her.”

“Oh, well...” she paused, a grin splitting her features. “Well, I don’t think I’ll make any decision tonight about anything, other than celebrating!” she beamed, then lifted her glass for another sip. She didn’t particularly like the stuff, but felt she needed to finish at least one glass of the bubbly stuff in celebration.

“What’s going on?” a new male voice called out.

Everyone turned to find Kevin in the doorway, that cheesy fake grin on his face as he looked from one person to the next.

“How the hell did you get in here?” Abe demanded, his jovial mood completely evaporated. In its place was outright belligerence.

Kevin held up a security badge. “I still have this,” he said, chuckling. “Since I used to work here. And I’m still dating Giselle.”

All eyes turned to Giselle and she glared at him. “Kevin, you are married with a new baby. And we haven’t been together for more than a year. You left me, if I recall.” She watched him carefully, clued in to his manipulations now that she was in a healthy relationship with Felix. “What game are you playing now?”

He stared at her as if she’d just lost her mind. “Honey, we had a lunch date just this afternoon.” He walked over to her, rubbing her arm as if he were her lover. Then he looked around at the others and chuckled. “I guess the champagne has already gone to her head.”

Giselle cringed away, out of his reach. “We didn’t have a date, Kevin. And don’t touch me.”

“I think you should leave,” Abe said firmly.

Kevin rolled his eyes. “Giselle and I have some unfinished business.” He grabbed her arm too quickly for her to react. “Don’t we, honey?”

“No!” she gasped, trying to pull away and remain calm. But this

version of Kevin was a bit frightening. “You broke into the building, Kevin. This is trespassing.” She turned pleading eyes on the others.

Monica stepped forward. “Take your hands off her. Now!”

Kevin chuckled, then pulled a gun out of his jacket. “Get back,” he ordered in a conversational tone. “Or I will shoot you.”

Monica immediately stepped back, her hands lifted.

Giselle gasped, shocked that Kevin owned a gun. “Where did that come from?” she demanded, still fighting for possession of her arm. But he only jerked her closer to him.

“I bought it last week.” He pointed the gun at Abe. “No heroics, understand? Giselle and I have some outstanding business to conclude. I’m not going to hurt her, but I will hurt anyone who gets in my way.”

Giselle didn’t know what he wanted to discuss with her, but knew this was just about the worst way to go about it.

“We’re going to head out now.” Kevin ripped the phone cord out of the wall before he pushed Giselle out the door.

Had the idiot forgotten about cell phones? Kevin had watched too many crime dramas.

“Now!” he growled, clutching her arm with all of his strength. As he dragged her out of the office, he growled in her ear, “Why did you cancel our lunch today?”

“I had an interview this morning, Kevin. I really was very busy today.”

His fingers tightened, hurting her. “Yes, but I had a job offer for you. And it’s a hell of a lot better than this dump. Why would you want to work here when you could work with me again?”

“Because...I like it here?” she offered. That wasn’t the only reason. But she doubted telling Kevin the truth, that the idea of working with him again utterly horrified her, would help. Ick! Especially now that she knew he was certifiably crazy!

“We’re also going to be lovers again.”



“You’re married!” she gasped, stumbling as he dragged her toward the elevator.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you and I can’t have some fun. You have your own place now. You’ll have to paint over all of that awful pink though. I’m not having sex in a freaking pink house, Giselle.”

Anger surged inside of her at his admission. Reaching down, she pulled her phone out and, keeping it low by her side, she turned on the camera, hoping that she’d hit the right buttons. “Kevin, are you telling me you broke into my house?”

He snickered, still looking up at the numbers above the elevator. “You really need better locks, Giselle. It was too easy to pick your locks.”

“And you stole my vegetables?”

Another chuckle. “Hey, Lisa and the baby were very appreciative. Those tomatoes were very tasty. I don’t think I’ve ever had produce right off the vine like that.”

She suddenly realized something. Kevin liked it when she lost her temper. It meant that she was off balance while he remained in control. Looking at him, she realized that he was waiting for her to yell at him for stealing from her.

“That wasn’t nice of you. But I’m glad that Lisa enjoyed the produce. If she’s nursing, then the fruit probably helped her.”

He snorted. “I didn’t take any fruit, Giselle. Tomatoes, cucumbers, squash...just stuff like that.” He peered down at her. “Do you also have fruit trees?”

Giselle didn’t bother to hide her eye roll. “Botanically, tomatoes and cucumbers *are* fruit, Kevin.”

“No, they aren’t. Everyone knows they are vegetables.”

“Something is considered a fruit if the seeds of the next generation are contained inside the flower. Tomatoes and cucumbers keep their seeds inside the skin of the plant. Therefore, they are botanically fruit.”

Kevin’s fingers tightened cruelly around her arm. “Vegetables, Giselle.”

She shrugged, refusing to cringe because that would give him satisfaction. “If you say so. You’re the crazy man with the gun.” She glanced up at the lights indicating the floor as the elevator descended, refusing to let him see how terrified she was.

“Who are your boyfriends?” he asked, a sneer in his tone now.

“What boyfriends?” she replied. She wouldn’t tell him Felix’s name if she could help it. She just wished that Felix was here now. He would know what to do about Crazy Kevin. His SEAL training would kick in and Felix would bash Kevin’s nose in or trip him going down a staircase.

But he wasn’t here. She was on her own and Giselle needed to use her wits to outsmart Crazy Kevin.

“Talk to me,” Felix demanded, rushing up to William, the guard from the Philips’ agency that had called him ten minutes ago.

“This man,” William explained, showing him a picture of Kevin, “showed up this morning and stopped your fiancée from entering the building.”

“Did he touch her?”

William instantly shook his head. “Not this morning. The conversation looked genial enough which is why I didn’t intervene. But he showed up again about twenty minutes ago and his genial expression was gone.” William rubbed his jaw. “I could be wrong, but my gut is telling me that your fiancée is in danger.”

Felix nodded sharply. “You were right to call me. I don’t care if this turns out to be a false alarm. I trust your instincts. I felt something yesterday was off when I talked to her. I didn’t have a name or a picture. So I appreciate the photo.” He rubbed a hand over his neck. “Who is the guy?”

“While she was at work, I had my team look him up. His name is Kevin Duffy and he used to work at this company. He was fired about a year ago, almost a year after he got a promotion. The theory in the office is that he must have gotten someone else to do his work for him.”

“Probably Giselle,” Felix snarled. “What else do you know?”

“Your fiancée and Mr. Duffy dated for several years, according to the rumors. Then he abruptly broke things off with her and almost immediately married the daughter of the owner of the firm that hired him. They have a newborn daughter, but the wife left him recently and, just yesterday, filed for divorce. Her lawyer is looking to have him kicked out of the family domicile and his car impounded since the vehicle is in the wife’s name.”

“Bastard. He’s mooching off of his wife *and* Giselle. What a loser!”

Just then, the doors to the building opened and Giselle came out first. Felix immediately started towards her, but when he saw the man from the picture step out as well, he knew that something was wrong. Then he saw the terror in her eyes and his gut twisted.

“That’s him!” William announced unnecessarily.

“I got it,” Felix stated, already moving to a better position.

Felix moved to the left, ducking behind parked cars until he was at the needed angle. Then he popped out and came forward. “Kevin!” he called out with a friendly, expectant tone.

The man swung around. Felix hated to do it, but he ignored Giselle, keeping his attention on Kevin. He had to focus now. He had to save her!

“What?”

Felix forced a smile. “Kevin Duffy? Don’t you remember me?”

Kevin shuffled his feet uncertainly and Felix saw the gun pushed against Giselle’s ribs before it was hidden by Kevin’s jacket.

“No I don’t...wait. Where do I know you from?”

Dangling preposition. The bastard didn’t even know how to speak properly! “High school, right? I think we were in the same history class. Didn’t you have...?” he snapped his fingers, acting as if he were trying to remember.

“Mr. Klinenpeel?”

Felix snapped his fingers again. “Yes! That’s the guy!”

Kevin shook his head. “I don’t remember you.”

Felix laughed, fisting his hands on his hips and bracing his legs wide

apart, getting ready. “I was shorter back then. And skinnier. I sat in the back, normally wore a hoodie.”

“Yeah!” Kevin replied. “I remember you now. What happened to you? You’ve definitely filled out.”

“I joined the Navy,” Felix stated. “Great exercise program. I’d highly recommend it.”

Kevin snorted. “I don’t think so. I’m an accountant now. A vice president.”

“Is that so?” Felix asked. “Duck.”

“Yes and...huh?”

Giselle had been waiting for the signal and she was already flat on the sidewalk before Kevin understood what was happening. Felix snatched Kevin’s wrist, shifted his weight, and flipped Kevin over his back so he landed face down on the sidewalk, his arm twisted behind his back.

“Drop the weapon!” Felix commanded.

The idiot struggled, not dropping the gun. So, Felix twisted harder. Finally, Kevin released the gun and Felix kicked it over to William. The man was already on the phone with the police and sirens wailed in the distance.

“Get off me!” Kevin was screaming. “You can’t do this to me!”

“Shut up!” Felix snapped. He glanced up and William was right there, handing him a plastic tie to use as handcuffs. He zipped the plastic tie onto Kevin’s wrists and kept him on the ground.

Then two things happened at once. Two police cruisers skidded to a halt and the police officers piled out of the vehicles with weapons drawn. William had his wallet out and was showing it to the officers. That seemed to calm down that side of the situation. But coming out of the building were three other people screaming that Kevin Duffy had pulled a gun on them. The officers picked Kevin up and stuffed him into the back of the police cruiser, then started taking statements.

Felix ignored the chaos as he turned around to find Giselle. She was standing with her back to the building, her eyes huge in her milk-white face. His gut churned sharply. Then she was running to him and literally threw

herself into his arms. If it weren't for his excellent reaction times, he would have dropped her. As it was, he pulled her into his arms, lifting her up against him to feel the vibrancy of her against him.

"You were here!" she whispered into his ear. "I needed you and you were here!" she said again, her arms tightening around his neck.

"I'll always be here for you, Giselle," he whispered back, holding her close. After nearly a decade of guilt over being absent when Jenna and Ava needed him, Giselle's words were like a balm to his conscience. She'd needed him and he'd been here. She was safe because he'd been able to save her! That was all he needed to know. She was safe.

"I love you," she whispered into his ear.

"I love you too!" he hissed back, peppering her neck and her shoulders with kisses, then lowering her feet to the ground so that he could kiss her properly.

Someone clearing his throat reminded them of the current situation, but he kept his arms around her waist, needing her as close as possible.

One of the officers chuckled. "I understand that you stopped and disarmed the perp?"

Felix nodded and gave his statement. Giselle went next. It took over an hour before the police let them head home. As soon as they entered his house, Felix dropped onto his couch and pulled her onto his lap. "Don't ever put yourself in danger like that again, Giselle."

She snuggled up to him and beamed. "I won't. But if I do, I know that you'll be there for me." She looked up at him. "I'd really love it if you could teach me that flippy-move though. Just in case."

Felix laughed, nodding agreeably. "Deal. I'll teach you the 'flippy move'," he promised. "As long as you love me for the rest of your life."

She snuggled closer. "Deal!"

## Epilogue

“Two down,” Jenna murmured to Pierce.

Pierce nodded, the pair watching their youngest sister, Ava, dancing with her husband, Grant. They looked perfect together, both of them moving perfectly in time with the music.

“Yep`. Just you and me, sis.”

Jenna snorted, shoving Pierce with her shoulder. “I’m single for life. What about you?”

He snorted. “Who would have me?”

Jenna surveyed her brother. “Well, if you weren’t such a grouch, I’d say you were a mildly attractive guy.”

He turned to stare at her, one dark eyebrow lifted. “*Mildly* attractive?”

She rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to the dance floor. “You’re my brother. What do you expect me to say?”

“Good point.”

“Ava’s pregnant,” Jenna announced.

That surprised him. “She is? She told you?”

Jenna took in a slow, deep breath, then let it out. “No. She didn’t need to. I mean... have you really looked at her lately? She’s just...she’s too happy. She’ll tell us about the baby soon.”

Pierce grumbled something unintelligible. Then added more clearly, “You’ll get married someday.”

She shook her head. “Nope. I’m married to my job. Everyone says so.”

They both turned, watching as Felix pulled Giselle back into his arms. Giselle’s wedding dress was magnificent, with a bodice that hugged her figure and a skirt that flowed out to mid-calf. Her shoes sparkled with pearls and shiny pieces, but it was her eyes that were what caught everyone’s

attention. Giselle was madly in love with Felix and that love shimmered in her eyes as she stared up at her new husband.

“I like her,” Jenna sighed. “She’s absolutely perfect for Felix.”

Pierce took a sip of his drink, nodding his agreement. “She’s pretty fantastic.”

“Did you ever think that Felix would get married?” Jenna continued.

Pierce chuckled. “Never.” They both watched as Felix swung Giselle around, her skirt fluttering in the breeze. “He’s so damn happy!”

Jenna nodded, her heart lighter tonight. “Yeah. They both are. It’s pretty wonderful to watch.”

Giselle gripped Felix’s arms, trembling as she danced. “I feel like I’m floating on a cloud,” she told him.

He laughed as he pulled her closer. “Are you ready to head out for our honeymoon?”

“Two whole weeks in Aruba!” she sighed. “What will we do for two boring weeks alone?”

He growled and nipped at her earlobe. “I will definitely occupy your mind, my love.”

She laughed, her eyes shining into his. “I’m counting on it!”

*A message from Elizabeth:*

*I don’t know why I have such a fascination with Navy SEALs. They just seem so...yummy, right? Anyway, I was talking with a former Navy SEAL who went on to attend medical school. He eventually specialized as a trauma surgeon and I thought that was fascinating! And you all know about the guy I dated who was a former “SEAL”! Ha!*

*Anyway, I was intrigued by the thought of what happened to battle scarred warriors after they left the military. And this is my twist on one possibility.*

*If you didn't read "The Beginning", a free prologue for this whole series, check on my website (<https://elizabethlennox.com/halliday-hotel-prologue/>) to read the story. It's not necessary for any of the books – but just a bit of a background on each of the upcoming characters.*

*As always, your feedback is wonderful! If you wouldn't mind, could you leave a review? Here's a [QUICK LINK](#) to the review page – and I thank you!*

*As usual, if you don't want to leave feedback in a public forum, feel free to e-mail me directly at [elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com](mailto:elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com). I answer all e-mails personally, although it sometimes takes me a while. Please don't be offended if I don't respond immediately. I tend to lose myself in writing stories and have a hard time pulling my head out of the book.*

*Elizabeth*

*Keep scrolling for a sneak peek at "Jenna"- the fourth book in the Halliday Hotels.*



## Jenna

Release Date: July 14, 2023

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He couldn't hear her footsteps, but the rhythmic pounding of her running shoes caught the overhead streetlights and grabbed his attention. As he watched, the woman came into view for a moment, running under the streetlights that lined the path. She was wearing a black sports bra and matching capri length leggings, which showcased her well-muscled body.

The woman didn't want to be seen.

That was his first thought as he watched the dark haired beauty running along the waterfront trail. The darkness helped, but she moved from one pool of light to the next, the shifting light and dark of the street lights and the occasional oncoming vehicle only bringing more attention to her.

She was gorgeous. Even in her dark running clothes, her limbs revealed her strength. The long ponytail snapped back and forth against her shoulders, causing him to wonder if her hair was as soft and silky as it seemed. He imagined that hair teasing his chest as she smiled down at him, her eyes...he wondered what color her eyes were...sparkling at him as he trailed his fingers over her bare skin.

“With five point three percentage points above the call, we can bring in another twenty-two million.” Sheik Zahir el Settar heard the conversation behind him, but the seller, the competition, wasn't quite where he wanted them to be yet. He'd step in when the Destra Group was willing to come down to four point nine. And he'd offer nineteen million in cash. The representatives from Destra would balk and argue that he was robbing them blind. But in the end, both sides knew that four point nine and nineteen million was an excellent deal for both parties.

Meanwhile, he watched the woman as she turned, her long, powerful legs taking her back around the edge of the ocean wall. She was heading home, he supposed. Zahir was thankful that her return trip would allow him

to continue watching the beauty, giving him a distraction for a bit longer. It was relatively late. He wondered why she was exercising at this time of the night. This was one of the safer areas of downtown Seattle, but it still wasn't safe to be running alone at nine o'clock at night. Wasn't she nervous about predators of the human variety? Or was she oblivious to the dangers?

He glanced at his watch, timing her as she ran past. His eyebrows lifted as he noted the pace. She was fast! No wonder her legs were so strong.

It was Tuesday night and the woman clearly didn't have someone to go home to. If she had, she'd be there right now. That was sad. Everyone should have someone to go home to.

Zahir acknowledged that he didn't have anyone either. Was she lonely? Or did she prefer the silence of the night? Was her nighttime run her only solace from returning to a home that didn't contain a husband or children?

Suddenly, he realized that he was tired of being alone. He hated going to his cold bed every night without someone special. He had dozens of people who demanded his attention, but there wasn't anyone, other than his bodyguards, who would give a damn if he went running late at night. No, he was alone as well.

Funny how that issue had never concerned him before. Why was he suddenly so viscerally aware of his single status after watching a lovely woman running under streetlights? It wasn't as if he could ask her to have a drink with him. He'd probably never see her again. The possibility sent a strange and unfamiliar pang through his chest.

When the woman ran out of his field of vision, Zahir's attention returned to the conference room. Impatiently, he looked at the twelve men and three women who were negotiating on his behalf.

He just wanted to buy a damn building! The seller wanted the building gone from his portfolio and Zahir wanted to tear down the crumbling edifice so that he could build a larger complex that would encompass three city blocks. There would be commercial and residential properties and the entire process would clean up an abandoned area of the

city along the waterfront. No one would be ousted from their homes. There were no residents in the site in question, other than rats and the rusting remains of a factory, all of which created a hazard for the city and the site owner.

On either side of this particular building, there were more collapsing buildings, unused train rails, another abandoned factory, and some wooden commercial docks that were rotting and about to tumble into the ocean.

His purchase of this property would bring much needed taxes to the local and state government and would allow the Destra group to off-load a property that had long been a drain on their resources.

Zahir's patience suddenly came to an end.

Turning, he glared at the group of people that had been sitting around the conference room table for the past several hours, inching closer and closer to a deal.

Enough! He was sick of the games!

"Three point two points and eighteen million," he blurted. Everyone around the table froze, stunned by the ridiculously low offer. "That's my final offer. Call me when you're willing to accept it." He nodded firmly to his lead negotiator, indicating that they were done.

He left the conference room, too irritated to continue. As he was leaving, he heard the others shuffling papers, standing up, and following behind him. He didn't care. None of this mattered. He was sick of everything.

That was a dangerous position for him to be in since it was his job to care. As Ruler of Sanaab, his entire existence revolved around caring about these kinds of issues. Well, not this specific issue, he corrected. Buying the waterfront land and converting the area to a more productive landscape was part of his personal portfolio, although he would most likely invest some of his country's wealth into the effort. But only if he was sure that the plan would make a profit. Sometimes, he kept his country's money out of an endeavor if there was too much risk. Zahir would never risk the prosperity of Sanaab. Not for anything. He loved his country and his people needed to know that their futures were secure.

His bodyguards immediately surrounded him in the hallway, but he wasn't in the mood for their oppressive presence. He knew that he couldn't order them to leave, but he could find a place where they would give him some breathing room.

There was a bar in the lower level of this building. Yes, a drink was exactly what he needed. A drink and other people. Zahir craved the presence of other humanity. People that weren't connected to him in any way. He needed to find a place where he could feel...normal.

Jenna Halliday stepped out of the shower and dried off. Glancing in the mirror, she considered putting on a bit of makeup. But after a glance in the mirror at her pale, features, she merely sighed and turned away from her reflection. She just needed some company, she told herself.

"I'm fine," she whispered into the silence of the hotel room. "Perfectly fine." Maybe if she said it often enough, it would become true.

She pulled on a pair of jeans and a knit top, then pulled her wet hair up into a twist on the back of her head. She scanned the room to ensure she hadn't left anything in the hotel room, then picked up her gym bag, stuffed with her sweaty running clothes, and left the room. She'd make a note in the hotel computer system to ask the maids to clean the bathroom again before allowing any guests to stay here.

As President of Halliday Hotels, a growing empire of hotels that spanned the world, Jenna knew that no one would question her use of one of the empty hotel rooms to shower after her workout. However, she was fairly certain that the night shift employees questioned her lack of a social life, since she'd finished working in her office around nine o'clock. Again. Since she'd been at her desk before six o'clock that morning, even Jenna was starting to question her lack of a social life.

Walking out of the room, she made her way down to the lobby. "Good evening," Jenna greeted the night shift, who were staffing the reception area tonight.

"Good evening, Ms. Halliday," they all chimed in, looking a bit nervous as she stepped behind the counter. "Is everything okay?"

Jenna gritted her teeth. For some reason, the question irritated her. Of course everything was okay. Her whole life revolved around ensuring that everything was absolutely okay! She lived and breathed for this damn place! Once a month, she spent a week traveling from one hotel to another to ensure that each site was up to the Halliday standards, which were very high! She had no social life because she was always, *constantly*, making sure that every freaking hotel was better than “okay”!

Slowly, she took a deep breath, trying to release the tension in her shoulders. “Yes,” she forced herself to reply with what she hoped was a gracious smile. “Everything is excellent. Thank you so much for your efforts tonight.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, the staff members puffed up with pride. That was what they needed, she reminded herself. A bit of acknowledgement and encouragement went a long way towards helping the staff at every level feel noticed and valued. “I’m going to put a note into the system for tomorrow’s cleaning crew, if you don’t mind?”

The night’s reception manager immediately stepped forward. “I can do that for you, ma’am. What would you like the note to say?”

Ma’am. Jenna was twenty-nine years old and she was a “ma’am”. Why did that bother her so much? Why did she suddenly feel ancient?

Because her mind was old.

Her body might be strong. She worked out religiously to ensure that she was healthy, that her mind and body was strong enough to do whatever needed to be done. Because everything needed to be better than “okay”.

Damn it, she was tired! Bone tired!

Forcing a friendly tone, Jenna said, “That’s okay.” She nodded politely. “I can do it.” Jenna went to the next computer terminal and typed in a code. Normally, she did this from her office, but for some reason tonight, the idea of going back to her office made her feel nauseous.

It took her less than thirty seconds to enter her password, log into the housecleaning system and enter the note for the cleaning crew. Then she logged out and grabbed her bag. Turning to the manager, she extended the bag. “Would you have someone deliver this to my office next door?”

The woman immediately took the gym bag and nodded.  
“Absolutely, ma’am. I’ll handle it personally.”

Jenna smiled her thanks, not mentioning that it would be better if the manager remained in her area of responsibility. Jenna was just too tired to explain that one of the other team members should be assigned the task. Instead, she turned and headed out, tucking her clutch purse under her arm as she went.

Now what? She looked around and started to pull her keys out of her purse. “I can’t do it,” she whispered, looking down at the beautiful carpet. Even now, she wasn’t sure what to do with herself. If she wasn’t working or exercising, Jenna was...lost.

Straightening her shoulders, she tried to breathe in, to appreciate the gorgeous lobby of the Seattle hotel. However, her eyes misted as that tight, invisible band around her chest tightened.

Ava, Jenna’s younger sister, was brilliant at decorating. Ava had designed the downtown Seattle décor with blues, greens, and teal. The carpeting here was a mixture of those colors, interspersed with soft browns. Like the ocean, she thought. No, like Puget Sound on those rare days when the sun gifted the city with warmth and joy.

Remembering that the hotel staff were probably still watching her, Jenna pulled her cell phone out of her purse and looked at it, but she didn’t see the information on the screen. She didn’t even flick her thumb to start reviewing the one hundred or so new emails that had arrived during her run and shower. Nope, she simply stared blindly at the screen, trying to pull herself together.

Normally, Jenna moved through the hotel with a purpose, always striving to look and be efficient in everything she did. She was president of the damn company and she had to be a role model. Jenna demanded a great deal from the thousands of employees that worked at the various hotels around the world. In return, she couldn’t give them anything less than her absolute best at all times.

Plus, she’d hijacked her siblings’ lives by demanding they help to make that first hotel a success. She’d ruined their lives, taken away their

choices for their futures. Now they were paying the price for her determination to scratch and claw her way out of the life of poverty that they'd been forced to endure as kids.

Both of those issues meant that Jenna couldn't let anyone down. This was her life.

Her penance.

[Click HERE to get "Jenna"!](#)