



*NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

**SELENA BLAKE WRITING AS**

**GILLIAN BLAKELY**

*Scoring*

**WITH THE**

**FOOTBALL  
STAR**

**GETTING FRISKY IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES**

# SCORING WITH THE FOOTBALL STAR

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A SECOND CHANCE SPORTS ROMANCE

GILLIAN BLAKELY

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## SCORING WITH THE FOOTBALL STAR

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*For Zita, Jodie, Nicole, Lynn and Michelle for taking a first look at Trevor  
and JJ's story.*

# ONE

*September*  
*Atlanta*

THERE WERE ONLY two rules that JJ Fairchild followed to the letter. Rule number one: always wear clean underwear. Rule number two: never have sex with strangers. Thus far in her twenty-nine years on this planet, those two rules had served her well.

Her best friend, Cindy Smith, suffered from no such compunction about rule number two if her latest sexcapade was to be believed.

JJ wasn't a prude, but doing the horizontal hokeypokey with a stranger wasn't her idea of a good time. If she was going to do something potentially dangerous, well, sky diving was more her speed. For starters, death would be her own darn fault and if she lived, there would be no possibility of STDs.

No, she had plenty to worry about without adding an unplanned pregnancy or diseases to the mix. For a moment she pondered checking her email to see if the bank had any word on the nine hundred dollars stolen from her account. But she knew she would probably find another less than pleasant note from her new boss, so she got back to the conversation at hand.

"I can't believe you just walked in there and had sex with the guy," JJ murmured, even though she was secretly enthralled. Cindy would always be more sexually adventurous; hell, she wrote erotica for a living. But JJ was happy to live vicariously. It was safer that way. And Cindy was one hell of a story teller—complete with accents, impersonations, and sound effects.

Gretchen Mascoe shifted on the other end of the couch she shared with Cindy. Easily scandalized, she held a hand to the base of her throat. "I can't either," she said.

From the far corner of JJ's sofa, Baby grinned. "I can."

Of course she could.

Baby Campbell lived for sex. Whereas Gretchen was conservative in dress, politics and action, Baby wore short skirts everywhere she went. Except the gym, where she wore short shorts and attracted the attention of every guy in the place.

"I didn't just walk in there and have sex with the guy," Cindy denied. Sighing, she sent an exasperated look at JJ, then to Gretchen and finally, Baby. Baby shot her a "yeah, right" look right back.

The four of them had been like sisters since college. Thursday night was a standing date for dinner, wine, and endless girl talk. So here they were, each snuggled into a corner of the opposing sofas in Gretchen's living room. Tonight's vino selection was from a new vineyard in California and JJ was tipsy after two glasses of merlot.

But she wasn't snookered enough that she'd let her friend get away with half-truths. She cocked her head at Cindy and raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, so I did have sex with him. But I didn't walk in there planning to," her friend denied.

"Well that's a relief," Gretchen said. Of the four of them, Gretchen was saving herself for her one true love. Except for her college boyfriend. And the hot guy she'd met on vacation last summer. Poor Gretchen. Her heart got broken far too easily. Sex complicated things for her. She wasn't the type who could just let loose and have fun. When she did, she had expectations and those expectations were never met in the end.

In that respect, JJ knew exactly how Gretchen felt. They weren't getting any younger, and that was the problem. Their little quartet was still unmarried. Unattached. Very much single.

JJ hated being single.

She was plenty used to it, but hated not having someone to wake up to and run things by. Not to mention, it'd be nice to have someone to share her life and goals and dreams with.

Baby leaned forward, the scoop neckline of her blouse hugging her cleavage. Of the four of them, she was the only one who liked being unattached and therefore able to date any man she wanted, whenever she



wanted.

“I just wanted to teach him a lesson,” Cindy said.

“I bet you taught him a lesson, all right.” JJ snickered.

Gasping in mock outrage, Cindy threw an ecru pillow at her. JJ jerked her glass out of the way and precious ruby drops came dangerously close to sloshing out. “Watch it!”

Baby shushed them with a hand. “What did he say?” She looked as if she was ready to beg Cindy for all the juicy details.

JJ sent her an *oh-please* look.

“What? I’ve been in a drought. Work’s been busy.” Baby shrugged and settled back in her seat. A petite blonde with a pixie cut and big blue eyes, she was the most experienced of their little group. She gave new meaning to the saying *live hard, play harder*.

Which was saying something, since JJ didn’t mind the occasional daredevil activity and Cindy wasn’t opposed to handcuffs in the bedroom.

Cindy laughed, her eyes glazing over a bit. “I told him it was false advertising. You know. To post a ninety-nine percent up time and then have my site down for four days—”

“Ninety-nine percent uptime.” Baby giggled and wiggled her blond eyebrows up and down.

Cindy grinned. “I told him it'd be like me walking in there and telling him I was going to suck his cock and then not following through.”

Gretchen choked on her wine. Cindy, smug with satisfaction, leaned over and patted Gretchen on the back. She was definitely the most creative and had the best imagination. JJ admired that, but since she craved financial security, she’d gone the facts and figures route. She’d majored in journalism and freelanced when she wasn’t traveling for work.

“And you'll never believe what was on his computer screen.”

“Porn?” Baby guessed.

Porn at work? It wasn’t unheard of, but JJ’s bet was a racy desktop background. And since the computer in question belonged to a geek, she guessed, “Trinity from the Matrix?”

“What?” Gretchen asked.

“My book. He was buying my book. Can you believe it?” Cindy refilled her glass and then tucked her feet up on Gretchen's oversized sofa.

“Did you tell him it was your book?” Baby asked. Leave it to Baby to hope that Cindy capitalized on her writing. “You could use the whole

experience as research,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows up and down again.

Knowing Cindy, the tech support geek had already made his way to the pages of her latest book.

“No. I didn't even tell him my real name.”

That was interesting. She started to ask why not when her phone made a low buzzing sound. JJ frowned and glanced down at her iPhone. A text message from John Culpepper, her new boss. Surprise, surprise.

JOHN: I KNOW IT'S GIRLS' *night, but plans have changed. Check your email.*

WAS HE BEING CONDESCENDING AGAIN? She couldn't tell. Just when she thought that he was respecting her work, he'd make another snide comment that left her gritting her teeth.

“Waiting for something?” Baby asked, leaning over to look at the screen.

“No.” After JJ skimmed the message again, she clicked over to the email app. “Damn, I've gotta jet. They're sending me to New York early.” Her schedule had become a wreck ever since her new boss had taken over six months ago.

“I'll call you a cab,” Gretchen said, reaching for the cordless phone.

“Thanks.”

“You're gonna be gone all weekend?” Baby asked.

“I'll probably be back Monday. The email doesn't list my return flight. I want all the juicy details out of you next week,” she told Cindy. Her friend just grinned.

JJ finished off her wine with an unladylike gulp and took the glass into the kitchen.

“Hugs,” she said as she gathered her purse.

What were the chances, she wondered as she headed for the door, of her getting sent to New York City, a week after some jerk at a New York City shoe store had stolen over nine hundred dollars out of her checking account? Her mortgage was due in seven days and if the bank didn't return her money by then... No. She would put that worry on her calendar for next week.

## TWO

*New York City*

JJ WASN'T GOING IN. She *wasn't*.

She should just head on to her hotel and figure out what to do for dinner. But as she clutched her handbag and stared at the colorful display of sneakers behind the large window, her irritation rose. Why shouldn't she go in? She hadn't done anything wrong.

Straightening her spine, she reached for the door handle and pulled. JJ didn't know what she expected to find in the shoe store. Obviously shoes, but certainly not the gorgeous salesman behind the counter.

He stood with his back to her, a phone pressed against his right ear. He was tall with broad shoulders and plenty of chiseled muscle filling out the navy T-shirt and well-worn jeans.

*Staring is rude*, her mother's voice whispered through her mind. JJ knew that, but she couldn't help herself.

There was something familiar about the man, and she found it nearly impossible to tear her gaze away. Those muscles made her tingle in some very important places and it'd been a long time since her body had reacted so strongly, so quickly. There was no denying the increased heart rate, the sweaty palms, the way her knees trembled and her breasts tightened.

Stopping next to a display of walking shoes, she forced herself to look at the colorful laces and take a deep breath. The scent of synthetic material and rubber soles was thick in the air.

Where did she know him from? A covert glance from the corner of her eye let her take in his profile. Holy smokes. At this rate she'd need a glass of ice water before he even turned around.

As if she'd called his name, he hung up the phone and turned toward her. JJ bit back a gasp as she took in the golden-blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. She'd know that handsome face anywhere...his strong jaw, full lips, and that sexy dimple in his cheek.

Trevor Wyatt was one of the best looking men to have ever played in the NFL. Not to mention, one of the cockiest. At least until his accident.

Suddenly she was twenty-four again and he was fresh out of the shower. The locker room was crowded with players and journalists but he'd drawn her gaze like a diamond drew a barracuda. He'd been her fifth interview, and boy was it memorable. The silver-tongued stud had stood there wrapped in nothing but a towel, flirted his ears off, and given her an interview...plus an invitation to dinner. She'd declined, not wanting to be involved with a jock who was only after one thing.

Not the type to be easily dissuaded, he'd asked her out every chance he got over the years—until he'd suddenly disappeared from the sport a little over twelve months ago.

The chemistry between them had always been thick as butter. And once she'd lost the opportunity for another invitation, she'd really missed their easy flirtation. She'd never forgiven herself for declining. He may have been a playboy in his heyday, but he was one fine playboy.

And the star of numerous fantasies.

She gave him a quick smile and moved over to a rack of running shoes, picking up one with pink laces.

Why the hell was he working here? At a shoe store in New York? He was a millionaire many times over. Unlike many players, he'd never been extravagant that she knew of so the chances of him needing cash were slim. But what did she know?

She knew he'd been in a car crash that had left him on the sidelines of the game he'd loved so much. But surely he could host a show or coach or *something*...

Not for the first time, she wondered if there could have been something between the two of them. She'd never had time to date anyone seriously; there was always a sporting event to be covered. He, on the other hand, had dated a dozen glamorous, famous women over the years.

A freckle-faced teen in clothes three sizes too large joined Trevor behind the counter. Grinning, he said something, smacked Trevor on the back, and then glanced around the store.

JJ dropped her gaze to the shoe in her hand. The thick sole and padding promised a heavenly run.

“Can I help you?” The teen's voice cracked a little as he approached. She turned toward him and noted the look of male appreciation in his eyes.

She'd love a new pair of sneakers. Something light and dreamy. Something that offered support and cushion. She zeroed in to the price tag for the shoe in her hand. One hundred and forty-four dollars.

Her blood pressure spiked.

How many pairs could she buy with nine hundred dollars? Better yet, when would she get the money back? An even better question was *how* had they stolen her credit card number? How had they used it? Was it an inside job?

The bank had only told her that the money had been used for purchases at this store and asked if she'd been in the city or knew anyone who was.

She knew next to nothing about thieves and how they stole things. What she did know was she wanted answers. And justice.

Taking a deep breath she glanced back up at the teen. “No. Thank you.”

“Okay. Well, my shift just ended so if you need something, ask Trevor.” He jerked his thumb, which sported black fingernail polish, toward the counter and then headed toward the door.

*Ask Trevor.*

If there'd been any doubt in her mind about the gorgeous man's identity, the kid had cleared that up.

*Ask Trevor.*

That sounded simple enough. But just what was she going to ask Trevor? Dozens of questions popped into her brain.

How was he doing these days?

What had he been doing since he left the NFL?

Did he miss playing football?

Most importantly she wanted to know why he was working here and where her money had gone.

Deep down, a part of her wanted to know what it would have been like to accept his dinner invitation and see where it led. To see if their chemistry was as explosive as she'd always assumed it would be.

He probably wouldn't recognize her anyway. She'd lost twenty pounds last year thanks to a no carb diet and a new-found love of running. Well, as much as one could love exercise.

Besides, her blond hair was shorter and dark brown now.

She'd made the change when John had taken over the reins at CSN and passed her over for story after story. She even wore brown contacts whenever she went into the office, to tone down the natural blue-gray color so many men found distracting. It was obvious by John's patronizing tone that he hadn't taken her seriously in the beginning despite her portfolio. This trip was proof that her physical changes had helped him see her as one of the guys.

No. Trevor Wyatt wouldn't recognize her.

It wouldn't matter if he did. She couldn't just walk up to him and demand to know where her money was, could she? He probably wouldn't even know. And there was no way she could ask him to dinner. She'd lost her chance. Besides, he was probably involved with someone tall and leggy, curvy in all the right places.

Not that JJ cared. She should leave. Just turn and walk right out the door. Back into the sunlight, away from him, away from the answers she so desperately wanted.

Instead she found herself drifting closer to the counter, as if her feet had a mind of their own. She kept her gaze locked on the rows of shoes covering the wall, floor to ceiling.

Maybe she should just call her bank again. Let them handle it. Yeah, that was a good idea. She could call them from her hotel.

"Let me know if I can get anything from the back for you," a deep, honeyed voice called. She turned toward it and Trevor offered her a brief smile.

Her stomach did a round-off back handspring, back tuck before hula-hooping around her knees. The reaction was nothing new. She always experienced a little physics-defying sensation in her gut when he spoke to her, not to mention a little shortness of breath.

When he looked her up and down, his pensive blue gaze lingering on her legs, her pulse started to hammer. She was used to that, too. And doggonit, she missed it. For whatever inexplicable, undeniable reason, she always felt so alive when he was near. All her senses heightened and everything seemed more acute, more exciting.

"Thanks." She glanced back at the shoes and decided it was time to go.

The sneakers weren't in her price range and she wasn't about to splurge on running shoes when she'd been eating noodles for the last week.

Every spare dime went into fixing up her latest flip, a cute condo in midtown Atlanta. Not that she had many spare dimes at the moment.

Dipping into savings wasn't a possibility. She'd specifically set up savings in CDs and money market funds that she couldn't touch without penalty for years at a time. She knew herself and her impulsiveness, far too well. It's how she'd gotten into flipping properties. Well, that and a persuasive but handy-with-a-hammer stepbrother.

Despite a healthy nest egg, she still lived with the fear of having nothing to eat. Nowhere safe to sleep. Funny how most people couldn't remember their fourth birthday; JJ remembered hers perfectly. She and her mother had been homeless. There were no presents to celebrate four years on the planet. No cake, either.

She turned and started for the door, but Trevor was there reorganizing a table of slip-on sneakers.

“Didn't find anything?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Really? Out of all these shoes...” He glanced around and then his gaze zeroed in on her feet. Inch by inch he surveyed her legs and she thanked the powers that be that told her to wear the black knee length skirt today. And that she'd shaved this morning.

When his eyes skimmed over her hips she resisted the urge to straighten her blouse. But then those sinful blue eyes lingered on her breasts and she felt them swell. Her nipples hardened as if he was actually touching them, and she crossed her arms beneath her chest.

His perusal didn't last long, no more than a few seconds but he was thorough. Very thorough. And her body reacted to him, to his incredible size and obvious strength and dashing good looks. Her breathing grew slightly labored, almost shallow by the time his gaze locked with hers.

Unadulterated interest was etched into his face and she licked her lips nervously.

“You're a runner,” he declared quietly, sounding sure of himself and pleased with the discovery.

She nodded.

“Are you sure there's nothing I can show you? Maybe you'll find something that fits perfectly.”

For a brief moment she thought he was making an innuendo. Of course there was *something* he could show her, and heaven help her, she'd been waiting for years to see how *it* fit.

Heat flared across her cheeks. God, if he only knew what she'd been thinking.

“How about this one? There's even a thirty-percent-off sale.” He held out a backless black and pink sneaker. Unable to help herself, she took it from him and studied it. Flipping it over, she glanced at the price. Twenty-five, with a thirty-percent-off coupon. It was cute and looked like a comfortable knock-around shoe, so she nodded.

“Seven and a half?” he guessed.

She cocked her head to the side and looked at him, then smiled.

“You must see a lot of feet.” That made her wonder just how long he'd been working here to be able to size her up so quickly.

The corners of that come-here-and-kiss-me-mouth turned up and then he headed for the back room. Damn. He was still so graceful for a man his size. And she was still tingling.

She took a seat in a nearby chair and crossed her legs at the ankles. Why were there butterflies doing a break dance in her stomach? It wasn't like she'd never had a good looking man smile at her before. Hell, *this* good looking man had smiled at her before. Dozens of times.

But she hadn't felt this heart stopping, stomach tingling excitement before. Or was it nervousness? She hadn't felt that either.

“Here you go. Seven and a half.” Before she could move, he squatted down in front of her, wrapped a large warm hand around her left leg. His palm slid down to her ankle, awakening every nerve ending along the way, and lifted her foot. His other hand slipped off her ballet flat and she sucked in a breath. The sight was a study in contrast, his skin so much more tanned than hers.

Sensual awareness shot up her legs, bounced around inside her, and then settled heavily in her womb. Her clit actually throbbed, oh-so-ready for his touch. She blinked, hardly able to believe how strong her response was. He could just slide his hands up over her knees, past the hem of her skirt...

She mentally shook herself and stared at the man before her. If she wasn't mistaken, he was thinking about the very same thing. Shamelessly, her knees fell apart, a fraction of an inch, but a fraction nonetheless. A fraction that gave him a better view, if the look on his face was any indication.



Thank God she'd followed rule number one.

A muffled door chime sounded and his head whipped toward the door. Hers did the same and heat crept into her cheeks again. Good grief, what was she thinking? Another customer had just walked in and here she was ready to spread her legs for a man she hadn't seen in over a year. A man who likely didn't even remember her name.

She snapped her knees shut and glanced at the shoe box on the floor. His gaze followed hers and then he reached for the box. Retrieving the shoe, he slipped it onto her foot. For the briefest of instants she felt very Cinderella-esque. A delicious feeling, hopelessly romantic and thoroughly silly, made her giddy.

Then he slipped off her other flat and replaced it with the other backless sneaker. Heaven help her, he had warm hands. And her feet were freezing, not that that was anything new. He must think she was made of ice.

"Test 'em out." He stood and held out his hand. She swallowed hard and placed her palm in his.

*Very warm. Very big. He pulled her up. Very strong.*

And he smelled good. Clean, like soap and detergent mixed with shaving cream. Her insides clenched again.

"I'll be right back," he said, and let her hand drop. He moved off to help the other customer and she walked around. Very comfortable.

The shoes gripped her feet, provided comfort and stability without being too rigid. Not bad for twenty-five bucks.

She'd just decided to get them when the other customer left.

"Sorry about that," he said. She had to look way up to meet his gaze. The sigh on her lips was involuntary but totally appropriate. Gracious, he was handsome. More handsome than she remembered. He'd cut his hair a little shorter but everything else, his size, intensity, potency was just as she remembered.

She licked her lips and tried to form a coherent thought. "No problem. I love these." She pointed a toe and dropped her gaze to admire the shoe.

"Great." He dragged his gaze up from her feet and they stared at each other as he searched her face. "You look familiar."

She smiled. "I'm surprised you recognized me. I interviewed you six years ago."

He visibly stiffened and his easy going charm vanished. "How did you find out I was here?"

His defensiveness would have put her on the offense except he looked so vulnerable. So she grinned up at him. “Sorry gorgeous, but I’m not here for you. I’m in town for the game.”

“And you just happened to walk into my cousin’s store where I’m working for the week?” He sounded doubtful.

“Actually, I came in here because someone stole nine hundred dollars from my bank account and used it to buy shoes at this store,” she said, feeling her irritation flood back.

Deep creases bracketed his handsome mouth. Hands on his hips, he stared her down. “Nice try, lady.”

He didn’t believe her. Arrogant, gorgeous jerk.

She marched over to the chair and put the sneakers back into their box. Then she slipped on her ballet flats and slung her purse over her shoulder. Picking up the box, she headed for the counter.

He looked baffled as he circled around to the register and scanned the bar code.

“Who the hell buys nine hundred dollars’ worth of sneakers? I mean, if you’re going to steal my money, at least buy something awesome...like Prada. Or Manolos. Or Jimmy Choos.” She sighed wistfully, expecting him to crack a smile but his frown stayed firmly in place.

“I’m not giving you an interview.”

“I don’t want an interview. I want my money back.”

“I don’t have your money.”

“Someone here has my money. My bank is looking into it. Then you’ll be out of the money and the product.”

“Why are you here if you don’t want an interview and your bank is looking into it?”

She thought about his question for a few seconds.

“I’ve been eating noodles for the last week thanks to whoever stole from me. So when I got sent to New York this weekend it seemed like serendipity, I suppose. I wanted to see the scene of the crime. I see you have surveillance cameras. I’ll mention it to the bank.”

He braced his hands on the counter and his biceps bulged in a way that made her wet. Those gorgeous blue eyes turned icy as he glared down at her. He looked so formidable that she almost took a step back. Almost. But she’d grown up in a house full of alpha males and she’d learned to hold her ground.

“Are you trying to start trouble?”

She put her hands on the counter and glared right back up at him. “No. Why are you being so ornery?”

“I’m being ornery?” He pointed his finger at her and huffed out a breath. “Listen lady—”

She narrowed her gaze on his finger. “Don’t point your finger at me, you big baboon.”

He dropped his finger, gave a frustrated sigh, and uttered an apology. Running his fingers through his hair, he stalked toward the door that led to the back room.

The chime sounded again. He called out a greeting and then glanced back at her. As if he was worried she’d create a scene, he nodded toward the open door behind him. “Come here.”

The words sounded more like a growl than a request. But something in his voice, or maybe it was the set of his shoulders, made her do his bidding.

He reached for her arm and gently tugged her into the storage area. The touch shot through her awakening any parts he hadn’t already kicked out of dormancy with his smile.

“I’m really not here to do a story on you. Your life is your life. I just want my money back. And barring that” —she glanced toward the door— “those shoes.” She offered him what he hoped was a warm smile.

“If you’re lying to me—”

So much for trying the sweet-talking southern route.

JJ nixed the smile, put her hands on her hips and stared him down. “Just ring up my shoes, please. Then I’ll be out of your hair.”

He searched her face. She saw his hands close at his sides, flex, and close again. How many times had she fantasized about those same hands and what they could do to her body? How much pleasure they could bring, teasing her nipples, fingering her until she was begging him to let her come...

She glanced up at his face again. What was he wrestling with?

And if he didn’t trust her, why was he staring at her lips the way a man dying of thirst stared at a glass of water?

Then in a lightning fast move that had made him a legend on the field, he wrapped his big hands around her waist and hauled her against him. Her breasts crushed against the solid wall of his upper abs and their thighs collided.

Gasping, her hands settled against his chest. The man was built. And ridiculously warm.

She met his gaze and licked her lips. If he was hoping to startle a confession out of her, he'd be waiting a hell of a long time. But if he wanted to hear her beg...

He stared right back. The voice in the back of her mind whispered for her to kiss him. To finally find out what all the fuss was about and verify that he'd been worth every naughty fantasy she'd ever had about him.

As if the invisible force holding them apart snapped, she stretched up and he bent down, their lips meeting in the middle.

Her eyes drifted shut and her breath stalled in her throat. His kiss was hot, firm, rough. Yep, everything she'd always fantasized about. And like him, bigger and bolder than her ordinary ho-hum life. She thrust a hand through his hair, needing to be closer. His tongue speared between her lips and everything feminine inside her melted. *She* melted. Against him, into him, beneath his hot hands that seared through the thin fabric of her blouse.

*Oh God.* He felt so good. Getting lost in his kiss felt so good. So right.

As if suddenly realizing how much time they'd wasted over the years, his big hands moved to the buttons on her blouse, fumbling to get them out of the holes. She couldn't be sure but she thought he was trembling.

That brought out her bolder side. The idea that this man, the man who'd run eighty yards to score the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl, could be unsteady, that there'd be any vulnerability in him whatsoever, was awe inspiring.

JJ dropped her purse to the ground and then sucked on his tongue. His hands stopped their course as he groaned. But he quickly returned to the job, freeing her from her silken prison. After tugging the shirt out of her skirt he splayed his fingers around her waist again, making her feel small and feminine. Then, almost reverently, he slid his hands north and cupped her breasts, testing their weight, tracing the scalloped trim with his fingertips.

Her knees knocked together as he pinched the stiffened peaks. "Oh..." She gasped for breath, feeling a little lightheaded.

Trevor seemed to know instinctively what she needed and how very wet he was making her. He turned and her back met a metal shelving unit. She winced at the pain between her shoulder blades but didn't stop trailing her fingers through his hair.

With his big body holding her there, locked in place, his thumbs continued to torment her nipples with slow circles and steady pressure.

When his lips moved down her jaw, chill bumps coursed over her skin

like wildfire. She shivered against him, clutching him to her. He licked the hollow of her throat and she let out an honest-to-God whimper. Gracious, what was he doing to her?

“You taste like sugar,” he murmured against her skin. “You know what my favorite carnival food is?”

His lips nibbled their way back up to her ear. Oh my—

“Funnel cake?”

“Cotton candy. A mix of the pink and the blue.”

“Sounds sweet. Ahh...” He bit her earlobe gently, tugging just hard enough to bring another flood of moisture between her thighs. At this rate her panties would be soaked before he even got them off her.

“You taste sweeter than you look.”

“Gee, thanks.” She slid her hands down the solid wall of his chest, relishing each wonderful muscle. After all this time, she was finally able to touch him.

“Have you seen yourself lately?” he whispered. “As much as I hate to admit it, I know a thing or two about women's lingerie.”

JJ's temper spiked. “I'll just bet you do.” She pushed him away but he barely moved.

“Seriously.” He leaned back just far enough to stare down at her breasts. “Black lingerie. Scalloped edges. I can almost see through the cups, beautiful. A sweet woman does not wear underwear like this.”

She raised an eyebrow at his assessment. Did that make her a bad girl? She supposed there was a case for that considering her current circumstances.

“It makes me wonder” —he trailed a finger down the valley between her breasts— “if you're wearing matching panties.”

The look in his eyes was pure mischief. She forgot all about her temper as a sultry smile curved her lips. If she was going to be bad, she might as well go all the way.

## THREE

“Well, you could wonder,” she told him, walking her fingers down to the button of his jeans. She wet her lips again. It took all her courage to force the naughty words between her lips and finish the sentence. “Or, you could see for yourself.”

He groaned and dipped his head, kissing her again. The evidence of his desire lay thick and snug between them. Hot and heavy, he took and she gave. Her hands tugged his T-shirt, freeing it from his jeans and then she shoved her hands beneath. His skin was softer than she’d imagined, and hot. Mercy, so hot. She soaked up his warmth, memorizing the feel of all those rock solid muscles rippling beneath her fingertips.

Suddenly he was pulling back, stepping away from her. When his hands dropped from her waist she fell forward a step.

Then she heard it. Someone rang the bell on the counter. Trevor sucked in a ragged breath that spoke to just how carried away they’d been. His blue eyes blazed with passion.

“I’ll—”

She nodded. “Take care of business,” she told him. Then her gaze dropped to his crotch. The tight fitting denim didn’t hide his current condition. Not one little bit.

She couldn’t help but grin. She’d done that to him. The knowledge sent a jolt of pleasure through her. It was good to have a little power over the man, because she found him absolutely magnetic. Deciding to tease him just a little more, she licked her lips one more time.

He groaned again and jerked open the button of his jeans. His fingers moved to his fly and her pulse spiked.

“Don't get too excited,” he muttered, obviously irritated at the interruption. Then, with jerky movements, he repositioned himself and righted his jeans. The shirt barely hid the bulge. Her smile turned to a smirk. His warning came too late; she was thoroughly excited.

JJ turned away, afraid that in her current state she'd throw herself into his arms and demand he take her right here and now, other customers be damned. *He has a job to do.* She mentally repeated the mantra three more times for good measure, taking a deep breath.

“I'll be back in a minute.” He leaned in so close that his breath tickled the back of her neck. “And when I come back, I'm going to give you a taste of your own medicine, you teasing little temptress.”

Holy moly; that was one hot visual. Six feet, four inches of prime male with a raging, and by the look of it, very large, hard-on. Teasing and tempting *her.*

From the corner of her eye, she saw him grab a box from the shelf and hold it in front of his crotch.

A moment later she heard his deep voice as he spoke with the customer. One minute turned to two. Then three. She walked to the end of the storage room, hands on her cheeks. What had she been thinking? Kissing him like that?

True, he'd made the first move. But she'd kissed him, just like he'd kissed her. Full on, tongue-on-tongue action. Hell, she'd been waiting to do that with him for years. Since the first moment she'd seen him across the locker room. Since the first interview question. Since she'd seen him standing behind the counter of this shoe store.

No, there was no lack of desire on her part.

But here? Now? In the back of his cousin's shoe store? When he was on the clock and she was in town for her own job?

Maybe they could meet up later. For dinner. Yes. Dinner sounded good. Sensible.

But then, was anything about this...no, this wasn't a relationship. She'd spent all of a few hours with this man in her entire life if you added it all up. That wasn't a relationship. Those blissful few hours barely qualified as an acquaintance. No, she'd call it what it was. An affair. A brief affair. A rendezvous.

Whatever she called it, there was nothing sensible about it. Not remotely. Her mother would be horrified. She could hear her voice now.

*Making out with some man in the back of a shoe store? Really Julia. I raised you better than that. You're not in high school.*

No. She certainly wasn't in high school. They didn't make men like Trevor Wyatt in high school. It took college and then years on the pro football field to create a man as heavenly as Trevor Wyatt.

And that was the crux of the problem. He ignited a fire within her that no other man ever had. It blazed hot. Fast. Burned like an inferno. One she had no chance of extinguishing.

Rolling her shoulders, she tried—and failed—to relax. Who was she kidding? The only thing that would relax her at this point was one heck of an orgasm.

She took another deep breath, let it out through her mouth, and leaned against the table. When he came back, she'd suggest dinner. Dinner, and then he could come back to her hotel. Was that sleazy? Based on the way he'd grilled her earlier, she seriously doubted he'd want her coming back to his place.

Thinking of his earlier interrogation irked her all over again. She wasn't on the job right this minute and it bugged her that he didn't take her at her word. On the other hand, if he didn't recognize her, how could he know? Why would he trust her?

And just what made him think that he was worth a story after all this time? He'd made it very clear that he was done with football, his private life was private, and he wasn't answering any questions. Just what had happened during that accident?

Her nerve endings spoke up then. *He's definitely worth a story*, they sang in unison. A full page, cover story in Playgirl magazine. With centerfold!

TREVOR FLIPPED the sign hanging in the window to “closed” and flipped the lock. He couldn't handle any more interruptions. He'd lusted after Julia Fairchild since the moment he laid eyes on her six years ago.

At the time, she'd been a junior reporter, working the locker room with poise and grace that belied her years or position. Every straight guy in the joint had hit on her. And when they weren't hitting on her they were checking out her assets. Trevor was guilty of that himself.

He'd asked her out all those years ago and she'd turned him down flat. Even now, the disappointment pricked him. Why hadn't she said yes? By the



way she'd combusted in his arms moments ago, it was obvious that she was attracted to him. Hadn't she been attracted to him back then?

Or was this all part of a scam? An attempt to get the scoop on why he'd left the field? The thought burned his gut like acid.

He stalked back into the storage room and found her leaning against the table at the far wall. She'd rebuttoned her shirt. Was she leaving? That was probably for the best, but damn if disappointment didn't stab him again.

"Sorry that took so long." Story or no story, he realized as he saw the look of uncertainty fade from her eyes, he wanted her wrapped around him like chocolate on a strawberry.

She smiled at him then, the come-hither smile of a woman who was happy...and horny. His disappointment dissolved as he stepped toe to toe with her. She stared up at him for a long moment and he saw the war inside her. What were the options she was weighing? He hoped whatever they were the outcome would be in his favor.

She reached for him, fisting her hand in the front of his T-shirt, pulling his head down for another kiss that sent all his blood rushing back to his cock. Damn, that was hot. Normally, take charge, aggressive women were a turnoff, but she was a perfect mixture of dominant and submissive.

Her breathy little moans drove him crazy. Did she know how those little sounds affected him? How he'd lay awake weeks from now, hearing them in his mind?

He ground himself against her, showing her what words couldn't.

"Trevor..." She whispered against his lips but got lost in the kiss.

He grinned, liking that he could distract her so easily. She was a woman of words. But right now, he wanted her actions. Her lips beneath his, opening for him. Accepting him. He wanted her breasts, flushed, full, with hard little nipples stabbing his hands.

She jerked his shirt up and slipped her hands beneath. He shuddered at the feel of her cool fingertips skimming over his skin.

He fumbled with the top button on her blouse.

"Why'd you go and do that?" he murmured, ducking to kiss the thumping pulse point in her throat.

"What?" Her voice was husky.

He searched for the words but failed to find them. "This," he said, indicating the buttons he had to undo again. He was tempted to give the deep teal-colored shirt a good yank and send the damn things flying.

Instead he cupped her breasts, wishing he could will the fabric away so that nothing separated them.

“Sorry.”

“I’ll just have to unwrap you again.” He kissed her neck again.

“Mmm.” She hooked her thumbs under the hem of his shirt and shoved it up to his chest. He shrugged out of it and tossed it over his shoulder. After looking his fill, he leaned into her again, but she put up a hand, holding him off.

“What?”

Her gaze dropped to his chest, then his abs, and back up to his shoulders. It was obvious by the heat in her gaze and the curve of her lips that she liked what she saw. A lot.

He didn’t remember her having brown eyes though. And her hair was darker. That’s what had thrown him off when he’d first seen her in the store. He’d be sure to ask her about it. Later.

*Much, much later.*

Impatient, he wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her onto the table. With her shirt gaping open, he memorized every curve.

She was neither rail-thin nor overweight. Her waist was small, made smaller perhaps by the extra seductive flare of womanly hips. Her abs were smooth, which suited him just fine.

He detested six packs on women. To him, the female form should be soft, lush, feminine, just begging to be cradled and cuddled. He didn’t want to risk getting nailed in the nads with a protruding hip bone.

Letting his hands follow his gaze, he trailed his fingers over her smooth skin and gripped her hips. He kneaded her flesh for a moment, loving the feel of her. So warm and real. The little gasp that escaped her lips drove his hands north again. What would it take to get her to make that sound again?

The heavy swells of her breasts in that tempting see-through number made his mouth water. He cupped the mounds, flicking his thumbs over the hard little points at the center. Damn, she was responsive.

“You’re every jock’s dream come true, you know that, don’t you?”

She laughed. It was a light, airy sound with a hint of disbelief. “Why do you say that?”

“I figured you female journalists wore white cotton. And you’ve been hiding this delicious package all these years.”

Her gasp echoed in his ears.

Not to mention, she loved football. Five points for the lingerie. And five more for loving his favorite sport. Her tally was adding up.

Lips curved up at the edges, she pushed the shirt sleeves down her arms. The black fabric of her bra made her creamy skin seem more intense. Her smile ratcheted up a notch as she reached back and unfastened her bra.

“That's my job,” he murmured.

“Too slow,” she said simply.

Damn. He loved her sass. “Vixen.”

The fabric loosened and he wasted no time pulling the straps over her shoulders and down her arms revealing her beautiful breasts. Her nipples were hard and dusty pink. Trevor realized it was a damn good thing he'd never gone to dinner with her. If he'd been lucky enough to score one night with her, he'd have had a hell of a time concentrating on the next game, knowing she might be in the stands. Forget catching a football. He'd have gotten himself killed. And it would have been all her fault.

Right now he wanted to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off to his bed and never let her out again. The primitive urge surprised him. But, he realized as he looked down at her lovely body, nothing should surprise him when it came to Julia Fairchild.

Smoothing a hand up his chest, she studied him closely, almost like she was painting him with a virtual paint brush. The dreamy look in her eyes told him she liked what she saw.

She flicked his left nipple with her thumbnail, sending a jolt through him. He trapped her arms behind her, holding her wrists together with one hand while bracing himself over her with his other.

“Playing with fire, beautiful.”

“I like the sound of that.”

He stole a quick kiss before heading south to the most perfect tits he'd ever seen. Perky but not plastic-surgery perfect. Taut, with small nipples made for sucking. He put his theory to the test and closed his lips over the nearest peak.

*Divine.*

He flicked it with the tip of his tongue, reveling in her breathy gasps and the way her belly trembled. She squirmed in his grasp.

“Trevor...”

“What?” he asked, barely letting her breast slip from his lips.

She didn't respond.

“Did you want something, sweetheart? All you have to do is ask.”

## FOUR

For a moment JJ thought of the freckle-faced teenager and his instruction to “ask Trevor” should she need anything. And here Trevor was, telling her the same thing. As if everything and anything in life was hers for the taking, if only she had the courage to ask for it.

But it was so hard to utter the words. To tell him what she wanted...needed. Words were her living and she wasn't a prude.

Trevor's lips twitched. “I never would have pegged you as the shy type.”

“I'm not shy,” she defended. *Was* she shy? She didn't think so. She could walk into a locker room full of naked men and not bat an eyelash. Okay, so that was a teensy white lie. She would totally blink. And then try not to stare.

“Then what is it?” He knelt on the floor and kissed her stomach. “Inexperience, maybe?” For a second, worry flickered in his gaze.

Oh good heavens...he didn't think she was a virgin, did he? She frowned. While she didn't have the little black book of a star NFL player, she'd had sex before. Not out-of-this-world sex, but pleasurable nonetheless. She always read Cindy's latest erotica release and the good Lord knew that had opened JJ's eyes. No, she wasn't a blushing virgin...

“It's not that...I just have trouble...expressing myself.”

Always had. Even though she wanted to be one of those women who could turn her man on with a naughty suggestion, she'd always found it hard. And the one time she'd tried, her boyfriend had laughed at her “corny words.”

*Asshat.*

Trevor barked out a laugh of disbelief but his smile warmed her from the inside out. “You? Ms. Words? Have trouble expressing yourself? I don't

believe it.”

“Just because I’m a writer doesn’t mean I express myself well...in...”

“In bed?” he finished for her.

She nodded.

“We’ll just have to work on that, then won’t we?” An eyebrow lifted in challenge, and something fluttered inside her. Hope, lust, she wasn’t sure.

She wanted to tell him to get back to what he’d been doing, but couldn’t force the words between her lips. Telling him how hot he was? No problem. Telling him she needed him? No problem. It was the specifics, the naughty words that tied her tongue.

He chuckled to himself and dipped his head. “Want something?” His mouth hovered just above her left breast, blowing a steady stream of hot air over her nipple.

“Yes...” she hissed.

“Say it, Julia.”

Shock and pleasure bubbled through her. “Y-you remembered my name.”

“Of course. Just because you colored your hair and put in those silly contacts and dropped a few pounds doesn’t mean I’d forget you.”

Her mouth dropped open.

He groaned.

“I—I can’t believe you recognized me.”

“It’s your lips,” he murmured, staring at them. “The one trait you can’t change. The one part I could never forget.”

“Oh—”

Holy smokes, that was hot. And with him staring at her lips like he was making a three dimensional scan, she got even wetter.

“Now...” He ducked his head and resumed his position a fraction of an inch above the tip of her breast. “You were telling me what you want.”

“I...I can’t—”

“Sure you can.” His tongue snaked between his lips, taunting her. He was so close. Just teasing her. He’d given her a taste of what to expect, shown her how good his mouth felt on her tender flesh, the way her body responded to his tongue, his lips, the delicious suction. And now he was just teasing her. Tormenting her.

Just as he’d promised he would.

“Just open those sexy lips and say ‘Trevor, I want your mouth on my breast.’”

A harsh laugh escaped her. "You're incorrigible."

"Mmm...big word. Not the right one, sweetheart. Say it. Ask me."

His command made her even wetter. It was all one big mind game and whether he knew it or not, it was making her hot. And courageous. His words, the way his hands held her where he wanted her, even the way he teased her.

"I want your mouth...on my...breast."

"What's my name, beautiful?"

She rolled her eyes.

"Trevor."

"Now put it all together."

Frustrating man!

"Would you just shut up and get back to it already?"

He laughed, loud and long. The rich sound was infectious, making her feel happier than she had in months. Then he dipped his head and pulled the aching peak into his mouth, laving it with his tongue, rolling it over and over. She arched her back, wishing she could wrap her arms around him, run her fingers through his hair. But he still had her wrists trapped behind her back and wouldn't let her touch him.

Frustrating...gorgeous...talented man.

"Mmm."

She let her head drop back, enjoying the pull of his lips. And oh... He raked his teeth down her breast. What sweet, delicious friction. Her thighs closed, squeezing his torso. Another chuckle rumbled out of his I-can-bench-press-your-car chest.

"We'll get to that in a minute, beautiful."

"This is torture, you know that? I never knew you had this kind of patience."

"The reward will be that much sweeter."

Oh, he'd better be right. She'd never felt like she could spontaneously combust before. But as it was, she had a full body fever going on.

Her eyes closed as he switched to her other breast. A few moments of his attention led her to a singular conclusion. He was a master. She'd never been more turned on. His voice, his eyes, watching her, his hot mouth suckling her breasts...all together it made her toes curl in her shoes.

His hands moved to her skirt, pushing it up. "Now, to see if you're one of *those* women." His grin was irresistible. No wonder he'd had such a long

string of women following him around over the years.

“One of those women?”

An eyebrow quirked upward.

It annoyed her, that he'd twice made mention of what type of woman she was. Did she have to be a specific type? Fall into a specific box? Couldn't she just be herself? Loved for everything she was and everything she wasn't? Scratch that. This wasn't the time to bring the L word into it.

“Are you the type who has to have matching underwear?”

Okay, so she *was* one of *those* women. But dang it, she liked wearing pretty things under her clothes. Sometimes, like today, she got to dress nicely, but most days she was in jeans and a T-shirt. Some jobs required her to wear a jersey.

Wearing a sexy little demi bra with matching panties gave her an ego boost. The delicate lingerie made her feel feminine and when she was surrounded by sports-loving testosterone-filled men; she needed every reminder that she was a woman. A desirable woman.

“Well,” she said, grabbing ahold of her courage, “what are you waiting for, stud?”

TREVOR GRINNED and shoved Julia's skirt to her hips. A tiny scrap of sheer black fabric concealed her womanly folds.

“So what type of woman am I?” she asked. There was something in her voice that betrayed her confident exterior and Trevor knew that somehow they'd left the fun-and-frisky sex behind and were now entering something deeper. Much more dangerous. If only he'd kept his trap closed.

“You're a beautiful woman.” He kissed the inside of her knee. “Sexy.” Then each thigh. “Lovely.” And finally, when he'd worked his way up to the apex of her thighs, he placed a kiss at her center.

“So, are you going to ask me for what you want or are you going to make me figure it out?” he asked.

She pursed her lips in a sexy little pout. “You're a resourceful guy. You figure it out.”

“I'd rather hear you beg.”

He hooked his fingers over her panties and tugged them down her legs. Good God, she was beautiful. Smooth skin, trim curls.

He swallowed. Wet curls.



She smelled like vanilla and sex, a heady combination. He pulled her hips to the edge of the table. "I told you my favorite carnival treat is cotton candy. Know why?"

"Because it's sweet."

"Because it melts on my tongue." He kissed the inside of her thigh and then glanced up at her. "Will you melt on my tongue, Julia?"

Her gasp was the single most erotic sound he'd ever heard and it echoed through his mind, making his cock twitch. She pulled her lower lip between her teeth. So unsure. And yet, so beautiful.

His cock was hard as a damn rock and he didn't know how much longer he could keep teasing her like this without losing his control.

But he knew that she needed teasing. Somehow this woman, this captivating woman, who had a way with words, was shy in the bedroom but there was something about her, the look of concentration perhaps, that told him she needed, desperately needed to come out of her shell. And dammit, he wanted to be the guy that brought out that side of her nature. The man who taught her how to ask for what she wanted. And then he wanted to be the guy to give it to her.

He used one hand to part her lower lips and his other to spread her juices. "You're beautiful, you know that? Pink and shiny. Like a fruit that I can't wait to devour." He saw her swallow and decided to press her. "Tell me what you want, Julia."

She stared down at him for several long seconds, worrying that lip in a way that made him want to kiss her. Kiss it. Run his tongue along the impression she was making with her teeth until she let him into her mouth.

Good grief, she had to cave soon so he could drink his fill. He was close to begging her...

She stared into his eyes, then licked her lips. "I want your mouth...on me." He could tell that admission had taken a lot of her courage.

But he wanted her to go farther, to embrace it. He kissed the inside of her thigh again. How far could he push her? And would she hate him for it?

He ducked his head until his breath was teasing her slippery folds. "This is what you want? You want my mouth right here on your beautiful pussy?"

He could tell by her startled gasp that his words had shocked her.

"Don't tell me you're a prude, princess." Their eyes locked.

"I'm not a prude, your highness. I can say cock with the best of 'em. Heaven knows I've seen enough of 'em in the locker room to last me a

lifetime.”

“You've never seen mine.” He was ninety-nine percent certain he'd never been naked in her presence. If he had, and he'd known it, he was sure he'd have made a fool of himself for all his teammates to see.

“Are you going to show it to me?”

His jaw almost dropped. But he caught himself in time to utter, “If you ask nicely.” Her nostrils flared. And then her cheeks turned a charming shade of pink.

They stared at each other for a few long seconds before they both burst out laughing.

“Pretty please,” she whispered. That look of uncertainty filled her eyes as her cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red.

Deciding to forgo the pleasure of eating her out, he stood up. Unable to help himself, he leaned back in for a scorching kiss and quickly got swept away. Her hands moved to his fly and after a few too many heartbeats he was free. His hands joined hers and he pushed his jeans and boxers down to his knees.

He needed her now. With a single minded determination that had made him as famous as his touch down dances, he slid a hand between her legs and dipped a finger into her. Tight and slippery, he worked his finger in and out a few times. Added another. Thrust them deeper.

Fuck. Just fingering her made him ready to shoot off.

They were so close, all he had to do was pucker and he could kiss her. As if reading his thoughts, she pulled his lower lip between her teeth and his cock jerked toward her. And since he'd let go of her arms, her hands caressed his skin with an urgency that stole his breath.

She reached for his cock and closed her hands around him. Cool but strong fingers caressed the length of him and he gasped. She took advantage, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. A zing of surprise traveled down his spine. He liked this side of her. A lot. Playful, sensual, taking rather than being a passive bystander. Damn, he couldn't wait to delve inside her.

He pulled back long enough to remember protection.

“Damn.”

“What?”

“I don't have a condom.”

“Damn,” she echoed in that sweet, southern drawl.

If his balls hadn't been turning blue, he would have laughed at her pitch

perfect declaration that mirrored his frustration to a T.

Slowly and with great effort, he removed his fingers from the warm, slick center of her body. Rather than look at her and all that he was missing, he backed up and turned away. Mentally he calculated the distance to the nearest drugstore. He didn't live in this part of the city anymore, but he thought there was one three blocks up.

Who was he kidding? Julia Fairchild deserved more than a quick lay in the back of an old shoe store. But Lord if she wasn't his teenage fantasy come to life. He'd worked in this shop every summer from the time he was sixteen until he went to college. He'd imagined, more than once, a beautiful girl coming through the front door and stealing him off to the back room to have her wicked way with him.

But that was the kicker. Julia was more than a fantasy. She was the real deal. Warm, willing woman. The woman he'd always had a little thing for.

Back room shagging wasn't how he wanted their first time to be, despite what his cock said.

Hoping his balls would forgive him, he took a deep breath to steel himself and turned back to her. She stared up at him with big, expressive eyes.

She was waiting for him to find the solution. He just hoped she'd approve.

Bending over, he retrieved her panties. Good Lord, they were minuscule. And see through. And *wet*.

Biting back a groan, he held them out to her. "Put these on and button up."

She looked more than a little disappointed. "Why?"

"I'm taking you to dinner." Something he should have done a long time ago.

## FIVE

### *Las Vegas*

CINDY SMITH STARED out at the Vegas strip, excitement bubbling through her. It'd been three weeks since she'd seen Adam and their parting kiss had been on her mind ever since. Some moments she still couldn't believe what she'd done. How she'd gone from teaching the tech support guy a lesson to having sex on his desk. Then going to dinner with him followed by a long night of horizontal (and vertical) activity in her hotel room.

The knock at the door pulled her back from memory land and she strode over to look through the peephole. Adam's dark brown hair, brilliant blue eyes and kissable lips filled her view. She flipped the lock, slid out the safety chain, and wrenched open the door.

"Hi," she said, smiling and ready to throw herself into his arms.

So much for playing it cool, Cindy.

He took two steps forward to close the space between them. She heard him drop something to the floor an instant before he pulled her against him. Without the added height from her high heels, she had to tip her head back a little to look up at him. "Hi yourself," he said, and then he kissed her.

Not a sweet "I've missed you" kiss, but hard and demanding. It curled her toes and made her lose her head. He turned her and she felt the wall at her back.

ADAM ANCHORED her against the wall with his hips while his hands traveled her body, familiarizing himself with her curves again. Damn, he'd missed her. More than he thought it possible to miss a woman. Boy, had he been wrong.

She threaded her fingers through his hair, keeping his lips against hers. He spent too much time working to date a lot, but he'd never been kissed the way she kissed him. Like she wanted to be as close to him as humanly possible. Like she never wanted to be separated and didn't care if she never breathed again.

He nipped her lower lip and was rewarded with a throaty moan.

Who would have thought the gorgeous bombshell who'd stormed into his office with the force of a hand grenade would be back in Vegas, in his arms?

He'd promised himself they'd go slow this time around. Dinner. Talking. Maybe even take in the sights. His cock obviously had other plans. But for once, he was overriding that part of his anatomy.

With all the willpower he possessed, he severed the kiss. That didn't stop her lips from trailing down his jaw. Hot damn, that made him shiver. From the beginning, she seemed to know just how to touch him. Just what to do to drive him slowly out of his mind.

He was looking forward to returning the favor.

"You smell good," she moaned against his throat, pressing hot kisses against his skin.

"So do you." Like cherries.

He took a step back. "I brought you a present."

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth and let it slide out slowly. Then she gave him a coy smile. "For me?"

He reached for the large shopping bag and headed for the small round table in the corner. She came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. They'd talked on the phone every night since she left. And although she still refused to tell him her real name, he'd done some sleuthing.

He didn't like deception, but he understood her reasons for keeping her privacy intact. After all, he was just some guy she'd met and messed around with one weekend. And just because he lived and worked in Vegas didn't make the old "what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas" any less true.

At least not until she'd come back to be with him again.

He knew all about her girlfriends, her apartment, her family, even her orange and white cat, Gizmo. And he'd shared plenty about himself as well.

Their relationship reminded him of his grandmother's stories about the nice boy she'd met just before he'd left for the war and how they'd gotten to know each other through letters. The nice young boy, by then a man, had come back from the war and immediately asked her to marry him.

Adam realized that without a physical connection—when there was nothing but phones, emails, text messaging, and the occasional video chat—there was a lot of time for 'getting to know each other.'

Which made him curious why she was still being mysterious about her identity after three weeks. He felt like they'd moved past the awkward "this is new" phase and were friends. And lovers. Definitely lovers.

He pulled a small vase of purple flowers out first.

"Freesia..." she said on a sigh and dipped her face closer to the fragrant blooms. "My favorite."

"I remember." He remembered everything she said. Like the fact that each spring she and her girlfriends went and got matching pedicures. *Happy toes*, they called them, because each toe was painted a different, bright, fun color. He remembered that Gizmo had been a stray, taken in by a rescue organization and loved being spoiled even though she still relished gutting her toys.

He pulled a canvas mouse with a long yarn tail out of the bag next. "Something for Gizmo."

Her lovely eyes beamed up at him and her smile tipped his world. "Thank you." She sounded breathless and full of joy. "She'll love it!"

"Now something for us." He pulled out a bottle of wine and two plastic cups. She'd told him about how she and her friends liked to try a new wine each week. While he was more of a hard cider guy, a glass of wine with a beautiful woman was no hardship. Especially when it made her grin like that. "Should we order some dinner to go with this?"

"Are you on the menu?" she asked, shifting so her hips met his.

"I'm dessert," he murmured against her upturned lips. "Now stop trying to distract me."

She frowned, sticking out her lower lip. Damn she was adorable. Beautiful and adorable. What a combination.

He poured the wine and reached around her for the menu. "They have chicken marsala," he said, knowing it was one of her favorites. "What else looks good?"

Still pouting, she turned and looked down at the menu. "Mmm... Bacon

cheeseburger with barbecue sauce.”

“I’ll get that, then. We can share.”

She looked up at him again with that expression he couldn’t quite decipher. The frown was gone and her eyes were soft and dreamy.

He settled himself onto the bed, glass between his legs and reached for the phone to place the order. She curled up next to him and sipped her wine as he talked with the kitchen.

“This is really good. I’ll have to make a note for next time the girls are over,” she said as he hung up.

“Good. Glad you like it.” He took a sip. “Now,” he turned toward her. “Are you ever going to tell me your real name?”

CINDY TOOK a long sip of her wine before turning to the man at her side.

“You remember that book you were looking at? The day we met...”

At the time she’d told him her name was Athena to protect her identity and add a hint of mystery to the experience. And he’d asked her a half dozen times since then, but she had a feeling he’d already figured it out. It wasn’t like she’d kept many other details of her life a secret.

Just her name and occupation.

But he was one smart cookie. Who would have thought she’d be so into geeks? She’d obviously underestimated brain power.

He nodded.

She had a feeling he’d already put two and two together. “That’s me. Cindy Smith. Erotica author.”

The corner of his lips turned up. “See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“You already knew, didn’t you?”

“Just because you set up a new email address didn’t mean you could hide, babe.”

She let out a fake frustrated sigh and bumped her shoulder against his.

“You’re not mad, are you?”

She shook her head. “But I should be. Then we could have make up sex.”

Those masterful lips turned into an outright grin that made her heart ache a little as it pounded in her chest. She reached up and pressed a hand over the thundering organ. How did he do that?

He finished his wine, set the glass aside and then turned back to her. “Sounds good to me.”

He quickly saved her glass from a certain spill and then pulled her beneath him. Giggling, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him. He ducked his head and proceeded to kiss her into oblivion. When there was a loud knock at the door, they came up for air. Groaning, he pressed a kiss against her forehead and then shoved off the bed.

Already? That had to be the fastest damn room service in history. Blowing out a sigh, she combed her fingers through her hair and sat up. A minute or so later he had the table set and the delicious scent of chicken marsala hit her.

“Smells delicious,” she said, taking the seat he held for her. A gentleman. Who knew they still existed under the age of fifty? The girls would be delighted to hear that.

The question was, would he keep it up? Was chivalry ingrained in him or was he simply romancing her?

Pondering the question and wondering why men like the heroes she wrote about didn't seem to really exist outside her novels, she took a bite. And moaned.

“Best room service ever.”

He cut the hamburger down the middle and offered her half. Maybe he *was* born a gentleman. She gave him half of her chicken and pasta.

“You're right.” He said a moment later, those clear blue eyes rolling back in his head. She liked that he obviously enjoyed food as much as she did.

“Fries are a tad over done.” But it's not like that'd stop her from indulging.

She was all about portion control and out-of-this-world flavor.

“I'm glad you came back out here,” he said and topped off her wine.

“Me too.” She wouldn't be able to claim this trip on her taxes since it wasn't the least bit work related, but that didn't matter.

“I'd like to come visit you some time. When things settle back down at work...”

“Settle back down?” She swiped one of the fries off his plate and started munching.

“Well, this crazy, beautiful woman stalked into my office a few weeks ago and tied me up. She demanded that my company provide better customer service,” he said in a droll tone.

“You're kidding,” she said in mock horror.

“What happened?”



He grinned across the table, the look setting her insides on fire. He was absolutely dazzling. Geeky, dazzling, and thoughtful. Perhaps she had the heroes in her books all wrong.

“You know what happened,” he said quietly, his voice a little tight. She kicked off her shoe and ran her foot up the inside of his leg. Sure enough, he was hard as a rock. Feeling the long, steely length of him brought a flood of moisture between her thighs.

“I meant after that. With work?”

“I brought it up with my coworkers. And we took it up with the boss.”

“You don’t sound like it went well.”

He pursed his lips and reached for his wine.

“That bad, huh?”

“He’s an asshole. Just wants the money, not to run a decent company.”

“So why do you work there?”

“Because it pays well. The hours are good. Gives me time to work on pet projects. Some buddies and I want to open our own company one of these days.”

“A hosting company?”

He nodded.

She thought about that while she ate. He certainly was smart enough. Not only computer smart, he had pretty good business sense from what she’d gathered. But she didn’t know the first thing about setting up a hosting company. She liked the determination in his eyes. And the way he’d rallied to provide better customer service, even if it got him into trouble.

Each night they talked, she grinned along with him as he recounted some of the issues from the day. Some of them made her feel better about herself. At least she knew what kind of computer she had and didn’t reply with “black.”

“You should do it,” she said as she finished half of the hamburger. She’d have to find something to wrap up the rest so she could stick it in the small refrigerator.

“One day.”

“Have you thought about buying him out?”

He paused, mid-chew. Then he shook his head. He ate in silence for a few more minutes and she could see the wheels turning in his head. Every so often he’d glance out the window and his eyes would track back and forth.

She smiled. He was working out a plan.

## SIX

### *New York City*

THEY DIDN'T MAKE it to dinner.

JJ wanted to smack her boss for interrupting her evening, but when the new owner of the New York Wolves was available to answer questions, John tripped over himself to get JJ there on time.

No sooner had Trevor declared he was taking her to dinner than her phone had beeped, alerting her to a text message. She hadn't even gotten her blouse rebuttoned, ever aware of Trevor's gaze on her, before the frustrating device rang in her purse.

Worse than being interrupted, her head wasn't in the interview. No matter how hard she'd tried to focus on Ricky Mathers and his answers to her questions, her mind wandered back to Trevor. She'd never experienced such intensity before. Never felt like the very center of a man's universe. He'd looked at her like he wanted to lick her from head to toe and back again.

When Ricky had uttered the word *catch*, all she could think of was what a catch Trevor Wyatt was. Even retired from the spotlight and no longer wearing those skintight, ass-hugging— She stopped that train of thought and blew out a sigh. Yeah, a woman would be crazy not to want him.

Every time Ricky had said *football*, she remembered the magazine photo of Trevor, butt-naked save for the nerf football he held in front of his naughty bits. Well, that and the devil-may-care smile.

It was probably one of the most famous photos the animals rights group

had ever published...with good reason.

Finally done with the interview, she headed out to the street. She clutched her phone in one hand and hailed a cab with the other. A courier whizzed by and JJ jumped back, clutching her chest. Crazy New Yorker. Her phone beeped and she momentarily gave up the task of flagging down a taxi as she checked the text message.

*GREG: Got the paint for your deck. Will head over tomorrow before the game to get it done. - g*

GREG WAS THE BEST. Her brother worked hard to help them both make money at this whole house flipping thing. She liked to think she had good taste and put together a cozy home. The buyers of their last four places had confirmed that. But Greg was the muscle. And he wasn't afraid of hitting his thumb with a hammer.

She hit the empty bubble at the bottom of the screen to reply.

*JJ: thanks. Can't wait to see it. Ordered the knobs for the kitchen on monday. Should be there soon.*

THEY LIKED to wait until close to their listing date before freshening up the exterior paint. Since the inside had been painted weeks ago, the deck was the last item on the To Paint list.

A yellow cab pulled to the curb and she hopped inside just as her phone beeped again.

*GREG: k. Let me know when they get there and i'll help you install.*

ONCE THEY'D INSTALLED the knobs, all that was left to do was stage the condo and put it on the market. That was always the nerve-wracking part. They'd been really lucky so far and she hoped their luck would hold.

She exited the texting app and clicked on the phone icon. How many hours had it been since Trevor had stood with her in front of the shoe store and flagged down a cab? As it had pulled to the curb, he'd reached for her phone and programmed his number into it. That felt like a lifetime ago.

The fact that Trevor Wyatt's personal number was in her contacts...it was surreal. Despite the fact that she'd interviewed dozens of pro athletes, he was the one who made her starstruck.

She clicked his number.

"I thought you'd never get done," he said by way of greeting.

"Me either."

"Where are you now?"

"In the back of the cab. You?"

"At the store. Closed up properly."

She giggled and lowered her voice. "You mean you don't normally flip the lock in the middle of the afternoon and sneak women into the back room?"

"You're the first."

Gracious, he knew how to stroke a woman's ego...among other things.

"Did you eat?" he asked.

"No. You?"

"Nope. I know the perfect place." He rattled off an address and she relayed it to the driver.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I'll be waiting," came the deep reply that made her stomach quiver.

True to his word, Trevor was waiting for her in the very back booth of the charming Italian restaurant. She would have missed it if it hadn't been for Trevor. The space was tucked away and authentic looking. Not packed or posh, but quiet and the hostess was friendly. She didn't even stare at Trevor as she escorted JJ to their table.

He rose as they approached. "Thanks, Dani."

JJ started to slide into the booth across from him but he shot out a hand. "Come sit next to me."

She smiled as she scooted across the old vinyl. "I don't know," she murmured as he slid in next to her, his arm brushing hers. "You might try to

take advantage of me.”

“Always.”

His cocky response did amazing things to her insides. Warm, tingly, and wet already? That was a record for her.

“What’s good here?” she asked.

“Everything. Especially the stuff that’s not on the menu.”

He put his arm on the back of the seat, amplifying the cozy atmosphere. She glanced up from the laminated menu, straight into those intense blue eyes that had haunted her dreams for the last five years.

“Mr. Wyatt, are you making a pass?”

“I’m the receiver, baby. And while I’m sure you’re delicious, I was talking about Antonio’s secret meatballs. I can’t tell you what’s in them, but they are to die for.”

“That’s what I want, then. I’m a big fan of meatballs.”

He groaned and his arm slipped down to her waist, pulling her up against him. She’d be lying if she said she didn’t adore the feel of all those muscles.

“You feel so good against me,” he whispered in her ear.

“You know how to make a woman melt.”

“Don’t melt yet, gorgeous. I want to get you back to your hotel where I can make you melt all over my tongue,” he whispered in her ear, sending a shiver over her shoulders. The hand curling over her hip emphasized his words and she trembled against him. If he kept talking like that—

Thank God their waitress showed up. She was hungry, and not just for food. But that would have to do for now. “Ice water, please.”

“Same for me,” Trevor said.

“Do you know what you want or do you need another minute?”

Trevor turned to her and lifted an eyebrow.

“I’ve heard I should ask for Antonio’s secret meatballs,” she told the waitress.

“Would you like a salad with that?”

JJ glanced at the warm gooey garlic rolls on the table. She should really get the salad and forget about the fantasy-inspired-carbs calling her name from the vat of golden butter. But as far as she was concerned, she was on vacation for the rest of the day and if she had a roll or two plus her dinner... maybe a dessert...nope. No room for veggies.

“Just the balls, please.”

Trevor groaned again. “Me too,” he croaked up at the waitress. The

instant she was gone, he turned back to JJ and slipped his right hand between her thighs.

“Trevor!” she whispered fiercely.

It might be late, but they were still in public.

“You can’t talk like that baby. You make me hard and a little crazy.”

“I think you’ve always been a little crazy,” she replied with a smile.

“Honey, you have no idea. I’ve been half out of my mind since the moment I met you.”

JJ froze. What?

He couldn’t be serious. She turned toward him, the movement causing her legs to part and he quickly took advantage. She growled his name again but didn’t push him away. The good girl in her demanded that she move to the opposite side of the table and put a little space between them. But the emerging bad girl was still dying for release. How quickly could he make her come? With nothing but his fingers?

And maybe his voice?

She swallowed back the lust and replayed his words through her mind. Now wasn’t the time to get lost in the feel of his touch, no matter how much she craved it. He’d just dropped a bombshell on her and she needed to know what he meant.

“Come again?”

He blew out a silent breath and looked up at the ceiling. Then he shook his head ever so slightly. “Do you say things like that to tease me?” he asked, still not looking at her.

“Like what?” She felt like she was missing something.

“I plan to come...again.” He glanced down at her. “And again.” He ducked his head until his lips were almost touching her ear. “And again.”

Oh...my...

She squeezed her thighs together and trapped his hand.

“Ready to get started, sweetheart?” His other hand smoothed up her side and gently tugged her hair until her neck was exposed to his lips. “I’m more than ready to pick back up where we left off.”

Oh heavens, what was he doing to her? She was acting like...well, she didn’t know what exactly. A woman in serious lust, she supposed. But when he spoke to her like that, in that rich honey voice, and touched her, she lost all her reservations.

Thankfully the waitress brought out two plates heaping with spaghetti, fat

meatballs and a delicious smelling red sauce. Otherwise JJ might have done something very unladylike.

She pounced on the food, thankful to have something to distract her. Trevor chuckled and after several long, tantalizing seconds, extracted his hand from between her legs.

“We’re going to have to get you over this shy thing,” he said, reaching around her for the salt. His arm brushed her breast and she wasn’t sure if it’d been accidental or not. Didn’t matter. Her nipples were standing at attention, practically flagging him down.

“I’m not shy. We’re in a public place.” She told herself that, but the place was deserted. “You need to go sit over there.”

“Why?”

“Because I find you incredibly distracting.”

“Really?” He leaned in close and caressed her thigh.

“Trevor,” she said in her firmest tone.

He threw his head back and laughed. When he had sobered, he glanced around the restaurant. “Would it matter if I told you we have the place to ourselves?”

“How do you figure that?”

He shrugged those massive shoulders.

“Oh my God, you didn’t get them to close for us, did you?” She’d heard of celebrities and star athletes doing such a thing.

“Sort of.”

She gave him a well-spit-it-out look.

“I own the place, all right?”

“You own...” He owned a restaurant? But...

“I’ve been eating here since I was a kid. When Antonio needed help, I had the resources to step in.”

He said it so casually, like it was no big deal.

“But...you own it?”

“He can make mean meatballs, but let’s just say he’s not the best with business management.” He smiled and she could tell that he was really fond of Antonio. “I have someone manage the business. He has the cash flow to keep making great food. Win win.”

Something inside JJ melted. He hadn’t bought the business to make money. He’d bought it to help out a friend.

“I bet you get free meatballs anytime you want, huh?” She twirled her

fork in the pasta.

“Mmm. It’s good to own a restaurant,” he said with a satisfied grin.

She took her first bite. So many delicious flavors hit her tongue she groaned. “Lord, that’s good. Like the best meatball I’ve ever eaten. I—”

She shut up as he forked another bite into her mouth. Eyes locked with his, her lips closed around his fork. No man had ever fed her before and she had to admit, it was really sexy. Especially when she felt a smidgen of sauce slide down her chin and he was right there to gather it with his finger.

“You’re distracting me again,” she whispered. Not that she minded. Not really. If he kept looking at her like that and touching her so sweetly, she would sit here forever.

“So tell me about you. I know you’re a crack shot writer from Atlanta.”

“There’s not much to tell.”

TREVOR DIDN’T BELIEVE that for a minute. She was deflecting. And he wanted to know what made her tick.

“What do you like to do when you’re not writing articles?”

“Well, there’s what I like to do and what I actually do,” she said, stabbing another hunk of meatball. He had to crane his neck to watch her eat but loved the sight of her lips closing over the fork. After five years and more dinner invitations than he could count, she was finally sitting here with him. Eating at his favorite spot in the city. Close enough to touch.

“Tell me both.”

She smiled and reached for her water glass. “I flip houses with my brother, Greg. That keeps me pretty busy outside of work. But when I’m not painting or picking out cabinets and counter tops I like reading, hanging out with friends and family. Boring, normal stuff.”

She flipped houses? He got a quick mental picture of her in a tool belt and nothing else. Damn, that was hot.

“There’s nothing normal or boring about flipping houses. That’s really impressive. How many have you flipped?”

“Four. I bought my first condo because it was really cheap. But it needed a lot of TLC. Greg promised that he could help with it. It took us about nine months to finish and by then, the neighborhood had picked up. Greg found another property close by. We were able to sell the first place pretty quickly.”

“All condos?”



“So far.”

He stretched his arm across the back of the booth again, trying to keep his urges in check. It was hard when her silky blouse gaped open and gave him a glimpse of what lay underneath. He’d had his hands and mouth— *Nope. Not going there, Wyatt.*

“What’s your biggest horror story?”

She thought for several seconds.

“I found a rat in the duct work once.”

“That’s it? I had visions of Hoarders or rotting floor boards or something.”

“It was dead.”

“Eww.”

“Yeah. And Greg wasn’t around to get rid of it, so double eww. It’s not like you can flush a rat down the toilet.” She made a cute scrunched-up face that had him laughing so hard his sides hurt.

Another plus five for the fearless woman.

“Are you working on one right now? A new condo?”

She nodded and held up a finger while she finished off another meatball. He was glad that she enjoyed them as much as he did. Somehow he’d known she would.

“Yeah. It’s almost done. Greg just texted me that he’s got the paint for the deck. I ordered the knobs for the new kitchen cabinets. We’re just about ready to put it on the market.”

“Wow.”

“I can’t do it until October though.” She made the cute scrunched-up face again.

“Do what?”

“List it. For taxes reasons I live in the apartment for a year so it’s technically my house and I’m not taxed like a business. It usually only takes about six months of work because we don’t do hard reno. Mostly cosmetic stuff. Updating to a more modern style. Greg buys another condo and lives in it. So we fix and sell one every six months.”

He pushed his empty plate away and propped an elbow on the table so he could watch her. “That’s really smart. Again, I’m impressed.”

He hadn’t always had the business sense he did these days. It would have been so easy to blow his money if his momma hadn’t sat him down when he’d first signed with the pros.

“Tell me about your family. Is Greg your only sibling?”

“No. I have two older brothers.”

She ate in silence for a few minutes. He could tell she wanted to ask him a question but was holding back. But hell, his life had been open book up until a year ago. What could she possibly want to know about him that she hadn't read in a newspaper? Or written about herself.

“Parents?”

“My mom died four years ago. But my dad still lives in Atlanta. Technically, he's my stepdad and they're my stepbrothers, but he's my real dad, you know?”

“Yeah.” He definitely understood that. He'd been born in Baltimore and dropped on the doorstep of the local fire department. Two months later his parents had adopted him and moved him to New York City. It didn't matter that they weren't his birth parents or that they didn't even have the same skin color as he did. They were his parents. His real parents.

For several long moments she fiddled with the pasta, silent and pensive. Then, as if making up her mind about something, she perked up. “Enough about me. I want you to scoot over there and start talking.”

“What?”

“I want to finish my meatballs and I can't do that if I have to keep answering your questions.” She softened the request with a kiss to his cheek.

Chuckling, he pushed to his feet and switched sides. “This isn't so bad. Now I can look at you easier.”

She finished off another meatball, wiped her mouth and then smiled across the table at him. “I don't suppose you could get Antonio to give up his secret recipe?” The sexy little eyebrow wiggle almost did him in.

“Not on your life, sweetheart.”

“Dang it. I'm gonna have to start using my credit card so I can rack up frequent flier miles, then. These are worth braving Newark for.”

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JJ'S entire body hummed with anticipation, making her aware of each breath, every step. On her way to the interview she'd stopped by her hotel to drop off her new shoes and slip on the high heels that made her feel powerful and confident. She'd figured she'd need the boost if she was going to be

interviewing one of America's wealthiest bachelors.

Right now she was glad she'd made the switch from boring flats to sex-kitten stilettos. She could almost feel Trevor's gaze on her legs as they strode through the lobby of her hotel and stopped in front of the bank of elevators. Trevor left her side just long enough to press the *up* button.

"Second thoughts?" he asked.

Not when he looked at her like she was something special. Held her like a princess. And talked dirty just enough to set her on fire.

The elevator doors opened and a man got off, leaving the car empty.

She shook her head. "Nope."

"Good."

Hand at her back, Trevor ushered her inside.

"What floor?" he asked.

She heard the barely controlled desperation in his voice.

"Ten."

With the button pressed, he turned to her and slid his hands around her waist. She'd had plenty of time to talk herself off the ledge of lust. To think about everything that could go wrong after a night of bliss. She fully expected to hear her mother's voice in the back of her mind, warning her against a one-night stand.

But this was Trevor Wyatt, a man she'd lusted after for years. Who she still fantasized about. Heck, if she had a battery operated boyfriend, she'd probably name it Wyatt.

And after that fabulous dinner, followed by a carriage ride around Central Park, she felt a connection with him that kept the doubt monster away. That and an orgasm was all she could ask for tonight.

Smiling up at him, she smoothed her hand up his chest. The only way off this ledge was to jump straight into Trevor's arms...and those incredible blue eyes.

He pulled her flush against him. He was already hard and she couldn't resist rotating her hips against that magnificent erection. All of that was for...*because*...of her.

"I was right about you," he said. It sounded like he was clenching his teeth. She couldn't be sure because she was staring at the buttons of the dress shirt he'd changed into, wondering just how fast she could undo them.

"How?"

"You're a cock tease...even when you don't mean to be."

The retort that popped into the mind made her cheeks heat.

“You can say it, princess. Whatever it is that’s making you blush so beautifully.”

Before she could respond, the elevator pulled level with her floor and the doors opened. Trevor stepped back and reached for her hand. Feeling more than a little hot and bothered, she made a beeline for her room. When she whipped out her keycard and attacked the lock, she heard Trevor’s soft laughter.

“Someone’s in a hurry.”

Freezing, she blushed all over again. He was right, of course, but he didn’t need to know exactly how anxious she was to finish what they’d started. No need to give the man a bigger ego.

He put his hand over hers. Warm and sure, he helped guide the card into the slot. Why did that seem so naughty? After smoothly and quickly retrieving the card, she heard the tell-tale click of the door unlocking.

“Green light,” he whispered in a voice so deep and sexy she thought she might come then and there.

The next minute was an absolute blur of kisses, caresses and ripping each other’s’ clothes off. She wasn’t entirely sure how she ended up naked on the dresser, her legs spread; high heels dangling. But she was sure of the look in his eyes. Trevor Wyatt meant to have her.

Her. The southern sports journalist with a little too much padding to be in fashion. All those teasing looks over the years. The occasional touches. The innuendo and dinner invitations. The wait was about to be over.

“Let’s pick up where we left off, shall we?” he whispered against her throat.

A delicious shiver shook her body and all she could do was nod.

This time around, however, he plucked a condom from his wallet. Thank heavens he’d remembered.

AS SOON AS he sheathed himself, Trevor braced his arms on either side of her hips. She reached for his cock, guiding him inside. Their eyes met as he pushed forward, surrounding himself in her wet heat. Her lips formed an O and he locked his jaw, barely hanging onto his control. She was impossibly tight, hugging him like a satin glove.

“You can move, you know. I won’t break, Your Highness.” There was

laughter in her voice and light in her eyes. She slid one hand down his back and curled the other around his neck, holding him close.

Until she'd spoken he hadn't realize he was holding back, holding steady, almost afraid to move lest he lose that last bit of restraint. Or wake up from this incredible dream.

A delicious dinner with Julia smiling across the table at him, followed by an evening of amazing sex. Yeah, that was a dream come true. He only had to be cock deep to know they were going to set each other on fire. He could already feel the tendrils of flame licking up his spine.

"Wanna make it last, sweetheart. You feel too good."

"That's always nice to hear." She lazily raked her fingers over his back.

"It's true." He pulled out slowly and gave a quick thrust. Such a sweet glide. Such an incredible sensation.

Her thighs gripped his hips and she locked her feet behind his back. If she kept that up this would be over in record time. He'd always prided himself on being able to hold on. But then he'd never waited years to be with a woman.

She nibbled her bottom lip. What was she thinking about? Could he get her to say the words out loud?

Her muscles rippled around his cock, another sign that she wanted him to pick up the pace. But he wanted to make her ask for it.

"Ask me."

Had she lost her shyness enough to ask for what she really wanted? Could she loosen her tongue?

She frowned; then pursed her lips and her eyes locked with his, hard with determination. "Make me come."

She was adorable. Especially when her bottom lip wobbled the tiniest bit. And that southern drawl... He tipped his head back and looked up at the ceiling to steady himself. "Now that's what I call an order. But it'll work." He pulled his hips back again, and then thrust forward until they were pelvis against pelvis.

TREVOR'S COCK WAS HUGE. JJ shouldn't have been surprised; he was big all over. She felt him, every inch of length and girth, in ways she'd never experienced with her previous partners.

As he finally picked up the pace, she couldn't stop the moan that seemed to come from her soul. She'd never felt so aligned, so connected with another

human being.

The feeling scared her a little so she pushed it away and concentrated on the unruly lock of hair that tumbled over his forehead as he stared down at their joined bodies. Damn that was sexy. And somehow he managed to hold her shyness at bay. It was in the way he enjoyed her, pushed her to enjoy herself...and him.

From her position she couldn't do more than cradle his body and urge him on with her legs, but he stayed wrapped around her, supporting her back as he pumped against her. The look of barely contained self-control on his face was so sexy. So...thoughtful.

Each thrust pushed her closer to the peak of bliss. Then he bent his legs, angling his cock higher so he brushed her g-spot.

That little trick earned him a gasp. "Oh!"

"You ready, sweetheart?"

She was now.

*Courteous.* She should have known he would be courteous. He loosened his grip on her back to reach around and stroke her clit with his thumb, igniting a wild heat that started at her core and spread outward like a brushfire.

Slow. Hot. Delicious.

Her orgasm swamped her and she lost all thought as she cried out. His voice joined hers and his body tightened around her like a python as his cock swelled inside her. Throaty groans rumbled from him as his hips made tiny jerking motions.

"Mmm." His big body trembled around her. "God, Julia." He kissed her neck.

JJ closed her eyes, relishing the moment. Memorizing the feel of him, the way he stayed exactly where he was, as if he didn't want to pull out just yet.

"That was amazing," he said, pulling back enough to stare down at her. Her heart stumbled a little at the tenderness on his face.

She nodded, trying to get her lips and brain to sync up.

"I guess I should get off you." The corner of his mouth tugged up in a way that sent her pulse racing all over again. Damn that dimple. It made her want to kiss it and beg him to take her all over again.

She shrugged, bliss heavy inside her. "I don't mind."

He chuckled and pulled out anyway. She got a good look at his cock then. Long, thick, and magnificent. Even after he'd come. It was still wet with her

juices. For some reason that made her horny. That and the fact that he'd been so overcome with lust he hadn't even kicked off his jeans.

She let her feet drop and gave him a long sweeping glance that made her insides clench.

“Don't look at me like that, woman. I'll be hard all over again and then how will I get my jeans zipped?”

JJ laughed and hopped off the dresser.

“You could always forget getting dressed.” She glanced behind him at the big bed covered with crisp white linens and pretty plum colored pillows. Would he stay the night if she asked him to? Because she definitely wanted a repeat performance.

## SEVEN

### *Atlanta*

“DID YOU GET A FACIAL? You're all glowy,” Cindy said, holding up her hands and wiggling her fingers in an imitation of rays of sunshine.

“I wish,” JJ murmured. It was her week to host the girls. And ordinarily she'd be excited to see them all especially since she'd missed their get-together last week, but lustful dreams hadn't provided much rest even when she had been able to stop thinking of Trevor and fall asleep.

She poured everyone a glass of wine, a new Riesling from Germany, and resisted the urge to glance at the clock on the microwave. What was a few hours catching up with friends? Nothing in the scheme of things. She loved her friends. Loved their time together just hanging out and catching up.

But since Trevor had left her bed every minute seemed to drag on like cold molasses.

There was a knock at the door. “That'll be Greg. The knobs for my kitchen arrived,” JJ explained as she strode across the living room.

“Hey Jules,” her brother said as she stepped aside to let him in.

“Don't think you're getting any wine,” she warned him with a smile.

He made an exaggerated eww face. “You know I don't drink that stuff.”

She found his timing a little suspicious. Had he come over tonight because she was hosting the girls or had it really been his best opportunity to get the job done? The former made her wonder which of her friends he might be interested in. “And you know I could have attached the knobs myself.”



“Then why didn’t you?” He chucked her under the chin and carried his toolbox into the kitchen.

“Need anything?” she asked him from the doorway.

“Nope. I brought everything I need.”

Always handy. She turned back to her friends as Baby asked Cindy about her latest book.

Settling back into her club chair in front of the window, she heard her brother moving around in the kitchen, unwrapping each brushed nickel knob. Then he fired up the drill. She was really lucky he was so handy and willing to help her out. Often she felt like he did more of the work than she did. She picked out the cabinets, countertops, flooring and wall coloring.

She wielded a mean paintbrush and could caulk with the best of them. But mostly she just tried to replicate designs that struck her fancy.

Was Trevor handy? Did he ever tinker around his apartment? Fiddle with cars or engines? Somehow she couldn’t see him doing that. Not because he was afraid to get dirt under his fingernails, because football fans everywhere knew that T-man had gotten plenty of mud beneath his nails during his time with the Wolves, but something told her he’d rather hire out the work and move on to something he enjoyed more.

That was a shame, though. She’d love to see him doing some heavy lifting. Those biceps of his would bulge and what woman didn’t want to see that?

Somewhere between reminiscing about the way his breath fanned across her thighs and the feel of his lips on her breasts she lost track of Cindy’s latest plot synopsis.

She blinked a few times and took a long gulp of wine. Then she turned her attention to Baby, who was glancing across the room, right at the kitchen doorway.

JJ followed her gaze and saw Greg hand tightening a knob with a screwdriver. Was Baby interested in Greg? She sent her pretty blonde friend a questioning look but Baby just grinned and turned her attention back to Cindy.

Had it really been two weeks since she’d been sitting at Gretchen’s house pondering Cindy’s casual fling? She let out a rueful sigh. What else could she call her weekend with Trevor?

At least she hadn’t broken her cardinal rules. Trevor was anything but a stranger and she’d been wearing clean underwear. The image of his face

when he'd first glimpsed her panties flashed through her mind.

He'd intimated that he wanted to see her again and she hadn't denied his request. She hadn't exactly invited him to Atlanta either... her boss was extra volatile lately and she didn't want Trevor to make flight reservations only to have her cancel at the last minute.

She didn't want to rush into anything, either. Her mom had learned the hard way to be careful where men were concerned. Meeting and marrying a man three months later did not a happily ever after make.

But who was she kidding? He could very well be interested in sex for sex's sake. If she were honest with herself, she wanted more. She had wanted more all those years ago when he'd been another cocky ball player flirting with her after games.

He wasn't a player anymore. But he was still a cocky flirt. The years had changed him, though. Matured him. Occasionally he'd looked almost haunted. But his killer smile was still quick to shine—

“Earth to JJ,” Baby's voice broke through her thoughts.

“Sorry.” She blinked a couple of times.

“What's up with you? You missed Cindy's whole plot.” Her friends stared at her curiously. The drone of Greg's drill echoed through her apartment.

“Just preoccupied with work.”

*Lying is not becoming of a southern lady.* Her mother's voice whispered through her mind. It wasn't a total lie, she thought, snagging a pretzel from the bowl on the large round ottoman.

At some point after she met Cindy, JJ had started having story ideas of her own. Long sagas about sports and players and all the craziness that was her life. Their life. Though she'd managed to write one book and send it to New York, she'd never told her friends she was writing anything other than articles for work. Sometimes she felt a little guilty about holding back that part of her life, but she didn't want to take the spotlight from Cindy. She was the writer. JJ was the journalist.

And after that book had been rejected several times, she'd gathered her courage and written another one. *Game Day* had helped JJ land an agent. Jessica Ross was a goddess in the publishing world and was confident that she could sell JJ's book.

It'd been three weeks since she'd heard anything, not that she'd expected a call anytime soon. Between her anxiety over the book, her job, selling the

condo, and this latest...whatever it was, with Trevor, she could barely concentrate.

“Is your boss still riding your ass?” Cindy queried with a frown.

They all knew what a pain John had been since he’d come aboard as editor. Lord knew he gave JJ enough to complain about. Cindy’s protectiveness didn’t surprise her. She was a fiercely loyal friend. JJ sighed, the guilt from her secrets multiplying. Plural. She had *secrets*. More than one. When had she become secretive?

“Always,” she replied.

“The way I see it,” Baby said in that confident tone of hers, “you either need to ask for a raise, steal his job, or find a new job.”

“I vote for steal his job,” Gretchen said. “That way you’ll be home to go shoe shopping with us on Saturdays.”

JJ froze, eyes locked on Gretchen. She wasn’t—she couldn’t know— No. That was impossible.

“Or not...” Gretchen said uncomfortably.

“You reminded me I’ve got some shopping to do.” Another lie. Gracious, she was racking up tickets to hell.

She reached into the end table and grabbed a notepad and a pen, then scribbled ingredients for her father’s birthday cake.

“I don’t want John’s job, but I’m not opposed to a raise,” she said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “Have you talked to Adam lately?” she asked Cindy, glad to divert the attention to her friend’s fella.

“As a matter of fact, he’s flying out here tomorrow.” Cindy was halfway through her list of places she wanted to show her new beau when Greg came through the wide doorway, toolbox in hand.

Cindy paused.

Greg grinned at her. “Sorry to interrupt girls’ night, ladies. I’m all done, Jules. Let me know if you need any help staging.” He waved goodbye, his gaze not lingering on anyone in particular.

Stinker. She’d been hoping for a clue.

She saw him to the door and wished him a good night. Maybe she was wrong, but he could do far worse than one of her friends. Next time they were alone, she’d ask him. It was probably just the hormones talking, but she wanted everyone to be as blissfully happy as she’d been in Trevor’s arms.

## EIGHT

Two hours later JJ's heart stuttered as she read the caller ID. Trevor had called several times the past two weeks and she found herself thinking about him at odd hours. Thoughts of him had made washing the dishes bearable.

“Hi,” she said by way of greeting.

“Hello, gorgeous.”

She loved the way his voice rumbled through the phone's speaker and made her body quiver with anticipation. Funny how a simple hello had her counting the minutes until she could see him. She mentally added ‘ plan a trip back to New York so she could kiss him’ to her to do list.

“What are you doing?” she asked, settling into her favorite chair. Caressing the soft suede, she imagined it was his skin and then turned toward the window to gaze out at the Atlanta skyline. Yes, this place should sell for top dollar. Even with the housing market on the fritz, she'd chosen a condo with a spacious feel, a fabulous location, and she and Greg had become master house stagers.

“Right now?” he asked.

“Mmm hmm.”

“Waiting in line at the rental counter at the airport.”

“The airport?” Her heart dropped. She hadn't known he was going to be traveling. It was silly to feel like she was missing out on his life. He certainly didn't have to run all his plans by her, but there was a stab of regret. She should have invited him down for the weekend. Now that John had stopped dicking around, she knew she'd be in town.

“I hope you're not busy tonight. Otherwise I've flown all this way for nothing.”

This time her heart skipped twice before coming back with a rapid beat. He was in Atlanta?

“Julia?”

“I'm here.”

“I've got the keys. Are you going to give me your address so I can plug it into the GPS?”

“I could have picked you up.”

“I think sweeping you off your feet and toolin' around town is in my job description,” he said, a smile in his voice.

She huffed out a laugh, smiling herself, and gave him her address.

“See you soon.” Before she could reply he'd clicked off.

JJ stared at the phone for several moments, trying to decide if she'd imagined the whole phone call. Maybe she should call him back just to check. But that'd be silly. Surely she wasn't imagining phone calls from her lover.

She glanced at the clock on her phone. Given the time, it'd probably take him twenty minutes to get here. Tossing her phone down, she raced to the bathroom. Good thing he'd called; she needed to shave or else he'd probably mistake her for a monkey.

Fifteen minutes and a shower later, JJ stood before her floor-length mirror holding two outfits in front of her. Jeans and a cute top or a slightly slinky dress?

She didn't want to look like she was dressing up for him or waiting around to see him. But on the other hand, dresses were much easier to take off. And this particular dress showed her legs to their best advantage.

Already imagining the look on his face, she hung the rejected outfit back in the closet and tugged the dress over her head. A quick coat of lip gloss and a quick brush through her hair and she was ready.

No sooner had she stepped from her bedroom than the phone rang. Taking a deep breath, she stepped toward the sofa table and plucked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Julia — let me in.”

Her stomach flipped over at the sound of Trevor's voice and more importantly, his close proximity.

“Sorry, no one here by that name,” she teased, almost unable to stop the laughter bubbling inside her.

“Julia!”

“Third floor.” She pressed a button to unlock the outer doors so he could enter.

*Be cool. Don't look too excited to see him.*

Knowing that'd be impossible, and unable to stop her feet, she strode to her front door and opened it. A few moments later she heard the elevator ding as it arrived.

Careful to keep her door from shutting behind her, she leaned into the hallway. The moment their eyes met, his steps slowed.

Damn, he looked good enough to eat. Scarcely able to believe that Trevor Wyatt was striding down the hall of her building, to her door, to her... A scorching heat raced over her shoulders. Lust, that's what it was. Pure and simple desire.

But as a smile of pleasure stretched his lips, she realized there was nothing pure or simple about her desire for this man.

“I should have asked for the vixen,” he said an instant before he took her into his arms and kissed her breathless. There was an urgency about him that hadn't been there two weeks ago—an urgency she returned with her hands, lips, and tongue.

It still amazed her what incredible shape he was in. How strong and solid he felt beneath her touch.

“Wait—” She tore her lips from his. “Don't let the—” But the door shut behind her, the sound of the lock sliding into place echoing in her ears.

“Uh oh. I take it your door locks automatically.”

She gave a quick nod.

“It's okay,” he said easily. “I'll call a locksmith.”

“You don't have to do that.”

“It's my fault the door locked. If I hadn't been kissing the daylights out of you...” He trailed off, looking at her like he wanted to forget the door and pick up where he'd left off. Her cheeks warmed under his gaze.

“I didn't mind,” she whispered.

Phone forgotten, he pulled her back into the circle of his arms and lowered his lips to hers. “We may never make it inside,” he murmured.

As his tongue teased its way through her lips and tangled with hers, she chastised herself for not accepting one of his dinner invitations years ago. He was head and shoulders hotter than any man she'd ever dated. And somehow he seemed to know exactly which buttons to push, how to touch her, what she

wanted.

His instincts were right on target when his hands roamed up her back and pressed her breasts against his chest. Closer. She needed to be closer.

And naked.

“Julia,” he whispered against her lips. “Let me call the damn locksmith so I can take you inside and make love to you properly.”

Make love? Properly?

A tremor of excitement quaked through her belly.

“There's no need—”

“There's every need, sweetheart. I can't wait much longer and I refuse to take you in the hallway of your apartment building.” She loved when he called her sweetheart. Every shred of femininity inside her melted. The tension in his voice prompted her to open her eyes. His smile was tight, strained.

“No, I mean I have a friend who has a key.”

“In this building?” he asked, his voice full of hope.

She shook her head.

“I'll call her. She doesn't live far from here.”

He nodded and took a step back. “Use my phone.”

She took the smart phone and dialed Cindy's number, amazed that she could even remember it. Taking a deep breath, she smiled up at Trevor. This was going to be awkward since she hadn't mentioned dating anyone recently.

“I'm not buying,” Cindy said quickly, obviously trying to head off a telemarketer.

“Cindy, don't hang up. It's JJ.”

There was a pause. “JJ? I didn't recognize the number.”

“I'll explain everything later. I'm afraid I locked myself out. Can I borrow my key?”

What a thing to have to say. But it was just as much her fault that they were locked out of her apartment. She'd been kissing him just as voraciously.

“Sure, I'll be right over.”

“No, don't worry about it.” The last thing she needed was Cindy showing up, causing another delay. “I'm on my way.”

“JJ—”

“See you in five,” JJ said and disconnected the call.

Eyeing Trevor she handed back the phone. “She's only five blocks away. Do you want to walk it?”

His eyebrows headed north. "I think we'd better drive." He picked up his duffle bag and then wrapped an arm around her waist. "The sooner we get that key, the sooner I can have you all to myself."

This time on a Thursday night, the streets were busy. It took them fifteen minutes to get through the lights thanks to events at the local theaters. When they pulled up in front of Cindy's apartment building, JJ's heart sank a little. Her beautiful friend was waiting in front, a mischievous smile on her face.

Before JJ could jump down from Trevor's rented SUV, Cindy had spotted her and came trotting over. There was no getting around an introduction now.

"Is that your friend?" Trevor asked.

JJ nodded, mind racing. She wasn't ready for all the questions. The demands of who, what, where, when...one question Cindy wouldn't need to ask was *why*. One look at Trevor Wyatt and any woman with a pulse would understand *why*.

Trevor rolled down the window and she cut him a look. Neither of them was making this easy on her.

"JJ..."

JJ took a deep, steadying breath and prepared for her two worlds to collide. She knew the instant Cindy got back up to her apartment she'd phone Baby and Gretchen to inform them of Trevor's presence in JJ's life.

For years she'd tried to keep her work life separate from her private life. Being surrounded by the fame of NFL stars was a very different world from the quieter life she experienced with her friends and family. More than once she'd had acquaintances and even complete strangers try to use her to get to a pro athlete.

Tickets, introduction requests, one woman had even tried to get JJ to give a third baseman a pair of panties with her number written on them.

Not that Cindy would do any of that. And Trevor wasn't so much a part of that old world anymore as he was her private life.

That realization shocked her like a jellyfish.

"Cindy Smith, this is Trevor Wyatt. Trevor, my old," she stressed the word with a teasing smile, "friend Cindy."

"Well, well, well... It's so nice to meet you, Trevor. I'm glad to finally put a face to the man who's had JJ glowing like a firefly. Must have been a fabulous visit up in New York."

How did she know all that? And why did Trevor have to laugh like that and make her insides melt?



“It's nice to meet you. I've been anxious to meet Julia's friends.”

“Julia?” Cindy parroted and gave JJ a surprised look.

She was never going to hear the end of this. Cindy's smile said so.

“I know you two are probably in a hurry, but if you wanted to come up, I just got home from the store. I found a fabulous new wine.”

JJ shook her head, probably quicker than she should have.

“That's what I figured, but...hey, Adam's coming to town tomorrow. Do you guys have plans?”

JJ's gaze swerved to Trevor's. While a part of her desperately wanted to show him off to her friends, she didn't need him getting too entrenched in her life if he was only in this for casual sex. Problem was, she felt like a prude bringing up the topic after a nice weekend and two weeks of phone calls.

She liked how things were going, loved the way he looked at her and was trying desperately not to think of the future. She didn't want to explain to anyone when and why he was no longer a part of her life. If she'd learned anything these past two weeks it was that long distance relationships were hard. Sure, technology made it easy to stay connected, but she missed being in the same room with him. It'd only taken her one weekend to become addicted to holding his hand.

But with the way he was looking at her right now, she wondered if he'd stick around forever. The very thought made her all melty and tingly and ready to pick out a china pattern at Macy's.

“None yet,” Trevor told Cindy, still holding JJ's gaze. He reached over and squeezed her hand as if understanding the turmoil inside her.

“Great. Why don't you come over for dinner?”

“We'd love to, Cindy. What time?”

This was all some alternate reality, JJ was sure of it. So...moviesque. The female lead's friends meet and inspect the male lead. Even the dialog sounded scripted.

“Let's make it early. Say six thirty?” Her eyebrows wiggled up and down suggestively. No doubt she wanted an early dinner so she could have a longer evening with Adam.

JJ didn't blame her.

She was chomping at the bit to get some alone time with Trevor, even if he was a traitor of epic proportions. She'd make him pay for that tomorrow. Although, in the scheme of things, she supposed they shouldn't have sex twenty-four hours a day. She'd hate to give him a heart attack. And dinner

with friends wouldn't kill her.

Trevor rubbed the side of her hand with his thumb, as if urging her to end the conversation.

"Cindy, do you have my key?" JJ asked, more than ready for the interlude to be over.

"Oh, yeah." She leaned back from the vehicle and dug in her pocket. "Here you go. You kids have fun."

After handing JJ the key, she stepped back and waggled her fingers at them.

"Nice dress, by the way," she called.

Wordlessly, Trevor put the SUV into gear, looked in the rear view mirror, checked his blind spot, and pulled away from the curb.

"She seems nice."

JJ clutched the key in her hand, praying that it wouldn't take long to get back to her place. Her insides were on high alert, had been ever since Trevor had called to tell her he was in Atlanta. For the first time in her life, she was actually quivering with desire. And if he didn't get her home in record time she was afraid she was going to have to do something totally out of character...like climb across the expanse between them and straddle his lap.

"She is nice," she said.

"But?"

"But nothing."

"Don't but nothing me, Julia. You've been off since you called her."

JJ exhaled a sigh.

"I'm sorry. I'm trying not to be."

"Then what is it? Did you not want me to come?"

"Of course I wanted you to come." She reached for his hand. He was so big. So warm. Gracious, she could just curl up in his arms and lay there forever. She would if he'd let her. "I'm excited you're here. You didn't have to fly all this way, but I'm glad you did."

She smiled over at him, wishing she could just lay everything on the line. But it was still too new. Two weeks. She was uncertain of, well, everything. Most of all, him. What exactly did he want from her? Aside from sex.

Fabulous sex.

Sex that should be documented by an expert it was so freaking fabulous.

"Really glad."

"So am I." He kissed her hand. "I want to meet your friends."

“Really?” Boy, if that wasn’t getting entrenched...

“Absolutely. Your family, too. They're important to you. And you're important to me.”

Oh...my...

“We're here,” he murmured, sucking her index finger into his mouth.

She'd been so absorbed in him she hadn't even noticed they'd turned into visitor parking.

Oh...that was naughty. Her insides clenched and as she shifted and squirmed in her seat, she felt the wetness between her thighs.

“We—” She licked her lips and tried again. How was she supposed to form coherent sentences when he was driving her out of her mind? With the engine turned off, the overhead light came on, spotlighting them both. The mischievous look in his beautiful blue eyes said he knew exactly what he was doing to her. “We should go upstairs.”

He let her finger slide from his mouth. *Oh...my...*

“Let's go.”

Moments later he'd gathered his luggage and helped her down.

As soon as she typed in the keycode to enter the building, he pulled open the door and ushered her inside. So this is what she'd been missing for years. A man at her side. A hand to hold hers. A strong shoulder to rely on.

How easy it would be to get used to this. To him.

THE SECOND THE elevator doors closed, he reached for her. She braced her hands against his chest and leaned closer. Stretching upward, she kissed him. Her eagerness made him chuckle against her lips.

She was a complex woman, but Trevor intended to figure her out. He just had to figure out which buttons to press.

Hands locked around her hips, he deepened the kiss. Her response was so eager, so pure, it took his breath away.

He knew now why he'd kept asking her out all those years ago. She was just as incredible as he'd known she would be. It was all there in her eyes, in her smile. She was an open book and yet full of mystery. A puzzle he was going to have to figure out, no matter how long it took.

The elevator chimed, letting them know they'd arrived at their destination. Much too soon, in Trevor's opinion. Whatever happened to elevators getting stuck? He didn't want to let her go, not even for the distance to her door.

“Got that key, sweetheart?”

He didn't miss the way she shivered with pleasure at his endearment. He'd have to use it more often.

She nodded, stepping back. The doors started to close, but she quickly pressed the *door open* button.

Pulling her against his side, they started down the hallway.

For a brief moment on the flight he'd questioned his sanity for flying south, showing up on her doorstep. But now, seeing the way she kept sneaking covert glances at him, he knew he'd done the right thing. If he wanted a relationship with Julia Fairchild, he was going to have to work for it.

He'd never met a challenge he didn't like.

In front of her door for a second time, he reached for the key. She handed it over quickly and stood to the side, her hands clasped loosely. Pushing the door wide, he used his foot to hold it open as he tossed his bag into the entryway. Then, without a second to lose, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her inside.

“Trevor,” she said, the tone of her voice somewhere between a surprised squeak and husky with lust. She was going to have to get used to him picking her up.

He'd never felt the desire to ferry a woman around, but he loved the feel of Julia in his arms, high against his chest, within easy kissing distance. The fact that she weighed hardly anything at all just meant he'd do it as often as he could. There was something wonderful about knowing he had a hold of her and she couldn't go anywhere.

“Which way to the bedroom?” He'd see her apartment later. Right now he needed to do something about the erection that had plagued him for a thousand miles.

“Straight ahead.” She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and snuggled close.

A dozen steps later he entered her bedroom. A quick glance gave him an impression of the space: bed, nightstand, and an armoire. Dark wood. White linens.

He wasted no time laying her down on the fluffy comforter. Wondering what sort of treat she had on beneath her dress, he settled himself beside her and ran his hands over her stomach. She curled toward him, a seductive smile gracing her lips.

A part of him wanted to lie here, holding her, breathing her in. But another part couldn't wait to feel her skin against his again.

"I've been thinking about this for two weeks," he murmured before slanting his lips across hers. She curled an arm around his neck and hooked a leg over his hip.

Unable to resist, he rolled to his back, pulling her with him. Draped over him like a blanket, she smiled. Damn, she was beautiful. Trailing his fingertips down her spine, he kissed her again, the way he'd been wanting to do for the last ten days. Not that he was counting...

Long, deep, thorough, with plenty of tongue.

He lost track of time as their tongues and legs tangled. Her hips rolled against his, giving his cock an erotic massage that had his whole body standing at attention. Mind blowing as it was, he wanted more.

Make that less.

He tugged up the hem of her dress and cupped the globes of her ass. She moaned against his lips and kept up the exquisite circling with her pelvis. For just a second he wondered if she'd been a hula-hoop champion when she was younger. She certainly had the motion down.

It wasn't enough. Impatient, he tore his lips from hers. "Sit up, sweetheart."

Slowly, painfully so, she placed her palms against his chest and sat up, gazing down at him in a daze of lust.

"You took out the contacts," he said a moment later, finally realizing what was different about her.

"Yeah." She sounded shy again.

"Why did you wear them in the first place?"

"My new boss didn't take me seriously when I was blond and blue-eyed."

"Idiot."

"It worked, though. The brown hair and contacts. I guess I was inconspicuous enough. I wouldn't say my career is where it was before he came on as editor, but I'm not as far off track as I was."

Damn. Trevor wanted to punch the asshole. But he bit back his temper. Right now was about them. No one else.

She looked so irresistible he skimmed his hands from her hips, up her ribcage, and stopped just below her breasts. Somehow, he found the strength to resist cupping the dreamy mounds. He could tell by her smile and the quirked up eyebrow that she was surprised by his restraint.

“I want you naked.”

Her smile kicked up a notch and she reached for the dress, pulling it up and over her head in one smooth movement.

“Good God, Julia.” His tongue practically rolled out of his mouth as he took in the fire-engine red, lace-covered satin. He stared, taking in each detail, for several minutes. The entire time, she sat there, straddling his hips, watching him.

He swallowed and tried to form words with a tongue that suddenly felt too big for his mouth.

“Unfortunately, that’s all gotta come off.”

The delicious smirk gracing her lips made his blood pressure spike. Heat raced over his shoulders, a sign that he was turned on, as if the pipe-hard cock between her legs wasn’t enough proof.

“Are you sure about that?”

Her gaze dropped to where their bodies touched. She shifted her hips forward ever so slightly. The glide was so smooth and her wetness covered his cock so readily that his heart stuttered.

Crotchless panties? Was she for real?

“I got them as soon as I got back from New York,” she murmured shyly.

“Were you thinking about me when you bought them?”

She nodded.

That did it. “Marry me,” he uttered fiercely, swiftly switching their positions.

Flat on her back, she laughed up at him. She was sexy *and* beautiful. Some women pulled off sexy but looked trampy. Other women pulled off beauty but never quite looked sexy. She, the lovely little vixen, accomplished both.

He gave a couple of test thrusts against her silky lower lips and quickly realized what a mistake that was. It was harder than hell to pull back, slow down, and concentrate on foreplay.

“You’re gonna be the death of me, woman.” And he meant it. Lingerie like that was sure to give a man a heart attack no matter what shape he was in.

“I wouldn’t want that.”

Sitting back on his heels, he let his hands wander over her body. Touching, teasing, occasionally tickling. She nibbled her lower lip, but he knew she was bubbling with laughter. Laughing and sex was an unusual

combination for him, but as he stared down into her lovely blue-gray eyes he realized he liked it. The exploration. The fun. It transcended the ache between his legs and a fast finish.

In fact, as he ran his palms up her torso, he skipped her breasts and headed straight to her collar bones, wanting to extend the exploration for as long as possible. Tonight, he'd explore every inch of her, driving them both wild in the process.

## NINE

They were halfway to Cindy's apartment the next day when JJ's phone buzzed in her pocket. Like Pavlov's dog, she automatically reached for it. Her brain had just enough time to register Greg's name before she hit the answer button.

"Hey, Greg."

"Hey. I think I found your next project." That was so like her brother. Always on the lookout for another property and not one to start a conversation with small talk. She couldn't fault him though; being task oriented had come in real handy in their little venture.

Despite the fact that he'd already contacted their Realtor who said she had an interested buyer, JJ really didn't want to talk about flipping condos.

Nevertheless, she heard herself answer "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." He sounded excited. "It's a loft. I know how you've been keeping your eye out for one."

Okay, so that got her attention. She did want to redo a loft one day. The thought of exposed brick, high ceilings, and massive windows got her creative juices flowing. "Sounds great. What part of town?"

He rattled off an address. Not a fabulous location, but certainly up and coming. And MARTA was nearby so future tenants could make use of Atlanta's public transit.

"It's in a building that was converted in the late nineties. Looks like a flipper started on updating but didn't finish. It's half gutted."

She smiled at the disappointment in his voice. "I know how you're going to miss using your sledge hammer."

What was it with men and demoing things? Not that she didn't find it



therapeutic to occasionally don goggles and gloves and whack the heck out of things. But she preferred the rebuilding. Watching new cabinets go in. Freshening up a space with paint and new flooring. Staging a property so that it looked magazine-ready.

As it was, she hadn't even had time to tidy up and put out the modern (but stark) decorations she kept on hand to make a flip look move-in-ready. But if their agent managed to find them a buyer without the hassle, she was all for it. And it was smart of Greg to be on the lookout for her next place. If they got an offer soon on the condo, she'd need to move in the next thirty to sixty days. And thanks to work, a busier than usual freelance schedule, and the dreamy man at her side, she hadn't even begun to start looking for a new place yet.

"Do you want to see it? Your current place is ready, minus the staging. I was going to call the Realtor tomorrow and see if she can show us the loft."

"Yeah. I want to see it."

Trevor swerved and she shot him a look of alarm. He mouthed an apology.

"Greg, call Laney and then text me with the details. We'll set up a time to do it."

"Will do. Later."

"Bye."

She clicked the off button and put her phone in the console.

"Who's Greg?" Trevor asked.

Why did he sound so tense?

"My brother. The one I flip houses with."

There was a long pause and she swore she heard him exhale.

"What?" she asked, glancing over at him as he negotiated Friday afternoon traffic.

"Nothing."

His answer was just a little too terse for her to leave it alone.

"I want to know."

"Just...your answers...part of town...use your sledge hammer...you want to see it—"

"Your mind ran away with you, didn't it?" she asked with a laugh. Perhaps that conversation had sounded a little... perverse.

JJ knew him well enough to know that even though they'd both just melted with an out-of-this-world orgasm, sex was still very much on his

mind.

“Totally.”

She laughed again. “Naughty boy.”

“I didn’t like it,” he uttered, hitting the turn signal with more force than necessary.

So he’d been jealous. That was kind of sweet, especially since they’d only been lovers for two weeks. Two rather blissful weeks.

“No need to worry, handsome. We might be step siblings but there’s absolutely nothing going on between me and Greg. Or anyone else for that matter.”

He quirked an eyebrow at that.

“Anyone but you,” she amended, leaning over to kiss his cheek.

THEY ARRIVED at Cindy’s apartment at six twenty-seven. Trevor slid his hand to JJ’s hip and gave her a reassuring squeeze. She tried to hide it but she was a bundle of nerves. She seemed more stressed over this meeting than he was.

She didn’t let on, but he sensed that she wasn’t quite ready to embrace him into her world. One thing he’d learned about her these past two weeks was she was a master at compartmentalizing her life and her time. Which was probably why she was so successful, despite an asshole boss.

But that was tough. He planned to infiltrate and hunker down for as long as she’d let him. Which made the various meetings and sponsorship events he had to attend next week all the more annoying. In a little less than twenty-four hours he’d become accustomed to her apartment, her tastes.

It was a seamless fit. So seamless that it scared him a little. Nothing was ever this easy, which made him worry what monster lurked around the corner.

The door swung open and a lean man in a Grateful Dead T-shirt smiled at them.

“You must be JJ,” he said, offering her a smile. Then his gaze flicked up to Trevor. “Holy crap, you’re Trevor Wyatt.”

His eyebrows formed a high arch above surprised blue eyes. Trevor was used to that reaction. He stuck out his hand and gave the obligatory, “Nice to meet you.”

JJ stepped forward and shook his hand, too. “It’s nice to finally meet you,

Adam. Cindy talks about you all the time.”

Her sweet southern accent drew Adam’s attention away from Trevor.

“All good, I hope.” He gave JJ a hesitant smile.

“Of course,” she said, leaning into the shelter of Trevor’s arm.

“Come on in. Cindy’s almost ready.” He stepped back into the condo. Bright pops of color reminded Trevor of Cindy’s personality. The floors were dark, the walls a rich, medium blue and the light fixture in the corner looked like a thousand daisies clinging together and lit from the inside.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Adam asked.

“Wine for me, please,” JJ said.

The scent of roasting vegetables made his mouth water. “I’ll take a beer if you’ve got one.”

Adam nodded, his brown hair swinging forward over his forehead.

“Hey Babe, they’re here,” he called, pausing outside a door just off the dining room. A female voice called back but Trevor didn’t understand what she’d said.

“Cindy’s got an amazing view, doesn’t she?”

JJ crossed the simply patterned white-and-orange shag rug and stopped in front of the floor-to-ceiling window. The sun had started to set, casting a red glow across the skyscrapers. The view reminded him of his own apartment and suddenly he wanted to see JJ standing in front of his window, looking out as if she had the world at her feet.

“I’m amazed how clean the air is here.”

She laughed and he was glad she wasn’t wearing the contacts. Without them, her eyes were much more expressive.

“You say that like Atlanta is small town America.”

“I’m ready as I’ll ever be.” Cindy’s voice sounded behind them and they turned to their hostess.

The blonde wore a tight, barely-there red dress. Trevor’s gaze darted from her to Adam. The other man’s expression went from friendly to lusty in the blink of an eye. Trevor’d felt the exact same way the night before when he’d seen Julia in the hallway of her apartment, her dress hugging her in all the right places.

“Wo-w,” JJ stuttered. “That’s...some dress.”

Knowing what an incredible package lay hidden beneath JJ’s form fitting jeans and soft gray sweater turned him on far more than any scrap of silk ever could. He’d be thinking about stripping her bare, one article of clothing at a

time, for the rest of the evening. Slowly, until he'd tortured both of them.

"I see Adam's taking good care of y'all. Isn't he a peach?" Cindy hugged her lover in a way that pressed her breasts against his chest. Then she turned a grin to him and JJ.

"The peachiest," JJ replied, but the words sounded forced to Trevor.

He slid his hand down to the small of her back and let a finger trail beneath the fabric. She leaned into his touch and gave him a look of relief. Surely she wasn't jealous of her friend. It irked him that she could be self-conscious about anything. But women were a whole different species from men sometimes. Too bad he didn't have any sisters he could call for advice.

Before Adam could hand him his beer, Trevor cupped Julia's chin in his hand and brushed a kiss across her lips. "Did I mention that you look amazing?" he whispered.

The smile he loved so much appeared then and all was right with the world. It was amazing how one touch and a few honest words could put her at ease.

"Once or twice."

"Okay, love birds. Let me pull the roast out of the oven and we'll eat," Cindy called from the adjoining kitchen.

"Need any help, babe?" Adam asked, following her.

Drinks in hand, Trevor escorted Julia to the dining table. The room was a mix of old and new: thick moldings, a chunky, well-worn table, and funky metal chairs. More boldly patterned artwork graced the walls.

"She painted those herself," JJ murmured, looking at the large square canvases.

"Nice. I like your paintings, Cindy," he called.

"Thanks. Wasn't that hard. Gold spray paint, then painters tape followed by colorful acrylics."

"What can I do to help?" Julia asked.

"Not a thing."

He heard a drawer slam and then lowered voices. His stomach rumbled as the scent of pot roast and garlic wafted beneath his nose. JJ smirked and bumped her hip against his. No doubt she was thinking of how they'd worked up an appetite today. Being on constant alert, having so much of his attention finely focused on the woman at his side wore him out. And he enjoyed every second of it.

She gulped a long sip of ruby-colored wine before placing the glass by

one of the place settings. He watched her gaze sweep the table. A finger came up and she quickly pointed to each of the plates as if she were counting in her head.

“Cindy, you set too many places.”

“Gretchen and Baby are coming.”

As if she'd summoned them, there was a knock at the door.

“Speak of the devil,” Cindy said.

Adam emerged from the kitchen and headed for the front door. Trevor didn't miss the way he covertly readjusted himself. He could sympathize with the other man's condition. It was hell to be horny all the time.

Two other women burst through the door, chatting the whole way down the hall. The moment they stepped into the dining room, silence reigned and they gave him a thorough once over.

“Good gracious, JJ. Where've you been hiding him?” the petite blonde asked.

Trevor was used to 'the look,' as he called it. Pure unadulterated lust based entirely off of an attraction, one which had nothing to do with the man that he was. 'The look' had helped him get lucky over the years, but he was past that now. Long past it.

“Aren't you going to introduce us?” the mousy brunette asked, pinning her friend with a curious glance.

“Um, sure. Trevor Wyatt, meet my other two best friends. Baby Campbell and Gretchen Mascoe.”

“Do you have a brother?” Baby asked, wiggling her eyebrows up and down. She stepped forward and extended a delicate hand.

What a flirt.

He kept his arm firmly around Julia's waist as he shook Baby's hand.

“Go find your own man and leave Trevor alone,” Cindy said from the kitchen doorway. She held a platter piled high with roasted beef and vegetables. Trevor's taste buds did a little jig.

Trevor enjoyed watching Julia interact with her friends. They'd obviously shared a lot over the years. There was something charming about the fact that they got together each week to talk and sample new wines. There was plenty of teasing and an obvious love between the four women.

Lots of laughter, too.

The camaraderie made him miss his team. His step from the limelight had been hard; many of the guys hadn't understood it. They were busy with their

lives, fast moving careers...women. Several of them had young families and no one knew the pressure of sending a team back to the Bowl better than Trevor.

Most of all he missed his best friend. But the thought of Carson made the back of his neck heat and the rest of him flush with a sweat. Would Carson ever listen to Trevor's side of things? Watching the way JJ smiled at her friends through good-natured ribbing about keeping Trevor a secret made him wonder if he shouldn't try to call up the man who'd been like a brother to him, on and off the field.

"Don't make me tell the rat story," Baby warned.

"Go for it," Julia shot back. "And I'll tell them about the time you thought a fish stole your bikini top."

The delicate arch of Julia's brow made him laugh. Damn she was cute. He loved it when she got all feisty.

Baby's light blue eyes lit up and she made a show of zipping her lips.

"So, Adam, tell us about your work," Trevor said, deciding a safer topic was in order.

The man sat down his fork and wiped his mouth. "I work for a web hosting company in Vegas. I haven't told Cindy yet, but a couple of friends and I just bought out the company this week."

"Really?" Cindy threw her arms around Adam's shoulders. "That's awesome!"

Adam accepted her affections, seeming only slightly embarrassed.

"We'd all been there for years, talking about doing our own thing on day. And the owner was letting tech support slide too much." He shrugged.

"Which is how he met me," Cindy said with a satisfied smile before kissing Adam's cheek. As she pulled back, she reached over to wipe her lipstick from his skin and Trevor could have sworn he heard Gretchen sigh.

Julia lifted her glass. "To new adventures."

"And new friendships," Baby added, a glimmer in her eyes.

JJ GLANCED at Trevor's profile in the low light. Why had she been so nervous about introducing him to her friends? Somehow in two hours, the uneasy feeling in her stomach was gone. Baby and Gretchen had given her a thumbs-up and matching grins on the way out of Cindy's apartment.

All in all, it'd been a great evening. Smoother than she'd expected, but

now she was chalking her low expectations up to nerves. It'd been a while since she'd dated anyone worth introducing to the group.

And Trevor...well, as much as she'd been crushing on him over the years, she was surprised that Baby had managed to keep from teasing JJ about it. She never knew what was going to come out of Baby's mouth, which was part of her charm, but also an occasional cause for embarrassment.

JJ reached across the console and laced her fingers with his. He'd been absolutely wonderful. A gentleman. Attentive. And the way he'd kept his hand on her thigh throughout the entire meal had ensured that her attention was at least halfway on him at all times.

Luckily, Adam had been there to provide a bit of distraction from Trevor and their budding relationship. She liked how down to earth Adam was. Quick to smile. Obviously a brainiac. And somehow, despite being opposites in many ways, he and Cindy seemed perfect for each other. Which was good, because JJ was pretty sure that between the two of them they could create nuclear power.

"Penny for your thoughts."

"I was just thinking about how crazy Cindy and Adam are for each other. It's good to see her in a real relationship."

"A real relationship?" he asked, slowing at a red light. Outside, a man played a saxophone on the street corner. A play must have just let out at the Fox. Hundreds of people poured onto the sidewalk, several tossed change in the man's saxophone case.

"One where both parties see a future. Baby's a serial dater and I'm afraid Cindy's followed her lead the last few years."

"What about you?"

"I'm not a serial dater."

"And our relationship?"

She turned to him then, heart in her throat. Why did she feel like this was a precipice of their relationship? And how could it be? They'd only been together for two weeks...if you considered a wild weekend followed by two weeks apart and another wild weekend "together."

"What about it?" she asked softly, terrified to say the wrong thing. Her heart squeezed and she realized just how important his answer was.

Before she could chastise herself for being silly and overly optimistic, he reached for her hand. "Is our relationship real?"

"I hope so." Otherwise she needed to get out of it ASAP. Trevor Wyatt

was the kind of man who could break your heart without even trying.  
“Me, too.”



## TEN

Two weeks later, Trevor sat in his rented SUV just outside the Georgia Dome, a perk of the local police force being a fan of his. His flight had arrived just as the game was starting and he'd been at loose ends since then. With no key to Julia's condo, he'd had nowhere to go, nothing to do...except think of her.

Trevor waited until the game was over and then forced himself to sit there for an hour longer before sending her a text message.

TREVOR: *surprise. Out front. Want a lift?*

IT'D TAKEN considerable willpower and several laps around the stadium to leave her alone so she could do her job. Being in her company was addicting.

Throughout the day he'd found himself remembering the look on her face as she'd come apart in his arms two weeks ago. The gorgeous O of her mouth, raised brows. Pure pleasure.

Her reply flashed onto the screen.

JJ: *Would love a ride.*

OH JULES...THE things she did to his heart. And his cock. Sometimes he wondered if she was the ultimate temptress. Or if she really didn't understand the connotation her words had.

He looked up for a landmark and gave her his location. Then his heart took off like a speed train.

Since JJ had come back into his life he felt more alive than ever. After his accident he'd stopped all public appearances, even charity events. Seeing Julia's busy schedule, the way she made time for friends and flipping houses, made him realize he needed to take his life off pause. There were organizations who counted on appearances from people like him to bring in donations. And he'd put off his endorsement deals as long as he could.

When he'd given his agent the go ahead to start scheduling a few things for him again, the response had been a little overwhelming. But he'd managed to work through the appearances this week in record time and made last minute plans to fly to Atlanta. He could've probably gotten last minute tickets to the rare Thursday game, but after being surrounded by fans all week, he didn't want to face any more.

He was starting to wonder if Julia's use of a disguise wasn't a stroke of genius. In a weak moment he'd even gone online to see about getting colored contacts and a box of brown hair dye.

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel as he pondered the latest "fan letter" he'd turned over to the police earlier in the week.

No amount of hair dye would stop the letters. And short of stopping all public appearances and losing his endorsement deals, he'd remain a target for crazies.

He blew out a sigh. Where was she? He needed to feel her hand in his, hear her voice and feel grounded again.

Had it really only been a month since she'd strode into his cousin's store? It felt like six.

A few minutes later she darted out of the crowd. She was wearing the backless sneakers she'd bought at his cousin's shop. Damn, she was adorable. Her ponytail swooshed back and forth as she walked, a skip in her step. As she got closer he could tell she didn't have in the muddy contacts. Those lovely blue-gray eyes were looking for *him*. The knowledge made him puff up with pleasure.

He unlocked the door just as she reached the SUV. She sank into the leather seat next to him and tipped her head back against the headrest. Her

sigh told him just how busy her day must have been.

But then she rolled her head to the left and her lips curved up. “Hi,” she said, her voice husky. Her eyes were bright despite the dim interior.

“Hi yourself,” was all he managed before he reached for her.

She leaned into his embrace and their lips met in a hot kiss. He cursed the console between them, needing to be closer, to feel her against him.

Cupping the back of her head, he deepened the kiss, tangling his tongue with hers. She moaned and sucked him into the depths of her mouth. So hot. So wet. His erection pressed against the fly of his jeans.

He had to get her back to her place ASAP. With her clinging to him, kissing him like she hadn't seen him in years, he didn't think he could last long. In fact, he knew he couldn't.

“You're going to have to let me drive, sweetheart,” he murmured, caressing her face. He opened his eyes just as she nibbled her lower lip.

Double damn.

He jerked away from her and threw on his seatbelt. Without another look in her direction, he started the car and sped away from the curb. Holy hell, she was going to get him arrested for public indecency. And the charges would be totally justified.

“No contacts?” he asked as he negotiated the remaining game traffic.

She shook her head, and again her ponytail captivated him. He couldn't ever remember being turned on by one, but his fingers itched to tug it until her head tipped back, exposing her throat.

“I don't think I'll be using them anymore.”

“Good.”

That earned him a grin.

“If John finds me threatening, too damn bad. I'm a good writer. He's lucky to have me on his staff.”

She was right about that. He'd read her article about Ricky Mathers. Entertaining and informative. He was glad she was ready to stand up for herself. That didn't stop him from wanting to take this John dude out back for a fist-nose pie though.

“What brought this on?”

She shrugged. “Got a job offer. It made me reread some of my work. I used to be pretty good. Enthusiasm does that. But that was when I loved my job.”

There was so much in her words, so many questions he wanted to ask.

But he settled on the biggie.

“Job offer?”

“I told them thanks, but no thanks. I’m not moving to the west coast.”

JJ’S PHONE buzzed in her bag and for a moment she considered not answering it. But she saw Thomas’s name flash up at her and she reached for it.

“It’s my brother,” she said so Trevor wouldn’t jump to the wrong conclusion again and sent him a teasing smile.

He grinned back and reached for her hand.

“Hey, Thomas,” she said into the speaker.

“Hey, Jules. I’ve got the tablet for dad, but Best Buy doesn’t gift wrap. If I try to wrap this thing, you know it’s going to look like a toddler did it.”

JJ laughed. Thomas might be the middle of her three brothers but he was also the responsible one, the glue that kept everyone else together. He couldn’t wrap worth a darn. For that matter, when he tried to use gift bags... yeah, he just didn’t have much of a creative bone in his body. He was no frills.

“Sure. I’ll wrap it before the party Saturday.” Which reminded her, she needed to call her dad and let him know what time she’d be there. “See you at eleven?”

Her phone buzzed, alerting her to an incoming call on the other line. She held it out quickly. Speak of the devil.

“Yeah. See you then.”

She clicked the button to switch the calls.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hi, peanut! How are you?”

JJ cut a glance at Trevor and offered him a quick smile. “I’m doing great. How’s the birthday boy?”

His deep laugh carried through the phone and reminded her of the thousands of times she’d heard it as a child. After her mom had married him, JJ’d had a happy home life. An idyllic childhood so different from her first five years. Sometimes a little too conservative, but happy nonetheless.

“I’m fine. Can’t wait to see my favorite daughter Saturday,” he teased. “What time will you be able to get here? The boys are already chomping at the bit for a rematch.”

A rematch of the football game in the backyard last year, where JJ had totally kicked butt.

“I’ll be there around eleven,” she said, offering Trevor an apologetic smile. He gave her hand a squeeze. “And Daddy...I hope you don’t mind if I bring someone.”

Okay, so that was a little presumptuous. Trevor might not even want to go. Was it too early for him to meet her family? She didn’t feel like it was. They’d covered a lot of ground in four weeks and she wanted to show him off to the most important people in her life. But she hadn’t thought to ask him when his return flight was.

“That’s great, honey. Can’t wait to meet him.”

That was it? No third degree? No endless questions? No demand for his name, age and social security number? All these years she’d expected that, should she ever “bring someone home.” Mostly because her father and brothers had teased her about lining up on the porch to clean their shotguns.

But JJ wasn’t going to question it, at least not out loud. She’d known her mother ached for JJ to get married and start a family and since she’d never wanted to get her mom’s hopes up, she’d never given the boys a chance to clean those shotguns. She’d have to remember to ask them about that on Saturday, she thought.

“I’ll see you at eleven. Cake in hand.”

“See you then.”

JJ disconnected the call and put the phone away before turning in her seat. Trevor seemed focused on the road but she knew he’d overheard the conversations and probably had questions.

“My dad turns sixty tomorrow.”

“The big six oh.”

She nodded. “We have a big party each year. I always make sure to take the weekend off to celebrate. We play football and eat cake.”

“Sounds fun. What’d you get him?”

“My brothers and I went in together for a tablet computer. Preloaded with all the best sports apps, of course. Thomas called to ask if I’d wrap it. I love him, but the man couldn’t wrap a present to save his life.”

Trevor smiled that smile she wanted to see every day for the rest of her life. It was simple, understanding, and down-right-sexy. And of course, there was that crazy cute dimple. Not two, but one. She was reasonably sure two dimples would give women everywhere heart attacks.

“Lucky he has you, then.”

“Yep.” She smiled as she thought of how her brothers often dropped Christmas gifts off at her place so she could wrap them. But they didn’t trust her not to peek, they were smart like that, so they either wrapped her presents themselves or had the store do it. These days, she could almost tell where her gifts came from just by the wrapping.

“So they don’t mind me tagging along?”

“Do you mind tagging along?”

“Not at all.”

He really was the best. So laid back. She hadn’t expected that. Nothing in those years of interviews had given away all the wonderful facets of this man.

“They’re gonna be so impressed when they meet you. I hope they don’t annoy you when they get all starstruck.”

“I’m just a man.”

“Who happens to be a legendary football player.”

“Dating their darling daughter and sister.”

She thought about the shotguns again. “They probably won’t even notice I’m there.”

“Oh, they’ll notice.”

The way he spoke indicated he expected a thorough talking to. He didn’t seem to mind. Was he an old hat at “meeting the family?” Or did he genuinely not mind explaining his intentions to her family?

She’d feel so much better if he’d explain them to her first.

“They’re gonna be so pissed when they find out you’re on my team,” she said a few minutes later.

“Why’s that?”

“Dad and I whooped them last year. My brothers are eager for a rematch.”

His laugh was genuine.

“Ahh, well, I’m a little rusty, so I’m sure it’ll be an even match.”

Why was he selling himself short?

And why did that make her want to find out everything that plagued him and then make it better?

## ELEVEN

Saturday JJ alternated between walking on air and too nervous to speak. As they wound their way out into the suburbs, she hardly noticed the first hint of fall foliage save for the few leaves spiraling across the road.

She'd spent the morning in her kitchen, baking. Trevor had kicked back to watch ESPN and just like the last time he'd visited, she'd felt...domestic.

It was nice.

And after the whole "is this a real relationship" thing two weeks ago, she felt the next step to becoming *real* was introducing him to her family. Once upon a time, before she'd started work as a journalist, Trevor Wyatt had been your typical NFL playboy. Everything the stereotype called for, or so it seemed. But after his first year, and a missed catch, he'd toned it down.

Still, she wouldn't put it past her brothers to go on the offensive. They'd casually met a couple of the guys she'd dated in the past. If they didn't like Trevor, too bad. She liked him. A lot. He made her feel pretty. And sexy. And cared for. He was more than just a hot jock with lots of money and talented hands.

The more she talked with him the more she realized that his parents had raised him right. He listened. He was polite when he wasn't being naughty. And he was thoughtful.

"You look like you're going to your execution."

Trevor's deep voice rumbled through her thoughts. He sounded amused.

"I'm sorry. Just lost in thought."

"I noticed."

"I just... I've never brought anyone home before," she admitted. Inwardly, she cringed, aware she sounded like a prude.

“Is that right?” Why did he sound so pleased about that? Probably the same reason she wouldn’t be pleased to know how many women he’d brought home.

“When my mother was alive, I didn’t want to get her hopes up. I never met anyone I wanted to introduce to my family, so I just haven’t.”

“And you want to introduce me to your family? I’m touched,” he teased.

“I’m bringing you, aren’t I?”

“I thought I was just the muscle you brought along to carry the cake.”

“That too.” Feeling saucy, she blew him a kiss.

“Don’t do that, sweetheart. I’ll have to pull over and kiss you right. Then we’ll be late and I don’t want to face down a house full of Fairchild men.”

“Don’t worry, you’re bigger than all of them. Probably stronger, too.”

“That’s not the point and you know it.”

“I know,” she said, smiling. “But it helps me not feel so nervous when I tease you.”

“I thought I was supposed to be the nervous party.”

“Hah.” JJ couldn’t explain why this was so important to her. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. If she really looked back at her life, the men she’d dated... they weren’t a fit for her family. Roughhousing, sports-loving brothers. And a mother who was the epitome of southern Baptist belle.

Sometime during the last week her mother’s reminders from the grave had ceased. And Trevor...he made her feel like anything was possible.

They pulled up in front of her parents’ house a few minutes later and the heavens opened up. She glanced out the rain-streaked window at the familiar white columns. “I seriously need to get one of these GPS things,” she said, giving the unit on the dashboard an appreciative nod.

Rather than give him constant directions, she’d left that to the computerized voice.

A horn blared from behind them and she turned in her seat to see her brother Ronny stepping out of his car. His wave and dashing grin let her know he’d tapped the horn on purpose. If she didn’t know better she’d think that Thomas was the oldest because Ronny was much too laid back and fun loving to be the serious, responsible eldest brother.

“Gang’s all here,” she said lightly, though butterflies were doing figure eights in her stomach.

Ronny trotted across the yard and took the porch steps two at a time. She chewed her lower lip. Rain had such lousy timing. Now they’d be cooped up



until it passed. She didn't want anyone to ask Trevor questions that made him uncomfortable.

Almost as if reading her mind, he squeezed her hand. "I can handle it."

She'd kept a tight rein on her inquisitiveness for a month. She didn't want everything to blow up in her face, just when she felt like they were developing into something more.

"I just don't want them to give you the inquisition, or—"

"Or?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Or ask you about your knee." Something she hadn't dared to mention until now.

"If they ask, I'll tell them the truth. Rain makes it hurt like a son-of-a-gun."

She huffed out a short, but relieved laugh.

"Should we go inside?" Trevor asked, still sounding amused.

JJ let out self-deprecating sigh and nodded. This was family. Her family. Friends she'd known for ages. They'd love Trevor and he'd like them and they'd all get along and be one big happy family.

That's just the way it had to be.

Rain pelted them as they strode up the walkway to the wide front porch, cake in hand. JJ picked out the voices flowing from the open doorway. Dad, Thomas, Greg, Cindy, Adam and a few neighbors she'd known almost all her life.

As her foot hit the bottom step, JJ reminded herself that she hadn't been this nervous the first time she'd entered the men's locker room for an interview. So this should be a piece of cake. A walk in the park. That helped ease a little of her tension. The warm hand at the small of her back helped even more.

"If things go south, just remember I can bench press two fifty and run the forty yard dash in four point two nine seconds," Trevor whispered in her ear.

JJ paused, a feeling of rightness and calm washing over her, through her. A rain drop smacked her on the cheek but in that moment she wouldn't have cared if she'd been soaking wet. Trevor Wyatt had her back. It was amazing...and surreal.

"I so want to kiss you right now," she whispered back. But she couldn't. Her dad had spotted her and was striding through the oversized front door.

"Peanut!" With no regard for the cake carrier in her hand, he swept her up into a bear hug. As always, he smelled of Old Spice and coffee.

“Happy birthday, Daddy.”

“Eh, the only reason I allow you kids to continue throwing birthday parties for me is to get everyone together under the same roof.”

“We're here all the time,” she said, even though she knew her job kept her away far too often. Just one more reason to get out of field reporting as soon as her bank account would allow it.

“Now, introduce me to your—” He pulled back and faced Trevor, a look of surprise lifting his features. “Don't I know you from somewhere?”

“Daddy, meet Trevor Wyatt. Trevor, my father Ron Fairchild. Trevor used to play—”

“For the New York Wolves. I know. I know,” he cut her off and extended a somewhat weathered hand to Trevor. “Pleasure meeting you.”

She'd known it wouldn't take the men in her family long to recognize Trevor, after all, she'd been raised in a die-hard tailgate-happy family.

“I always wondered if our little sis would bring home an athlete.” Ronny, her oldest brother, put her in a quick headlock and gave her hair a tease. True to form.

She elbowed him in the ribs and he let her go, laughing like always.

“You don't need an introduction, but I'm Ronny.”

Thomas and Greg had followed him. Greg, the baby of the family by a few months, looked doubly impressed by the handsome man at JJ's side.

They introduced themselves, handshaking ensued, and there was a tiny moment of silence before the football talk began in earnest.

“I knew this was going to happen,” JJ muttered. Trevor must have heard her because he chuckled.

“Let's take this party out back,” her father said, above the dull roar of conversation and pouring rain.

“I put the box on your old bed,” Thomas whispered.

“Okie doke.” She excused herself as the men picked up Cindy, Adam and several of the neighbors on their way through the house. JJ was glad to have a momentary reprieve and rushed up the stairs to wrap the present.

It took her all of five minutes and then she was back downstairs, making sure the kitchen was set up. Trevor had left the cake on the counter. She heard everyone laughing through the open French doors and smiled.

“Seems like your young man is a hit,” Mrs. Bradley said, watching the fuss through the back window. The group had congregated on the covered porch.

“We’re a football crazy bunch. You know that.”

Mrs. Bradley and her husband had been a fixture at holiday parties, birthdays, and the annual Fairchild Super Bowl Extravaganza for as long as JJ could remember.

“I think it’s more than that.” The older woman artfully arranged trays of food on the kitchen island. Though her black hair was peppered with gray and her beautiful ebony skin had a few more wrinkles than she’d had back in January, she’d aged well. JJ often wondered what her mother would have looked like as she aged. “He suits you. They can see it.”

“Let’s hope. I wouldn’t want him to go home with buckshot in the—” She cut off before she said ass. Mrs. Bradley had been a friend of her mother’s for many years and undoubtedly would not approve of a woman using such words. Unfortunately, JJ had picked up language during her years watching sports, roughing with boys, and dealing with athletes.

By the way Mrs. B’s lips curved JJ knew the older woman hadn’t missed JJ’s near-slip of the tongue. She was gracious enough that she didn’t call her out on it.

JJ pulled the caramel cake from the carrier and placed it among the desserts on the counter.

“That looks delicious.”

“It should be. Southern Living never did publish a bad recipe.” JJ forced a smile.

“For dating a football legend, you don’t look so happy.”

JJ’s smile faltered. Trust Mrs. Bradley to say it like she saw it. She’d never been one to mince words.

She supposed the older woman could see her nervousness. Someone was bound to bring up Trevor’s quick exit from the sport. It was inevitable, she supposed. But she didn’t want him to feel—

“He’s a big boy, Julia. He can handle whatever they dish out,” Mrs. Bradley said before she turned and joined everyone on the back porch.

JJ stared after her. Mrs. B was right, of course. JJ simply needed to find a way to stop worrying about it. He’d been so vehement when he’d thought she was there to interview him, poke into his life. But they’d gotten past that. He seemed to trust her now.

She needed to trust him to be the man he was. Strong and capable, perfectly able to handle his own affairs. And while she didn’t want him to feel uncomfortable, she needed to realize that life was life. Something was

bound to happen to make him uncomfortable at some point. It wasn't her job to protect him from that.

As she leaned against the counter, watching the men laughing at something Trevor had said, she knew that Trevor was making an effort to be a part of her life. He'd shown up. It was about time she showed up and joined him. If she wanted a relationship, she had to get over her insecurities and worries about how he'd react, step off the sidelines, and join the game.

She glanced at the family portrait hanging above the family room fireplace. Her mother had battled cancer for several years before she'd died. And in those years, she'd thrown caution to the wind and really learned to live.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, JJ blinked away the tears. Her mom would have liked Trevor. Not just because he was easy on the eyes. But because he was good to her daughter.

"Life's too short," she'd said several times during those last years.

"You're right mom," JJ whispered to the empty room.

Life was too short to sit on the sidelines, hemming and hawing over the future. The future was uncertain. Trevor was here. Now. And that was good enough.

On her way to his side, she stopped by the cooler for a beer. They made room for her in the circle and Trevor slid an arm around her waist. Wasn't this what she'd dreamed of for years? And if she was honest, hadn't she wanted the man at her side to be none other than the wide receiver from the Wolves with the knee-banging smile?

"Trevor was just telling us that the producers of that dance show want him for next season," her father said.

"Is that right?" JJ cut him a glance. He hadn't said a word about it. The idea of one of those gorgeous dancers in a barely-there costume made her blood pressure rise. She recognized the flare of jealousy and wouldn't apologize for it. But she reminded herself that the pro dancers were just that...professionals.

And maybe he'd learn some smooth moves he could use on JJ.

"Show us your moves," Ronny said.

"You had a pretty good touch down dance, as I recall," Thomas added.

One of the things she loved most...whoa, girl. Okay, admired most about Trevor was his comfort in his own skin. Years in the spotlight gave him plenty of experience to draw from, plus some really hilarious jokes.

He turned and gave a goofy impression of a butt-shaking cowboy lassoing a calf. Everyone cracked up.

“Your man’s a hit,” Cindy whispered in JJ’s ear.

“I knew he would be,” she said automatically and realized it was true. Despite his once-upon-a-time Bad Boy status, he had the kind of magnetism that drew people in. Was that why she’d been so attracted to him for so many years?

“It’s a good thing he only has eyes for you. Some unscrupulous woman might try to steal him.”

JJ had accepted that fact years ago. That first smile he’d given her had rocked her universe. But she’d known then that he belonged to the world. A man with talent like his couldn’t be locked away. It wasn’t fair.

But he’d locked himself away after his accident, hadn’t he? She didn’t see his name in the news much anymore; he’d left the team. Maybe he didn’t belong to anyone but himself now.

“Good thing the rain stopped. I’m issuing a challenge,” Greg told her, his light blue eyes glittering.

“I’m still gonna kick yer butt,” JJ told him, laying the southern drawl on real thick.

Ronny moved to the built in bench at the edge of the porch and retrieved the football they’d had since they were kids. “Time to get muddy!”

JJ still remembered the first summer her hands had been big enough to hold that hunk of cowhide properly. There were very few moments in her life where she’d been that proud.

“I think we’re going to need bonus points,” Thomas said, stealing the ball and tossing it up in the air.

“Bonus points?” JJ put her beer on the table and started for the yard.

“You know, like the curve in math class. Trevor’s a professional,” her brother insisted.

“Wuss” JJ chided.

“I’ll go easy on ’em,” Trevor announced.

“Don’t you dare,” she said. “You’re my not-so-secret weapon. Payback for all they times they—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Thomas yelled. “Just catch the ball.”

## TWELVE

“Are you ready to admit defeat?” JJ crowed two hours later.

Trevor loved the way her eyes sparkled. She was having so much fun taunting her brothers. And being a younger brother himself, he was more than happy to help her settle a few scores.

“Fine. I’m muddy anyway,” Ronny admitted.

Indeed he was. Trevor was a little damp, but he’d dry.

“Good game,” he said, extending his hand to everyone.

“Next year, I’m bringing backup,” Thomas grumbled. “You stacked the deck, sis.”

JJ smiled mischievously.

“Good luck trying to find someone of Trevor’s caliber,” she said as they stepped onto the stone terrace. She wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Ronny, know any NFL players?” Thomas asked popping beer caps.

“Aside from Trevor, that’d be a no.”

“Looks like I’m gonna win next year, too,” JJ taunted.

“All right, quit planning and come eat,” Cindy called from the doorway.

They left their shoes by the back door and descended upon the kitchen en masse. It wasn’t until he stood; plate in hand, and everyone laughed discussing their game and heaping food onto their plates that Trevor realized just how much he missed the noisy family environment. He didn’t go home nearly as much as he should.

Julia’s father brought in a platter of hamburgers and hot dogs. “Eat up!”

Trevor’d just snagged himself a dog when Julia’s cellphone rang.

Juggling her plate and cutlery, she retrieved it and glanced at the screen. She sighed and said “I have to take this,” before disappearing into the front hall.

“Her new boss is something else,” Cindy murmured.

“I thought she had the weekend off.”

Cindy paused mid-scoop and glanced toward the hall. “She does. It’s a standing arrangement. Not that he gives a—” She cut off and glanced across the island at Mrs. Bradley. “You know.”

Trevor knew the type. Anything to win. Whatever it took. Harder. Faster. Better.

From everything he’d read, Julia was great at her job. She understood sports and wrote engaging stories. Hell, Roger Morrison had handpicked her to do his first interview after he’d been indicted on chicken fighting charges two years ago. She’d done an amazing investigative piece on steroids and their lingering effects. Trevor had read almost every article she’d ever written. What did her boss have to complain about? And why the hell did she stay?

She’d gotten a job offer this week and he highly doubted it was the only one on the table. He’d be willing to bet that she’d have her choice of stories if only she’d give her boss the boot.

After he’d finished filling his plate he headed out to the long teak patio table and snagged a spot.

“Want another beer, Trevor?” Ronny held up a bottle.

“No, thanks.” He held up a bottle of water. Truth was he never had more than a glass of wine or a bottle of beer these days. One was enough to be social.

He knew it’d take a lot more than a couple of beers to get him drunk. In fact, he knew exactly what it’d take. But he would never chance it again.

“Where’s JJ?” her father asked, taking a seat across from him.

“She had to take a phone call,” Cindy said.

Trevor turned in his seat and looked through the window. He saw her pacing back and forth through the entry way, her free hand making wild gestures. He didn’t want to interrupt, but she looked like she needed rescuing.

“I’ll check on her,” he said and stood up.

In the dim entryway their gazes met and she rolled her eyes. Then she held up a finger.

“Fine. I’ll take care of it. But not until later.” She paused and listened for another moment. “John, I’ve got to go.”

She pulled the phone away from her ear and stabbed a button with vicious intent. “That man is going to cause me to drink.”

“Want me to beat him up?” he asked, pulling her into his arms.

“Would you? I’d be forever in your debt.” She snuggled close. “I’m sorry for the interruption.”

“Don’t worry about it. I figured if I came looking for you it might give you the excuse you needed to escape.”

“It worked perfectly.”

She tipped her head back and stared up at him. “Julia...” He couldn’t help but brush a kiss across her lips. “Don’t tempt me.”

She chuckled softly, her lush breasts rubbing against his chest. “Come on. Let’s eat. I’m hungry.”

So was he.

“HAVE you let Trevor read your book yet?” Greg asked.

Oh dear Lord, where was a sinkhole when you needed one to swallow you?

“Greg!” she snapped then clenched her teeth.

“What book?” Cindy and Trevor asked at the same time.

“You wrote a book?” her father asked. “That’s great!”

She’d known letting Greg read *Game Day* was a mistake. She should have made him pinky-swear that he wouldn’t tell a soul, just like she had when they’d been kids.

“What?” he asked, completely naive to the situation.

JJ tried not to squirm like a fish on a hook. It would only attract attention. “I wrote a book,” she said casually.

“When?” Cindy asked.

“Last year,” JJ mumbled.

Cindy stared at her from across the table and JJ tried in vain to read her mind.

“What’s it about, dear?” Mrs. Bradley asked.

“Sports, what else?” Greg said and gave a quick laugh.

What else? JJ frowned. Did he really think her life revolved around sports? That she couldn’t write anything else? Well, it was either sports or flipping houses. Sports seemed like it’d sell better, so she supposed he had a point.



“Actually, it's about a football star who struggles to regain his life and performance level after his wife dies in a car accident.”

“What?” Trevor asked.

The word was so quiet, so haunted, she turned in her seat to look at him. He'd lost some color and his eyes were darker than she'd ever seen them.

She started to assure him that it was just a silly concept, entirely fictional. But as she glanced at him, she realized what a lie that would be. The kernel of the idea had hit her the moment she'd seen his press conference, confirming that he was leaving the Wolves.

Other than that, it was entirely fictional, but she'd fallen in love with her hero. Rooted for him as he tried to turn his life back around after losing the woman he'd loved. Cheered for him as he'd found his form again and fought his way back to the top of his sport.

No. It wasn't a silly concept. But the haunted look in Trevor's eyes told her that something was wrong. Was he remembering his accident? He didn't jerk away from the hand she laid on his forearm, but she could tell he wanted to.

“It's pretty romantic,” Greg said and JJ looked across the table at him. “You know. If you like that kind of thing.”

“I can't wait to read it, peanut.”

“Me too,” Mrs. Bradley added.

Okay, enough about her and her book. Offering Trevor a quick smile, she turned back to the table.

“Who wants cake?”

There was a quick round of I dos and JJ pushed back her chair. She gathered her plate and carried it into the kitchen, aware that Cindy had followed her.

“Are you going to submit it anywhere? How long is it?”

“It's just over a hundred thousand words. And yes, it's being submitted.”

“Oh my God,” Cindy said, grasping JJ's upper arms. “You didn't hire one of those query services, did you? Those things are a rip off. And editors look down on authors who use them. You could get black listed.”

Frowning, JJ took a step back, breaking Cindy's hold. Boy, she was wound up.

“No. I have an agent.”

Cindy's blond brows skipped up her forehead. “You have an agent?”

“Yes.”

“And you're just telling me this now?”

“Yeah,” she mumbled, rubbing a finger between her brows to ease the tension.

“Well,” Cindy said, putting a hand on her hip. “Who is it?”

JJ went to the cabinet by the sink and pulled out a tall stack of dessert plates. Cindy looked at her expectantly from across the kitchen island. She might as well get this over with. It's not like it was hush-hush anymore.

“Jessica Ross.”

“Jessica Ross?” Cindy's eyebrows managed to crawl even higher. “The Jessica Ross from Ross & Company?”

JJ knew what a coup it was but she didn't want to seem braggy about it. Cindy had let her agent go two years ago.

That knowledge given JJ a moment of pause during her research and subsequent conversations with Jessica.

She pulled a box of candles out of the drawer and scrounged around for a lighter.

“That must be a hell of a book.”

JJ shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise and unsure why. She'd worked hard on *Game Day*. Like every spare minute for months hard. And she was proud of the story, the characters, the message. “Jessica likes it. She said my first one had a rubbish plot.” She crinkled her nose at the memory.

“So this is your second book?”

Oops. “Yeah.”

“I thought we didn't keep secrets anymore.”

After a particularly rough summer following college when Cindy and Baby had been secretly dating the same man—an older, married man—the four of them vowed no more secrets.

“I just didn't want you to feel like I was stepping on your turf. And besides, wouldn't it have been a nice surprise if I'd gotten it published and gave everyone a copy for Christmas?” She offered her friend a sincere smile.

“Is it erotica?”

“No.”

“Then how could you possibly step on my toes?” Cindy cocked her head and gave JJ the look.

“Let's not make a big deal of it, Cin. You know how many books don't sell. I don't want to set myself up for disappointment.”

Plus, she knew how Cindy was. She ate, slept, and breathed publishing.

She was the president of her erotica writers organization. She wrote articles and went to conventions. And when she wasn't writing she was plotting promotion. Several times over the last five years Thursday night Girl's Club had turned into help-Cindy-stuff-envelope parties.

JJ loved Cindy like the sister she never had...a bossy older sister. But she didn't want to have to report in every Thursday night that no, she had not sold her book. All the while, they'd all be getting their hopes up on something that might never happen.

"All right." Cindy sighed and skirted the island to give JJ a much needed hug. "But don't think I'm not telling Gretchen and Baby so they can grill you."

"Fair enough." JJ laughed.

With the candles on the cake, she pocketed the lighter and returned to the table. "Everyone ready to sing?" she asked and lit the candles. Greg and Ronny sucked in a giant lungful of air and their cheeks puffed out like chipmunks gorging on chestnuts. Everyone laughed.

And then, right on cue, everyone sang Happy Birthday. Her father blew out the candles. Ronny snapped a picture with his smart phone. And JJ cut the cake, hardly able to hand the pieces out fast enough.

She took her place next to Trevor and ate her slice in silence. Though he was making small talk with the others, and laughing at their jokes, he didn't seem quite as *on* as he had been earlier. Something about her book had disturbed him but she wasn't sure what she could do to put him at ease again. As far as she knew, he'd never been married. And he never talked about why he'd left the sport he loved so much. As secrets went, his was up there with the Bermuda Triangle and Area 51.

Maybe he was worried that she'd used him as a template. Who knew? She'd ask him about it later because she was tired of remaining mum to keep men comfortable. Doing so was against her nature. She'd never been that way with her brothers. And the only reason she bit her tongue around John so often was that she valued her job and more importantly, the institution that had been so vital to sports journalism for so many decades. The fact that her boss was an asshole certainly tarnished said institution...or at least the glow she got from working there.

A cool breeze swept across the patio and JJ shivered. Trevor put his arm across the back of her chair and she leaned into him.

"Great cake," he said, squeezing her shoulders.

He seemed to have come out of whatever funk had gripped him earlier. The tension she'd felt earlier had disappeared. He drew lazy patterns along her arm with his finger and once again, a feeling of rightness stole through her. Yes, this is exactly what she'd wanted her whole life. A man who *got* her, got along with her family, and didn't mind getting a little muddy before dinner.

"Glad you liked it." Lucky for her, there was more caramel frosting in her refrigerator. If he was on his very best behavior, she might just frost him.

"What's going through your head right now?" he murmured, leaning close.

She smiled, hoping that her cheeks weren't pink. "Nothing."

He gave a soft grunt. "I don't believe it."

"I'll tell you later," she whispered, hoping she could keep the promise.

"All righty, Pop. Time to open your presents," Greg said. JJ turned her attention over to her father and watched the festivities. Not for the first time, she wished her mom was still around to enjoy moments like this.

It was so good to be around this table with friends and family. People she'd known for so long. People who loved her and would always be there for her. Traveling, even though she was often surrounded by truckloads of people, was lonely. Writing was also a lonely, individual profession. Not like a team sport. Or even a business project.

About as team as she got was submitting her articles to her editor and her book to Jessica.

As she looked around at all the people she loved most she realized her secrets were out. For better or worse. Everyone knew about her book now and Trevor was at her side. Something eased in her chest. Almost like she could really breathe again.

And for the first time in a long time, she didn't feel alone. Rather, she felt whole. Complete. And happy.

## THIRTEEN

As Adam drove them back to her apartment, Cindy alternated between annoyed and excited. Annoyed that JJ felt like she needed to keep her book writing a secret. And excited because she'd finally have someone close by that she trusted to critique with. Or at least brainstorm with.

Who was she kidding? It'd be nice to talk to someone who understood that she wasn't crazy when she casually mentioned that her characters were "talking" to her again.

Okay, so perhaps she was a little crazy for keeping her true identity a mystery from a handsome, charming man, but as she'd suspected, Adam had found out all on his own. And it wasn't so much a secret as protecting herself until she'd gotten to know him better.

But JJ was a different matter. Sometimes she held things close to the vest and after almost a decade, Cindy still couldn't figure out why. There really wasn't a rhyme or reason but her writer-brain suspected it had to do with JJ's childhood and her mom and the hardships they'd endured before Leigh Ann had married Mr. Fairchild.

For as sweet and wonderful as Leigh Ann had been, taking Cindy, Baby and Gretchen under her wing as if they were her own daughters, she had some cuckoo ideas. JJ usually laughed them off, but sometimes Cindy wondered if she wasn't still trying to fit the mold her mother had cast for her.

That'd be damn near impossible since JJ was a sports-loving non-virgin and didn't go to church these days.

"What's got those wheels churning so hard over there?" Adam asked. He trapped her hand in his. His touch settled her and she relaxed into the seat.

"Just thinking about JJ and her secrets."

“Why was her book a secret?”

“Hell if I know. She knows we would have supported her. Will support her no matter what.”

He flashed that smile that made her stomach tumble. “That’s what good friends do.”

She nodded. “She’s not one to draw attention to herself and she has weird ideas of stepping on others toes.” Ideas that Cindy didn’t understand at all. The world was enormous, billions of potential readers to be had.

“Because you’re a writer?”

Cindy sighed.

“JJ said that when she was younger her mom wanted each of her kids to try out for different sports, that way no one would outshine the other. I think Ronny played football, Thomas soccer and Greg, baseball.”

There was a momentary silence as he turned right onto the highway onramp. “Okay, that’s a little weird.”

“Mrs. Fairchild was a wonderful, warm woman. But damn, she had some crazy ideas sometimes. She hated confrontation and competition... I mean, she’d go to their games. In fact, I doubt she’d miss a game if she could help it. But between her kids...I don’t know. I get the feeling that she just wanted harmony.”

He gave a short, quick laugh. “Good luck with that. Have you met those guys? I imagine there was way more ‘rowdy’ than there was ‘harmony’ while they were growing up.”

“You said it.” She was thrilled that he was getting along so well with her friends. She’d been hanging out with the Fairchilds for years and thought of them as family. “Sometimes I think JJ’s stuck between being herself and being a junior version of her mom. That frustrates me to no end. The whole ‘quiet and demure’ thing. If that’s not who you are, that’s not who you are.” She should know...

“JJ’s still living with her mom’s ghost,” Adam supplied, ever intuitive.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I think so.”

“Do you think she realizes she’s doing it? Or is it just subconscious?”

Cindy thought about that for several minutes, remembering the past. “Both. Back when we first met, she’d let her hair down around us, but when we’d go over to visit with the Fairchilds, it was like she’d wrap herself in this shell. She wasn’t as outspoken around her mom. Which, I get. Most people can’t really talk to their moms about boys and sex.”

“I don’t talk to my mom about boys and sex,” Adam said quickly, causing her to giggle.

“Anyway, JJ’s good at being evasive. But I don’t even think she realizes when she does it. It’s like a mode...journalism mode, maybe?” She shrugged.

“She asks questions.”

“Yeah. It keeps the spotlight off of her. I think she likes things that way. Which is fine—”

“As long as she’s not trying to hide important aspects of her life.”

“Like with Trevor,” she said, getting agitated again.

“She probably just wanted to see where things were going. And Trevor obviously likes his privacy.”

Adam was right of course. Trevor, for as wonderful and easy going as he was, obviously valued his privacy. She couldn’t imagine what it’d be like to be in the spotlight so constantly. Her books made her mildly famous, but she didn’t include a picture on her website for a very good reason. People could be crazy. And petty.

Multiply that times superstar NFL Super Bowl champion status and... She shuddered.

His fans were probably mega crazy. And he probably had very little quiet time to himself. People always wanting something from him. Journalists wanting to know every intimate detail of his life. Paps following him, wanting pictures. Hoping to catch him in a scandal.

Okay, so she *could* imagine how rough that would be. But then she’d been born with a wild imagination.

“So I forgive her for the Trevor thing. But two novels? And getting the best agent in New York City? If I didn’t love her so much I’d be jealous as hell.”

Adam squeezed her hand. The reassuring gesture loosened some of the tension in her shoulders.

Truth was she’d submitted to Jessica Ross years ago and though the agent within the company who’d read her submission had been complimentary about Cindy’s writing, she had rejected the book. It wouldn’t have been a very good fit anyway. Cindy’s style wasn’t as commercial as Ross & Company usually repped.

“Either way, I’m totally tattling,” she said with a grin. After pulling out her phone she called Gretchen and Baby in a three-way.

As soon as they were on the line she said “Guess who wrote two novels

and didn't tell us."

"JJ," Gretchen said without pause.

"Yeah. She even has an agent shopping the second book around. Can you believe that?"

"Kinda, yeah," Baby said.

"Well, anyway, who knows when she'll pull on her big girl panties and tell you, so I'm telling you."

"Don't be upset with her," Gretchen said. "She's probably nervous about invading your territory. You know how she is."

Cindy let out a frustrated laugh/sigh. "Why does everyone think she's stepping on my toes?" She glanced down at her pretty grape-colored toenail polish. Probably half a month left to keep the piggies in sandals, although she'd been known to wear flip-flops in December. Just one more reason to love Atlanta.

"You're always going on about the publishing industry and what idiots they are. You're kind of a diva about it, Cin. But we still love ya," Baby said.

"You've been published for years, Cin," Gretchen added, her voice quiet and thoughtful.

"You know she's no good at tooting her own horn."

"For a year?" Cindy quirked an eyebrow at that. "We should have been getting her online more. Building her brand. Starting a website. Competition is fierce these days."

"And this is why she didn't tell you. Because you'd make a big deal out of it," Baby said.

"Writing a book is a big deal. We should have been able to celebrate with her."

"I agree," Gretchen said quickly.

"Me too. I'm not saying it's not. But you can be persistent and she probably just wanted some concrete news before she told you," Baby added.

"I wouldn't have taken over," Cindy denied, knowing what they were thinking. So she amended, "much."

"Don't bug her too much," Baby said. "She'll get everything done that she needs to get done...if and when someone buys her books."

"But she needs to start building her brand now. All those people who read her articles? I bet they'd follow her on twitter. And maybe even Facebook. We could post a teaser chapter to get her some likes. I should read the first book. Maybe it'd be good enough to give away for—"



“Cin...” Gretchen said, warning in her tone.

“Send her a list of suggestions.”

“Trust you two to gang up on me,” Cindy said, feeling a little dejected. So she was a strong personality and she cared about her friends. That didn’t make her the bad guy.

“We’re not ganging up, Cin,” Baby said after a long pause. “It’s my week, this week. I’ll get champagne too.”

And just like that, bygones were bygones.

“Good. We’re celebrating that book whether she wants to or not.” Cindy nodded to herself.

Gretchen made a sound of agreement. “See you Thursday.”

TREVOR COULDN’T SHAKE the uneasy feeling in his gut. Though he’d tried to keep his cool and act natural, the premise of JJ’s book had thrown him. It brought back memories of his own accident and all of the turbulent emotions of that night. Happiness, then shock, disbelief, followed by physical pain like he’d never known before.

Not that he could tell her that. Not yet.

He pulled into a parking space outside her building and cut the engine. That night fifteen months ago still haunted him. Sometimes he had nightmares and woke in a cold sweat.

Shoving it all aside, he rounded the car and opened her door. This weekend was about her, being with her. Moving forward; not being stuck in the past.

“Is everything okay?” she asked as she stood. Her pretty face was pinched with concern.

“Yeah,” he lied. “Don’t tell anyone but I ate too much. Us tough guys aren’t supposed to admit to indigestion.”

She grinned. “Your secret is safe with me.”

He reached for her hand. If only she meant it...if only he was willing to trust her. To tell her everything. She had no idea how much he craved a confidant. But she was also a journalist. And as a rule, he didn’t trust people whose job it was to dig into his life and rip him to shreds.

Which made him question his own sanity. Why the fuck was he with her when she had the power to make his life hell? He blew out a sigh.

She hadn’t asked him a single journalistic question in the four weeks

they'd been together. Maybe he should just stop worrying about it and enjoy his time with her. Because when he wasn't worrying, he had a hell of a good time.

"Let's go veg on the couch and let our food digest," she suggested as they stepped onto the elevator. That sounded like a good idea.

He pressed the button for the third floor and leaned back against the wall. "I want to hear about this book of yours. Why did everyone seem shocked at the news?"

He'd been shocked at the news of course, but she'd only been back in his life for a month. Hardly time to learn everything there was to know about her. Especially when he was starting to realize that although she was sweet, beautiful, and charming, she was also a complex woman. And the last few times they'd been together, there hadn't been much time for talking.

She leaned against the opposite wall and twisted her lips, as if trying to come up with an answer. "I didn't tell anyone I was writing it. Cindy's the fiction writer. Always has been."

"Your book isn't fiction?" He fought an irrational wave of panic.

"Of course it is. It's just... I don't know. I didn't want to steal her thunder, I guess. I'm a journalist. I write fact. I create stories from hard numbers and quotable quotes."

"I'm not following."

She sighed just as the elevator stopped at her floor. "I'm crazy. I know."

"Maybe so. But you're cute."

He laced his fingers with hers again and tugged her down the hall, eager to get her into her apartment and into his arms again.

"I guess I just didn't want to make a big deal out of it if nothing came of it."

"But you have an agent, right?"

She nodded.

"Isn't that, like, a big deal?"

He wasn't really up on the publishing industry, but he assumed it worked much the same way as sports. An agent wasn't going to keep you on his roster if you weren't going to make him any money.

"Yeah, I guess."

"You don't like disappointing people."

"No. I don't. I don't like getting their hopes up and then not being able to live up."

“I know that feeling. Remember that pass I missed my first year out?” he asked as he took the keys from her and unlocked her door. He liked that she let him do things like open doors for her.

She’d probably been a junior or senior in high school at that point, but she nodded and it warmed him to know that she actually did remember. She knew so much about his career and football in general. He’d never met another woman like her.

“That changed me. All those expectations. Hopes resting on my shoulders and I dropped the ball. Literally.”

“In the scheme of things...” She sighed quietly and then pursed her lips. “I wasn’t really trying to keep it a secret. You know, the way people do when they’re ashamed of something. Or something could get them into trouble. Or even keeping a party a secret so it’ll be a surprise. I just didn’t mention it. And it seems silly now, but sometimes you share your dreams and they don’t come true. It’s harder. It’s harder because then people feel bad for you. They pity you.”

When had she ever had anyone pity her? But her tone said she spoke from experience about broken dreams. He wanted to ask her about it but right now, she didn’t need to relive the past. She may never be ready to.

But he could certainly sympathize, because what she said was oh-so-true. After that missed pass he’d felt a dozen emotions pummeling him. And that was nothing compared to the experience of letting his team down.

Some of the guys had been downright pissed at the young, cocky rookie who’d screwed up and lost them the biggest game of their season. Others had been quietly upset. Others had made jokes, trying to ease the tension in the locker room. But the people he’d resented the most were the ones who quietly offered their reassurance that he’d do better next time.

He should have caught the damn ball the first time. It’d taken him years to understand that sometimes people just messed up and if you were lucky, you got a second chance.

“Pity sucks,” he admitted.

“The token ‘everything happens for a reason.’ That sucks too,” she added.

“When one door closes, another one opens.” He sat down on the sofa and pulled her into his arms.

“Better luck next time,” she said with a nod.

“Practice makes perfect...although, I did practice that catch a million times after that game.”

“I would say the practice helped.” She gave him one of those looks that made something inside of him tighten.

She fit so perfectly against him he remained silent for a long moment, trying to find something wrong with the situation. A gorgeous woman who laughed at his jokes and knew more about football than his own brothers was snuggled up against him, her arms around his waist and her cheek pressed against his heart. Nope. Nothing wrong here.

Right now he needed to get back on topic, because as tempting as she was, they needed to have this conversation. No matter what a certain part of his anatomy said.

“When did you plan to tell everyone?”

“If the book sold, I would have told people. That would’ve gotten me at least ten sales.” He felt her grin against his chest.

“When your book sells, I’ll be first in line to get my copy autographed,” he murmured, trailing his fingertips down her spine.

“You might have to fight my dad for that spot.”

“Okay, second seat. But that’s final.”

She laughed softly.

“Julia?”

“Yeah...”

“Can I read it?”

“Now?”

“Sometime. Maybe you can send a copy home with me. I’ll read it on the plane.”

“Good. Because I’m not moving from this spot.”

“Sounds good to me.” Sounded perfect, actually.

“Want to see what’s on ESPN?” she whispered.

“Nah. It’s supposed to start storming again soon. I’d rather just lay here with you and listen to the rain.”

She pushed herself up and glanced at him.

“What?” he asked, trying to read her expression.

“You’re too perfect. I’m looking for a flaw.”

He laughed. “I have plenty of flaws, sweetheart.”

“None that I can see from here.”

He didn’t want to tell her that he had a hard time trusting people. And he could be a jealous lover. Or...well, he didn’t want to tell her anything that would take that starstruck dreaminess out of her eyes. She’d learn all that on

her own. And right now, he just wanted to enjoy the warm glow of a new relationship.

“How did Greg know?” he queried sometime later. The rain was just starting to hit the big window behind them, adding to the coziness.

“About the book? I’d printed out the first half to revise it and had chapters scattered all over the coffee table. He came over to measure the kitchen in my last condo while I was out and being the nosy brother he is, he read the damn thing. And didn’t even get the kitchen measured. After that, I kinda had to let him finish it because he wouldn’t stop pestering me.”

There was a wealth of love in her tone and he understood that love/hate sibling dynamic. But at the end of the day, he was there for his brothers and they were there for him.

Being with Julia’s family today made him miss Marcus and Kyle and roughhousing with them. They hadn’t done much of that since his accident. It was Trevor’s fault, of course. He’d withdrawn from everyone for a few months. His family, friends, his agent. And he’d let them all think it was because he’d left the sport he loved so much.

Gosh, they were a pair. He and Julia and their secrets. Momentarily, he wondered what other secrets she was hiding. But it wasn’t like he could ask her. He didn’t have any right to. Not until he was ready to come clean. So he pushed that worry away, too.

Holy smokes, he was getting good at that.

## FOURTEEN

JJ stretched and her hand hit something hard...and hot. Her eyes snapped open and she turned to find Trevor sleeping beside her, his big body curled around an extra pillow.

Her body warmed, reminding her of the long, carefree evening of snuggling and listening to the rain before he'd finally swept her into his arms and hauled her off to bed. It was official; she needed a bigger bed if they were going to keep seeing each other.

After he'd snuggled up next to her the night before, he'd kept her in his arms, obviously content just to hold her. Sleeping with him, against him... actually sleeping with not a hint of something more physical was the sweetest experience she could imagine.

He looked so peaceful now. So relaxed. She let her gaze sweep over his body. His skin was smooth and almost completely tanned. Well-muscled and perfectly proportioned. And he had a morning hard-on to inspire fantasies.

The sight of him against the crisp white sheets of her bed would certainly play a starring role in her future fantasies.

"Are you just going to stare at it or are ya gonna touch it?" The deep voice startled her and her gaze swerved to his. He was awake. And watching her. Heat infused her cheeks and he chuckled.

In a lightning fast move, his hand snaked out, cupped her head and pulled her in for a kiss. She ran a hand over his chest and then detoured south. When she closed her fingers around his erection he tore his lips from hers and leaned back, groaning with pleasure.

His responsiveness thrilled her. Ready to take advantage of all his secret spots, payback was only fair; she rolled toward him, planting a kiss in the

middle of his chest. Tucking a knee beneath her, she let both hands roam over his pecs, teasing his nipples. He sucked in a shuddering breath.

Then he grinned at her, lighting up her world and making her heart ache at the handsome sight. His warm hands caressed her skin but didn't interfere with her quest. Smart man.

She trailed her lips over his abs, loving the play of muscle beneath his skin.

When she arrived at his cock, she wrapped both hands around the thick shaft and looked up the length of his body. He was watching her intently.

“Wasn't there something you were going to tell me yesterday at dinner?” He asked. “Something...naughty?”

She wished she could utter the naughty words that came to mind, just push them through her lips and watch him writhe like a worm on a hook. She loved it when he got all hot and out of control. She loved being brave and bold and being the woman that inspired his fantasies. But most of all, she loved that he'd never once made her feel silly or inferior or slutty.

No. He made her feel beautiful and sexy, naughty and cherished.

Pulling her lips into what she hoped was a sexy smirk, she whispered “wouldn't you like to know?”

His cock twitched in her hands. She laughed softly and kissed the tip.

“Very, very much.”

His words were rough and husky.

“I was just thinking that I had extra caramel frosting in my fridge.” She watched him closely and saw the exact second he comprehended the words. His eyes widened a little, then his jaw hardened and at the same time, his erection grew between her fingers.

“Is that right?” She loved how breathless she'd made him.

“I was also thinking that if you were good, I'd have to frost you with it.”

“Julia—” he said on a groan.

Her name had never sounded sexier. She smiled. The power was hers to control. He was hers to conquer. She kind of liked being in the driver's seat.

“Ask me.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, obviously close to losing control. “What?”

“Ask me.”

“Put it in your mouth.”

Her tongue snaked between her lips and licked him like a Popsicle.

“Oh my God.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw his big hands dig into the bed on either side of his hips.

“Like that?” she murmured, teasing him.

“You have no idea.”

She had an idea all right. He'd taunted her so many times with long, tantalizing strokes of his tongue against her clit. Always teasing. Never quite delivering. Holding her at the delicate precipice.

She had exactly the right idea.

She licked him again. And again, until his lips shaped a constant O and he breathed hard, his face wearing a mask of concentration and desire.

“Want me to go get the frosting?”

“No!” His chest heaved. “Stop teasing, Julia, and suck it.”

“Bossy.”

“I can show you bossy, sweetheart. I'm sure you've got pantyhose around here somewhere and this headboard...” His words ignited the fire low in her belly and they both went still. “It was made for tying you up.”

She cupped his balls in her hand, rolling them gently. Trevor tossed his head back and a primitive sound erupted from his lips. She wasn't done yet, though. Not by a long shot.

Her lips closed over the purple head of his cock and she immediately swirled her tongue around him, tasting, teasing.

“Damn, sweetheart. You keep that up and I'm going to come.” She twisted her mouth around him, taking him deeper. Then she let him pop free.

“That's the general idea, isn't it?”

He uttered a low curse and she laughed. Pleasuring him was different. Fun. He hadn't expected her to do it. Hadn't begged for it as some of her past lovers had. He didn't criticize her technique, just sat back and enjoyed himself. So she continued driving him wild with her mouth until he warned her to stop.

She didn't stop. With one hand around his shaft and the other cupping his balls, she started a slow suction that had him cursing again.

Then, before she knew how it'd happened, he reached forward, hooking his hands beneath her arms and pulled her up his body until his cock lay nestled beneath her pussy.

“I'd much rather come inside you.” His hands closed over her hips and lifted her onto his straining cock. Inch by glorious inch she sank down onto him until, at last, he was filling her. She stared down at him, loving the look



of pleasure on his face, the way he kept his eyes closed as if he were savoring all the sensations.

Then all of a sudden it hit her. It must have registered with him too because his eyelids snapped open.

“Condom.”

Lifting her off, he uttered a curse. “I’ve never forgotten before,” he said, leaning up on an elbow, angled toward her. He watched her for a moment and then ran a hand through his hair.

If she hadn’t been so surprised with herself she would have thought his shellshocked expression rather cute.

“Me, either.”

They’d both been distracted, seduced, immersed in passion. Totally immersed, evidently. She’d never been so distracted that she’d forgotten all about protection before. She didn’t want to be a single mom. And she didn’t want a baby before she was ready. Those two thoughts always hovered in the back of her mind, a warning...a siren with bright flashing lights waiting to go off.

They stared at each other for several long moments. It wasn’t like he’d come...but still.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. Cupping her cheek, he forced her to meet his gaze. “I know better.”

She placed a palm against his shoulder and leaned in for a kiss. “It’s not your fault. I—we got carried away.”

He lay back, taking her with him. “You make me lose my head,” he said against her throat.

She’d never felt sexier than she did right now. Knowing that she’d made a man who never forgot protection forget...the ultimate aphrodisiac.

“Suit up,” she whispered back, feeling brazen and loving the stillness her words created in him.

He reached into the nightstand, snagged a condom, sheathed himself and lifted her back onto him in under a minute. Oh yeah. She was thankful for that focus and those lightning fast reflexes. Oh so thankful, she thought as she slid down the length of him again.

She was still amazed at the feel of him inside her. The way he filled her, touching places no other man had. The curve of her lips must have told him so.

“Feel good, princess?”

She nodded.

He reached between them and stroked her clit in slow circles. Her breath whooshed in and out of her lungs as her body began to tighten. She tried to hold herself steady so those long, talented fingers could work their magic.

Her eyes drifted shut and she blocked out the world, everything but the feel of him inside her. And those magic fingers. He stroked her faster and she lifted her hips slowly; then slid back down his shaft. After a few tries they found a rhythm and her orgasm built quickly.

“Now it's time to come.”

“Mmm hmm,” she agreed, breathless and needy. “Oh!”

Her movements halted as the sweet pleasure coursed through her and at the same moment she felt Trevor swelling inside her, coming with a deep groan. She moaned, loving the tightness of her skin, the strain of their muscles, the way they were locked together. And each ripple of ecstasy rolling through her until she was nothing more than a warm, melted pile of feminine bliss lying against his chest.

“Perfect timing,” she whispered.

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

JJ wasn't in any rush to move, but her stomach growled. Trevor laughed and his arms tightened around her.

“I guess I should let you out of bed and feed you again.”

She grinned up at him. “That'd probably give me more energy for later.”

“Already planning for later?” He wore a pleased, almost Cheshire cat, expression.

For all his fussing yesterday, he seemed completely at ease today. Maybe one of these days she'd figure him out. Until then, she'd enjoy the ride.

“You know it.”

## FIFTEEN

The following Thursday, JJ climbed the stairs to Baby's townhouse and straightened her spine when she reached the top. Raising her hand, she pressed the pineapple-shaped doorbell.

She glanced down at the text message from Trevor for the thousandth time since he'd sent it Monday morning and that warm happy feeling bounced around inside her.

TREVOR: *loved the book. you should write moody's story next.*

YESTERDAY when they'd talked more about the story and the characters, he'd urged her to let the girls read it. Once again, he was right.

These women had been her support system for years. Through boyfriends and breakups, job offers and that interview with superstar-turned-convict Roger Morrison. Who knew how many bottles of wine they'd topped off together and there was no telling how many laughs they'd shared.

She just hoped they'd—

The door opened. "Well hello there miss soon-to-be-published author," Baby said.

JJ gave her an exasperated smile. "Hardly."

"Come on." Baby waved her in. JJ felt those big blue eyes studying her carefully. "You look like you could use some wine."

Baby gave JJ a trademark grin and just like that, the ice was broken. She

had known that Baby would take everything in stride. That's just the kind of woman she was. Easygoing to a fault. Go with the flow...

"You have no idea." It'd been a rough day, which was why she was propping herself with three day old text messages.

Cindy and Gretchen were already there, tucked into the ultra-modern bubble chairs Baby was so fond of. JJ laid her purse on the clear acrylic entry table. Five days ago she'd stood in her parents' kitchen and had an epiphany. Now she needed to follow through. It was time to own up to her desire, to admit she was a writer, not just a journalist.

To admit she was seeing a smoking hot football player. Well, former football player.

After settling into one end of the equally modern, too-boxy-to-be-comfortable sofa, and setting her bag on the floor, she gladly accepted a big glass of red wine.

"A Shiraz from that little boutique vineyard we liked," Baby said.

"Australia is producing some great wines," Gretchen added, scribbling a note on their wine scorecard. Being somewhat graphically inclined, Gretchen had created a note-card design several years ago so they could track the wines they tried. Each sheet on the oversized notepad had a space for the wine's name, type, year, country, region, an overall score, and then notes.

JJ had been dubious of any sort of formal wine notes, but they'd had plenty to drink over the years and the scorecards helped them remember their favorites. They kept them in a binder and passed it around each week so the next hostess could make an informed decision when it came to her selection.

Admittedly, picking out something everyone would like sometimes had her standing in the local package store for half an hour. That was, until she'd realized she could always go back to the scorecards and find a favorite. Sommeliers they were not, but they knew what they liked and JJ loved the tradition.

JJ took a sip, noted the flavors, and watched her friends do the same. Gretchen passed the notepad and JJ scribbled a few notes of her own before handing it over to Cindy.

"So, I'm dating Trevor Wyatt. And I have a full length novel with agent Jessica Ross," she said. Sometimes it was better to just rip the Band-Aid off. They knew both bits of information, but she felt it was time to lay everything on the line. No more secrets.

Baby grinned but Gretchen and Cindy remained pensive.

Oh boy, it was groveling time.

“I know we said we wouldn’t keep secrets, but I wasn’t sure if this thing with Trevor was a one-night stand or what.”

“Well you guys didn’t look too one-night standish to me,” Cindy said.

True. It didn’t feel like a fleeting affair. She hadn’t expected him to be so attentive but he was. And though she didn’t want to jinx it, she felt this relationship was different than any of her others. Deeper. Richer. Fuller. More exciting.

JJ nodded. “We’ve been together a month. Remember that money that was stolen from my account last month?”

“Yeah. Did you ever get that back?” Baby asked.

“The bank finally took care of it. Anyway, I went to the shoe store where my card number was used and Trevor was filling in while his cousin was on his honeymoon.”

“How sweet,” Gretchen said. Bless her hopeless romantic heart.

“Anyhoo, one thing led to another and we went out to dinner that night.”

Baby and Cindy shared a *yeah, right* look.

“Finally,” Gretchen chimed in.

The other two gave her a droll look.

“What? She’s been talking about this guy forever,” Gretchen defended.

Had JJ really been that transparent about her feelings for Trevor?

“Is he...you know...everything they say he is?” Cindy asked, and actually looked like she might blush.

JJ laughed. “That and more,” she said with smug satisfaction. He was so much more. More thoughtful. Tender. Naughty. All around pretty perfect for her.

“So are you guys going to keep seeing each other?” Gretchen asked. Trust her to look for a happily ever after.

“I think so. We’re just kind of playing it by ear, I guess.”

Cindy arched a brow and shot Baby a knowing smirk. “Playing it by ear, my foot. The man’s flown down here twice to be with you.”

“Good for him. Our JJ deserves to be chased a little,” Baby said.

“So long as his intentions are good,” Gretchen added.

There was a pause and then all four of them busted out laughing. God, she’d missed this. The easy going camaraderie amongst dear friends. With her secrets gone, new life had been breathed into their friendship. No more secrets. Not even if she wasn’t prepared for questions or didn’t feel like

something was important or if she wanted to keep things compartmentalized.

These women had her back. If she had a one-night stand or needed a clean pair of undies, they'd be there for her.

"I have something for you guys." She took three bound copies of her manuscript out of her bag and handed one to each of them. "My book."

Baby clapped. "I can't wait to read it," she said, and Gretchen agreed, already flipping open to the first page.

"Did you let Trevor read it?" Cindy asked.

"I sent him home with a digital copy. These are hot off the printer. You'd better like it because I slaughtered a tree to print it."

They laughed.

"What did he say?" Cindy asked, her gaze focused on the book.

JJ handed over her phone as Baby hopped up and ran into the kitchen. She was back in a flash, her hands working the cork out of a bottle of champagne. "I got the good stuff!"

Tears sprang to JJ's eyes and her nose twitched.

"Time to celebrate," Cindy agreed. Manuscripts forgotten, the wine glasses were shoved to the center of the table. Gretchen fetched four ultra-modern, square champagne flutes.

"To handsome men," Baby declared a moment later, lifting her glass.

"And new books," Cindy added.

"To true love," Gretchen said.

"To the best friends a girl could ask for," JJ finished, clinking their glasses together.

Good friends. Family. Love. That's what life was about. Taking chances and being true to yourself.

*Now you've got it, my beautiful girl,* she heard her mother whisper. *Now you've got it.*

"Oh!" She remembered something else. "I sold my condo!"

At that, they all jumped up and did their own little version of a touchdown dance.

There were hugs and tears and promises of no more secrets. And plenty of bubbly.

---

SHE'D JUST CRAWLED into bed when her phone trilled. She didn't need to look at the caller ID to know it was Trevor on the other end of the line. He usually called late.

"Hi." She sank back against the mound of pillows and closed her eyes. It wasn't hard to conjure his face in her mind's eye or even imagine he was in the bed next to her.

"Hello, gorgeous." His smooth, rich voice carried through the phone's speakers and made her quiver.

"Where are you?"

"Just outside of San Francisco. Boys club opening tomorrow morning."

"Ahh. You're a good man, Trevor Wyatt." He continued to prove it, little by little, every day.

"Yeah well, I decided it was time to get back out there and use my name for something more than endorsements."

It couldn't be easy, opening himself up to the questions and curious kids who had no filter between their brain and their mouth. Two things she knew about Trevor: he was a very private man, and he loved football with every fiber, tendon, and bone in his body.

"I'm sure it'll mean the world to those kids. Meeting a real-life superhero. You can help them believe anything is possible."

"I'm not a superhero."

"You may not wear a cape, but you're a superhero to them. Larger than life."

There was a long pause and she wondered if the call had dropped.

"Did I lose you?" she asked.

"Just thinking."

Normally she didn't push. When he got pensive, she let him have his space and time. Even when everything in her was shouting questions, she was good at turning parts of herself—her curiosity in this case—off. But tonight she opened her mouth and asked "About?"

"How was your day?"

Changing the topic...a classic evasive maneuver. She decided to call him on it. With a short laugh she said "I doubt that's what you were thinking about, but I'll play along. My day was rough, but my condo is now under contract. Happy about that. Now Greg and I can get serious about buying that loft."

"You're my little house-flipping dynamo."

“Hardly. Greg does all the heavy lifting.”

“You say that but I have a feeling you’re the brains behind the operation.” She laughed and snuggled deeper into the pillows. “I’ll tell him you said that.”

“I’m sure he’d agree with me.”

“How about you? Having a good week?”

“Yeah. I went over to my mom’s for dinner Tuesday. Got to see my brothers. I’m not so sure she was glad to have all of us roughhousing in her living room again, but she hardly complains.”

“I bet she loved it. Mom always said her favorite times were when everyone was home, noisin’ up the house.”

“I would’ve liked to have met your mom. She sounds like a great lady.”

JJ smiled and blinked back a errant tear. “I think she would have liked you. You may not be southern, but she would’ve forgiven that.”

His rumbling laugh warmed her. Dang, she missed him. Missed feeling that laugh. Resting her head on his chest.

“You think so?”

“You have plenty of fine points working in your favor.” Too many, so JJ had stopped counting. She didn’t dare ask him where the relationship was going. He’d said it was real and that was good enough for now. If she catalogued all his good qualities, it’d be a really long list.

“Oh yeah?”

“Are you hinting for a list, Mr. Wyatt? That’s not very humble of you.”

Another bark of laughter.

“Sweetheart, whoever said I was humble?”

*She’d* thought it, on more than one occasion. Like when he’d caught that ball during his last Super Bowl and run his legs off to make the touchdown. While everyone had been congratulating him on an incredible catch, he’d complimented the quarterback for throwing it just right.

A team player. That’s what Trevor was.

“I’ll list three things, shall I?”

“I’m not stopping you, princess.”

“You understand the value of family. Momma would’ve liked that. You’re not fast and loose with your money. We both appreciate that in a man. And you’re good to me. No mom could complain about that.”

“Tell me about her.”

JJ opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling fan. It wasn’t often that she



met someone who wanted to know about her mother. Everyone in her circle of friends and family knew all about Leigh Ann Fairchild.

She didn't know where to begin.

"What do you want to know?"

"You said your dad is your stepdad? How did they meet? How old were you?"

"I was five. The story goes that they met at a party thrown by a mutual friend. And Momma was the prettiest girl there, according to Dad."

"Like mother, like daughter."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr. Wyatt." There was a click on the line and she assumed it was his call waiting. She was used to their calls being interrupted but that didn't stop the longing to stay on the line as long as possible.

"I'm counting on it, sweetheart. Listen, I know it's late. I'll call you tomorrow. Maybe I can detour through Atlanta on my way back to New York."

"I'd like that."

"Great."

The pause was so long she wondered again if the call had been dropped. Stupid cell towers.

"Trevor?"

"Sorry, I was going to say sweet dreams, but if I meet you there they'll be anything but sweet."

She laughed. "You're right about that."

"So I'll just say 'dream of me' and 'good night.'"

"I will," she said honestly. "Good night."

## SIXTEEN

JJ's phone rang, waking her from a wicked hot dream about Trevor. Three weeks apart hadn't lessened her desire for him or her imagination. If anything, it seemed to be increasing both. Her dreams the first week had been hot. The second week, twice as steamy. Last night he'd been painting her naked body with a can of whipped cream. She groaned, never so hungry for strawberry shortcake in her life.

Rolling over, she glared at the clock and wished he was in bed next to her. Seven thirty. Who in their right mind was calling her at seven thirty?

She stretched for her cell phone and jabbed the talk button.

"'Ello?" She coughed, patting her chest then revised, "Hello?"

"JJ? Did I wake you? It's Jessica Ross."

Her agent's name pushed aside all thoughts of fruit and creamy goodness. She jerked into a sitting position and ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm awake now."

"I have exciting news." Jessica's voice sing-songed through the speaker and JJ actually felt a little shiver. As a lifetime New Yorker and a strong business woman, Jessica wasn't one to get excited about much and she certainly wasn't demonstrative. But JJ hadn't signed with her for hugs and a pat on the back. She'd signed with Ross & Company because of Jessica's reputation in the industry.

"That's my favorite kind," JJ said, struggling to pull herself together.

"I have a contract on my desk for your book. It's such a good offer. They are super excited about the project. They want to meet with you. They're ready to move, JJ. Gone are the days of slow New York publishing."

Contract. Project. Meet. The words peppered her like rain drops. She held

the phone out and looked at it for a moment. The call timer on the screen ticked by. It was a live call. Still, she felt like she was dreaming.

“JJ? Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m just—processing.” Barely processing. “Wow. I—that’s amazing!”

“I agree. Do you have your calendar handy? They want you here ASAP.”

“I...um, yeah.” She put Jessica on speaker and flipped to the scheduling app.

As soon as she was done with the whirlwind of questions and notes and scheduling with Jessica, she switched to the text messaging app.

“Oh my God, this is really happening,” she said to the empty room. Holding both hands against heated cheeks, she glanced around at her bedroom. Everything looked just as it had when she went to bed last night, but everything felt different this morning. She felt...different.

She was more nervous right now than when she’d closed on her first condo and the real estate lawyer had handed over the keys. And at the same time, she was so excited she felt like she might bounce right off the bed.

With trembling fingers she sent Trevor a note.

*JJ: just got some exciting/scary news.*

THE NEXT MESSAGE was to the girls.

*JJ: agent just called. I sold game day.*

SHE THOUGHT about calling her dad, but figured one of the four people she’d just texted would be calling her soon. Right on cue, Cindy’s number flashed on her screen and JJ hit the green button.

“You’re fast,” JJ said.

“Bailey? Bailey wants your book? You lucky girl! Is it a good deal? Did you ask for all the details? Does she have a contract? Who’s the editor?”

JJ's head spun a little. She was sure Cindy's was spinning even more because she was almost positive her friend had said all of that without taking a breath. "Yes, Bailey. Jessica says it's a great deal. I did ask for all the details. She has a contract in hand."

"And the editor?"

"I haven't heard of him. Scott Spangler?"

"I haven't heard of him either, but that doesn't mean anything. I'll look him up."

As usual, JJ got a little lost in Cindy's shuffle. But she was thrilled to have someone, other than Jessica, in her corner. While she trusted her agent, publishing was a big, scary new world. Similar and yet different from her job of the last seven years.

When she hung up with Cindy she glanced at the clock. Eight forty-five. Trevor was in LA for another appearance today. This time for an inner city youth league.

What time was it in California? She started to count backwards with her fingers. Her phone buzzed and she glanced at the text.

*BABY: That's awesome, Jules. Will call you when I get out of this crazy-assed meeting.*

SMILING, JJ hit the reply button.

*JJ: how's the promotion looking?*

TREVOR'S NAME flashed across the top and she hit the speaker phone button.

"Good morning."

"Hey beautiful. Just heading to the gym when I saw your text." She could tell by the sound of his voice that it was an early morning for him and he was still a little sleepy. It made her miss him. She got the impression he was

rarely in one place long enough to get used to the time zone. Luckily Atlanta and New York were both on the east coast.

“That’s great news, sweetheart. I knew someone would buy it.”

“They want to meet with me next week. I can’t believe it.”

“Well, you’re rather famous. They probably want to see how nice you’ll look on the book jacket.”

That made her smile. “Go get your workout in. I’ve got some articles to finish. And to-do lists to write.” Not that she wanted to. She’d much rather stay on the phone with him all day.

“I miss you,” he said.

She closed her eyes and imagined him sitting next to her, whispering those words in her ear...massaging her shoulders.

“Ditto,” she whispered. And if she didn’t hang up right now she was bound to beg him to stop by on his way back to New York and then she’d be even more behind than she already was. “Go run.”

He laughed. “Later, gorgeous.”

Deciding to call her dad after work, JJ put on a jogging outfit, grabbed her keys and phone, and then headed out the door. She didn’t enjoy running. Not until the first ten minutes passed and her body stopped complaining, anyway. Then she loved it. It was probably the endorphins, but she did get some good ideas while her sneakers were beating the sidewalk. Today she made a mental list of things to do before her trip to New York next week and things she needed to ask Cindy and Jessica. And as soon as she got home she was making an appointment with her hair stylist.

She just hoped her stylist could fit her in on such late notice.

## SEVENTEEN

*Newark, NJ*

THE FOLLOWING Wednesday JJ arrived at Newark. It was two months to the day since she'd gotten off the plane and caught a cab to the city. This time, however, there was a brittle chill in the air. Autumn had New Jersey in its clutches.

JJ pulled her luggage along behind her and headed for the gate. Trevor was supposed to be waiting for her at the curb. The now familiar tendril of desire flooded her system as she walked.

Outside she scanned the long line of cars. No sign of him. When she'd discussed her trip to New York this week, Trevor had offered to pick her up. She'd expected him to offer for her to stay at his place as well. But he hadn't.

She frowned at the memory and surveyed the line of cars again. Security probably wasn't letting anyone stop if their party wasn't already waiting. The place was packed so she made her way to the far end and reached into her purse for her phone. After turning it back on, she scanned her messages. One from Trevor. He'd sent her a voice mail as well.

She clicked the play button and held the speaker to her ear.

"Hey, beautiful. I'm caught in traffic. I don't know if I'll be there in time to get you to your meeting. Gimme a call when you get this."

Sighing, she glanced at the time. She was supposed to meet Jessica at the publisher's offices in less than two hours. Plus she wanted to be early, to have time to get herself together and go over her list of questions again.

Who knew how long it'd take by cab; no one could predict accidents and every time she came to the city, some construction project was causing a delay. Even if Trevor was on time, there'd be no time to check in to her hotel and drop off her bags.

She thought about sending him a text but decided it'd be safer to call if he was actually in motion.

"Hey gorgeous," he answered a moment later.

"Hi. I'm here."

"Dang, I was hoping I was going to make it."

"Where are you?" She glanced at the fleet of taxis.

"I'm still in the city. I was...uh...doing some shopping."

It wasn't like him to be late. But the idea of Trevor shopping... The corner of her mouth turned up. What was he shopping for? More condoms? That thought brought on a full-fledged grin. Too bad she had somewhere she needed to be. "Stay there. I'll just take the subway."

"I'm sorry, Julia."

"Not a problem. It'll probably be faster this way. I was just anxious to see you," she explained.

"I'm anxious to see you, too." His voice didn't disguise that fact and she felt a little better. Truth was she'd been counting down the hours until she saw him again.

"I'm not sure when my meeting will be over," she said, already heading for the subway.

"Doesn't matter. I'll head over there now and camp out in the fire lane if I have to."

She loved it when his voice got all deep and possessive. And knowing him like she did, she would wager he would indeed camp out in the fire lane, legalities be damned.

"All right. I'll call you on my way out."

"Julia?"

"Yeah?"

"I talked to my mom earlier. She wants you to come over for dinner tonight. I didn't know what your plans were, you know in case your editor wanted to take you out or something. Or maybe you'd want to have drinks with your agent or—"

She cut him off. "I'd love to meet your momma."

There was a pause and she thought she heard him sigh, but couldn't be

sure. The airport was noisy.

“Excellent. See you later.”

“Drive safe.”

TREVOR’S PHONE buzzed in his pocket and he retrieved it quickly. He was alive with nerves today, anxious to see Julia’s smile. Hear her voice. Hold her hand.

As the guys would say, he was whooped.

Thing was, he didn’t mind a bit.

JJ: *waiting for the elevator now.*

HE HEADED out of the coffee shop and jogged across the street.

TREVOR: *downstairs.*

DAMN, he couldn’t wait to see her. He glanced around to make sure no one was paying him any extra attention and then he checked his email just to keep himself busy as he waited. His agent was still hounding him to do that dancing show. That was way too much spotlight for him. Though the idea of dancing with one southern belle in particular sounded nice. Maybe he should take her out on the town after they stopped by his mom’s for dinner.

With nothing new to attend to, he pocketed the phone and watched the revolving door beneath the large silver sign proclaiming Bailey Books. He did a double take as a pretty blonde pushed her way through the door. His body reacted swiftly. He knew that face. Those legs.

But she had been brunette the last time he’d seen her. And she hadn’t mentioned getting it changed back. The fact that he wasn’t there, by her side, sharing the same space each day, drinking from the same coffee pot each



morning was starting to grate on him. He was missing all sorts of important details and moments of her life.

She tugged a suitcase behind her and suddenly it was five years ago and he was seeing her for the first time. The shiny, golden-blond hair, those bewitchingly unusual eyes, the pretty smile...*those legs!* Shaking his head, he strode forward.

Another woman followed her onto the sidewalk. Julia was listening carefully to whatever the other woman was saying. Judging by the sharp haircut and standard New York black wardrobe, this was her agent.

He'd never been particularly shy or self-conscious, but this was Julia's career and he didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that. As if sensing his gaze, she looked up and a slow smile stretched her lips. She waved him over.

When he was an arm's length away she reached for his hand. "Hey you. Trevor, this is my agent Jessica Ross. Jessica, Trevor Wyatt my—"

"Boyfriend," he inserted easily.

Her grin kicked up until her blue-gray eyes sparkled.

"A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Ross," he said, and extracted his hand from Julia's just long enough to shake her agent's.

"Likewise. You'll have to come with us to dinner. I was just telling JJ about this great little place I know where all the agents and editors hangout."

"Oh," Julia said, glancing between them. "I'm sorry, Jessica. Trevor already invited me to meet his mom tonight. Can I take a rain check?"

"Sure. Sure. Take care of our girl," Jessica Ross said, and gave him a quick eyebrow quirk to punctuate the order. "Great to finally meet you, JJ. It's gonna be big!"

Something about the way she said it told Trevor she was already seeing dollar signs. And with that, the woman with the short black hair turned on her heel and faded into the crowd. Trevor couldn't resist pulling Julia closer, even in such a public location.

She turned those amazing eyes up at him. "Hello, boyfriend."

"Like how I staked my claim?" He wasn't sure what had possessed him to spit out that proclamation without consulting her first, but it had felt natural.

"Very much." She got that faraway look in her eyes like she was imagining them together, naked.

That could certainly be arranged.

"Hey, aren't you Trevor Wyatt?" a feminine voice asked from his left side.

Slowly, he turned toward the voice. A plump middle-aged woman and a somewhat taller but just as plump man stood before him, their jaws practically on the sidewalk.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The woman smacked her husband in the stomach.

“I told him you were still living in New York, but George never listens to me, do you George? We’re huge fans of yours, huge.” She was talking with her hands. “I’m so sorry to interrupt.” She sent an apologetic look to Julia. “Could we trouble you for a picture? No one back home will believe we bumped into you.”

“Sure thing,” Trevor said. He sent Julia an apologetic look of his own but she just smiled and shrugged. Such a trooper. Where had she been all his adult life? A woman like her would keep a man grounded while stroking his ego.

He stepped in between the man and woman as they handed Julia a camera. “Do you mind, dear?” the woman asked.

“Not at all.” Julia took the camera, found the shutter button and lifted it to her eye. “Say cheeseburgers!”

The couple at his sides laughed and he smirked.

“Great picture,” Julia declared, handing the camera back. A brisk wind bore down on them, whipping her hair around her face.

And just like that, Trevor fell the last little bit head-over-heels for one Miss Julia Fairchild.

## EIGHTEEN

“So tell me everything,” Trevor said as soon as he had her bundled into his Land Rover. Despite the traffic of the city, he preferred traveling by car so he could maintain his personal space. Ten years ago he'd thought nothing of hopping on the subway. How times had changed.

He took a right out of the parking deck and immediately stepped on the brakes, but that just gave him the opportunity to steal a glance at the woman at his side. Her lips were curved up in a pleased smile.

“They seem really enthusiastic about the book.” She seemed surprised by that. “I didn't expect that. My editor, Scott, seems a little young, but as grandma Fairchild used to say 'he's as sharp as a tack.' And after seeing their plan for launching the book, Jessica is trying to get me a bigger advance.”

Once again Trevor bit back the irrational surge of jealousy. Just because her editor was young and male meant nothing. Nothing. She didn't sound the least bit interested in the guy. “That's good.”

“I know it's her job but their first offer was way bigger than I'd expected.” He wasn't surprised that they wanted the book and were willing to pay for it. It had all the elements of a bestseller. He should know. He'd had plenty of time to catch up on his reading this past year. Still, she sounded a little stunned. But then, he knew she had some money quirks. Who didn't?

From the corner of his eye he saw her press her palms against her cheeks. Damn, she was cute.

“You're worth it. It's an incredible story, sweetheart.” It'd taken him a few hours before he'd been able to tame the anxiety monster and dive into her book. But she'd blown him away with the characters and intimate details of the sport he'd loved for so long.

“That's what Jessica said.” She turned the air vents toward her face and took advantage of the dual climate control to lower the temperature on her side.

“You all right?”

“Yeah. I think it's just nerves. Should we drop my stuff off at my hotel?”

“Nah, lets worry about that later.”

A half hour later Trevor pulled into his mother's driveway. He wasn't sure what to expect since he'd never brought a woman home, not since high school, anyway. And the few times Mom had met the women he'd dated over the years, she hadn't approved.

Neither had he, when it came down to it.

He cut the engine and kissed the back of Julia's hand. She looked a little nervous. But then she'd had plenty of firsts today. First meeting with her agent, editor, publisher, and her boyfriend's mother. That was bound to have anyone tight as a spring.

“She's gonna love you,” he murmured as he helped her out of the truck.

“How can you be sure?” she asked, eyebrow quirked up in that adorable way that challenged and charmed him.

“You're southern. You have that going for you,” he teased, reminding her of her comment about her mother liking him despite the fact that he grew up in New York.

“What is it with you northerners? It's like you hear a twang and fall all over yourselves.”

He laughed and reached for her hand. “Mom's from rural Maryland. She'll feel right at home with your accent.”

“Really? I never knew that.”

“Yes ma'am,” he said, doing his best to inflect a bit of her accent into his voice. He failed miserably and she giggled, squeezing his hand.

“Are you two just gonna stand around all evenin' or you gonna come in and have dinner?” his mother called from the back deck.

“Coming, Momma,” he called and then tugged Julia along.

“Momma, this is Julia Fairchild. Julia, my mom, Patricia Wyatt.”

He wondered what Julia was thinking as she took in his mom's salt-and-pepper hair and beautiful ebony skin. It'd taken him years to realize that all families weren't mixed race. And that there weren't many other white kids on his street, but his parents and brothers had never made him feel adopted.

“It's so nice to meet you, Mrs. Wyatt. You have a lovely home. I love the

color palette,” Julia said.

Trust her to admire the decor. But Momma ate it up.

“Thank you. It's all your fella's doin’,” she said, her lips stretched in a wide smile.

As soon as he'd cashed his first big check he'd hired painters to spruce up his childhood home. His parents had refused to let him buy them a new place so he'd had to settle with fixing all the issues that his father was too busy to tend to. Trevor never blamed him for failing to keep a fresh coat of paint on the house; as a doctor, his work was more important than fresh flowers or crisp trim work.

And after his father had died, his mom wanted to stay here so Trevor'd had to be satisfied with making sure her house was the prettiest on the block. She, of course, didn't mind that one bit. Half the time he came over for a visit, she was holding court on the small front porch, gossiping with the neighbors and watching the world go by.

He didn't miss the way Momma regarded Julia.

“It's nice to finally meet the woman who gave my son his nickname,” Momma said. Julia must have passed some sort of inspection because Momma pulled her in for a hug.

Trevor was surprised that she knew where his nickname, T-man, had come from. That first article Julia had written documented some “out of his world plays” as she'd put it, and since He-man was taken, she'd called him T-man. The moniker had stuck like gum to a shoe and that's what the majority of his teammates, coaches, and media called him.

“Come on in. Your brothers'll be here in a few minutes,” she said as soon as she'd released Julia.

Trevor gave a faux shudder. “Aww, why'd you have to invite them?”

She made a tsking sound and ushered them through the back door into the kitchen. “You're just scared they'll try to steal your girl.”

Julia covered a smile with her hand and Trevor raised an eyebrow. Just the thought of someone trying to steal her from him sent his pulse racing. They may not be in the same city most of the time but he knew they were monogamous and he wanted things to stay that way. The idea that she'd be interested in anyone else or that some man, even one of his brothers, might try to turn her head—

He must have started to let the fierce emotions inside him show because Momma snapped her fingers in front of his face. “You know they'd never do

that, Trevor.”

“I know, Momma.”

“What can we do to help?” Julia asked, easing the tension in the room. She always did that. Turned the upside down right side up again.

“Not a thing. Table’s already set and as soon as—” She stopped short as Marcus’ booming laugh filled the front hall. Sometimes it was eerie how much he sounded like Dad. “Speak of the devils,” she said, grinning from ear to ear.

JJ WATCHED Trevor embrace his brothers. There were a few moments of roughhousing, some playful jabs, a bit of trash talk. The usual. Seemed brothers were brothers no matter where they grew up.

She stepped into the small, cheerily painted foyer. The three men filled the space to overflowing, so they moved to the living room. JJ had a quick impression of dinged up hardwoods, fresh neutral furniture, and a patterned rug. But mostly, her eyes were drawn to the three tall, handsome men.

“Marcus, Kyle, I’d like you to meet Julia.” Trevor’s hand slid across her lower back. She loved how he called her that almost as much as she loved it when he called her— “My girlfriend.”

“It’s good to finally meet you,” Marcus said, his grip tight and warm.

“We’ve heard a lot about you,” Kyle added, pumping her hand a few times.

They both had their mother’s beautiful dark skin and beckoning eyes. She’d bet they got their height and build from their father. And that easy charm that all three Wyatt men possessed, who knew where that came from? But she would bet that they’d been a handful growing up, getting into trouble and then smooth-talking their way right back out of it.

“All good, I hope,” she said, and sent Trevor a teasing smirk.

“Very good,” Marcus assured her.

“Come on, dinner’ll get cold,” Trevor’s mom called from the long, skinny galley kitchen in the back of the house.

JJ’s mom had said those exact words so many times during JJ’s childhood. Getting everyone to the table had been a ritual and sometimes, a little like herding cats. The longing to hear her mother’s voice again hit her hard and swift. It’d been a long time since something had set her off, reminding her of her mother with such precision.

Marcus and Kyle headed for the kitchen as she took a deep breath.

“Everything okay?”

Trust Trevor to home in on an emotional meltdown. It was like he had spidey senses. But as she dared a quick glance up at him, she realized he just paid attention to her. Close attention.

That made her even weepier.

Wiping the stray tears threatening to spill down her cheeks, she nodded. “My mom used to say that all the time. I miss it.”

He grinned and pulled her into a hug. “I think it’s universal.”

She couldn’t help but laugh and nod as he led her to the back of the house. He was right. And he’d known just what to say to ease her heartache.

While they’d been saying hello, Mrs. Wyatt had pulled all sorts of delicious looking dishes from the oven. JJ stepped forward to help the matriarch of the Wyatt household put the food on the table. Green beans. Rolls. Some sort of yummy looking roasted beef with root veggies.

“Everything smells delicious,” she said as she sat down next to Trevor.

“Let’s hope it tastes that way,” Mrs. Wyatt said, smacking Kyle’s hand as he tried to sneak a roll.

JJ smiled. This was why Trevor was so easy to get along with. So laid back. He came from a good, easy going family and had a mother who clearly kept him in line. It also explained why he fit so seamlessly with her family.

“It will, Momma,” Marcus assured her.

“You’re fishing for a cookie,” she said, sending him a knowing look.

JJ snickered.

“You know it.” Marcus laughed. Yep. Charm. And a Denzel Washington smile. Watch out ladies of New York.

“Now say grace.”

Marcus bowed his head. “Dear Lord. Thank you for the food we’re about to eat. Thank you for bringing our family together today and for bringing Julia to our table. And thank you for the cookies I’m going to receive after supper. Amen.”

“Amen!” Kyle said, clearly pleased with that last bit.

Holding back a giggle, JJ glanced over at Mrs. Wyatt, who gave her sons a droll look as she put her napkin in her lap. Then she turned to JJ. “Hand me your plate, Julia. Ladies get served first at our house.”

There was absolutely nothing about that statement that should have sent her pulse racing but it did. It reminded her of all the times Trevor had made

sure to see to her pleasure first.

Quickly she handed over the plate and prayed her cheeks weren't as pink as they felt. She took a sip of the ice cold water and studied the old farm-style table. The top planks were at least three inches thick and she could tell by the joints that they hadn't used nails.

She ran her finger over the well-loved finish. "Your table is lovely."

"Thank you. It's been in my family for generations. One day, these three will be fighting over it."

The men laughed that whatever-you-say-momma laugh that she'd heard from her own brothers over the years. JJ took a bite of the roast and moaned at the delicate texture and delicious seasonings.

"That is so good!"

Mrs. Wyatt just smiled. "I'll give you the recipe."

"I'd love that."

"So would I," Trevor said, stretching his arm along the back of her chair. "Maybe she'll make it for me next time I'm in Atlanta."

JJ didn't miss the covert glance the other two Wyatt men sent each other. They were curious about her relationship with Trevor, which was only natural.

"JJ's a bit of an interior decorator, Momma. She and her brother flip houses."

"Really? I used to watch all those shows, but then the market went caput."

"I thought you were a journalist," Marcus said.

JJ bit back a rueful laugh. "I am. Most of the time."

Trevor explained how she and Greg bought two condos a year and fixed them up in their spare time.

Kyle smacked Marcus on the arm. "We should do that."

"In this economy?" Mrs. Wyatt said.

"In this city?" Marcus added.

Kyle shrugged. He reminded her of Greg. Young, vivacious.

"Well, if you decide you're interested, I'd be happy to give you the lowdown on what we've learned so you don't make the same mistakes."

"You're on," Kyle said, looking pleased.

Trevor kept his arm draped along Julia's chair throughout the meal and tried not to make too big of a deal of the stories his mother and brothers were rehashing for Julia's amusement. It would only make them dig deeper for



more embarrassing tales.

“So what does JJ stand for?” Kyle asked, turning his attention to her.

For work, she went by JJ and Trevor’d often thought it was because Julia sounded so feminine, especially in a male dominated sport.

During her very first interview with him, he’d told her she didn’t look like a JJ. She’d told him her name was Julia and she’d been Julia to him ever since.

“Julia Jane,” she told them, making a disapproving face. His brothers laughed. “I have three brothers and when I was little I wanted to be just like them. Julia was too girly for a tomboy.”

Trevor smiled at her logic.

“Well,” Momma said. “I think Julia fits you.”

“Me too,” Trevor murmured.

“Come on, dear. I’ll show you the photo albums.” His mother pushed away from the table. “You boys clean up.”

The three of them knew better than to complain. It would only lead to bathroom and floor mopping duty. They’d learned that a long, long time ago.

Trevor leaned back in his chair and watched Julia settle onto the couch next to his mother. It didn’t take long for a stack of photo albums as high as his arm was long to appear on the coffee table. The two women dove in together, talking and laughing like old friends.

At that moment Trevor understood why none of the other women he’d ever dated had passed muster. Clarissa had been beautiful and worldly. April, high maintenance and Shauna, smart with a big mouth and an even bigger opinion of herself. And while all of them had been polite and sophisticated, none of them were down to earth, easy to talk to, and willing to break a nail if it meant winning flag football.

Julia was special, pretty, and perfect for him.

She tucked a strand of blond hair behind her ear and leaned over to look at a picture Momma was pointing to. She smiled and looked up, her gaze colliding with his.

There was something in her eyes that made his chest tighten. He wasn’t sure what that look meant, but he could certainly hope.

“Yo, Mr. Big Time. You gonna help out?” Kyle called from the other end of the kitchen.

Trevor shrugged off the nickname they’d given him the moment he’d been drafted and gathered his plate and glass.

“You’ve got it bad, man,” Marcus said as Trevor joined him at the sink. They fell into the familiar routine: cleaning up, washing dishes, putting away the left overs, if there were any. Over the years as the three of them had grown, there were fewer left overs to put away.

Trevor reached for a sponge and a spray bottle of cleanser.

“Yeah. I know.”

“You know? And you’re not running the other way?” Kyle asked, clearly shocked.

Trevor shrugged. There was no denying his feelings for Julia, at least not around the two people who knew him best. He was prepared to deal with their ribbing. One day he planned to return the favor.

“Wow.”

From the corner of his eye, Trevor saw Kyle give Marcus a look. They didn’t understand because they weren’t in his shoes. They hadn’t stood in front of Julia for years, answering her questions, asking her out, feeling the sting of rejection when she’d let him down gently. Always gently...with a kind smile and some sort of a self-deprecating tease.

Why hadn’t she ever said yes? Why was she saying yes now? Was it his career? Was it possible that while she enjoyed the sport, she didn’t want to date a baller?

“Earth to Trevor.” Marcus waved a hand in front of his face.

“Man, he really does have it bad. Look at him getting all dreamy-eyed,” Kyle said, smacking Marcus on the arm.

“Shut up and get back to work.”

“Defensive, too,” Marcus teased.

“He wants to be alone with his fantasy woman,” Kyle said, a wide grin.

“Trust me, the real thing is way better than the fantasy,” Trevor said with a smug look. Way, way better.

“Aww, yeah!” Kyle and Marcus high-fived.

“Shut up,” Trevor ground out, putting them both in a headlock. Marcus elbowed him in the ribs and Kyle tried to twist out of his grip. A wrestling session ensued until Momma called from the living room.

“You three quit roughhousin’ and get back to work!”

Some things never changed. Kyle was scrappy. Marcus was good looking. But as Trevor peeked his head into the living room, he realized that some changes were welcome. And he wanted to see Julia on that couch, head together with his Momma, for years to come.

## NINETEEN

“Your family’s great,” JJ said after they'd left his mom's house. “I see a lot of your mom in your brothers. And you all have what I’m now calling *Wyatt charm*.”

Trevor smiled over at her as he drove them back into the heart of the city.

“I want to show you something.”

It was dark out and she was stuffed and tired. Although she really wanted to get to a bed and collapse, she hadn't seen him in so long the greedy side of her wanted to stay up as long as possible, just enjoying his company.

He pulled into an underground parking deck and parked in a reserved space. She didn't recognize the building but noticed extra security measures like key card entry, a security guard, and plenty of surveillance cameras.

He got her luggage out of the back along with a Neiman Marcus bag. Was that where he'd been shopping earlier?

“I've never brought a woman here before.”

“Where's here?” she asked, as he swiped another key card to open the elevator doors.

“You'll see.”

“Will there be meatballs waiting? Because you spoiled me last time. I've come to expect a certain amount of deliciousness...”

He threw his head back and laughed. “You still have room for meatballs?” he asked as the elevator launched them skyward.

“I'll always have room for Antonio's meatballs.”

“Clearly, I've created a monster.”

She laughed. That was true. “I’d like to meet him sometime.”

He nodded as the elevator stopped. The doors opened, revealing a short

hallway with two doors.

He strode to the door on the right, her suitcase in his hand. He made quick work of the lock and held the door open for her.

She stepped into a dimly lit foyer. Dark tile covered the floor. Most of the right wall was covered the trophies and footballs and jerseys. A tremor of excitement shot through her as she stepped to the display case.

“This is your place...”

Why did he keep his Super Bowl rings behind glass?

The door closed behind him with a thud. He slid an extra bolt home and dropped their bags to the floor.

She turned toward him and understood how profound his statement was; he'd mentioned it twice. As if he needed her to understand that she was special. And trustworthy.

“You said that.”

“I had to be sure...about you. About us...” He took her by the hand and led her deeper inside.

It was a loft. She felt all fluttery as she did any time she saw the beautiful, wide spaces that were so popular these days. Complete with high ceilings painted a charcoal gray, big windows that showed off an incredible view, and exposed brick, it was everything a loft should be. Though looking at the building made her think the brick was applied to give the space an old feel, it still had plenty of industrial charm. The furniture was masculine and neutral, not that she'd expected anything different.

“Sure?” she finally asked, rejoining the conversation.

He led her to the couch and pulled her into his lap. “Very few people know all the details I'm about to tell you.”

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and stared into his eyes, hoping to convey that he could trust her. But her heart started racing as she soaked in the serious look on his handsome face.

“Two and a half years ago I started getting letters...not the normal kind of fan mail. From a stalker.”

JJ gasped.

“It wasn't the first time, but in the past, the person stopped after a few creepy months. This person didn't. The letters grew more and more graphic. The tone was obsessive like you can't imagine. They knew details—” He paused and licked his lips.

“The stalker knew details, intimate details. It was obvious that they were

going through my trash. Can you believe that?" He grunted.

"That's sick," she agreed.

"The cops said they couldn't do anything as no one had been injured. They've obviously never been stalked. Never felt like they were being watched all the damn time. Like there was a crazy person out there waiting for them. Public appearances were hell. The letters kept coming, getting more and more graphic and more and more violent."

A tremor shook his body and she ached for him. For what he'd had to endure and for being brave enough to tell her the truth even though the memories were obviously costing him.

"We were pretty sure it was a woman. She'd say things like she couldn't wait until we were together and why didn't I write her back. If I didn't write her back she was going to hurt herself. She knew we were supposed to be together. All...stereotypical stalker bullshit."

She felt his anger growing, because it was obvious that person had stolen his security and peace of mind. And that the memories still haunted him. There was a responding anger in her chest and it was all she could do to stay seated, to let him finish. She'd never in her wildest dreams imagined that Trevor, her sweet, handsome, thoughtful lover would have experienced something so frightening.

But his tone said it all. And the way his eyes stared right into hers but grew more and more unseeing. More distant by the second.

"Somehow she got my number and the calls started. I got my number changed immediately. But the letters kept coming. And then emails. It was like a fucking nightmare that I couldn't wake up from." His voice was hoarse with pain and disbelief. She tightened her grip around his neck as tears wet her eyes.

He took a deep breath and seemed to come out of the trance. After wiping a palm against his jeans he continued. "The guys downstairs started opening my mail for me and turning things over to the police. I hired a bodyguard for a while. One day she sent me a note about my mom."

"Oh my God." She cupped his cheek in her hand.

He grunted again. "You can imagine how furious I was. I convinced my mom to come stay with me for a while, which she loved and resented at the same time. Eventually I had the security in her house fixed up and hired a guard to stay with her there. But by then the damage was done to my relationship at the time. After I stopped seeing Hailee the next letter declared

victory.” She saw the play of the muscle in his cheek as he ground his jaws together. He let out a frustrated sigh and shook his head. “The bitch wanted me all to herself.”

JJ’s mind ran away with her; imagining the worst-case scenario. Sweat crept across the back of her neck. Never had she experienced such a strong desire to do another person harm, but the idea that anyone would torment this man, threaten his sweet momma... She took a deep breath to calm herself.

When that didn’t work, she took another.

“And then the letters stopped. For a month. A month and a half. Nothing.” He glanced up at the ceiling and took a deep breath before continuing. “I’d grown so used to looking over my shoulder I was a basket case. There was a party out in the Hamptons and Carson invited me to go with him. He knew about the stalker and how desperate I was to join the living again. To relax. I needed a break, to get away.”

“Understandably!”

“I had six beers and a shot of whiskey.”

He looked out the window, his gaze far off.

“Carson’s sister, Stephanie, came with us and at some point Carson hooked up with a girl. I was tired by that point and ready to go to bed so he gave us the key to his house and sent us on our way. I wasn’t shitfaced, but I wasn’t in any condition to drive, either, so I handed my car keys to Stephanie.”

JJ’s heart was in her throat. He remained silent for a long time and she knew what he was going to say. They’d gotten into an accident that stole his career the same way the stalker had stolen his sanity.

“She got behind the wheel and we started talking. I was still so relieved that the letters had stopped, that I could hang out with my friends again. I laughed for the first time in months. I was happy...mellowed by the alcohol. I felt like I could finally breathe again.”

He smiled at the memory and JJ’s heart broke for him.

“It was just about that time when I realized that she was talking to me about things she had no way of knowing. Private things. Intimate details... just like the letters. And we had been driving for a long time. A lot longer than the few miles it should have taken to get to Carson’s house. Long Island is huge and I had no idea where we were. Panic started setting in and she told me how happy she was that we were finally alone. That I’d finally come to my senses. I was sobering up fast. For the record, crazy stalker bitches work

much faster than coffee.”

She was amazed he could find any humor. Hell that he could even function. It was like a novel. A horror story.

“I tried to get her to stop so we could talk. Which was code for run like hell. But she didn't stop. She said that we'd stop when we got there and she wouldn't tell me where *there* was. I was praying that we'd run out of gas. In my brain I was trying to reconcile the fact that my best friend's sister was my stalker. I just couldn't wrap my brain around it. But she started getting agitated because I was trying to reason with her. And when the reasoning didn't work, I started getting angry. And...”

He bit down on his lower lip and she saw the sheen of tears in his eyes. JJ held him tighter, raking her fingernails through the hair at the nape of his neck, trying desperately to sooth him. “What, darling?”

Those vibrant blue eyes met hers again, crinkled around the edges and a deep line between his eyebrows. “I was scared,” he whispered. “She wasn't sane. Not the least little bit and I had no idea what she had planned or what she was capable of. She could have had a gun or a Taser or drugs. I had no idea. I couldn't believe that Carson's little sister was the person who'd been tormenting me for so long. All I knew was that I had to get away from her. I, six foot four and two hundred pounds of NFL wide receiver was terrified of a woman. I asked her again to let me out and it set her off. She started screaming and swerving as she hit me.”

His muscles jerked. “And I'll never forget her voice as she got calm and quiet again. She said if she couldn't have me, no one could. I was ready to take my chances with diving out of a moving vehicle but she saw me reach for the door handle. She started swerving again and slapping my arm. I grabbed her wrist and somehow saw a sign flash by for a bridge ahead. She managed to snatch her hand back and I saw it on her face, plain as day. She meant to run us—” He paused and licked his lips. JJ held her breath. “I grabbed the wheel.”

“The car flipped. When I came to, I was on a gurney. My leg hurt like it was missing. And she was still screaming. I wasn't sure if the sound was in my head or not, but then I saw the officers and paramedics were trying to calm her down. Find out what had happened. I was so traumatized, I could barely talk. I had a business card in my wallet for the detective in charge of my case. I got them to take it out and call him. Later they told me I'd kept saying the word stalker. And that she was telling the cops that we were

together. She was my wife. She was pregnant. We had to be together. She was going to find a way for us to be together again.”

He was quiet for several moments and JJ couldn't stand the pain etched on his face any longer so she tucked her face against his throat.

“It sounds like a bad movie, doesn't it?”

“A scary book.”

“If it hadn't lived it, if my damn knee didn't ache like hell every time it rained, I wouldn't believe that it'd happened to me. That I'd lived through it. These days the whole experience seems like a really bad dream.”

“What happened after they took you to the hospital?”

“I passed out cold and when I woke up at the hospital the next day they told me she'd died from internal injuries.”

She felt something wet hit her cheek and looked up to see twin tears coursing down his face. She kissed them away.

“My very first thought was thank God the nightmare was over. But my second thought was for Carson. She was still his sister.” He swallowed. “The police in the Hamptons are good at keeping scandals quiet. And I later learned that Carson's family shut down the story. They knew about her mental issues, just not how deep they went. And he knew about her crush on me. He never came to my bedside. Never answered my phone calls. And after all that... hell, I lost my best friend. All because I'd said hello to Stephanie at a party years earlier.”

Trevor pulled back on the memories, the anguish, and stuffed them back into a dark corner of his mind. Julia clung to him as if her life depended on it. It was a brutal story; he knew that all too well. He just hoped that she didn't think less of him for—

“That bitch,” she ground out, suddenly coming back to life. “I can't believe Carson's family knew she was crazy... he knew how she felt about you. And he never said anything.”

Her cheeks flushed with anger and he thought she'd never looked prettier. Then she pegged him with eyes that were more gray than blue.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered, leaning back into the circle of his arms. “You don't need me adding to the crazy.”

“You're rather endearing when you're mad.”

She shook her head. “I'm not mad. I'm...” She seemed to grapple for the word. “Furious. The thought of anyone hurting your momma. The thought of anyone hurting you...”



She closed her eyes and he saw her collect herself.

“How’s your leg?”

“They said I’d never run as fast again... that it was a miracle I kept my leg and don’t walk with a limp. Luckily, I’m a fast healer and they said that worked in my favor. But between the gimp leg and all the other injuries from the field...”

He didn’t want to add that he feared making himself a target again.

“You gave it up and stepped out of the spotlight.”

He nodded.

She stared at him for a long moment, running her fingers through his hair.  
“You’re the bravest guy I know.”

He grunted. “Hardly. Firefighters are brave. Cops are brave. Soldiers are brave. I’m just a guy who got paid millions to catch a damn football.”

She hopped off his lap so quickly he was surprised she could move that fast. Kneeling between his thighs, she reached for his hands. “Don’t you dare play that card Trevor Wyatt. Yeah, you got paid crazy amounts of money to throw a football around. But didn’t you once tell me that you saw yourself as an entertainer? A person who exists to make others happy? That you believed in football as more than a game but as a tradition, a past time that brings friends and families together? Bonds fathers to their sons? That it gives people something to root for and believe in?”

Her gaze was hard and assessing.

“And didn’t you tell me that you hoped that your career would inspire others to follow their dream?”

She remembered all that?

“Of course I remember it,” she said and he realized he’d spoken aloud. She went quiet, thoughtful. “I remember almost everything you’ve ever said to me. Which is why I’m going to say this to you... Firefighters and cops and soldiers may not get paid as much as you did. But they have a job to do. A scary job that they signed up for. I’m not going to argue the money card but I want you to remember that they step into scary situations, eyes open. Guns and fire hoses drawn. They know the risks. They accept them. They meet the challenges they’re tasked with because that’s their *job*. That doesn’t mean they’re not brave. But they *are* trained for fear and chaos. *You*...were not. You didn’t volunteer to be the victim of some crazy stalker woman. You weren’t trained in psycho warfare. You didn’t ask to be terrorized.”

She reached up and pushed his hair off his forehead. “But the fact that

you went through it and handled it as well as you did, protecting yourself and your mother as best you could... and the fact that you can even face the world knowing how crazy people can be... I think you're very brave."

Trevor swallowed the lump in his throat, never so touched in his whole life. She looked deflated and out of breath and absolutely gorgeous. Even though his mom and brothers had lived through the whole experience with him, he didn't think they understood what it had cost him the way Julia did.

She was a warrior goddess. Fierce and loyal. He made a mental note never to get on her bad side. And man, did she have a way with words. Once again, she'd turned his upside down world right side up again.

He leaned forward and cupped her cheeks. Staring back and forth into her eyes he knew without a doubt that he'd never love anyone the way he loved her. She knew his deepest, darkest, scariest secret. And there wasn't a fleck of pity in her eyes.

Dipping his head, he brushed his lips across hers, wishing he could put into words what she meant to him. But she was the writer.

"I want to make love to you," he whispered against her lips.

"Right now?" She stared at him with a startled expression.

"Right. Now."

She rocked back on her heels and stood up. "Let me freshen up first."

He stood. "Sure thing."

He grabbed her luggage and the shopping bag from Neiman Marcus. "Let me give you the nickel tour. Den's the first door on the left as you come in. Living room. Dining room," he said, leading the way toward his bedroom. "Kitchen's over there. Guest bathroom's up on the left."

He pushed open the door to his office. "My office. Guest room's across the hall... and *here* is my bedroom."

He sat her bag down at the end of the bed. "Bathroom's just through there. Make yourself at home." Funny how those words didn't scare him as much as he'd thought they would. In fact, they didn't scare him at all.

When she emerged from the bathroom five minutes later, Trevor almost swallowed his tongue. He'd settled onto the edge of the bed, facing the bathroom door and listened to her moving around in his space. He'd loved hearing her hum.

She'd brushed out her hair until it fell in soft, silky waves that just brushed her shoulders. The black nightie was somehow demur and sexy at the same time, just like the woman wearing it. Clinging to her breasts, dipping at

the waist...

“I was going to be all cheesy and tell you that your outfit was missing something,” he said. “But that outfit isn’t missing a thing.”

The pleasure on her face made him happier than he’d been in a long time.

“But since I already bought you a present, you might as well open it.” He handed her the shoe box.

Her smile shifted to a smirk that said she loved surprises. That was good because he wanted to surprise her for a very long time to come.

“Oh—” Her lovely eyes snapped up to meet his. “You got me Jimmy Choos?”

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth as she stared back down at the high heels, trailing her fingertip over them.

“That day you marched into the shoe store you mentioned something about Prada and Jimmy Choos... Consider these a congratulations for selling your book present.”

She said his name on a sigh.

He reached into the box. “They reminded me of the lingerie you were wearing that day. Black. See-through...”

“With scalloped trim,” she finished.

“Want to try them on?”

“Very much...” She stopped him as he bent down to place them at her feet. “But right now, I really want to make love to you.”

## TWENTY

### *Atlanta*

TREVOR SAT his end of the couch down onto the pavement and glanced up into the truck. He'd been bunked down with Julia since Tuesday and so far, it'd been the best week of his life. Now that she knew the truth, she understood why her book had given him pause and why he liked to drive rather than let someone else take the wheel. The tension hovering between them had turned solely sexual. Even moving day was going smoothly.

Her bedroom set was already loaded and he and the guys were toting the rest of the furniture out to decide what to load next.

"She sure doesn't have a lot of stuff," he commented as Ronny and Greg draped a thick moving blanket over her desk.

"One of my favorite things about my cousin," Beau said.

While Julia had been at her traditional Thursday night meeting with the girls, he'd gone out with Ronny and Greg and they'd introduced him to Beau.

Trevor liked the guy's easygoing nature and say-what-you-mean attitude. He didn't see much of a family resemblance, though.

"I like her—"

"Hey now!" Ronny cut in. "She's our sister. We don't wanna hear none of that."

Trevor arched a brow. "I was going to say her smile."

Even after she'd turned her hair brown and put in those awful contacts, he'd recognized her lips.

“Sure you were,” Greg said, slapping him on the back.

Trevor sighed and rolled his eyes. Greg might be a few months younger than Julia, but he protected her as any brother would. And he and the other Fairchild men ribbed Trevor like he’d been in the family for years, not months.

“We don’t care if you’re having sex with her,” Ronny said and Trevor’s head whipped around. “We only have two rules where our sister is concerned. Keep her happy and keep her safe.”

JJ’s eldest brother gave him a *got me?* look and then carried a floor lamp into the truck.

“Safe includes not breaking her heart,” Thomas said as he and Beau loaded one of the club chairs.

“What he means is, that four point whatever second dash you run...it won’t mean nuthin’ if you hurt her,” Beau said, emerging from the back of the box truck.

All movement stopped and Trevor glanced at each of the men. He admired their loyalty and if he had a sister, he’d give her boyfriend the same exact talk. But at the moment he was more worried about Julia breaking his heart than the other way around. Still...

He nodded. “I would never intentionally hurt her.”

“Unintentionally?” Ronny asked.

Trevor sighed. “I’m a guy. I’m bound to screw up at some point.”

Everyone laughed and the tension eased.

“You guys done riding my ass now? We’ve got a truck to load.”

JJ SCRIBBLED the word *kitchen* across the top of the box and then reached for the tape.

“Can’t believe moving day is here again,” Cindy said from across the room, where she was stacking JJ’s dishes into a box.

“And I keep telling you guys, I can do this myself or hire movers.” She finished taping the box full of utensils and cutlery, then sent Cindy a grateful smile.

The boys were hauling her furniture out to the moving truck while she, Cindy, Gretchen, and Baby finished labeling and boxing stuff from the kitchen and bath.

“You know we don’t mind helping. Plus, you live light.”

She certainly did. Everything she owned, minus a few extra accessories for staging, could fit into one rental truck. She wasn't sure if that was sad or a case of brilliance. But it sure did make moving day easier.

And luckily, this go 'round, she hadn't even had to unpack her staging goodies because their Realtor already had a client in mind. The modern vases and subdued artwork were housed in boxes in her parents' basement and they'd stay there until the loft was finished.

"And I feed you," JJ said with a grin. "Which reminds me..." She reached for her cell phone and strode over to the deck overlooking the parking lot.

The men were embroiled in an intense conversation. So many alpha males in one spot...that should be interesting. Greg and Thomas were gesturing to the furniture and to the truck and then back to furniture.

Trevor and Ronny stood to the side, talking and watching.

"What do you guys want on your pizza?" she called. They all looked up at her, their conversation halting.

"Everything," Trevor called and she felt the heat of his smile all the way to her toes.

Her cousin Beau stepped out of the truck and yelled up to her. "Meat."

"Typical," she shouted back.

After placing their pizza order, she returned to the kitchen and helped Cindy pack up the measly contents of her pantry.

"Even your pantry lives light," Cindy teased.

"You know I'm not much of a cook."

"Correction," Baby said as she breezed in. "You can cook. You just don't cook."

"Same difference." Although she'd made Trevor's mom's roast recipe on Wednesday and it'd been a big hit. There wasn't any left.

"We've got the bathroom done. Closet next?"

It was about this point during every move that JJ started getting a little nostalgic. Not only had she made the condo her home, she'd picked out the lovely dark wood cabinets and creamy-with-just-a-hint-of-sparkle counter tops. Solid surface to stand up to whatever the new owners wanted to throw at it.

Absently, she trailed a finger along the smooth surface.

The fact that she had such great friends and family made the moment even more bittersweet.

“That’d be great.”

She’d already packed a few outfits for the next few days, along with a toiletry bag. And though she’d hauled the wardrobe box out of storage, she hadn’t had the time or energy to pack it yet. Between getting the new place cleaned up enough to move in, work, and Trevor, she’d barely had time to sleep.

“I’ll pack the laundry room,” Gretchen said, grabbing two more boxes from the pile in the center of the living room.

While they went to work on that, JJ attacked the cabinets with a damp sponge. She liked to leave the place as clean as possible for the new owners. She wouldn’t meet them until day after tomorrow, but she understood it was a young couple, a few years out of college.

She smiled as she scrubbed out the drawers. That must be fun, starting your life together at an early age. Looking forward to the future and babies and vacations and a new home.

“What are you smiling about?” Cindy asked, elbow deep in cleaning the fridge.

“Just thinking what it must be like to be young, married, in love. Buying your first place.” JJ sighed and knew she sounded wistful.

“Not you, too. Gretchen’s our resident hopeless romantic.”

JJ threw her sponge at her friend. “Like you’re one to talk, Miss I’ve-used-up-all-my-minutes-talking-to-Adam.”

The truth was, she absolutely was feeling romantic and wistful. After Trevor had told her about Stephanie and given her a pair of the most gorgeous shoes ever, they’d made slow, sweet love. Everything about that night had been different. More tender.

Cindy handed the sponge back, glowing a little. She did that whenever they started talking about Adam.

“Think he’d ever move out here?” JJ dared to ask.

Cindy’s lips twisted. “I don’t know. I don’t even know if we’re at that point yet. All I know is long distance sucks and phone sex is not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Then you’re not doin’ it right,” Beau drawled from the doorway.

She and Cindy gasped and threw their sponges at him. Chuckling, he ducked the onslaught of cleaning supplies. “These boxes ready to go down?” he asked, nodding to the stack in the doorway.

“Yep.”

“Hey honey, we’re not moving the washer and dryer, right?” Trevor called, coming through the front door.

“Nope. Sold them with the condo.”

He nodded and helped Beau load the boxes onto the dolly. She smiled at the two men, thinking they could have been brothers. Both tall, bronzed, and golden blond...if they went out in public she was pretty sure women all over the south would swoon. Whereas her brothers had dark hair and blue eyes, Beau took after JJ’s aunt, right down to his light brown eyes.

He was cocky and laid back at the same time, which explained why he and Trevor had hit it off like long time buddies.

“Fridge is done,” Cindy declared and JJ breathed a sigh of relief.

“I did the oven the other day,” she said. Mostly because she’d made a frozen pizza that decided to melt all over the place.

“So that just leaves mopping. Let’s wait until after we eat to do that.”

“Sounds good.”

The living room was empty, save for the pile of boxes, and there was a cooler of drinks in the adjoining dining area. She’d vacuum last.

There was a knock at the door and she peeked her head into the hall. The pizza delivery guy hovered on her doorstep, arms laden.

“Thank you so much. How much do I owe you?” she asked, reaching for her purse.

“The guy downstairs already paid.”

Trevor... Somehow she knew he was the one who’d paid for the pizzas. He was so good to her.

“Great.” She took the steaming pile of boxes. “Thanks again.”

No sooner had the delivery man left than the five men strode through the doors. Yep. Typical males.

Thankfully she’d remembered to keep the paper plates and napkins out. Pizza in hand, they sat down on the living room floor and used the boxes as impromptu tables. The boys told jokes and everyone laughed. They all shared war stories from past moves. Except for Trevor. The lucky duck had movers the two times he’d ever moved. Baby recalled the time JJ had called, freaking out over the dead rat.

“You guys like that story too much,” JJ said.

“It’s pretty funny,” Trevor chimed in, grinning over at her.

“You four need to remember that I grew up with you and know all your secrets,” she warned her brothers and cousin. “And you three...I’ve known



you since college.”

Cindy stuck out her tongue. “I have no secrets left,” she said in a seductive I-could-have-been-a-Victoria’s-Secret-model sort of way.

Everyone laughed because though she wrote steamy sex and looked like a bombshell, she wasn’t exactly promiscuous. No. That was Baby’s department.

JJ looked over at Greg and saw him staring at Baby.

Aha! Feeling sneaky, she pulled out her cell phone and typed in a text message.

*JJ: You’re staring.*

HIS POCKET BUZZED and he retrieved his phone. She knew the instant he read her message. His gaze shot to hers and she gave him a warm smile.

Frowning, he typed something back.

*GREG: so? what of it?*

SHE RAISED an eyebrow as she typed back.

*JJ: Not a thing, dear brother. You two would make a cute couple. But be careful, Baby’s not ready for till-death-do-you-part.*

HE SMIRKED.

*GREG: like i am?*

JJ WAS STARTING to think she was ready. Heck, just because she loved sports didn't mean she hadn't been daydreaming about her wedding for... well, ever. One of her earliest memories was playing wedding with Barbie and Ken after her mother and Ron Fairchild had walked down the aisle. She'd been a little obsessed with weddings after that.

Not because her parents' big day had been elaborate, but because her mom had looked like an angel in her white silk dress. They'd gone small but traditional. Her brothers had stood with their father and she with her mother. And before God and a little group of friends and family they'd vowed to love each other and make a family together.

"Why are you crying?" Trevor whispered in her ear.

"Am I?" She wiped a hand under her eyes and felt the moisture. "Just thinking about my mom."

He squeezed her shoulder.

"How about a toast," Greg called, lifting his can of Coke Zero. "To JJ. My partner in crime. Talented author, designer, and kickass home stager."

She liked how he stressed the kickass part.

"Here, here," everyone called, saluted and clinked their cans together.

"To new friends, old friends, and the best family a girl could have ever asked for," JJ said, lifting her own can.

"And to quick sales and easy moves," Cindy added.

"I second that," she said. Easy moves indeed.

## TWENTY-ONE

It was the last Thursday in November and JJ couldn't figure out where the last three months had gone. Autumn had positively flown by. She was semi settled in her new loft, as much as one could be with half a bathroom and a nonworking kitchen. Thanks to online shopping she already had several items knocked off her Christmas list, but she was still searching for the perfect thing for Trevor.

She was hunched over, basting the Thanksgiving turkey, when the doorbell rang.

"I've got it," her dad called.

"That should be Trevor and his family," she called back. Her brother's had already arrived, which just left the Wyatts.

Ever since her mother had died, JJ had taken it upon herself to 'do' Thanksgiving. But following in her mother's footsteps meant a heck of a lot of work.

She usually lost count of all the side dishes she made. In fact, she started cooking on Tuesday. Since she was still brushing her teeth in the kitchen at the loft, she'd been spending more and more time at her parents' house. Even though the appliances were a little dated, they were installed and actually worked. Which was more than she could say for the empty spaces waiting for a refrigerator and dishwasher in her new place.

Voices echoed through the entry way and she recognized two in particular. Trevor and his mom.

She smiled and shut the oven. A football went sailing by the window over the kitchen sink and she saw a flurry of bodies diving after it.

"Julia, you've outdone yourself," Patricia Wyatt said as JJ started for the

front door. "This place smells fabulous."

Her father hung Patricia's coat in the entry closet, beaming as she oohed and ahed at being back in the south. She went on about the accents, the chivalry, and how welcoming the gas station attendant had been.

"Our JJ takes after her momma. My Leigh Ann was a great cook." Her dad patted his belly which was far too trim since her mother died.

JJ brushed off the compliments and gave everyone a hug. "I'm so glad you guys could make it."

Trevor was the last in line. "Got a hug for me?" he murmured, his eyes alight with mischief.

"You betcha, handsome." She pecked him on the lips for good measure.

"What can I help with?"

"Not a thing, Mrs. Wyatt. Come on out back. We've got an early football game going. And Trevor," her father said over everyone's head. "I took your advice about that outdoor TV."

JJ heard Trevor's mom ask them to call her Patricia as they headed toward the back of the house.

"They had a ball putting that thing up," JJ whispered to Trevor. "Who knew there were so many kinds of drill bits at Home Depot? Go fawn over it and act impressed," she added, just loud enough for her dad to hear.

Chuckling, her father led them through the French doors and onto the back patio.

"I'm amazed you can still enjoy the outdoors," JJ heard Patricia say. "It's such a toss-up in New York. Either cold or rainy. Sometimes both."

JJ was mashing potatoes when she felt Trevor's hands slide over her shoulders.

"I've missed you," he whispered.

She sighed and leaned back against him. Everything in her softened. "I've missed you too."

They hadn't seen each other since he'd helped her move earlier in the month. He'd been busy with appearances and endorsement deals and John had kept her busy with work. Any day now she expected her first round of edits to arrive from Scott Spangler.

Cindy was right. The long distance thing was getting old. She'd never thought of herself as a particularly physical person, but there was no denying that she craved being near Trevor. Most days she felt restless, almost unhinged. Hearing his voice on the phone soothed her. Seeing him on video

chat was nice, too.

But there was something about being in the same room with him. Feeling his energy. Just knowing he was so close. Being able to reach out and touch him whenever she wanted. It went beyond the sexual.

“Let me help with that.”

“You know how to mash potatoes?”

He laughed and took the masher from her. With a quirked up eyebrow, he bumped her out of the way gently with his hip. “How hard could it be? Besides, I’ve gotta make myself useful somehow.”

As he mashed, very well by the look of it, she popped the rolls into the oven to warm up.

“You’re very useful,” she murmured, hugging him from behind and placing a kiss in the center of his back. “And have I mentioned how sexy you look in a sweater?” she asked softly.

“Stop that, woman, or I’m gonna make a mess.”

Laughing softly to herself, she turned and glanced around the room. After retrieving her notebook, she marked off mashed potatoes and rolls.

“You can go out back and play, you know. You won’t hurt my feelings.” She cut chunks of butter and tossed them into the potatoes.

“Knee’s a little stiff today,” he muttered, as if it pained him to admit it. She supposed it was. Men, especially tough alpha men, didn’t like admitting to pain or injury.

Her first instinct was to offer him an aspirin or order him off the bum leg. But she bit the words back. Her mother had hovered...often too much. She’d made a concentrated effort to be caring without suffocating.

“Besides,” he added, “I want to be with you.”

And just like that, she lost the last piece of her heart to the sinfully handsome wide receiver.

RON FAIRCHILD LOVED HAVING ALL his kids under his roof and he used any excuse to get them together. He and Leigh Ann had always wanted a big loud family, full of love and laughter. Today, there were three extra men at his table, cutting up and eating like food was going extinct. She would have loved it.

She would have loved Trevor Wyatt. He had no doubt about that. Right now, the big man three seats down had his head bent toward JJ, listening to

something she was saying. He looked at her like she was the sun and the moon and the stars.

Ron knew that look. Knew that feeling...missed that feeling.

“Thank you again for having us,” Patricia was saying. He glanced to his right and found her smiling at him.

She was really lovely when she smiled.

“Our pleasure.”

“I can’t believe you cooked two turkeys.”

“I’m officially a fan of deep fried turkey,” Marcus inserted.

Ron chuckled. “Glad to hear it. I doubt we’ll have much left by tomorrow. Sometimes I think my boys never stopped growing.”

Patricia made a sound of agreement as she reached for her water glass. “They sure do eat like they’re going through a growth spurt don’t they?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The boys were making plans to go paintballing the next day. As usual, JJ fit right in. She might wear dresses and high heels these days, but since the moment she’d moved into his home almost twenty-five years ago, she’d been holding her own with three rowdy brothers.

“Since the kids are planning their own outing tomorrow, maybe you’d let me show you the high spots of Atlanta,” Ron said to Patricia.

“What high spots?” Greg inserted but quickly turned back to the conversation at the end of the table.

“I’d love that.”

“Excellent.”

“That was so good I could have another round of everything,” Marcus said, his hand on his belly.

Ron grinned. That was one of the highest compliments in his book.

“Better hold off, son. JJ’s been cooking pies all week.”

“You’ll love JJ’s pie,” Ronny said from the other end of the table. “What kind did you make this year, sis?”

JJ wiped her mouth and held up a hand. “Pumpkin.” She extended one finger as she counted off. “Pecan. Sweet potato. Apple.”

“I’ve died and gone to heaven,” Kyle said, reminding Ron of Greg. Such youthful exuberance.

“You and me both,” Trevor added, but he was looking at JJ.

Ron didn’t miss the way his daughter swayed a little toward her boyfriend.

“We usually eat it in the living room, if that’s okay,” JJ said. “I’ve got vanilla ice cream and whipped cream for anyone who wants it.”

There was a bevy of discussion of flavor combinations.

“Sounds wonderful dear,” Patricia said. “Boys, clean up.”

Ron watched, amazement bubbling through him, as all three Wyatt men jumped up to clear the dishes. Trevor pecked JJ on the lips as he scooped up her plate. Marcus gathered Greg’s and Patricia’s before reaching for Ron’s.

Patricia chuckled. “They’ve been doing their own laundry since they were little, too,” she said, obviously reading his mind.

“Obviously Leigh Ann and I coddled ours too much.” He loved his late wife, but she had been a bit of a coddler.

Not to be outdone, his sons gathered up everything that was left and headed for the kitchen.

“Pumpkin pie with whipped cream, Dad?” JJ asked, standing.

“You know me too well, honey.”

“Mrs. Wyatt?”

“I think I’ll have the apple with the ice cream.”

“Coming right up.”

Ron was glad to see that Patricia ruled her family with an iron fist and didn’t let her boys get away with anything. It eased his worry about his only daughter dating such a popular man. Trevor seemed like a great guy, but since Leigh Ann’s death, he’d felt extra protective where Julia was concerned.

But after meeting the rest of the Wyatt clan, he realized she was in good hands. He added that to his list of many blessings.

JJ’s laughter carried through the house and someone turned the game back on. Ron pushed away from the table and then helped Patricia to the living room. Was it too soon to wonder when they’d be hearing wedding bells?

Whatever the case, it was good to see his daughter so happy.

Now if only he could get his three knuckle-headed boys into good stable relationships. He was counting the days until he could bounce grandbabies on his knee. Yes, sir. Counting the days.

AFTER HER MORNING interview with a contractor for an article about flipping houses, submitting her latest piece to John and having leftovers with

Trevor at her parents' house the next day, JJ found herself on a paintball course trying her hardest not to pass out from exhaustion. But sneaking through the woods, trying to move undetected, had her adrenaline pumping. She crouched behind a small, rustic structure and tried to steady her breathing. How Trevor and the guys had talked her into this she didn't know.

But him cooking breakfast for her on her little portable grill had surely helped.

As long as she lived, she'd never forget the startled look on his face the first time she'd put a bright turquoise paintball in the center of his vest. The sinful mouth she'd kissed most of last night had dropped open in disbelief. But before he could return fire she'd run off.

That'd been ten minutes ago and she'd hit him twice since then. Her dad would be so proud.

She wasn't sure where her teammates had ventured off to. And she didn't much care. She'd only been half listening to the instructions about getting flags and taking them back to base. At the time she'd been more concerned with the gleam in Trevor's eyes and the fact that the enormous paint ball course was several miles across.

Pressing her back against the aged wood shack, she held her breath for a few seconds to see if she could hear his approach. Nothing.

In the distance a *phbt-phbt-phbt* rang out. Then a curse and a laugh. But in her corner of the world, things were quiet. While the idea of shooting her lover with tiny balls of paint hadn't been particularly appealing, JJ could appreciate the running and activity involved. And besting Trevor at his own game was growing on her.

Feeling bold she called out, "It's a good thing you know your way around a football field."

His rich laughter rang through the woods. "I never should have given you a head start, sweetheart," he called back.

Her lips twitched.

"Keep telling yourself that, big boy."

She was pretty sure he was coming up the left side of the building. Flanking right, she kept her finger on the trigger. If only her momma could see her now.

Sure, she'd been something of a tomboy after her mom had remarried. She'd had to be with three rough and tumble brothers. Her dad had taught her how to shoot right along with the boys. And while she'd been good at hitting



stationary targets, skeet shooting reminded her too much of hunting ducks.

“I think you missed your calling,” Trevor said, from directly behind her. From the corner of her eye she saw his large frame filling the doorway.

Darn. She hadn't thought to check inside the building. So much for beating him at his own game.

She let go of the gun and it dropped to the end of the strap around her neck. A shiver raced up her spine as she held her hands up and turned around.

“You got me,” she whispered.

He looked very pleased with himself. Behind the goggles, his blue eyes simmered with heat.

“The question is, what am I going to do with you?”

She pursed her lips and then gave her eyelashes a flutter for good measure. “That *is* the question.”

“I suppose I could take you captive.”

Another shiver raced over her shoulders. She was starting to think she should have worn more than a light-weight jacket and a long sleeved T-shirt. The vest, goggles, and helmet did little to keep her warm on a cool November day.

“And then what?”

His handsome mouth hitched up on one side and her heart fluttered. What would it be like to see that smile every day? Over breakfast one day and lunch the next? In the middle of the night or on holidays? Twenty years from now when his hair had turned a salt-and-pepper gray?

Trevor slipped his strap over his head and slowly lowered his gun to the ground. His gaze never left hers. “Then I'd have my way with you.” He jerked off the goggles and tossed them over his shoulder. The helmet followed.

A white hot spark flamed to life inside her and she swayed toward him. Toward the enemy.

“You don't play fair,” she whispered. Not that she minded in the least.

As far as she was concerned, paintball created an adrenaline rush that was like no other aphrodisiac she knew.

So slowly she thought she might get wrinkles first, he reached over and gently removed her goggles and helmet. Next went her gun. Oh, he was good at this tension thing. Her insides were knotted, coiled, and ready all at the same time. Her breathing was deep and slow; her breasts heavy and aching for his touch.

“I never claimed to.”

“To what? Oh. Play fair.”

He cocked his head to the left and swept his gaze over her in a long, thorough perusal.

When at last his gaze locked on her lips she was ready to come out of her skin. Never had she felt so naked before a man and certainly not when she was fully dressed. It was as if he could see every flaw, every sin, every desire.

“Turn around and show me what I've captured.”

She turned slowly to the right, the cheekiness of the game leaving her. This was seduction at its finest. She was sure of it. How he made her feel both beautiful and needy at the same time, well, he should teach a course. Women would be lined up around the block to sign up their significant other.

“Beautiful.”

Leaves crunching beneath her feet, she finished the pirouette. She wasn't ready to let him have his way quite yet. And anything she could do to prolong the lusty look in his eyes was definitely a good thing. The siren inside her wanted to string this encounter along as far as it could go. Plus it'd be fun to see just how far she could push her captor.

“Now what?”

“Strip.”

“What?” Her voice rose an octave and she glanced behind her.

“Start with the vest.”

“If you think that I'm going—”

He cut her off with a hard kiss as he jerked her into his arms. Oh my. His hands cupped her ass and his tongue tangled with hers, not taking no for an answer. Taking a step back, he lifted her into his arms and stepped inside the building. Arms and legs wrapped around him, she held on tight, soaking in his energy. Lips fused with his, she hardly noticed him maneuvering them until her back hit the wall and the door slammed shut behind them.

He fumbled with something behind her and she heard a lock slip into place. “I really should tie you up,” he said between kisses to her shoulders and neck. “Tease you. Torture you a little.”

“What's stopping you?” she asked. She hadn't meant for it to sound like a challenge. But she welcomed a little teasing from this man. In the end, he always pleased her.

“I don't have the patience or time right now.” He rotated his hips, driving

his erection against her belly.

He didn't waste another second. In a flurry of movement, he had her jeans unbuttoned and shoved to her ankles. Before she could kick off her hiking boots and step out of the denim trap around her ankles he scooped her up. Spinning, he put her down next to an old work bench.

"Turn around."

She liked it when he sounded all growly. Needy. His hands moved to the button of his jeans and a second later he'd shoved them below his hips. He already had a condom out and tore the wrapper with his teeth.

"Don't make me tell you again, captive."

Giggling softly, she did his bidding. The earthiness of the shelter filled her nose. She'd never be able to go camping again without thinking of this. Of Trevor.

Paintball either, for that matter.

He pushed her shoulders down and she braced her hands against the table. She didn't have much time to contemplate how grimy the surface was before his hands skimmed over her hips. She rocked back, ever eager for his touch.

"Easy, tiger."

A thick finger parted her lower lips, dipping inside quickly, easily, before she felt the blunt head of his cock.

This was so naughty. A delicious shiver raced down her spine and she pressed back against him. He met her thrust and slid into her until she couldn't take any more.

His groan said it all. It was as if he was made for her and it didn't take him more than a minute to build a blinding orgasm inside her.

"Ready to come, my lovely captive?" he whispered.

"Very ready," she replied, almost panting with need.

He reached around and circled her clit with the tip of his finger. That and a well-timed thrust was all it took to send her into the heavens. He came with a low, grunty growl, his arms tightening around her.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out as wave after wave of delicious pleasure swept through her. Her knees went all wiggly and she locked her elbows to stay upright.

"Holy hell, woman. What are you doing to me?" he said sometime later, from where he'd dropped his forehead against her shoulder.

"No idea, captor. But you're doing it to me, too." She wanted him to do it to her forever.

CINDY WAS NEVER GOING to let her live this down, JJ mourned on the way back to her loft. First, she'd "walked in there and had sex with the guy." And if her indiscretions in New York hadn't been enough, she'd had sex in a semipublic place. With her brothers scouring the woods right outside! And his brothers, too.

A shiver of embarrassment heated her skin. Did they know what the two of them had been doing in that shed? Marcus and Greg sat in the backseat of Trevor's rented SUV, chatting amongst themselves, congratulating each other on their win. Her brother was a traitor, she thought with a grin. And Trevor was going to be touting his win for weeks.

The rascal didn't play fair and she'd be sure she pointed that out every time he told everyone about stealing her flag. He'd stolen it all right, just as soon as he'd given her an orgasm that made her toes curl just thinking about it.

Her cheeks heated again as she thought about what her girlfriends would say. Baby would drill her for details and Gretchen would be scandalized. JJ smiled at the thought. That orgasm had been worth it. She could swear she still felt residual tingles.

"You okay?"

How did she answer that question without giving away too much?

"Doing great. Minus the fact that I look like a Jackson Pollock painting."

Trevor laughed, loud and long. The more she heard that sound the more she wanted to hear it. She needed to devise a plan to keep him in her life on a permanent basis.

"And wondering if I'm going to ever get the paint out of my hair," she added, just so he'd laugh again.

"Hey, it's not my fault you ran into enemy fire."

It was entirely his fault. After fun-and-frisky paintball shed sex she'd been ready to get home and have him all to herself. It didn't help that he'd promised to give her a foot rub that would make her melt.

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Wyatt." She kept her tone light and teasing. "I still expect my foot massage."

"I wouldn't renege on a deal."

"You two need to get a room," Greg said from the backseat.

She glanced back and found his blue eyes alight with laughter. "We

intend to. Just as soon as we drop you two goobers somewhere.”  
That wiped the smirk right off his face.

## TWENTY-TWO

The following day, Trevor returned to New York. He'd already dropped his mom off at her house and his brother's had taken a cab from the airport. He was half a block from his loft when he saw a flock of paparazzi camped out on his doorstep. What the hell did those vultures want now?

He should have known that the bliss he'd felt these last few weeks wouldn't hold. Those bastards wouldn't stop until they'd picked him clean of every shred of privacy he possessed. He knew all too well how their questions and stories could lead a deranged woman to think she really knew him. Understood him.

His chest tightened and he struggled to breathe.

"Do you want me to circle around back, sir?" his driver asked.

"No."

Tipping his head back, he thought of Julia's smile. The way her eyes crinkled when she was happy and the adorable creases between her brows when she was frustrated. She thought he was brave...

He wanted to be. For her. And for himself. To prove to himself that anxiety didn't have to win and that he was normal again. Healed. Whole.

Julia made him feel whole.

No, he was done going through the service entrance because he didn't want to face the press. Hell, he might never be ready, but that didn't mean he had to run from them. His business was his business.

As soon as the car rolled to a stop, bursts of light filled the Town Car's interior. Several deep breaths later, the driver popped the trunk and retrieved Trevor's luggage.

He gave himself a quick mental pep talk, just like he had before a game.

Pumping himself up, boosting his ego skyward, and telling himself he could do anything he set his mind to. Even find his bliss again.

Unfortunately, he was starting to wonder if some of his happiness was tied to Julia. He was just going to have to camp out on her doorstep until she agreed to spend eternity in his bed.

The thought brought an instant, sweeping calm and a smile to his lips.

Questions bombed him as he stepped out of the car and the flashing bulbs put him in the spotlight.

“Trevor, what’s this about you looking at property in Atlanta?”

“Are you leaving New York?”

“Why the move?”

And just like that, he went from calm to furious. This was what he’d been afraid of for the last three months. These bozos turning his relationship with Julia into a circus. Putting her in the crosshairs of some crazy person.

Though his housekeeper reported that the doorman hadn’t found any more letters in the last week, he couldn’t help but worry that history was about to repeat itself. Only this time, the woman he loved was at risk.

“No comment,” he said, reaching for his suitcase.

Without another word he pushed his way through and escaped up to his loft.

After grabbing a beer from the fridge, he settled onto the low slung couch and pulled out his cell phone. He’d learned to be proactive about his security which meant protecting his privacy with an iron fist.

Unless they learned Julia’s identity, he didn’t want to give her cause for concern. She was too busy to add another level of stress to her life. If he wasn’t such a greedy bastard, he’d step away from her altogether until the dust settled.

Eventually she’d be done with her edits, her loft would be finished, and hopefully this latest “fan” would disappear back into the woodwork. But as he mulled over the idea, he knew it wouldn’t work. He needed her too much. Simple as that.

Mentally he went through everyone who knew he’d been in Atlanta and looking for a house. It was a short list. His agent didn’t even know.

JJ, her family, and his family had known he was in Atlanta, of course. But not the shopping part. He’d done that before he’d picked up his mom on the way out of town. While his brothers had taken her Christmas shopping, Trevor had arranged to meet with the real estate agent. He’d been careful not

to utter a word about his plans. There was no use rocking the boat before anything was finalized.

That left his real estate agent, obviously. And the real estate agent's assistant.

After draining half the bottle, he punched a button to dial the real estate agent. He hated playing the part of the rich asshole but sometimes it was called for.

"Paul Witticker," the agent said after two rings.

"Paul. Trevor Wyatt here."

"Mr. Wyatt, I didn't recognize your number."

Trevor hated the way the man had sucked up, but he came highly recommended. It annoyed Trevor that he was going to have to change his phone number again.

"We have a problem."

"What's that? I'll do anything I can to help," Witticker said quickly. Too quickly.

"When I arrived back in New York there was a posse of reporters waiting on my doorstep wanting to know why I'm looking at property in Atlanta."

"Oh, dear."

That was it? Who said 'oh dear' these days?

"You don't happen to know who could have leaked that information, do you?"

"No sir. It didn't come from this office, I assure you."

Trevor's mood darkened. He really didn't like being lied to.

"Mr. Witticker, only two people knew I was in Atlanta looking at property. So I'm reasonably sure the leak came from your office. Perhaps your young assistant was over eager."

"I...uh...Anthony knows our client's privacy is of utmost importance."

Trevor blew out a sigh. He should have known just by looking at the guy what a pompous ass he was. The bow tie should have been the first clue. His language the second. Utmost? Who said shit like that?

He decided to try a different tactic. "Look, I get it. A famous football player comes into town looking to buy a house. That's news. I bet Anthony is even a fan. He probably told a buddy who told a buddy who happened to be a reporter."

His phone beeped, alerting him to an incoming call on the other line. He ignored it.



“I...yes, I’m sure that’s what happened.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Trevor replied.

“I’m so glad you understand Mr. Wyatt. He meant no harm, I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah, well, either way, you’re fired. I need people I can count on to be discreet. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Witticker.” Trevor hung up and hit the voice mail button.

His agent’s name was at the top of the list. He blew out a sigh, really not wanting to hear what Brady had to say right now. Even without listening to the message he had a pretty good idea what his agent would say.

Deciding to ignore the world for a while, he ordered a pizza and stretched out to read Julia’s book again. Despite the initial seizing of his heart when she’d mentioned the premise of her book, she was a brilliant writer. Her pacing was flawless and the attention to detail was like she’d lived the story herself.

Other than the car accident, there were no similarities between him and the hero of the book. Where the hero had been a quarterback, married, and very much in love, well, Trevor wasn’t a quarterback or married...yet. And the hero struggled through the physical therapy to rejoin the sport he loved.

Trevor had thrown in the towel. Sighing, he stared out at the city. Fuck, if he didn’t feel like a quitter. But quitting had really been his best option. His only option. It wasn’t like he’d ever be as fast as he’d been. It was a goddamn miracle he didn’t walk with a limp. He set off every metal detector he walked through, though, thanks to all the pins in his leg. His knee and shoulder still ached when it rained.

No, it was better to go out on top and leave a legacy.

He was halfway through the book when his phone rang again. Deciding he couldn’t avoid Brady forever, he answered the call.

“What’s this about you moving to Atlanta?”

Yep. He’d totally called it. Damn, he hated being right sometimes.

“I’m not moving to Atlanta. I’m buying a house there.”

“This is about her, then. The journalist?”

“Of course.”

“Does she know what you’re planning?”

“Not yet. Soon.”

“Don’t you think you should see if she even wants you down there before you go dropping change in an unstable real estate market?”

Like he had anything else to do with all his money. And he was sure that Julia wouldn't mind if he had a place closer to her. Absolutely sure. That week he'd spent with her before she'd moved told him as much.

"Look, I fired the real estate agent I was using. Someone from his office opened their mouth. Find me someone else. A straight shooter who can keep his mouth shut. I want to move on this before the holidays."

"Christ, that's soon."

Not soon enough as far as Trevor was concerned. Other than family, there was really no reason to be in New York all the time. And he was starting to like the southern climate. Whereas they were predicting snow for the city this weekend, Julia had left for her morning jog wearing a T-shirt.

"Find me somebody."

"All right. Do me a favor and talk this over with her." There was a pause. "Before it blows up in your face."

"Why would it blow up in my face?" A feeling of unease prickled him.

"I don't know. Women can be finicky. Ask my ex-wife."

"Look, as soon as I have an agent I like, and houses I like, I plan to take her with me to pick one out."

"Oh my God. You're playing house."

"Brady..."

"Stay by the phone," his agent said before the call disconnected.

Half an hour later the phone rang again.

"Who have you got for me?"

"Just what you asked for. A straight shooter who can keep his trap shut. The only reason I know he's worked with other players is because they're my clients and I called them to ask. Evidently his whole family is in the business and he's the go to guy for the Hawks and Falcons. Geez. Those southerners really love their birds."

"They're birds of prey, Brady," Trevor reminded him.

"Got a pen?"

Trevor stalked into his office. "Yeah." He took down the name and number.

"He's expecting your call."

"Thanks Brady."

"What do you want me to tell all the reporters who are calling?"

"Tell them my personal life is none of their business."

"Will do."

Trevor ended the call and punched in the agent's number. A smooth masculine voice with a soft southern accent answered. "Justin Sherwood."

"Mr. Sherwood, Trevor Wyatt here. I understand you're the man to talk to about a house."

"I like to think so, yes. What are you looking for?"

Trevor really had no idea except that he wanted a big yard and a shower he didn't have to duck to get into. He told the real estate agent that and heard a brief laugh. "And gated. Privacy is important. Reporters are parasites," he said and instantly felt guilty. He really meant the paparazzi.

He didn't lump Julia into that group, but still...

"Okay then. Let me get to work and I'll be in touch. Is this a good number to reach you?"

"Yes."

It was almost nine that night when Justin sent him links to five houses that fit Trevor's requirements. He knocked one off the list for being too far out of town. The other was old and covered with wallpaper. He didn't want Julia feeling the need to tackle a home deco project. He wanted her attention on him.

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JJ WAS ABOUT ready to draft her resignation on Sunday when Cindy called. John was the most insufferable bastard she'd ever met. At one point in time he'd been a decent writer, but good heavens. Being in the editor's seat gave the jerk too much power. And he never bothered to curb his sexist viewpoint. No wonder his wife had left him.

"Please tell me you're bringing over a case of wine and a pint of Ben & Jerry's," she said by way of greeting.

"Oh, honey. What's going on?"

"John."

The single word said enough. How sad was that?

"What'd he do this time?"

"And I quote, 'I heard you had brass balls, Fairchild. Don't get soft on me.'" JJ growled in frustration.

"You don't really need to keep working there, you know. You've got your book now. And you could always expand your freelancing. Or maybe

you and Greg could get another house to flip this year.”

JJ wanted to agree with everything Cindy was saying, even if buying an extra property would kill her at tax time.

The truth was she'd dreaded every moment of her job this year. It was monotonous. One game bled into another. Stats, stats, stats. Interview after interview. A revolving door of players, injuries, trades and scandals. More numbers and then her words, trying to weave them into something that would interest anyone.

“I know. What's up?” she asked.

“What's this I saw about Trevor looking at property in Atlanta?”

JJ sat up in bed and gripped her cellphone a little tighter.

“What are you talking about?”

“Adam and I were on the phone as he was checking his feeds. There was a snippet about Trevor looking at property here in Atlanta.”

Cindy's words made JJ's heart beat a little faster. Could it be true? Why hadn't he said anything?

“This is the first I've heard of it,” she admitted.

Surely if there was any truth to it he would have mentioned it. They'd been together two of the last three days.

“Maybe they're just making shit up,” Cindy said. “Some reporters do that. Someone probably saw him at the airport and made it up. You know it goes.”

“Was it a tabloid?”

Cindy made a sound to the negative. “A sports blog, I think.”

“Well, he hasn't said anything to me about it. Some days I think blogs are the new tabloids,” JJ said, feeling a little disappointed.

“Would you want him to, you know, buy a house down here?”

“Of course,” JJ said immediately.

“Would you ever consider moving up north to be with him?” The way she asked the question made JJ wonder if there was a deeper meaning behind it.

“Honestly, I've not thought about it.” She thought more in terms of them being together than where they would be. Something to consider. “I would miss seeing you guys each week. And all my family is here.”

She had a big extended family, but it would be her brothers and father that she'd miss the most. A knot twisted in her stomach.

“What about you? Have you thought about moving to Vegas with Adam? You guys have been dating, what? Four months?”

If their relationship was anything like hers and Trevor's, Cindy would be eager to take it to the next level. JJ had tried to play it cool so far, demanding little of the man who'd stolen her heart.

The question was, was Cindy ready to settle down?

"I've thought about it."

She didn't say anything else and JJ got the impression from her silence that Cindy had thought about it a *lot*.

"So what's stopping you?"

"I hate the desert, for starters. So much sand. Brutally hot. And I'd miss all the trees."

"But Vegas sounds fun. And besides, where else should 'Cindy' live if not Sin City?" JJ tried to lighten the mood.

"I don't know many people there. You guys are here. Long distance sucks," she said in a choked whisper.

"Oh honey. You really like this guy, huh?"

"Yeah. I really do." Cindy sounded miserable.

JJ knew the feeling. They were two peas in a pod. Yearning for men who lived half a country away, with no conclusion in sight. "What can I do?"

"Want to come over for some ice cream?"

"I'll bring some wine, too," JJ said.

## TWENTY-THREE

### *Atlanta*

A WEEK after his conversation with Justin Sherwood, Trevor had Julia by his side as he drove north from her loft. After the leak from Witticker's office, Trevor had asked JJ to pick him up at the airport. The fewer people he saw, and the fewer places he had to sign his name, the better.

Using a fake identity was a necessary evil, but he detested the complication. The next house he bought would be under the guise of a shell corp. He didn't want to risk having his name in the papers again.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" she asked.

She looked adorable and sexy in her long, red coat. Very Christmassy, and the crisp December air lent a blush to her cheeks. He laced his fingers with hers and kissed the back of her hand.

"Nope." Luckily, the media zoo outside his door had quieted after a few days and so far they hadn't connected him with Julia. And fortunately, there hadn't been another letter, so he could breathe easier on that front, too. But he wouldn't be totally at ease until he had them both protected behind a security gate in a house with a top-notch security system.

She sighed good-naturedly.

"I wish you lived closer," she said, as he turned off the exit. "The flight time wouldn't be so bad, but when you factor in traffic and security..." She let the words dangle out there and he could tell the topic was heavy on her mind. There was something she wanted to ask. He was starting to wonder if

all southern girls skirted around a topic the way she did.

He didn't say a word, though he was dying to. It'd be worth it to see the look on her face when his plan unfolded. He'd memorized the directions before he left home so his phone's navigation system wouldn't give it away.

Three lefts and a right later he turned into a gated community. Stopping at the gate house, he rolled down the window. "Trevor Wyatt. Justin Sherwood is expecting us."

The security guard nodded and pressed a button that opened the heavy iron gates.

"What's going on?" Julia asked, sounding nervous.

"You'll see."

He navigated to the house and stopped behind Justin's car in the circular drive. Trevor definitely liked that feature; no more parking deck to contend with. And there was a good hundred and fifty feet between the front door and the cul-de-sac. More space between the house and the neighbors.

After helping her out of the car, he held her hand and led her up the stone path to the front porch. Justin was waiting with the door open.

"Since the owners still live here, the house is furnished but I'm hoping you can get an idea of the space despite that," Justin said as they approached, sounding a little apologetic. He extended a hand to Julia. "You must be Julia. I'm Justin Sherwood."

"Nice to meet you," she said, but Trevor could tell the wheels were churning in her head. She was trying desperately to figure out who Justin was and what they were doing in this house. He decided to take pity on her.

"I'm planning to buy a house here in Atlanta. I was hoping you'd help me pick it out."

"What?" Her tone was both shrill and hopeful as she rounded on him, those pretty blue-gray eyes big and expressive.

"Which part?" he said with a laugh.

"I'll give you two a moment," Justin said, and made himself scarce. Trevor really liked that guy. Maybe second time was a charm.

"You're really buying a house here? I thought the reporters were chasing a false lead thanks to that blogger."

"You read that?"

She nodded. "I've been meaning to ask you about it but—"

"We've been pretty busy this week," he finished for her. Too busy. All the money in the world and the best endorsement deals meant nothing if he

couldn't spend time with her.

Her lips curved up in a sexy pout. "You've been showing off your body again."

"I hate modeling that stuff," he said. They'd oiled him up and bent him around like a mannequin. He was the canvas, he supposed, but he felt too exposed.

"Oh, but every woman in the world wishes she was those Kevin Kurtland briefs. Trust me on that one." She rose up and brushed her lips against his. "Sales will be through the roof."

That didn't matter to him. It was nice, though, that Kurtland still wanted Trevor to model for him. Growing up, he'd never thought he'd have to list underwear model on his resume. The deal was certainly lucrative and Brady would probably cry when that relationship broke up. He loved the free swag.

Trevor would rather boxers or even commando than have something hugging his junk all day. Unless of course, that something was a special someone.

"About buying a house here...I'd like to, yes."

"I—" She paused and looked around at the large foyer, then craned her head to look into the wood paneled study.

"What are you thinking? You have to help me, beautiful. I'm still learning your expressions."

"I—" Rather than finish the sentence she launched herself into his arms and held on tight.

"I take it you like the idea."

She nodded quickly and her lush vanilla scent filled his nose.

"You could have told me when we were in the car and I was going on and on about flight times and traffic..."

"Oh, but then I couldn't have seen the look on your face and believe me, it was worth waiting for." He'd never thought another person's excitement could make his whole day, but the instant her eyes had widened with hope... he'd be walking on air for days.

"Should we have a look around?" he asked a moment later. She nodded again. "Do you want me to carry you?"

"Sorry," she whispered and took a step back.

He cupped her cheeks in his hands and lowered his lips to hers. "Never apologize for wrapping yourself around me like that."

She smiled up at him.



“Have I mentioned how glad I am you took out those contacts and switched back to your natural hair color?”

She snickered. “You might have mentioned it once or twice.”

“Come on. Let’s have a look around,” he said so he wouldn’t be tempted to haul her off to some corner and have his way with her.

Julia ultimately declared that it was a lovely house, but not “Trevor.”

He agreed. The next house was in the same neighborhood and they followed Justin over.

Julia declared it too big. Trevor agreed with that, too. He was pretty sure he could park his whole apartment in the kitchen. Twice. Who needed that much space? Unless you were catering parties every night.

He’d asked Justin to save the best for last.

As they pulled up to the less imposing but still secure private gate, Julia gasped.

“That’s magnificent.” He wasn’t sure if she was talking about the contemporary black gate or the stone house behind it, but either way, he liked her response.

“Want to see it?”

“Yes please.”

Smiling, he followed Justin through the heavy wrought iron gate and up the driveway. Another circular drive. Plus one.

“This is in a more European style. Stone on all sides,” Justin said as they approached. “Not as big as the last house and more modern than the first. But still traditional enough to fit in with the area.”

JJ FELT as if she were dreaming. She only saw houses like these in magazines and on HGTV. Double entry doors. Gleaming dark hardwood. Giant picture windows. Justin was saying something about a limestone fireplace but JJ was trying to figure out where the overhead balconies went.

“A woman would kill for this closet,” she said ten minutes later. She was pretty sure it was the size of her bedroom. And the organizational system, plus the lighted mirrors... Swoon worthy.

“The master bath,” Justin said, waving them through to a space dripping in pale marble.

“Wow.” Yep. Dreaming. That explained everything. The herringbone pattern in the shower and the lovely brushed nickel faucets.

“The master suite has an incredible view, of course.”

“Of course,” Trevor said dryly.

Was this what he was looking for? All this perfection? All this space? It wasn't nearly as large as the last place. That one had room to park a 747 in the living room with space left over.

“How about we head down to the terrace level? I think that's what will interest you the most.”

Justin certainly wasn't joking. He might call it a terrace level and he managed to do it without sounding hoity-toity, but it was still a walkout basement. And it had a beautiful bar and several big screen TVs.

“These doors open all the way, leading to the covered terrace. Outdoor kitchen is just around here. Another set of TVs out here.”

He forgot to mention the beautiful outdoor fireplace.

“What do you think? Perfect for a Super Bowl party?” Justin asked.

“Or a Fairchild Super Bowl Extravaganza...” Trevor added, grinning down at her.

JJ smiled, loving that he'd adopted their family slogan.

Despite the spaciousness, the architect and designer had done a good job to make sure the home was still cozy. It would cost a fortune to furnish, though. Heck, the house cost a fortune. She didn't need to see the number in black and white to know that.

“This may not be New York, but that'd probably be a little chilly,” she said. February was always the coldest month in Georgia.

“Ahh...” Justin strode over and flicked a button on the wall. There was a low hum and then she started feeling heat.

“Get out!”

“No expense spared,” Justin said with a smile. “The outdoor kitchen and the covered part of the terraces have these heat lamps installed around the perimeter of the ceiling so you can enjoy the fresh air year round.”

“That's crazy,” she said.

“But handy for a Super Bowl party,” Trevor said.

“Okay, I'll admit that.”

“While she's mulling that over, let's have a look at the pool. It's heated.”

“I love the yard,” Trevor said as they strode around the long slender pool. “And that it's so private.”

It was certainly private and JJ chalked that up as being in the house's favor. Trevor deserved his privacy.

A few minutes later Justin excused himself and JJ perched on the edge of a stone wall and looked over the backyard. She wanted to soak up the perfection while she could.

“What do you think?” Trevor asked. He sat down and covered her hands with his.

She sighed. “I just...wow. I just keep thinking this is how the other half lives. Not even half. I mean, do you have any idea of the craftsmanship? The appliances in the kitchen cost more than my last condo.”

“So you don’t like it?”

“I love it,” she said miserably.

“Hey...” He leaned over, wrapping his arms around her. “What’s wrong? This was supposed to be fun.”

“It is. It’s just so much. I just...it’s a beautiful property. Dreamy really. But I’m just so—”

“If you had all the money in the world, would you buy it?”

She gave an unladylike snort. “You don’t have all the money in the world and neither do I.”

“Why does money freak you out so much?”

She laid her head on his shoulder and took a deep breath. “My father left my mother when I was young. Like two. Just decided he didn’t want to be a husband and father anymore. It was a complete shock to my mom. They’d met and married three months after meeting. I came along seven months after that. Doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that I was the catalyst for their marriage.”

He squeezed her shoulders and she had the power to continue. “But my mom insisted that they were deeply in love and that his leaving was totally unexpected. She’d moved across the country with him and was working hard to support us. She said every month we sank a little deeper. One of my first memories is us getting evicted and kicked out on the streets. I remember crying. I remember her struggling with our suitcases. I remember it raining; Mom said it was the first time in months. I remember my doll, the one doll I was allowed to bring with me, getting wet and dirty.”

“Julia...”

“We lived like that for a while. In and out of shelters and I think Mom just got more and more depressed. And mad. I think her anger is what saved us. One day she picked herself up, dusted us off, and booked us a ticket back to Atlanta with the last dollars she had. And after that, everything changed.

We had a support system again. She was familiar with everything and it was like she'd made up her mind that she wasn't going to waste any more time on my father...that we were going to have a good life. She managed to get a good job and we stayed with family the first few months. And then she met Dad. And after that, everything really was different."

Fat tears rolled down her cheeks and her heart ached from the memories. And most importantly the absolute relief she'd felt when she met Ron Fairchild and he'd asked her if he could be her daddy.

She'd wrapped her skinny little arms around his neck and he'd picked her up, holding her close to his heart. He'd been her daddy ever since.

"I just... ever since that day we got kicked out, I've tried to be conscious. It wasn't that my mom wasn't a hard worker, she was. It's just... she fell apart emotionally. And she kept it together as long as she could. But she wasn't prepared for being abandoned and going from homemaker to sole provider. Especially in an expensive city. I never wanted to be in the position of having to dig food out of the trashcan again. I never wanted to feel like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop."

They sat there in silence until her nose felt frozen.

"Come on. Let's go warm you up."

She wiped her tears as she surveyed the basement one more time. It really would host a fantastic Super Bowl party. "You'd have to invite everyone you know," she told him. Well, he might not have to. But she would. His team would probably fill up the space with their broad shoulders.

She realized then that that's why he liked this place. It was different than his penthouse. Big and spacious enough to hold his shoulders. And his trophies. And host parties. But it was a world away from the chaos of the big city. Private. Secure.

"Thank you," he said, wrapping his arms around her from behind. "For telling me about you and your mom."

She shrugged. "I try not to let the old feelings freak me out. It was a long time ago, and everything's different now. My family. My support system. My savings account." The corner of her mouth pulled up at the thought of her nest egg. "But every so often..."

"You freak out," he said softly. "I think that's entirely understandable. I still freak out when I hear tires squealing. It takes me back to that night."

She turned in his arms and hugged him tight. He had no idea how much she appreciated knowing what had really happened to him. How pleased she

was that there wasn't a wall between them anymore. And as much as it made her heart ache when he shared details like that, she felt his trust.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she loved him, but she bit the words back. It was too soon. Except...she was done living close to the vest. Life was too short. Too uncertain to hold back. Especially when she was sure of her feelings...

It was time to take her mom's advice.

"I love you," she whispered.

His smile softened his expression and her heart started to pound.

"I've been thinking the same thing about you since that day you said 'say cheeseburgers' in front of Bailey."

It took about ten heartbeats for his words to sink in. For her brain to comprehend them. To understand what he was saying. "Really?"

Laughing, he wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her off the ground. "Really. And now I really want to make love to you on that bar over there."

Lips against hers, he swallowed her gasp.

"And then I want to christen every room in this place."

The rush of pleasure made her lightheaded. It was a good thing he was holding her like he'd never let go because at that moment she was sure she could faint from an overabundance of happiness.

"That's a lot of... christening."

He threw his head back and laughed. Then he sobered.

"Walk through with me one more time?"

"Of course."

"Which room will you display your trophies in?" Julia asked as they made their way through the master bedroom.

At the moment he wasn't thinking about trophies. Rather he was imagining a massive bed against the far wall and beautiful naked Julia Fairchild on top of soft white sheets.

"You okay?" she asked and turned back from the window to look at him.

"Yeah. Just wasn't thinking about trophies." He let his gaze roam south and by the time he got back to her face, her cheeks were as pink as her nose.

He held out a hand to her and when her palm was pressed firmly to his, he led her into the bathroom. "I think the tub is big enough for two," he murmured.

As predicted, there was a tiny little gasp. Then she looked up at him,

eyebrow raised. “Why don’t we find out?”

Trevor groaned. Trust Julia to pick right now to learn how to ask for what she wanted. To find her inner vixen and unleash her. The mental images flashing through his mind made him hard in an instant.

“As much as that appeals, I’ve got a surprise for you. Close your eyes.”

“Trev—”

“Humor me, gorgeous.”

With her hands over her eyes, he guided her to the closet.

“Open.”

She answered the question of how many times he could make her gasp in one day. Fourteen so far. And damn if he didn’t love that sound. Loved making her make it.

“Go try them on.”

She ran over, holding her hands over her mouth and then, as if they were made of fine china, stroked a finger down the jewel-encrusted heel. As soon as he’d seen the stilettos in the window, he’d known they would look great on her.

“When—”

“I had Justin sneak them up here. Had to be sure they fit with the place.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “Fit with the place?”

“Well, I knew as soon as I saw them that they’d fit you perfectly.” He put his hands on her shoulders and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I knew they were the perfect fuck-me heels. But you know, a man likes to be sure.”

“Are you sure?”

“That they’re the perfect fuck-me heels?” He loved that every time he uttered the F-word, a little tremor shook her body.

“That they look good with the house.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Do you know how many magazines the girls and I have drooled over? Jimmy Choos. Prada. Manolos.” She swiped at her cheeks. “Christian Louboutins,” she whispered breathlessly, sliding her finger along the distinctive signature inside the shoe. “They’re too much.”

He would have laughed if he hadn’t been about to come in his pants. “Ask me.”

“What?” she squeaked as he spun her around and pressed her up against the wall. He kissed her throat. Licked the lobe of her ear.

“Say ‘Trevor, would you buy this house and make love to me in every

room?”

Another tremor.

He lifted his head so he could watch her expression.

She slowly lifted her chin and stared up at him. Her eyes were more blue than gray now. “Trevor, would you buy this house and fuck me in every room...while I’m wearing those shoes?” She glanced over at the shoe rack.

Shock and pleasure collided within him and he captured her lips with his. He thrust his tongue into her mouth as she slid her fingers into his hair, holding on tight. Not enough.

“Mine,” he growled and kissed his way back down her throat, delighting in her moans.

“Yours,” she whispered back.

Her leg slid up, hooking over his hip and she ground her pussy against his cock. Dear heaven, she was sex on stilettos. And he needed her. Now.

“Damn coat.” He grunted, his fingers moving to the oversized buttons.

“Trevor—”

“What is it, sweetheart?”

“This isn’t your house. We can’t—”

“Justin!” he called. “You’re right,” he whispered and kissed her one more time.

Then he stepped back and adjusted his cock. Thirty seconds later, Justin knocked on the door. He had a smile on his face and a stack of papers in his hand.

“Made a decision?” he drawled and had the decency not to look at Trevor’s crotch.

“I’ll take it.”

“Excellent. I’ve got the contract right here.”

“Sit tight,” he told Julia, and then strode across the room to handle the particulars.

While Trevor went off with Justin to sign the papers, JJ held her hands to her heated cheeks and debated pinching herself. This was the most amazing day ever. And if she was dreaming, she really didn’t want to wake up.

She walked over to the shoes and touched the crystals. Sheer white lace covered the neutral leather peep-toe heels. Exquisite. The girls would flip. She smiled.

He loved her.

She could hardly believe it. She’d thought it was too soon, but she was

wrong. Love was never too soon. Too much.

“Now where was I?”

She turned just in time to find Trevor striding through the door, homing in on her like a heat-seeking missile. He didn't so much as pause before his lips were crashing down on hers again.

Picking her up, he spun and set her down on the large center island.

“That's right,” he murmured. “Buttons. Always buttons.”

Together they stripped each other until she was naked atop her coat, him between her thighs. She reached for his cock, needing him to take care of the ache inside her.

“Hold on gorgeous, I think you're missing something.”

Disappointment hit her like a bucket of cold water. Spinning back to the shoe rack, he plucked the heels and turned back to her.

She giggled. “I feel like Cinderella,” she said as he slipped them onto her feet.

“I've always thought you were a princess. Now where was I?”

She raised an eyebrow.

“What? Too shy to repeat it?” He asked, running his hands up her thighs in a way that made her spread her legs shamelessly.

“No. I'm just waiting for you to suit up.”

There was a tiny pause before his lips twitched. Good. She'd managed to shock him twice in one day. Three times if you counted the news that she'd been homeless as a child.

“Aren't you glad I learned my lesson?” he asked, pulling a condom from his wallet. Never again would he be without a condom, she was sure of that.

“Very.”

As soon as he was sheathed, he reached between her thighs. “Forget it. I'm ready.” She reached for his cock again and guided him home.

Oh, that was it. Just what she'd been needing. That feeling of completeness. Wholeness. Togetherness. It was still there despite weeks and miles apart. But this time, this joining was so much more.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered against her lips.

“I love when you do that.”

“And I love you.”

She moaned and laid back. The change in angle made her moan a second time. And then again as he slid his palms from her hips up her sides and then covered her breasts. He replaced one hand with his mouth and his tongue



drew lazy, wet circles around her nipple.

She closed her eyes and bit down on her knuckle.

“You can scream, sweetheart. You’re not going to disturb anybody.”

He kept up the rhythmic thrusting, building her orgasm with each press of his hips. When he trailed his hands back down her legs she silently thanked her presence of mind to shave this morning. It’d become a necessity since Trevor had come back to her life.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?”

“Al...most.”

He wrapped his hands around her ankles and lifted her legs until the high heels were pointed straight up. She stared up at the crystals sparkling in the bright overhead light. But it was the look in Trevor’s eyes that pushed her over the edge. Love, tenderness, heat, desire, and concentration.

“Come for me.” His words came out just as her orgasm swept through her with shocking power. Crying out, she held onto the edge of the countertop and pointed her toes, every muscle in her body going rigid, trying to hold onto the wave of pleasure. To ride it all the way to shore.

She loved it when he came. How hard and twitchy his muscles got. The look of absolute ecstasy on his face. The way he threw his head back and groaned loud and long. But most especially the way he collapsed on top of her, dropping her legs and using her breasts as a pillow.

“That was...” he trailed off, breathing deeply, his chest rubbing against her belly.

“Incredible.”

“Understatement of the year, babe.”

“Couldn’t agree more, Mr. Wyatt. Couldn’t agree more.”

AFTER THEY DRESSED, Trevor couldn’t resist one more kiss. “It’s getting late.”

“Mmm hmm.” She sounded sleepy and bliss-filled, just the way he liked her.

“What do you say we go back to your place and curl up in bed together?”

“Sounds great.”

“I’m pissed that I didn’t think to have a bed waiting to be brought in,” he muttered as they made their way to the front door.

“You were that confident?” she asked as he locked the door.

“Truth? No way. But I was hopeful. And sometimes that’s enough.”

She smiled up at him in that special way that melted his bones. “I love you, Trevor Wyatt. I think perhaps I always have.”

He kissed her quickly in the fading light. “Keep talking like that and we won’t make it back to your loft any time soon.”

“Is that a fact?”

“You can take it to the bank, sweetheart.”

“I just want to do one thing first.”

“What’s that?”

She pulled her cell phone from her pocket, struck a pose and aimed the camera at her feet. Then she attached the picture to a text message. To Cindy, Gretchen and Baby he presumed though the group name was simply: My Girls.

JJ: *dreams DO come true.*

HE FELT THE SAME WAY.

## TWENTY-FOUR

*January*  
*Atlanta*

IT WAS the day before the playoffs and JJ had just enough time to pick out a new closet organizational system for the loft. Not that she'd been to the loft in the last two weeks. It'd taken Trevor all of a morning to move a bed into the new house. An afternoon shopping with her had outfitted his kitchen with the basics. A quiet Christmas with his family, followed by a breathtaking New Year's Eve in New York and she was back to work and helping Greg get the kitchen installed.

Back to reality, she'd teased. But the reality was she was blissfully in love and aching to be with Trevor on a more permanent basis. That meant getting the loft finished so it was out of her mind and off her to do list.

The Home Depot had been stripped of all Christmas paraphernalia and they were firmly on the "get organized in the new year" bandwagon. Which meant extra savings for her.

She pondered the various options, decided against wire shelving and turned her attention to the hanging drawer units. Retrieving her phone, she started to open the note file that included all the measurements for her apartment but there was an email waiting from Scott, her editor.

He was happy with the edits she'd sent in thus far. Thank goodness. She was planning to finish them up today so that would be one more thing off her list. Then she and Trevor could enjoy some quiet time at his new place before

she had to get back to reality.

No sooner had she closed her email than the phone rang. John's name flashed across the screen and she considered not answering it. But knowing him, there'd be some last minute detail she needed to hear.

"Hi, John." As always, she did her best to be professional.

"What's this about you dating Trevor Wyatt?"

The phone slipped from her hand and she reacted quickly to save it from crashing against the cement floor. How did he know? She released a sigh; the last thing they needed right now was the paparazzi chasing them.

"Is it true, JJ?"

"Why does it matter?"

"You're kidding, right? Please tell me you're not really that blond."

He'd been cracking blond jokes regularly since she'd gone back to her original color in November.

JJ's chin shot up but she took a deep breath. One day karma was going to bite the man in the ass. She only hoped that karma had teeth like a piranha and that she got to be there to hear him scream like a little girl.

"If you're dating the guy, you have the perfect opportunity to get the interview of the century." JJ was under no illusion that he cared about her or her career. He wanted the interview in his paper. He wanted to unearth a scandal that would put him on the map.

It annoyed her to no end that he was interested in such tabloid journalism.

"According to everyone, I already did the interview of the year. With Mathers." Or even more highly acclaimed interview with that scoundrel Morrison. She couldn't help but rub it in John's face. He so had it coming.

"Yeah. Whatever. Formal, informal, I don't care. Just get me something. This could put us back on the map!" She heard the excitement in his voice and her stomach soured.

"I'm not interviewing him."

"Yes, you are. It's your job. It's your new assignment, in fact."

"Look, John. Trevor's private life is no one's business but his. If he wanted to do an interview, and decide what topics are off limits, then I'd agree. But he doesn't. So there's not going to be any interview or any article."

"Don't be stupid, JJ. He's a celebrity. His life is an open book. He knew that when he signed up. Speaking of which, what the hell is this about you writing a book?"

“What are you talking about?” She pushed the words through tight lips and gave up looking for the closet organizers. Instead she sank down onto the cold cement floor and leaned back against some boxes.

“Your publicist called and asked if I’d be willing to write a review for your book. I told her she had to have it wrong, you couldn’t possibly have written a book.”

“Why the hell not?” she asked, her temper getting the better of her.

“Well, for one, it might not even be legal. I’ll have to look over your contract and secondly—”

That was all it took for her to snap. She hung up on the controlling little twerp and made a beeline for her car.

TREVOR WAS in the middle of his workout when a New York number flashed across the top of his cell phone. Normally he didn’t answer calls while he was working out, but he’d been distracted all day so wasn’t like the call would be interrupting anything at the moment.

He leaned forward on the bench and put the kettle bell between his feet.

“Wyatt.”

“Mr. Wyatt, this is April Reynolds. I’m Julia’s publicist. I was wondering if you had a few minutes to talk.”

“Uh, sure,” he said, frowning. What the hell did she want? And more importantly, how had she gotten his phone number?

“Great. I’m scheduling appearances for JJ’s new book and I’d like to know if you’d be willing to come to the New York and Atlanta signings to help her promote it. I don’t have exact dates yet, but if you’re willing to attend I’d be happy to work around your schedule.”

Trevor stared down at the newly installed gym mat and felt the walls closing in. Had JJ put her up to this? How did her publicist even know they were dating?

“Why would I do that?” he heard himself ask. It’s not that he didn’t want to be there for Julia. Hell, he’d make every signing he could.

“I, uh, I’m sorry. Jessica Ross told me that the two of you were dating, and your picture was in the paper this morning, so I assumed—”

“My picture’s in the paper?”

“With JJ, yes. *Wyatt Partying with Reporter*. That’s the headline.”

He massaged his forehead but the pounding ache didn’t go away. So

much for being lost in the New Year's Eve crowd.

"I'm going to have to get back to you."

He hung up. A little flashing light caught his attention. Geez. He had six voice mails. When had that happened?

He didn't have it in him to listen to them yet and none were from friends or family. Instead he clicked Brady's number.

"Hey Trevor. Thanks for getting back to me." There was a hint of sarcasm in his agent's voice.

"I didn't listen to my voice mail yet."

Brady let out a quiet curse but Trevor caught it.

"What's going on?"

"You're all over the papers again, man. They want to know who JJ is and everything else. You know the drill."

"Great. Fucking great."

"I'm turning your PR back over to Chastity."

"You don't have to do that."

"You know very well I do. It's her job. She does it well. You need her on your side, Trevor. Give her five minutes of your time so that we can move past this."

Five minutes. Trevor sighed again. "All right."

"I'll have her call you. Keep your phone on."

JJ STABBED the caramel and chocolate ice cream with her spoon. Snuggling in the corner of one of Gretchen's matching sofas, she listened to Baby's latest speed dating adventure.

"I just don't think you can get to know someone that quickly," Gretchen said.

JJ agreed but kept the comment to herself. Going on five months and she still had no idea what was going on in Trevor's head. After the call from John this morning, she'd hid out at her loft, afraid that if she went back to the new house there might be paparazzi waiting. Or worse, following her.

But no one had followed her, luckily. Her phone was a different matter.

"It's not about getting to know someone well, it's about seeing you have enough in common to go further," Baby said.

"So you're looking for a boyfriend now?" Gretchen asked and topped off her wine glass.

Baby was quick to shake her head. “But I wouldn’t mind dating the same guy more than once. I’ve been on too many first dates and I’ve had too many sloppy first date kisses.”

“So... you’re looking for monogamous sex?”

Baby’s face lit up. “Yeah. That sounds about right.”

JJ thought about the two phone calls from snoopy reporters, the email from that blogger who made it her mission to follow celebrities to the ends of the earth. And the fact that Trevor hadn’t called, texted or emailed all day. She had no real cause for concern... Except, she was concerned.

It wasn’t like him to go so long without being in touch. He had to be getting calls from the media. She hadn’t been able to look at the articles since she’d spent the afternoon on edits. And finishing up her closet shopping online.

“Everything okay?” Gretchen asked, and JJ glanced over and found her friend staring at her. She tried to shake off her unease.

“Yeah.”

“How are edits coming?” Cindy asked, pouring another glass. The Chardonnay was aged in ceramic rather than oak and JJ had to admit, it was yummy.

“Done. Finished them this afternoon and sent them off to Scott just before I came over.”

“Well, woo hoo for that! We should have gotten champagne again.” Her friend’s smile lit up the room.

“I’ll just take some more Chardonnay, thanks.”

“G, where’s the notepad?” Cindy asked.

Soon they were filling out their thoughts on this week’s wine and Baby broke out another carton of Ben & Jerry’s. Despite the cheer of the holidays, today had called for ice cream. JJ had taken it upon herself to bring eight or nine flavors.

“Cherry is my favorite,” Baby said with a cute smile.

“So how are things with T-man?”

JJ thought back to their weekend in New York, how attentive he’d been. How much fun they’d had partying together, counting down as the ball had dropped. And then that steamy kiss at midnight.

“Earth to JJ. Come in JJ,” Cindy said with a teasing smile.

“It was good.”

“Was good?” Cindy asked.

“Have a good Christmas?” Gretchen added.

“Sorry. New York was good. I just...” She sighed. “John called this morning.”

“This doesn’t sound good.” Cindy sat forward, curling her arms around a pale aqua throw pillow.

“Evidently the publicist at Bailey called to ask him for a review or something. I think he just likes giving me a hard time because I’m a woman. But the story must be out there because Gretchen saw my book mentioned and I’ve had two other reporters calling. One email from a celebrity blogger.”

“Aww, what’s wrong with getting your book out there?” Baby asked.

“It’s the invasion of privacy,” Gretchen told her.

She wasn’t about to tell them what had happened to Trevor, but she now understood why privacy was such an issue for him. If his uncle was still alive or there’d been anyone else to watch over his cousin’s store after the whole theft snafu, he probably wouldn’t have been working at the store that day.

The thought of not seeing him again, not meeting like that and falling in love with him... She didn’t want to think about it. So instead, she finished off the pint of fudgy-chocolate goodness.

“What does Trevor say?” Baby asked.

JJ let out a long sigh. “That’s the thing. I haven’t heard from him.”

“Since...”

“This morning when I left the house.”

“Did you check your texts?”

“A billion times.”

“No email either?” Gretchen asked.

“Nope.”

They all fell silent. JJ tried not to let her mind run away with her, but she loved him so much. If there was something bothering him, she wanted to be there to help him fix it. And if she couldn’t fix it, at least she could be there to support him.

“Maybe something came up. Or maybe he’s on the phone,” Gretchen said, obviously trying to put a cheery spin on things.

JJ remained quiet. Cindy had been too quiet this evening and JJ noticed her studying the carpet a little too closely. Come to think of it, there hadn’t been the usual discussion about one of her books. No plot problems or character antics.

“Everything okay, Cin?” JJ asked.



“You’ve been quiet tonight,” Baby added, and they turned their focus on the pensive blonde.

“Adam and I broke up,” she whispered.

She said the words so quietly JJ thought she had to be hearing things. But Baby scooted down the couch and wrapped an arm around Cindy’s shoulders just as the first tear fell.

JJ hopped up to find a box of tissues.

“We’re just—too far apart,” Cindy was saying when JJ returned. “Three years younger—” Hiccup. “—than me.”

JJ settled onto the armrest and kept the tissues at the ready, trying to decipher her friends tear-filled words.

“I thought about moving,” Cindy said, reaching for a tissue. “But he didn’t want me to be away from my friends and family. I thought that was sweet. But I-I want to be with him. I—”

She sniffed and blotted her tears. After sucking in a deep breath, she continued. “If I’m honest, I don’t really want to move. I hate the desert. Nice to visit, wouldn’t want to live there.”

“Why doesn’t he move here?” Baby asked gently.

Cindy shrugged. “He didn’t really say anything beyond his company’s there. And it’s still so...young. They only took over three months ago. It’s not like we’re married,” she said and JJ could tell that her friend was trying to justify why the relationship wouldn’t work.

Suddenly, she felt extra blessed that Trevor both loved her and had made the move to Atlanta, sparing her the stress of being separated from everything she’d ever known. It couldn’t have been easy for him. If anything, giving up Antonio’s meatballs was a terrible hardship.

“Plus, the relationship’s still so new... I’m just not sure it’s worth uprooting everything for.”

JJ squeezed her shoulder. “When it’s worth it, you’ll know.”

Cindy nodded and wiped her tears again. “I’m sorry, you guys. I didn’t mean to get all blabby on you. I want to hear about everyone’s Christmas. It’s been forever since we’ve seen each other.”

They all agreed and chatted about presents. Decorations. Food. Always food.

“Did Trevor buy you anymore shoes?” Baby asked. “Because that last pair was To. Die. For.”

JJ smiled. “No. No new shoes.”

“Well...”

“What’d he get you?” Gretchen added.

JJ smiled. “One of his original jerseys. He’s not sure if it’s the one he was wearing the day we met, but that would have been extra sweet. And also, a key to his house.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Cindy said.

“Me, too.”

“Well, we’re thinking of having a Super Bowl party at the new house, if you guys—” Her phone interrupted her. “Are free,” she finished and she glanced at the number.

John. Figured. The asshole had called her again in the middle of the afternoon to discuss her latest “assignment.” She’d let it go to voicemail.

She was so close to telling him to shove it.

“John,” she told them.

“Hah. This I want to hear,” Baby said.

Smiling, JJ pressed the speakerphone button. Professionalism be damned.

“JJ. My star reporter! Have you talked to Trevor yet?”

JJ’s jaw literally dropped open. Snapping it shut, she steeled her spine and took a deep, calming breath. In. Out. Do. Not. Scream.

“No. I’ve been busy doing my job.”

She saw Baby smother a snort with her hand. JJ rolled her eyes and shook her head. If she hadn’t lived the last nine months, she wouldn’t believe that any person could be such a roller coaster of sexist pig and seemingly sincere. But lately he’d stopped apologizing after the fact and just stuck his foot in his mouth.

“Interviewing Trevor Wyatt is at the top of your job description.”

“He’s not going to agree to an interview and I’m not asking him.” Besides, wasn’t there some sort of boyfriend/girlfriend code of ethics she’d be crossing? It wasn’t exactly attorney client privilege. Maybe if they got married she could get out of it.

John’s next words knocked the smile right off her lips. “Interview him or start looking for another job.”

Her own shock was mirrored on the faces of her friends. Baby was shaking her head violently and JJ held up a finger, requesting that she stay silent.

“Are you saying you’ll fire me if I don’t interview him?” She spat the words back through the phone. Every nerve in her body was at full alert, hot

and pissed off.

“Just do the interview, Fairchild.”

He hung up on her.

JJ turned off the screen, held the corner of the phone to her forehead and counted to ten.

Baby spoke first. “He can’t fire you!”

“He’s the boss,” JJ said, knowing that her tone was mocking and unprofessional. But she was among friends. Her best friends. And right now she wanted nothing more than to figure out how to kill him off in her next novel.

“No. I mean he cannot fire you. I highly doubt your contract would allow it. And I could throw all sorts of reasons at the bastard that a woman should not be interviewing her boyfriend. Conflict of interest...” Baby said and went off on a tangent.

JJ settled back into the sofa and reached for her wine glass. She’d definitely be calling a cab tonight. Between her headache, heartache, and the extra glass of wine she was planning on drinking, she was in no condition to drive home.

“I’ll worry about it tomorrow.” She thought about it as she sipped her wine. “You know what; I’m not going to worry about it. I’m done worrying. D-O-N-E, done. He can fire me if he wants to. What’s the point of working so hard with such a jerk for a boss? It’s not like I even enjoy the job anymore. He can stuff it.”

There was a moment’s long pause as the four of them looked at each other. Wow. That had been a long time coming. Ten months or maybe more.

Gretchen giggled. Cindy joined in. And before long, they were all laughing themselves silly.

“You go girl!” Baby said.

“What she said,” Gretchen added.

“How very ‘unsouthern’ of you,” Cindy teased.

Yeah, JJ’s mom probably wouldn’t have approved of that outburst, but when amongst friends, one should let one’s hair down. And say it like it is.

“Wow. That felt good.” JJ smiled. Really good.

## TWENTY-FIVE

Trevor heard what Chastity was saying but couldn't get past the words "going public." Attending that New Year's Eve party had been about giving Julia an experience she'd never forget, not "going public."

"The advantage is we can get ahead of the story, spin it how we want to \_\_\_"

"You're going to spin my relationship?" Trevor all but growled the words. Could this day get any worse? No. He probably shouldn't wonder that. Doing so was an open invitation for mischief to wreak more havoc on his life.

"We can release the information *you* want to release. Give them enough that they'll leave you alone."

He liked that part of the scenario. Was Julia done with girls' night yet? He needed to call her back and let her know what was going on.

"Brady's going to hate that idea," he mused. All the more reason to do it.

"Leave Brady to me. He just likes the single-guy/star-athlete appeal. What he doesn't realize is that I can sell happily attached, non-womanizing athlete far better. You'd probably increase your female fan club twenty-five percent."

He hated when people talked about his life in terms of numbers. As much as he'd lived by stats, when public relations gurus and image consultants started describing his fan base by percentages he started to feel like a patty of ground beef. And after everything that had happened with Stephanie, the idea of putting himself back in the cross hairs brought up his defenses.

"I'll need to talk it over with Julia. This affects her, too." In some ways even more than it affected him. He could just imagine her fellow journalists

turning the mic in her direction at the next game.

“Absolutely. Talk it over with her. She’ll understand the importance of us telling the media what we want to and that we need to do it ASAP. And don’t worry about Brady.”

Trevor wasn’t worried about Brady. He rarely gave a shit what his agent thought. He certainly wasn’t going to stress himself out when there were much more important things to be worried about at the moment.

After he hung up with Chastity, he decided to give Brady a heads up on things just so he could head off the inevitable questions and calls. Sometimes he wondered if his agent got off on scandals that made his clients more popular. There were very few situations the man couldn’t turn to his clients’ advantage, thanks to Chastity.

“Everything set with Chastity?” Brady asked as soon as the call was connected.

Trevor realized that was his answer. The guy was thirty-nine years old but would probably see an early grave thanks to his stressful habits. Years ago when they’d first met, Trevor had found the fast-paced lifestyle alluring. It had quickly lost its appeal but he didn’t see Brady ever growing out of it.

“I’m about to call Julia. She needs to know what’s going on with this latest stalker. Joe should be touching down here in Atlanta in the next few minutes. Once I’ve discussed things with Julia and Joe, I’ll talk to Chastity again.”

“We need to do whatever Chastity says. You know she’s the best in the biz. The sooner we get on this the better. I’m sure it’s a nice boost, a free boost, for Julia’s book but—”

“She did not leak the story. She wouldn’t do that.”

“How can you be so sure? Look, I know you’ve got the hots for her man, but think with your head for a minute—”

“That’s my girlfriend you’re talking about, Brady. I love her. I know her. She lives her life behind the spotlight.”

“Just let Chastity do her thing.”

“Not until Joe is in place. I’m not leaving anything to chance.”

“All right. Keep me in the loop.”

Trevor wanted to snort. He quickly reminded himself that Brady was a business acquaintance, not a friend. He didn’t care much about Trevor’s personal life so long as it didn’t mess up his game or his endorsements and now that endorsements were all that was left, he’d love to keep Trevor’s

name in the paper. It was just business.

So instead of snorting and telling Brady to kiss him where the sun didn't shine, he gave a quick "sure" and hung up.

JJ'S BODY was warring between a sugar rush and the blissful mellowness that three glasses of wine had brought on. She'd probably overindulged, but it was just one of those days. She'd run an extra mile for the rest of the week to even things back out.

She punched her pillow and settled in, knowing sleep would be far away. Part of her wanted to call the cab back and head over to Trevor's house. But the other half of her was miffed that she hadn't heard a peep from him in well over twelve hours.

Her phone buzzed atop her night stand and she flopped over. Since she'd given up hope of hearing from Trevor today, she didn't know who would be calling her this late. If it was another reporter—

Trevor's name flashed across the top of the screen and she hit the answer button.

"Are you okay?" she said, rather than the standard hello. Inwardly she cringed at how much she'd sounded like her mother just then.

"I'm fine. Are you okay?" He sounded concerned.

Interesting question considering she had called him several times and gotten no answer. Maybe all her calls made him think something was wrong.

"I'm okay." She wasn't going to ask why he hadn't called her back, not tonight. It was just good to hear his voice, to feel the connection to him, no matter how tenuous. She'd prefer to have him in bed next to her so she could prove to herself that he was fine. Safe.

"I'm sorry I didn't call earlier. How was girls' night?"

"Not as much fun as usual. Adam and Cindy broke up."

"That sucks. Why?"

"Long distance, I guess. She doesn't want to move and neither does he. I think they were probably tired of trying to make it work."

"They seemed good together."

"Yeah." JJ had thought the same thing. When those two were in the room, it was like two pieces of a puzzle clicking together. They had that annoying habit of finishing each other's sentences and grinning at each other like lovesick fools.

“So I got a call from your publicist earlier. She wanted to know if I’d be willing to drop in on your signings to lend my support. I—”

“She what?” JJ had hardly spoken more than a few sentences with the woman. April whatever-her-name-was had plenty of ideas for promoting the book and honestly, that just wasn’t JJ’s thing. So she’d smiled dutifully and acted excited all the while longing for freedom. “How—was this before the article or after?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. The story is out. I’ve been getting calls all day.”

“Me too,” JJ inserted.

“Brady’s brought in a PR guru to handle things on my end but I’m more concerned about you.”

“I’m fine. I had a few calls from journalists. One from a blogger.” She couldn’t hold back the sigh. “But it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“I know, it’s just, if it starts to grow legs...” He paused, as if regrouping.

“I know,” she said. Boy, did she know. She’d been thinking about it off and on since Gretchen had told her. Her fellow journalists would have a field day asking *her* questions for a change. The men who still considered sports journalism a man’s field would probably resent her more than they already did. In fact, she could just hear their snide comments about sleeping her way to a story.

As if she’d ever do that.

The day she needed to sleep her way to the top was her last day.

She realized he’d been quiet for a while. Or maybe their call had gotten dropped.

“Did we get dropped again?” she asked.

“No. Sorry. Just thinking.”

He didn’t sound like his usual self. “What’s wrong?”

He sighed. “I’ve been getting more letters.”

The way he said the words made her sit up in bed.

“Listen, I’ve brought my former bodyguard back on board. He’s heading to your place right now. I want you to let him in and listen to him completely —”

“You what? What letters? Like *letters* letters or creepy letters?” Her blood pressure rose and she got up and paced to the window and then back to her closet.

“Creepy letters.” He sounded almost agonized saying those two words

and everything in her wanted to rise up and defend him. Go to battle for him. Protect him from the psychos who would make his life hell because of their crazy, sick fascination.

“His name is Joe Catrell. Tall, dark haired. He’s really good and he’ll keep you safe. I’m going to stay put tonight but we’ll meet up at the airport tomorrow.”

“Wait. Back up. He’s coming here?”

“You were mentioned in today’s letter, Julia.”

Her? His words sent a trickle of fear down her spine.

“Because the media outed us?” she said. Stupid party. It’d been a wonderful night but not worth causing them future problems.

“Yes.”

“And you think there’s a valid enough threat that I need protection?”

“After last time, I’m not willing to take chances, sweetheart.”

There was a knock at her door and it took her a moment to calm herself. How had he gotten past— right. She was in her loft now. No extra security downstairs.

“Hold on a sec,” she said.

“Is he there? Did Greg install the peephole yet?”

Ignoring him while she wrestled with the door lock, she kept the safety chain in place and her foot against the door. But as she cracked it open and got a look at the tall man on the other side she quickly realized that her foot and a safety chain had no chance whatsoever.

“Miss Fairchild?” he said. She nodded. “Name’s Joe Catrell.”

She heard a hint of accent and presumed Texan. In the dim hall light, she got an impression of deep blue eyes, strong cheek bones and a lean, whipcord body.

“I don’t suppose you have ID on you?” she asked, feeling the need to be a little extra cautious. No doubt he could snap her in two at will.

“Julia—is Joe there?” Trevor’s voice came through the line.

The man outside her door held up a wallet with his driver’s license on one side and a photo of a couple of kids on the other.

“Does he have kids?” JJ asked Trevor. She asked partly to verify the man’s identity and partly because the idea of a bodyguard having kids struck her as... odd.

For some reason she’d always thought of bodyguards as, well, loners. Ramblers. Hopping from job to job with minimum ties or emotional



involvement.

“Two nieces and a nephew,” Trevor said.

“Holly, Summer and Sam,” Joe said, putting the wallet away.

She shut the door, unlocked the security chain and opened it again. And her imagination was suddenly running wild with her.

She gave him a quick once over now that she could see more of him. She realized he was looking her over as well.

“You’re smart to ask for ID, but you really should have a peephole.”

He came inside, dropped a duffel bag on the floor, kicked the door shut and flipped the lock like he’d live here for years.

“Working on it.” She hadn’t been here much to really need one. Until now.

“Tell Trevor I made it and I’m having a look around now.”

*Oh you are, are you...* “Joe’s here. Having a look around,” she relayed, eyebrow raised as she watched him circle her apartment.

“Good.” She could actually hear the relief in his voice. “I’ll see you at the airport tomorrow.”

“Okay. Night. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

She ended the call and watched as Joe poked his head into her bathroom and then her closet before he came back out and looked out the windows.

“Do you think we’re... in danger?” she asked. Part of her wanted to shake off the notion. She was boring and mostly harmless. But after what Trevor had told her about that terrible night with Stephanie, the agony in his voice made her realize anything was possible. And that her simple ho-hum life wouldn’t be as simple with him in it.

But that was just the way it’d have to be, because she wasn’t going anywhere.

Joe turned around and gave her his attention but she wondered if he was keenly aware of his surroundings. He seemed intense and “on” in a way she’d never experienced before.

“Hard to say, but I live by the rule that there’s always danger around.”

How very sad. But she supposed in his line of work, it felt that way.

She wanted to ask him more questions but exhaustion was weighing on her. Suddenly she wondered where he would sleep. Glancing from his tall, broad shouldered frame to the couch, she didn’t think he’d fit.

He must have noticed because he said, “Don’t worry about me. I come

prepared.” He nodded toward his bag.

Of course, he did. Why didn’t that surprise her?

“Anything else you need from me before I go to bed?”

“I think we can cover everything in the morning. Feel free to lock your door.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve got nothing to fear from me, but you’d be crazy to take my word for it. You won’t hurt my feelings if you lock your bedroom door.”

He stalked across the room to gather his bag.

“Okay, well, help yourself to anything in the kitchen.” She headed for her bedroom and saw him unroll an air bed. In his line of work, it was probably dangerous not to have a good night’s sleep. Her respect for him went up, knowing he made sure he was well rested.

Realizing he was right about her not knowing him well enough to trust him—though if Trevor trusted him, she did too—she locked her bedroom door. Thought again how piddly the chain on her front door had seemed when compared with the man in her living room. She scooted her favorite tufted chair in front of the door and then got back into bed.

Sitting there wide awake, she finally realized what it was that put her on edge where Joe Catrell was concerned. He reminded her of a storm cloud, strong and dark that bore down on you whether you were ready or not.

## TWENTY-SIX

JJ was running behind and still getting used to having a shadow that stuck to her movements like glue. She had to give Joe credit though, he'd yet to annoy her or get in her way. Game day chaos had once embraced her like a fuzzy blanket, pumping her full of excitement. But today it seemed like the universe was conspiring against her, throwing one obstacle after another in her path. She was getting dirty looks from some of the other journalists, and raised eyebrows in Joe's direction. Luckily he was good at smooth-talking himself through any situation.

But right now she had a short, floppy-haired kid chasing alongside her like a dog who chased cars. She'd been surprised when one of the internet bloggers who'd managed to get closer access to the action had turned his camera her way and started peppering her with questions.

Problem with bloggers was they weren't bound by the same standards as journalists usually were.

"How about an exclusive? I can get you some incredible promotion for your book."

She doubted that, but what did she know about promotion? Or his blog stats? Hard as it was, she tamped down on her frustration. Calling on years of her mother's *southern lady* training, she stopped short and felt Joe almost run into her.

"That's so sweet of you. I'll be sure to give my publicist your information. I've got to run right now, but maybe closer to publication day we can chat. K? Thanks." She gave him what she hoped was a sweet smile and saw the puzzled expression cross his face.

She took that second-long break and made her escape, motoring forward

again. She hated that she was late for her lunch with Trevor.

As they burst out into the sunlight she heard Joe's chuckle.

She smiled up at him. "Something on your mind, Joe?"

"Just haven't seen many people handle reporters the way you do, that's all. Color me impressed."

"It's all part of my charm. That and I'm a journalist, so that helps."

"I thought that guy's eyes were going to cross."

"Too bad they won't stay that way."

He escorted her to the car Trevor had hired. She didn't blame Trevor for wanting to stay out of the chaos. He planned to attend the game, from the relative sanity of a box with a few friends, but there were too many people around that would no doubt want to "chat" with him right now.

Having Chastity give a statement that Trevor and JJ were dating had only piqued the interest of the more entertainment-style reporters. Bloggers were eating it up.

Yesterday they'd confirmed that Trevor had indeed purchased a home in Atlanta to be closer to JJ. She couldn't believe people were interested in stuff like that. For her, the game had always been about the war on the field. Or on the court. Or in the boxing ring. Whatever the conflict was between the players or the coaches, she'd found *that* interesting.

This fascination with her personal life was crazy.

How did Trevor stand it? How did any celebrity? How had he managed to keep the details of his accident such a secret? Carson's family must have a ton of sway...

How wearing that must be on him. It wasn't like he'd done anything wrong. Feeling like he had to keep it a secret... Why did he keep it a secret? Had Carson asked him to? Had they signed an agreement?

He hadn't mentioned anything about that.

It's not like other celebrities hadn't come forward about their stalkers. And there was nothing to be embarrassed about. Not really, despite what he thought.

She knew he didn't think a big tough football player should admit to being scared, but how could he not have been?

"Can I ask you something, Joe?"

He inclined his head. He would've looked right at home in a cowboy hat, she decided.

"What happened to Trevor that night..."

He nodded again.

“Were you working for him at the time?”

She saw a muscle tick in his jaw.

“No. Few days before he left for the Hamptons he told me I’d fulfilled my responsibility to him and since things had been quiet for so long he didn’t feel he needed me any longer.”

“You didn’t agree?”

“No.”

“Why’d you agree to work with him again?”

“Trevor’s one of the good guys.”

He was right about that. And those simple words spoke volumes about both Trevor and Joe.

AFTER THE THIRD set of fans had interrupted his lunch with Julia, Trevor realized it had been a mistake to eat out. When would he learn?

Usually he could get away with a little anonymity in a city as big as New York, but on a major game weekend, it was like everyone had on player radar.

But he’d eaten here once years ago and thought Julia would enjoy it. So he’d brought her. Not that they’d had much time to enjoy it in peace. He felt guilty for being annoyed with his fans. But there it was. And it wasn’t like Joe could fend everyone off without Trevor looking like a complete asshole.

So he decided it was best to grin and bear it. That’s what Julia seemed to be doing, although he could tell she was getting a little flustered.

He was starting to wonder if his idea to accompany her on her trip was a bad one. His presence was bringing her undue attention. Attention she didn’t want or need right now.

The moment they were back in the car he apologized to her for the chaos at the restaurant, but she just smiled.

“You’re famous. They love you. I understand that.”

Her phone rang in her purse and she quickly sent the call to voice mail. “It’s like every sports blogger in the world thinks I’m today’s story,” she grumbled. “I wouldn’t put it past some of the guys to leak my number.”

“We’ll get you a new number as soon as we get back to Atlanta,” Joe said from the front seat.

“I’d appreciate that,” she said, sounding somewhat relieved.

Once again Trevor questioned the wisdom of accompanying her. Hell, of starting a relationship with her at all. But it was far too late for that thought now. He couldn't live without her. The sooner they were back in Atlanta and she was situated behind the gates of the new house, the better.

But perhaps he was just fooling himself. Perhaps this constant state of looking over his shoulder was his permanent reality. Perhaps his money would've been better spent on a private island far away from photographers.

"Have you gotten any more letters?" Julia asked quietly.

"Not the last time I checked," Joe said.

It felt so damn good to have Joe back in his life, watching over things, taking over some of the burden. But mostly watching Julia's back. He didn't imagine her reception at the game had gone very well with the other reporters today. They obviously thought *she* was a story.

And though he knew she wouldn't tell anyone about Stephanie or his accident, he prayed they didn't press her until something accidentally slipped. He, better than most, knew how the constant barrage of questioning could make you lose your mind.

"Does Chastity think the story will die down soon?"

He shrugged. "She understands that I want it buried. Whether she and Brady are going to let that happen..."

"It's stressing you out, isn't it?" She reached for his hand and her cool skin was like a much needed lifeline.

"A little," he admitted with a slight smile.

"Have you ever—"

"Have I ever what?"

"Have you ever considered telling your story about that night? The notes?"

He broke out in a cold sweat. "No."

"Do you have some sort of agreement with Stephanie's family?"

"Where's this coming from, Julia?" His shoulders were tight with tension and his stomach bunched into knots.

"I just... You said it yourself; the best way to get something to blow over is to spin it your way."

She was using Chastity's words, words he'd used only two days ago to get her to agree that they should go public about their relationship, against him.

"I don't want my darkest night... How the hell do you spin something

like that?”

“I don’t know. I just thought it might help you not be so stressed about someone finding out. I’m surprised someone hasn’t dug it up already.”

That had him pivoting toward her.

“Don’t look at me like that, Trevor. I’m not going to sell you out. I just think you might find life easier if—”

“What, if I put myself in the limelight so some psycho bitch can threaten me and my family again?”

“Why did you come with me this weekend? You knew there would be tons of cameras and journalists.”

He tipped his head back and sighed. “Hell if I know.”

He couldn’t stand to be away from her and he couldn’t stand the chaos surrounding her job either. Everything had been so much easier before this latest volley of letters. He’d been at peace, not second-guessing every person he met. And worse than last time was the possibility of some crazy person coming after Julia. Just the thought made his chest ache like he’d been slammed beneath every linebacker in the NFL.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry.”

“We’re here,” the driver said as the car rolled to a stop.

“Look, I think it’s best if I head back to New York for a while. Maybe this’ll blow over and—”

“What?” Julia and Joe said in unison.

“Joe will stay with you and see you back to Atlanta.”

“And when it blows over? What if it doesn’t blow over, Trevor?”

He pulled a hand down his face, not wanting to think about that right now. Wanting to go back in time a week ago when he’d had her in his arms, not worried about anything but making her smile. To a time where she wasn’t in danger simply for being in his life.

“I’m sorry our relationship is inconveniencing you,” she said, and jumped out of the car before he could tell her she was wrong. Joe gave him a hard look and leapt out after her.

For an instant he thought about going after her, but he’d gotten what he wanted. Distance. And hopefully, her safety.

Yeah, he was making Joe’s job harder, but hell, Trevor felt like he was in a fucking tail spin.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

JJ hustled into the building, tears blinding her. She wiped at them, furious that she'd broken down at all. The man didn't deserve her tears. After four months of...everything. She'd given him *everything*. Her secrets. Her past. Her heart. Her future.

And he'd wiggled out over... Hell if she knew what, exactly.

Her safety? Yes. That was important. As was his. And his family's. But this *thing* he kept locked inside? The stupid *secret* that he was scared of a crazy woman intent on killing him...

Her heart clenched.

Did he want her to move out? Was this a cool off period? A regroup? A breakup? What?

She headed into the nearest bathroom to pull herself together.

"I'll be right out here," Joe called as she ducked into the maze of hallways, stalls, and sinks. There was a fair amount of activity but plenty of empty space in front of the mirrors.

Her phone beeped and she pulled it her of her bag to see a text from her brother.

GREG: *Called Trev to see if he wanted to come over and watch the game but he didn't answer. Is he with you?*

SHE TOOK A DEEP BREATH.



JJ: *Think he's heading back to New York. Not going well here.*

SHE WASN'T sure what else to say, but knew that Greg would understand so she hit send.

A few deep breaths and a good long stare at herself helped to calm her down. Dammit. She was stronger than this. It was time to push aside the fear of what had happened to Trevor in the past, along with this current threat. Sure, it was smart to be alert, but constant worry wasn't.

She couldn't let the anxiety of losing him rule her. She wasn't losing him. Not now. They had a few things to work out. That was all.

It was high time to put on her big girl panties and deal with her life. That included a shitty boss, a wigged out boyfriend, and anyone else who felt like messing with her.

After putting the phone in her back pocket, she rinsed her face with cool water and then looked up into bloodshot eyes. Damn, she looked like hell warmed over. This was no way for a woman in charge of her life to look.

She dug a brush out of her bag and tamed her blonde locks. When her phone vibrated, she pulled it out and saw Greg's number.

Suddenly she felt weepy again.

"Hey," she said.

"You okay? What happened?"

She didn't want to get into it but her mouth ran away with her, unleashing the whole story. The torment of the last few days. Dear God, if this was his life, how could she be in it? Even out of the sport, so many people came up to him during lunch. How could she deal with the media hounding them all the time? Making things up? Pestering them for answers?

No. She wasn't going to think like that. She was in control of her life. Her actions. *Big girl panties...remember the big girl panties.*

"Sorry. Didn't mean to unload on you."

"That's what big brothers are for," he teased.

She sniffed and smiled. "I'm three months older, little brother."

"And I'm six inches taller, little sister."

Laughing, she wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I love you, Greg. I'm so

glad my mom married your dad and gave me such wonderful brothers.”

“Aww, now don’t get all sappy on me. You’ve still got work to do. And I’ve got to get your ice maker hooked up.”

“My ice maker?”

“Yeah, I was going to surprise you, but you sound like you could use a pick me up. Your kitchen will be completely finished by the time you get back. I even took it upon myself to find the perfect knobs this go round.”

“Hallelujah!” A major headache off her plate. “Thanks for the good news. I needed that.”

Desperately.

“Sure thing. I’ll see you when you get back. Take care of yourself.”

She was pretty sure Joe had her covered in that arena. Although, it was up to her to keep her heart intact.

TREVOR FELT LIKE AN ASS. He pulled a long swig of his beer and wished he could press the mute button on the remote. With the playoffs in town, the airport was busier than Black Friday at Walmart. He couldn’t even charter a plane right now.

So he sat at the bar and tried to tune out the world around him. Especially the flat panel TVs staring back at him. Reporting the game and everything surrounding it. He had three different channels to look at.

It’d be so easy to give in, to do an interview. To share one of the scariest and most embarrassing—no, the scariest night of his life. Just get it all out there. But the stubborn side of him wondered why he needed to. He didn’t owe anyone anything.

Except for Julia. He thought back over their dozens of conversations. She hadn’t asked him any personal probing questions. Nothing a journalist would have asked. She’d never pressured him to do an interview... unless you counted today.

She was warm and attentive. By some miracle, she loved him. But at the same time, he felt like she’d kept part of herself closed off. Like she didn’t get as close as she naturally would.

And that was his fault. His doing. Keeping secrets. Not being open... hiding that awful night. It was his fault if she felt like she couldn’t be completely herself. That she wasn’t completely at ease.

And now, with this latest threat, neither of them were at ease and he had

no idea how to get back to it. Sure, Joe provided a little bit of comfort, but—

But he'd spent such a large chunk of his life there that the public, and the media, felt like they knew him. Like he owed them an explanation.

But some things were too hard to admit to himself let alone the world.

A text from Greg popped up on his phone.

GREG: *Was going to invite you over to watch the game but jj said you're back in new york.*

TREVOR SIGHED. His heart ached and he wasn't sure of anything at the moment. But honesty was the best policy.

TREVOR: *On my way. I needed some time away from this circus. To think.*

GREG MUST HAVE BEEN WAITING AROUND because he replied quickly.

JJ: *About what? You know she loves you. She would never do anything to compromise your privacy. She's just as private as you are.*

THERE WAS a subtle “or have you not noticed?” tacked on to the end of the sentence.

Trevor sighed, not sure what to believe.

TREVOR: *She's —*

HE DIDN'T GET the rest of the sentence out before his phone rang.

"Yeah."

"Look, your relationship is your business and I don't want to butt in," Greg started. "But has she ever struck you as the type that would steamroll anyone to get what she wanted?"

"She'll do anything to keep her job."

"How do you figure that?"

"She told me about her past, about digging through the garbage for her dinner. I get it. She wants to be financially secure."

"She *is* financially secure. When Mom died, dad gave us all part of the life insurance money. And I know for a fact that every time we sell a condo, she socks away eighty percent of what Uncle Sam doesn't take. You think that shit-for-pay job is keeping her financially secure?"

If that was the truth, then why was she so set on keeping her job? If it wasn't about the money, then what was it about? Landing the next big interview?

For the first time in over a year Trevor had a strong urge to call Carson. It wouldn't do any good, of course. It was unlikely that he'd answer Trevor's call. But man, he missed the days when they confided in each other. Figured out their problems together. The only other person he'd ever want to turn to in this situation was the one woman he couldn't call.

"Besides, if she was really concerned about money, wouldn't she quit the stupid job and shack up with you?"

Now that made sense.

"Thanks for calling, Greg."

"One more thing. Did you know that JJ's boss said he'd fire her if she doesn't interview you?"

"What the hell?"

"Just thought you should know, but I doubted she'd tell you."

"Thanks." I think.

"Anytime."

Unfortunately, Trevor felt more confused than before.

"JJ, they want you in the box."

She frowned. "Who does?"

The beady-eyed man shrugged and put his massive earphones on again. He waved her along. She followed him down the hall and up the stairs to the press box where the commentators discussed the players and the game.

“JJ, you're looking beautiful as always.” A man who she faintly recognized ushered her forward. “Always so stylish. When you get tired of hiding behind the newsprint, you give me a call, okay, honey?”

She had a weird Twilight Zone moment where nothing made sense and she wondered briefly if she was dreaming.

“Someone get a mic on her.”

“What?”

“They've opened a spot for you at the table,” a voice said.

JJ craned her head around the video camera and saw the big half-moon table with the station insignia blazed across the front. Potted ferns dotted the shot and four men in crisp suits sat there talking. A fifth chair sat empty at the end.

A wave of nausea swept over her. She turned to ask for clarification but the short, beady-eyed tech guy was coming at her with a mic pack.

“This isn't my job,” she said to no one in particular. Somewhere in the very back of her mind she thought how cool it would be to sit at the table with the commentators, the big boys. But the rest of her, her stomach included, felt totally unprepared. How did her hair look?

Evidently, not good. A stylist stepped toward her with a round brush and a can of hair spray.

She wasn't ready for this. She wasn't a reporter. She didn't do... JJ gulped. TV.

But before she could escape, her hair was fixed, the mic was clipped to her blouse; thank God she'd worn something decent to the game, and someone was pushing her toward the empty chair.

“JJ,” Marty Hill said. Her eyebrows inched upward as she sat down. He knew her name? “We're so glad you could join us.”

“We hope we didn't pull you away from an important interview,” Stu Thompson said. The four of them looked at her expectantly. Were they filming this? She laced her fingers in her lap to keep from fidgeting.

“How's the mood in the locker room?” Trey Alexander asked, his voice smooth and dreamy. She'd never had the pleasure of interviewing him as his career had been over a few years before hers had started, but boy oh boy. He still had *it*.

They all turned to her.

She glanced at the camera and back at them. “Intense. They're focused on the game ahead,” she said.

“Good, good. We heard you had lunch with Trevor Wyatt. How's ol' Trevor doing?”

How did they know that? She could guess. In the age of twitter and Facebook, nothing was private anymore. Except Trevor's accident...for the time being.

JJ swallowed hard. She should have known they wouldn't invite her into the boys club unless they were after information.

“Trevor is doing just fine.” She really shouldn't have called their relationship inconvenient. It wasn't true. Sure, it was a bump in the road, but she highly doubted either of them would ever use the term inconvenient.

Blissful. Swoon worthy. Knee knocking. Rocky. Yes.

But dammit, he acted like she did something wrong. Like wondering or asking him questions. He'd better get used to it. It was big girl panty time.

“What'd you guys have for lunch?” Trey teased, his blue eyes shining beneath a cap of silver hair.

“I had Chicken Parmesan. With extra parmesan,” she told Trey with what she hoped was a sweet smile.

“Since the two of you are so close maybe you can answer some questions for our viewers, questions we've all been wondering,” Marty said, gesturing to the four of them.

Was he really going to sit there and insinuate... he sure was. The bastard. From the corner of her eye she saw Joe step next to the camera. His tall, dark, and deadly presence calmed her.

“We all know about Trevor's accident and that he left the sport after that, but from what we understand it was a knee injury that he could have come back from.” Stu, the jerk had the nerve to look sympathetic.

There was a pause as she stared at each man in turn. They were obviously waiting for her to fill in a blank. The overhead lights were hot and she felt like she might boil beneath the spotlights. Quickly, she glanced around the room at all the wires. The cameras. The people. They were all waiting for her to answer. To tell Trevor's darkest secrets. Again, she wondered if she was dreaming.

It could have only been a second or two, the pause. But it was long enough to disgust her. And to tweak the dial on her life to crystal clear.

Another quick glance at Joe steeled her determination. She hoped Trevor was watching. Then she turned on her sweetest smile.

“Mr. Alexander, I was just thinking about you the other day. How’s your leg?” It was common knowledge that a bad on field break had ended his illustrious career.

His jaw dropped open before he recovered quickly. “It’s fine.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that,” she said, putting the accent on real thick. She heard Joe chuckle. “I’m sure it’s a pain for everyone to ask that all the time. Kind of reminds me of when my momma was alive. She was always asking when I was going to find the ‘one’ and bring him home for dinner.” She gave a quick little faux chuckle.

“But it’s probably even more annoying for your whole future to be dictated by one bum leg and to be reminded of it every day.” She shook her head in sympathy and sighed.

“The truth of the matter is Trevor and I *are* in a relationship. Love you sweetie,” she said directly to the camera and then turned to the four numbskulls at the table. “Obviously, I spent years interviewing him and everyone else down in the locker room. But now that I’m on the other side of the mic, it’s a whole different world. You know how that is, Trey?” She paused to kick up a grin at him. “My point is I’m sure if Trevor wanted the world to know his business, he’d tell you. Don’t you think?” She gave them an arched look. “And if you think that just because I’ve spent the last seven years as a journalist I’m going to tell you anything personal...” You can go to hell. “You’ve got another think coming. Good day, gentlemen.”

She’d always wanted to say that. With a smirk, she pushed away from the desk and hopped out of the chair.

She didn’t bother to see if they looked as stunned as she hoped they felt. She knew for certain they wouldn’t feel ashamed for asking questions like that. Men like them rarely did. Well, maybe Trey Alexander would.

She marched down the corridor, Joe and the tech guy hot on her heels. He plucked at the mic box hooked to the back of her skirt.

“Don’t touch me.” She whirled around to face him. A crowd had gathered in the doorway, a matching stunned expression on all their faces. Joe was right by her side, holding the guy back. Joe reached behind her and unclipped the pack as she unhooked the mic from her blouse. Together they thrust the equipment into the tech’s hands.

“Let’s go,” she said to Joe. “We’re done here.”

*She was done here.*

TREVOR SAT IN STUNNED AMAZEMENT.

His head had popped up the moment he'd heard Julia's voice. He'd known what was coming next. Commentators lived for ratings.

At least, he thought he'd known.

But she'd surprised him. She'd surprised everyone. The moment she'd told Stu Thompson and his band of brothers off, Trevor's heart had stalled in his chest. No one had ever stood up for him like that. Not his agent. Not his publicist. Everyone wanted all the gory details. They felt entitled to them.

But Julia understood. Not only had she understood, she stood up for him. And now she'd probably get fired for it.

He continued watching the TV, waiting to see if JJ would return. Somehow he doubted it, though. She'd gotten that adorable mulish look in her eyes that he loved so much. With the bit between her teeth, she could be stubborn when she needed to be.

But never had she been more gorgeous than when she was defending him on national television, her cheeks pink with fury. A true warrior goddess.

"You sure are the talk of the town today, my friend. That girl's a keeper," the bartender said.

"Tell me something I don't know." He hopped off the barstool and ran out of the airport as fast as his bum leg would carry him.



## TWENTY-EIGHT

JJ stepped off the elevator and rooted around her purse for the key card.

“Would you see if you can get us on the next flight to New York?” she asked Joe.

“Sure.”

It surprised her how seamlessly he was fitting into her life. Watchful, protective without getting in her way.

“I’ve got it,” he said smoothly, as they stopped in front of the two-bedroom suite. He pulled out a key card and had the door open a second later. Yep, he really was a handy shadow.

By now she knew the routine. He went in and checked the room before she or Trevor entered. Since she had no desire to come face to face with a deranged stalker, she leaned against the wall and pulled out her cell phone, intending to text Trevor.

“What the hell, JJ?”

She spun around and saw John striding down the hallway. *Oh, this just got better and better.*

“What are you doing here?” she asked, not bothering to hide her frown or her hostility. She’d known he was going to be at the game, but this hotel? Trevor had upgraded them to Hotel Drisco for added protection.

Never mind what he was doing here. It’d save her a trip to his office Monday.

“I can’t believe you just walked out of an interview...” He stopped right in front of her, a little too close for her comfort level. Had his wide-set eyes always been that wild? She could smell alcohol on his breath and realized he must have been partying with somebody. A player? Fellow journalists?

“Julia—”

She jerked her head toward Trevor’s voice. He came toward her all broad shoulders and corded muscle, like a bull storming down the streets of Spain. Her heart tripped over itself. She’d never been so happy to see him before.

And now that she knew he was safe, adrenaline gave her self-confidence a boost.

Squaring her shoulders, she turned to her soon-to-be ex-boss. “It wasn’t my interview to give. I told you that.”

Trevor was at her side an instant later and she felt his fury through the palm he slid along her back. She leaned into his touch.

“Still looking for that interview, John?” Trevor asked.

“Trev—” JJ started.

“Absolutely, Mr. Wyatt.” The change in her boss was amazing. He seemed to straighten, pull his shoulders back and turn on the charm all at once.

There was no way she was letting Trevor give this weasel an interview. JJ let out a breath lest she hyperventilate, feeling like a momma bear backed into a corner.

“He can interview my fist,” Joe said, deadly quiet, from just over her left shoulder. She whipped her head around and saw the hardness chiseled in his features. Wow. When it came to intimidation, Joe wrote the book.

John’s eyes bugged out.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Trevor added.

John gulped, gaped, and then he was back on the attack. He shoved a finger at JJ. “You’re fired!”

JJ’s temper snapped. She started to smack his finger out of her face, but latched onto it instead, bending it back just enough to bring him to his knees. He cried out, cursing, begging for her to release him.

Her brothers had always insisted she know how to defend herself, she thought with a smirk. “Didn’t your momma ever teach you not to point at a lady? News flash, you big bully, you now owe me a severance package or I’ll see you in court for wrongful termination. My lawyer will see to that. I’ll expect it by the end of the week. And you can write your own articles for the playoffs.”

She released him and he fell forward, gripping his finger. “Joe, would you be a peach and take out the trash?”

“My pleasure.” He grabbed John by the scruff of the neck and pulled him

to his feet as if he weighed no more than a sack of potatoes.

High on adrenaline, she didn't wait for them to disappear around the corner before she glanced up at Trevor and jerked her thumb toward their suite. "You. Inside."

Trevor looked a little startled by her order but followed her. She led him into their bedroom and pushed him onto the end of the bed, all the while trying to ignore how big and warm he was. After dropping her purse onto the dresser she turned to the big brute who held her heart.

"I've had just about enough testosterone to last me a while. So here's the deal. You and me..." She pointed from him to her and back again a few times. "We're a team. I'm upgrading you to quarterback. Joe's going to be your left tackle and watch your back. Me. I'm going to be the cheering section. You got me? I'm done with this tiptoeing around business—" She used her fingers to make a walking motion. "Afraid I'll say something to upset you or bring that night crashing back around your ears. You're right, you are a tough guy and you can handle it. But more importantly, we're going to handle whatever comes our way, together."

She took a deep breath and studied his stunned expression. Satisfied that she'd gotten that point across, she continued. "When we first met, I was crazy attracted to you. You were funny and witty and charming and too darned gorgeous for your own good. And you knew it. You might have been out of your wild-child phase, but I wasn't about to be a notch in your bedpost. And I didn't want to share you with the world, Trevor. I still don't. So I kept myself in check and you kept dating bimbos. But I understand now that this wildly popular man is just who you are. This is who you will always be—a legendary football star that millions of people love and respect. And I get that. Because I love and respect you. But I love and respect you differently, because I *know* you. I know you're strong and you're tough and you're a nice guy who inspires little kids. And I know that every time you think about that night you feel the fear all over again. How could you not? I know when you talk about it you think everyone's going to look at you funny because somehow they'll know just how scared you were and how angry you were that you didn't see it coming and how you wish, almost more than anything that you could have somehow saved that crazy woman from herself. And I know that you feel the weight of her death on your shoulders and somehow think you were just a teensy bit responsible. And it hurts you that not only did you lose your career but your best friend as well."

“Julia,” he said on a groan.

“I’m not done yet. You’ve wound me up and now you’re gonna have to let me talk.” She settled into his lap, cupping his jaw in her hand. “I don’t care if you tell the world about your stalker or not. But I *do* care if you let that experience mess up what we have. What we have the potential to have. This latest whatever it is, we’ll handle it together. I know you’re scared for me and you wouldn’t be the man you are if you weren’t. But we can handle it. Together. I don’t care if we have to clone Joe into a whole security team or move to the middle of nowhere. What matters is you and me. I like Joe by the way, so you’re not going to let him go whenever you feel like it.”

He laughed at her abrupt change in topic.

“And since I no longer work for CSN, we’re gonna go to today’s game and have a good time. You and me, on a date. A perfect date. And if anyone looks at us funny, we’ll just smile and wave. You don’t owe them a thing. I certainly don’t owe them a thing. Then we’ll head back to Atlanta and I’m going to start writing Moody’s story. Greg and I will finish the loft and put it up for sale and I’ll decide if I want to keep flipping houses. In the meantime I’m going to shack up with you in that big house and travel with you to your appearances. And we’ll host the best Super Bowl party ever.”

He silenced her with a kiss. “How about a Fairchild-Wyatt Super Bowl Extravaganza?” he asked a few minutes later, then trailed his lips down her throat.

“That’s just what I was thinking.” Happiness fizzed through her blood like champagne bubbles and she couldn’t help but let out a delighted giggle.

“I love you Julia. I’m sorry if I’ve given you less than one hundred percent.” Those blue eyes were so sincere she almost dissolved spot.

“As long as you promise to trust me, trust us, in the future, I’ll let you make it up to me.”

His dimple made an appearance. “Is this gonna cost me another trip to the shoe store?”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Not at all.”

Tightening her arms around his shoulders, she leaned close to his ear. “I was thinking you could start by making love to me. And maybe do that thing you do with your tongue,” she whispered and then tugged on his earlobe with her teeth.

She felt his cock flex beneath her thighs.

“The cotton candy thing?”

“Yeah... the cotton candy thing. Think you’ve still got what it takes to make me melt?”

“Sweetheart, you know it.”

JJ loved a man who was true to his word. Most of all, she loved him.

## EPILOGUE

Today was the day.

She, Gretchen Mascoe, was going to tell him, Greg Fairchild, all around best and hottest guy in the world, how she felt.

Just as soon as she helped her best friend pop the question.

The annual Fairchild Super Bowl Extravaganza was in full swing and Gretchen watched the festivities from her perch atop a barstool. Unlike the last eight times she'd attended, this year the host venue was different. Instead of the Fairchild family home, fifty of the Fairchilds' nearest and dearest along with a throng of Trevor's former teammates were spread out in Trevor Wyatt's palatial basement.

The lovebirds threw one heck of a party. One didn't need to know a thing about football to be impressed by the giant TV. And if that wasn't enough viewing pleasure, there were three other smaller but equally sleek, flat panel TVs dotting the room. It didn't matter where you sat, the sound system echoed the announcer's voice from one side of the space to the other.

Gretchen searched the crowd for a glimpse of Greg, confident in her decision. The timing was finally right. He wasn't dating. She was most definitely single. It was high time to take their long-time friendship to the next level.

At least, that was the pep talk she'd given herself in the car on the way over here. Now that they were under the same roof that creepy guy at the last speed dating event seemed like a less scary option than putting her heart on the line.

"Who are you looking for?" Cindy asked as she sidled up to the bar.

*Busted.*

Gretchen glanced at her friend and gave what she hoped looked like a nonchalant shrug. “No one.”

Cindy raised an eyebrow in that classic “I don’t believe you” way of hers and flagged down the bartender.

“Two dozen hot guys in this room and you expect me to believe you’re not scoping anyone out?” She made a *pish* sound. The bartender slid a beer bottle across the granite and Cindy took a swig.

“Yeah, well, one of the hot guys already hit on me and—”

“Of course he did! I told you that sequined top is a winner.”

Yes, she had. And the handsome jock had been a boost to Gretchen’s ego but he wasn’t the blue eyed hottie she dreamt about every night.

She heard Baby’s giggle and narrowed her gaze on their friend who held court like she was a princess. Gretchen wished that she could be that comfortable in her own skin. Since college she’d watched Baby charm man after man, smiling and talking, using body language that Gretchen had yet to master. But most of all, Baby had gumption. She went after what she wanted.

Last week’s Girls’ Night had driven home just how badly Gretchen needed gumption in her own personal life. School and business gave her no such problems but two faulty relationship attempts had left her shy in the man department.

That was going to change. From now on she was following Baby’s lead and going after what she wanted.

Since Trevor was a former NFL star, he had plenty of tall, rich and built-like-a-bomb-shelter friends for Baby to flirt with. Unfortunately, the only man Gretchen was interested in had disappeared out the side door about five minutes ago and she was curious what had pulled him away. Like the rest of his family, he loved football.

Mr. Fairchild liked to joke that all three of his sons had been born with footballs in their tiny little hands. When he’d married JJ’s mom, she’d insisted each of the boys find a different sport to play. It didn’t matter though. From the moment Gretchen had met the three dreamy Fairchild men a decade ago, it was obvious that they all adored football.

A roar of displeasure echoed through the room and a dozen or so people jumped to their feet. Trevor, ever the voice of reason, waved his hands up and down to calm everyone. “There’s still two more quarters, guys. Lots of game left.”

A beer commercial filled the screen, signalling half -time, a bunch of

guys jumped up and headed for the bar. Gretchen leaned around the bulging biceps and searched the crowd for JJ.

“Now who are you looking for and don’t tell me ‘no body.’” Cindy said.

“JJ,” Gretchen replied.

Ronny and Thomas Fairchild, were in an animated conversation. Next to them on the sofa their father’s arm was draped over Mrs. Wyatt’s shoulder and Gretchen wondered if either parent knew what was about to happen. She grinned just thinking about the surprise awaiting everyone.

Where had...there she was. JJ nodded at Gretchen.

That was her queue. Crossing her fingers that she didn’t mess this up, she quickly turned to the elaborate TV remote next to her wine glass. They’d gone over her part in today’s activities yesterday, but Gretchen had never seen a TV remote that was nothing but a giant touch pad full of virtual buttons and certainly not one that controlled multiple TVs and audio.

Luckily, things worked just like they were supposed to. The beer commercial paused, the audio silenced and there was a backlash in the crowd and a fair amount of “what the hell?”

JJ left Trevor’s side and stepped in front of the main TV. Smiling at everyone, she looked considerably less nervous than Gretchen felt. She had no problem speaking in front of her students, but a room full of family and friends and good looking men? Perhaps love made one brave. Or braver since JJ had never suffered in the courage department.

Gretchen breathed a sigh of relief that everyone seemed mollified for the moment. The murmurs quieted as everyone turned their attention to the woman in skinny jeans and a New York Wolves jersey.

“We won’t miss anything, I promise—” JJ started.

“What’s goin’ on, babe?” Trevor asked.

Gretchen noticed Greg step through the doors that led to the terrace and glance at his sister. He had a slight smile on his face and she assumed that he knew what was about to happen. Only a few months younger than his stepsister, he and JJ were close, not to mention business partners.

“I’m so glad everyone could make it. Super Bowl Sunday is a big day in our family and this year’s Extravaganza is the biggest yet. Trevor and I are thrilled to host the party and so glad all of you came to help us break in the house.”

Everyone laughed, charmed.

Shoulders back with a hint of a smile on her pretty face, JJ surveyed the



room. The she focused on Trevor and her smile widened.

“I know everyone here knows Trevor pretty well. What you might not know is that I used to interview him during my time as a sports journalist. Over the years I lost track of the times he asked me out.”

She sent him a sweet smile but he made playful ‘stabbed in the heart’ motions with his hands. Gretchen chuckled.

“I always regretted turning him down. Last fall I was in New York and to make a long story short, I ran into him again. He was manning his cousin’s shoe store so Jamal and Kendra could take a honeymoon. Is it any wonder I fell for him?”

There were plenty of sighs from the ladies and a bit of male ruckus since JJ was getting into mushy territory.

“Anyway, a young co-worker was leaving for the day and told me to ask Trevor if I needed anything. I didn’t know it at the time but I’d be asking for Trevor’s help plenty over the next few months. Which leads to today. There’s one more thing I need to ask.”

Gretchen clung to the bar so she didn’t melt into a puddle. Hopefully someone was videotaping this because it was so romantic.

JJ took a deep breath and Gretchen was pretty sure the rest of the room knew what was coming as they all seemed to be holding their breath as well.

“Trevor Wyatt, all around best guy I know and kick-ass wide receiver, will you marry me?”

Yep, Gretchen’s heart melted. JJ’s blue gaze was filled with love and focused on Trevor like twin lasers. There was a beat of silence and then an eruption of cat calls and cheers, well wishes and bawdy jokes.

Trevor wasted no time sweeping JJ up into his arms and Gretchen rushed forward to save the beer bottle dangling precariously from his fingertips. He shot her a quick look of thanks before burying his handsome face against JJ’s neck.

Gretchen heard him mutter “I was supposed to ask you that question.”

Exhaling a sigh, Gretchen stepped back to give them space. Arms tight around JJ’s waist, he spun her around, reminding Gretchen of a scene in a Valentine’s Day commercial.

After setting her back on her feet he pulled something out of his pocket. Gretchen’s heart squeezed in her chest and a sheen of moisture filled her eyes. Trevor took a step back and knelt down. JJ slapped a hand over her mouth.

Even from this angle, Gretchen could see how surprised and happy her friend was. The whole room was silent, anxious, completely focused on the unexpected events of the day. Gretchen snuck a peek at Mr. Fairchild. His grin stretched ear to ear and Mrs. Wyatt had tears in her eyes, her right hand pressed over her heart.

“I already had this picked out,” Trevor said.

Gretchen’s heart squeezed harder and she folded her hands, holding them to her lips. This was better than a romance novel.

“I beat you to the punch,” JJ said and a soft chuckle went through the crowd.

“You did. I’m hoping this answers your question.” He opened his hand and a large diamond ring twinkled from the center of his palm.

JJ nodded and her blonde ponytail bobbed up and down.

“He can’t hear your head rattle,” JJ’s father called.

The room erupted in laughter and JJ joined in. Shoulders still shaking, JJ held out her hand and Trevor slipped the ring into place. She didn’t even pause to study it before she leaned over, gave a quick ‘yes’, and kissed his lips.

A second round of cheers, louder than the first, preceded the rush. Gretchen stepped out of the way just in time to keep from being squished by another massive guy.

“How romantic is that?” she whispered to Cindy.

They hadn’t had any doubt Trevor would say yes; he was just as crazy about JJ as she was about him. But him going down on one knee with a ring had been a sweet surprise.

“Very.”

Gretchen’s smile widened. The plan had gone off without a hitch. Just as JJ had hoped, it was a terrific party and a perfect day.

Looking past the well-wishers, Gretchen caught Greg’s eye and felt a wave of desire all the way to her toes. He was the only man who’d ever gotten that response from her body. He smiled at her now and she grinned back.

Telling herself it was time to do what she’d come to do, tell him the truth, lay it all out there, she started forward. Three steps into her journey, she skidded to a stop, surprised to see Baby saunter up to him. With a hand on his bicep, the pint sized blonde snagged his full attention, breaking the invisible connection between him and Gretchen. Baby grinned up at him like she was

about to make his day.

Gretchen's smile faded.

Baby gave Greg a thorough, and very obvious, once over. Gretchen felt sick to her stomach because she'd seen her best friend in action before. They'd visited enough bars and bistros over the years for Gretchen to know when the itty, bitty lawyer was in *get-him* mode.

She felt like she was watching a slow motion movie. Baby tilted her head to the right, showing off her neck. Even though it was February and cold outside Baby wore a short skirt, knee high boots and a cropped red sweater that hugged her curves. Greg smiled at something she said and the skin around his eyes crinkled.

As Gretchen watched the two of them talk, something inside her shriveled up and died. That might be a tad melodramatic but it perfectly described the feeling of emptiness and shocking cold that seeped from one cell to the next until her whole body felt chilled.

In fact, her feet were frozen to the floor even though her brain was ordering her to cross the room and... and what? Break up their conversation? Tell Greg that Baby was only using him for sex?

Baby reached for Greg's hand and she tugged him toward the staircase that led to the house above. Gretchen didn't want to watch them go but it was like a car accident, you couldn't turn away. And with every step they took she felt like she was going to hyperventilate.

She'd lost her chance.



Now that JJ and Trevor are on their way to happily ever after, it's time for Gretchen to find happiness. [Grab Falling for His Fake Fiancée today!](#)

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An action movie buff with a penchant for all things supernatural and sexy, New York Times bestselling author Selena Blake combines her love for adventure, travel and romance into spine-tingling paranormal romance. She also writes sensual contemporary romance under the name [Gillian Blakely](#). Selena's books have been called "a steamy escape" and have appeared on NYT Times, USA Today, and Amazon bestseller lists, been nominated for awards, and won contests. When she's not writing you can find her by the pool soaking up some sun, day dreaming about new characters, and watching the cabana boy (aka her muse), Derek.

Fan mail keeps her going when the diet soda wears off so write to her at [selena@selena-blake.com](mailto:selena@selena-blake.com).

Visit her online at:

<http://www.gillianblakely.com>

Or if you're on Facebook, become a fan at

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